

Christopher Hobson, 'Foreword' for Suman Ranjan Sensarma and Atanu Sarkar (eds), *Disaster Risk Management: Conflict and Cooperation* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2013).

Natural disasters have been becoming more regular, deadly and destructive. This situation is expected to worsen as a result of climate change, as noted in the findings of the most recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Such an outcome is particularly worrying if one considers figures from some of the most significant recent natural disasters: the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami resulted in more than 226,400 deaths and Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 caused more than 138,300 deaths. If one widens the scope to consider displaced persons, the numbers are truly staggering: the 2008 Sichuan earthquake displaced over 15 million people, and in 2010 over 42 million people were displaced by natural disasters. And even if compared to the last decade 2011 was a below average year in terms of the number of natural disasters that occurred, it proved to be the most expensive on record. This was owing to a number of major disasters in developed countries, notably in Australia, Japan and New Zealand. What these facts all point towards is that natural disasters represent a very grave threat to our lives and wellbeing. While we can never fully prevent from occurring, there are many things that we can do – individually and collectively – to limit and minimise the death and destruction caused by these events. In this regard, *Disaster Risk Management – Conflict and Cooperation* is a valuable book that makes a sustained contribution to our knowledge about this pressing set of issues.

When considering natural disasters, there is a common tendency to juxtapose them against manmade disasters, such as interstate conflict or civil war. Seeing natural disasters as 'acts of god' is thoroughly misleading, however. Doing so ignores the significant role human choices and behaviours play in turning natural hazards into disasters. In the 2010 Haiti suffered a magnitude 7 earthquake resulting in more than 316,000 deaths; the following year a magnitude 9 earthquake off the coast of Japan triggered a tsunami that collectively resulted in more than 15,800 deaths. Of course there were significant natural factors that influenced the loss of life and damage caused: notably the epicentre of the Haiti earthquake was very close to Port-au-Prince, whereas the Japan quake occurred approximately 70 kilometres off the coast. Yet human factors were just as significant – if not more so – in explaining the massive difference in terms of death and damage these two disasters caused. Haiti is one of the world's poorest countries, and has a long history of internal conflict and poor government. In contrast, Japan is one of the most industrialised, wealthy countries in the world. It is also a leader in disaster preparation and prevention. There is nothing 'natural' about these aspects that helped shape the disasters. These are due to human decisions, behaviour and human-made structures that have influenced the respective fates of these two countries. In particular, the vulnerability of Haiti and Japan to natural hazards is a result of significant structural factors. This issue is something dealt with here, in chapters such as the one by J.C. Gaillard, who correctly observes that 'vulnerability is actually rooted in a deep tangle of structural constraints that are social, historical and cultural as well as politico-economic in nature.' Acknowledging this entails serious consequences, however. The most effective route to long-term disaster mitigation is through addressing the inequalities and underdevelopment that leaves many countries and people dangerously exposed to natural hazards. This kind of longer-term perspective stands in contrast to the strong focus that is usually placed on the immediate relief phase *after* a disaster has occurred. Yet it is much less costly to

prepare for such events *before* they happen. Taking this longer view suggests that responding to, and preparing for, disasters should be part of a much more basic focus on socio-economic development. In this regard, the *2005 Hyogo Framework for Action* notes that ‘sustainable development, poverty reduction, good governance and disaster risk reduction are mutually supportive objectives.’ Aligning these goals into a cohesive approach to development, thereby reducing the vulnerability of people to natural hazards, is a major challenge, but something that must be done.

Building more resilient communities cannot simply be a top-down process, however. An important theme of this book is the value of bottom-up initiatives, and the importance of building local capacity to deal with natural hazards. Immediately after a disaster there are many things that affected people cannot do, and they do need help from other actors: the central government, as well as the international community. Yet it is a mistake to view them as passive victims. This is an important point that Patralekha Chatterjee considers in her chapter: ‘sometimes, unwittingly, we impose permanent victimhood on the disaster-affected. Disasters, like other crises, also throw up opportunities for empowerment.’ Indeed, this point can be extended to a more systemic observation: natural disasters are certainly crises, but they need not be complete catastrophes if they are also taken as opportunities: a chance to respond, to build back better, to address societal problems that leave certain people more vulnerable and marginalised.

One of the priorities for action identified in the *Hyogo Framework* was to ‘use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels’. *Disaster Risk Management – Conflict and Cooperation* directly contributes to this important goal. Suman Ranjan Sensarma and Atanu Sarkar have compiled a valuable collection that successfully highlights a range of significant issues that arise in the context of responding to, and preparing for, natural disasters. By incorporating a diverse range of perspectives and case studies, this volume provides the kind of knowledge that is needed for building a world that is better able to handle the massive challenge that natural disasters pose.

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