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Title	Disaster risk governance : strengthening collaboration with non-state actors
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Citation	Jonatan A. Lassa. (2014). Disaster risk governance : strengthening collaboration with non-state actors. (RSIS Commentaries, No. 065). RSIS Commentaries. Singapore: Nanyang Technological University.
Date	2014
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10220/19945
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No. 065/2014 dated 7 April 2014

Disaster Risk Governance: Strengthening Collaboration with Non-State Actors

By Jonatan A. Lassa

Synopsis

The increasing use of disaster risk governance today suggests that there is a deeper problem with how disasters are being managed. It does not mean governments have been ineffective. But they do have to function better through strong collaboration with the wider communities to reduce risks.

Commentary

THERE HAS been a shift in the framing of disaster reduction from a management approach to one focusing on governance and institutions. This suggests a deeper and bigger problem. This problem lies in the fact that vulnerable countries have been facing a rise in disaster risks. In my view, however, the problem is not the risks but the institutions and types of institutionalism that shape the modes of disaster risk governance.

While risks are increasing globally, its distribution has been unequally distributed according to class, gender, power and different social markers. The grand vision in governing disaster reduction is that we want to see a world in which, when the totality of risks cannot be fully eliminated, the risks are reduced to an acceptable and manageable level that ensures sustainable human security.

Governance Discourse in the Hyogo Framework For Action

Disaster governance discourse is manifested in the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR), in particular the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). Its Priority Action Number 1 (HFA1) is to "Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation". The national institutional and legislative frameworks come first under Priority Action 1.

The paradigm behind HFA1 is that governments should take bold efforts administratively and politically to reduce the risks. However, after the Cold War, most governments, including those in the West, have been highly criticised due to their failures to protect their citizens from all types of problems and risks. Governments' behaviour to risks suggests that they do not always proactively provide incentives and resources required to reduce the risks.

In addition, the simple assumption that governments are fully rational institutions does exist in reality. Implicitly recognising governments' challenge, the HFA suggests that actors beyond governments get involved in risk

reduction through the mechanisms such as multi-sectoral national platforms where the memberships are open to governments/local governments, NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), private sectors, academia, motivated individuals etc.

HFA promotes more self-governance in risk reduction. It has an embedded vision where it endorses the idea that allows the community at risk to participate in sharing not only the future of risk knowledge generation but also DRR policy formulation. Combining these hybrid powers - beyond government - with the participation of communities at risk is likely to form the basis of desired disaster risk governance today.

Governance of everything

There is an observable 'puritanism' in governance studies arising from concern with the overuse of the term 'governance' as seen in published papers, the media, conference papers and donors meeting. One can easily find terms such as food governance, food security governance, climate governance, nuclear governance, water governance, global governance and aid governance.

Seven years ago, the concept of governance was hardly used, especially in conjunction with disaster risks. A google search threw up only three to five hits. Initially the embedded meaning was to marry good governance with disaster management. The vision was to ensure effective disaster management, more accountability and less corrupt practice by governments, while governments should ensure the public voice is heard and the media can play more roles in communicating the dangers of disasters globally.

Governance in this sense refers to how to govern public affairs through different routes where other actors such as civil society, the private sector, the media and citizens play significant complementary roles. Governance refers to styles and characters of governing public affairs. Government should function (for the benefit of the society at large) through strong collaboration with the relevant non-state actors.

Collective action of the hybrid actors has been the focus of the HFA over the last 10 years. In this context, one of the long-lasting questions in disaster risk studies is how governments work and/or how to make governments work and how governments take steps to be a creative power that steers the rest of the actors to effectively and efficiently reduce disaster risks.

Future of disaster governance studies and policy

The coming expert meeting in Singapore for the 2015 Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) on 10-11 April 2014, supported by UNISDR and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is timely. One of its key propositions is to reconceptualise and reframe disaster risks and the practice of disaster risk management (DRM).

Based on existing knowledge gaps in DRR and resilience, the following points can be considered:

- Sustained change in risk reduction will not only depend on incentives and political will and CSO participation. The modern government's machinery namely 'disastocracy' (or disaster-related bureaucracy) has been a key part in reducing/amplifying risks. However, this has been barely studied and understood. Therefore studying government and public administration behaviour has been more relevant today in studying disaster risk in a changing climate.
- In the recent turn to adopt a more complex hybrid risk governance model, the steering roles of governments needs to be complemented by other actors such as NGOs, especially so in the developing world. This complementary role should also be strengthened. At the same time funders need to support critical views such as from 'independent' think tanks and academia, including those that are linked to existing policy brokers or DRR policy entrepreneurs.
- The world has been getting more complex. Climate change has started to 'climatise' traditional disaster risks and has created a new risk reduction regime. As a result, disaster risks have been governed through multiple ways ranging from disaster management institutions to the insurance market, civil society, military cooperation and global environmental institutions. However, there has been very little exploration concerning the increasing complexity of disaster risk reduction.

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