
Addressing Homelessness through Disaster Discourses: The Role of Social Capital and Innovation in Building Urban Resilience and Addressing Homelessness

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› **Abstract** *Natural disasters and homelessness are two urban pathogens witnessed in most large cities. While at first glance they may be seen as two separate policy domains, they can also be interlinked. A conceptual analysis of this inter-linkage is necessary before we start imagining and giving shape to holistic approaches to address them. This think piece focuses on the notion of resilience-building through social networking and innovation, especially when initiated by adopting housing-led initiatives.*

› **Key words** *Natural disaster, vulnerability, resilience, housing, social innovation*

Introduction

Natural disasters are becoming more frequent and threatening worldwide, and Europe, specifically, is threatened by a series of natural hazards; while Northern and Central Europe are more at risk of storms, floods and extreme temperatures, Southern Europe is mainly vulnerable to earthquakes and wildfires (EM-DAT, 2012). Against this background of risk, Europe is also threatened by a number of socioeconomic risks such as a lack of adequate and affordable accommodation, high unemployment rates and increased poverty, the extreme form of which is homelessness. Can these phenomena be interlinked? At first glance it would seem that natural and social

phenomena should be addressed separately. Indeed, natural causes are an inherent element of disaster phenomena, while homelessness has systemic, social and individual causes. However, untangling the links between poverty, homelessness and disaster vulnerability is an interesting exercise to test alternative approaches to treating the structural causes of both problems simultaneously.

Disaster Discourse

Disaster discourse involves debates and interpretations of what disasters really are, how to measure their impact, and how to address the impact in an efficient and effective way. The dominant paradigm in disaster research is characterized by “a straightforward acceptance of natural disaster as a result of extremes in geophysical processes” and a technocratic view that the only way to address the problematic is by public policy application of geophysical and engineering knowledge (Hewitt, 1983, pp.5-7, cited in Delica-Willison and Willison, 2004). The main assumption is that natural and social domains are separate entities. Dividing the social from the natural has led to the construction of hazards as disorder, namely as interruptions of order by a natural world that is external to the human world (Oliver-Smith, 2004), or as indiscriminate ‘acts of God’ that affect communities in a random way (Fothergill and Peek, 2004).

This rhetoric ultimately leads to some perverse responses to disasters; first, it may lead to policies and practice that only address symptoms but are hesitant to target the structural causes of vulnerability to hazards (Oliver-Smith, 2004). In addition, we enter a vicious cycle where too much emphasis is put on natural processes, while the social framework within which these processes manifest themselves is neglected (Oliver-Smith, 2004; Masozera *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, this produces, as Swyngedouw (2006, p.117) eloquently describes it, “a spectacularized vision of the dystopian city whose fate is directly related to faith in the administrations, engineers and technicians who make sure the taps keeps flowing and land keeps being ‘developed’”.

However, in the 1980s, new scholarship reoriented disaster discourse by questioning the spirit of the dominant paradigm. Disaster phenomena are increasingly analysed through the lens of coupled human-environmental systems, and disaster planning is being sketched not only by intervening in physical domains, but also by changing and modifying societal forces; in disaster terms, this means reducing vulnerability through strengthening resilience (Haque and Etkin, 2007).

The newly emerged paradigm introduces and examines the notions of vulnerability and resilience with the aim of showing how disasters can be perceived within the broader patterns of society (Masozera *et al.*, 2007). A commonly accepted definition

of vulnerability in the disaster context, produced by Blaikie *et al.* (2005), is a person's or group's incapacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of determinants (social, economic and political) that define the level to which one's life and livelihood is put at risk by a discrete and identifiable natural process. Herein, the time parameter plays an important role. Since damage to livelihood, and not just life and property, is an issue, the more vulnerable groups are those that also find it hardest to reconstruct their livelihoods following disaster (Blaikie *et al.*, 2005).

On the other hand, resilience can be defined as the ability of people to withstand, prepare for, and bounce back from natural hazards (Colten and Sumpter, 2009). However, the political activation of vulnerable groups and affiliated third sector organisations in the governance of disaster intervention is currently being reduced, resulting in affected communities being perceived as victims without resources or resourcefulness. People's struggles and bottom-up strategies to cope with adverse conditions remain little noticed and understudied. Without a proper understanding of them, policy- and decision-makers are more likely to resort to stereotyped responses to disaster phenomena (Corbett, 1988 in Blaikie *et al.*, 2005).

Poverty and vulnerability can be regarded as two sides of the same coin. The same rhetoric applies to poverty and resilience. For example, a poor family who has insufficient income cannot afford to own land in a safer location or invest in protections for their dwelling. Moreover, poor people do not have the required economic standing that would allow them to mitigate the negative consequences of hazards (Watts, 1983, cited in Delica-Willison and Willison, 2004). Other examples include the absence of effective state protection (for example, in relation to weak access to information or resources/benefits due to bureaucratic obstacles), being forced to engage in dangerous livelihoods, or receiving only minimal entitlements. The losses for the poorest and the most vulnerable are frequently smaller in absolute terms when compared with wealthier people, but they are proportionally larger, especially in terms of the recovery process (Blaikie *et al.*, 2005). Vulnerability analysis, therefore, is a broad theoretical approach to investigating environmental hazards coupled with questions of social inequalities (Bolin, 2006). It also moves the focus of the disaster discourse from 'risky' regions, to individuals or social groups that are 'at risk' (e.g. Kasperson *et al.*, 1995, cited in Forsyth, 2008).

The resilience analysis is a conceptual approach to examining how communities organize themselves by mobilizing social networks and immediate resources to address future hazards (Delica-Willison and Willison, 2004). This approach opens a discussion on what role those people vulnerable to natural hazards should play in forming disaster policies and discourses.

Most often, the socioeconomic means that poor people need in order to secure their livelihoods are rarely 'handed down' to them through hereditary lines (Blaikie *et al.*, 2005). Quoting Swyngedouw (2009, p.606) "neither freedom nor equality are offered, granted or distributed. It can only be conquered. Real changes are born when those who are not equally included in the existing sociopolitical order, demand their right to equality". This is especially relevant for the recovery/reconstruction era, during which people must not be assumed to be passive recipients of aid while also being constrained by an ambiguous political economy. On the contrary, as Blaikie *et al.* (2005) rightly highlight, the pattern of access in every society is the result of struggles over resources. The combined knowledge of a society about the risks it faces and the means to prepare for and respond to the distress often produced in the aftermath of a disaster are fundamental to understanding how resilient a group may be (McIntosh, 2000, cited in Colten and Sumpter, 2009).

But how can resilience-building be initiated, supported and sustained? Disasters represent emblematic moments that shed light on socioeconomic dysfunctions. I argue that a progressive way to embark on institutional transformation to address these dysfunctions lies in the opportunities the recovery period provides in connection to issues like housing. The creation of platforms for exchanging views on addressing immediate housing needs following a disaster is key in collectively learning how to deal with future risk and unpredictability. It also helps reorganize and bring into focus new paradigms based on a participatory understanding of the conditions generating the disaster, as well as new alternatives to disaster governance models aimed at building resilience. The reconstruction stage is an excellent opportunity to test resilience-building among those affected and to consider the creation of new institutions for disaster risk reduction through socially innovative interventions in the housing domain.

Building Houses, Building Resilience

There is a broad consensus on the fact that housing is of key significance in one's quality of life. Besides having wide economic, social, cultural and personal importance, housing construction techniques and location can also influence environmental sustainability and natural disaster prevention (Erguden, 2001; Bullard and Wriht, 2005, cited in Masozera *et al.*, 2007).

However, the issue of housing is becoming more and more problematic for low-income households around the world. These social groups often occupy mobile or poorly-constructed houses that are easily destroyed or readily incur damages from storms or other disasters (Pastor *et al.*, 2006, cited in Masozera *et al.*, 2007); urban squatter camps, for example, are usually concentrated in the most precarious areas

on marginal urban or peri-urban land, and homeless people living in cardboard boxes, under expressways or in inadequate hostels can be witnessed in nearly all cities. For homeless people, who constitute the poorest of the poor in an urban environment, not only are their lives in constant threat during a storm or flood, but they are also at risk of losing any possessions they may have accumulated (Phillips, 1996, cited in Morrow 1999). After a disaster, they are even less likely to find a place to settle and the numbers of those who are homeless can be expected to increase (Cherry and Cherry, 1996, cited in Morrow, 1999).

Any attempts to provide safe and affordable housing will inevitably be subject to two challenges: 1) official regulations governing the acquisition and use of land for housing, which often limit its availability and further increase its price and 2) housing, as Satterthwaite (2010) rightly points out, refers not only to 'the home' but also to 'access to income' and 'access to services', and for those with limited or unstable incomes, the location of the house in relation to where its dwellers work is often as important as the quality of the house and the security of tenure. The problem of these top-down approaches is that they emphasise what they can do *for* the victims, and not what needs to be done *by* them (Satterthwaite *et al.*, 2010), yet any really effective disaster risk reduction intervention is not just what a local government does but also what it encourages and supports others to do (Hardoy *et al.*, 2010). The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights also notes that, unless disaster aid and civil protection mechanisms are quickly adapted to enable working with the untitled, the unregistered, the unlisted and the undocumented, they can function to support and even reinforce the inequalities and vulnerabilities that existed prior to the disaster (Satterthwaite, 2010).

An interesting angle from which to conceptualize alternatives to the housing problematic is Turner's analysis (1972); he suggests that the word 'housing' can be used as a noun or a verb. When used as a noun, housing describes a commodity. When used as a verb, it describes the process of housing. Consequently, any housing measurement criterion will differ according to the meaning of the word adopted. In the first case, the measures of housing products are the physical standards commonly used, while from a verbal perspective, the vital aspects of housing are not quantifiable at all (like meeting the needs of people).

In a disaster context, and especially against the background of disaster reconstruction, it is crucial to follow Turner's approach and distinguish between what things are, materially speaking, and what they can do in people's lives. This approach raises, however, an important question: who will decide how these needs will be satisfied? The answer is twofold and depends on what interpretation one gives to the word 'housing'. If housing is treated as a noun, then different kinds of agencies will plan for and provide for people's housing needs with the result that homeless

people become consumers or passive beneficiaries. On the other hand, if housing is treated as a verb, decision-making power is equally distributed and homeless people may participate in directing the construction of their own houses (Turner, 1972). The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies again echoes implicitly the core of Turner's idea: "[i]t is increasingly recognized that the meeting of shelter needs in the aftermath of disaster should be seen as a process of 'sheltering' undertaken by the affected household with varying types of material, technical, financial and social assistance as appropriate rather than simply the provision of a per-determined shelter 'product'" (in Satterthwaite, 2010, p.25).

This logic could be also applied in the European context. The Housing First approach, which treats stable housing provision as a priority, is incrementally gaining ground in several Europe member states. If this housing-led approach is coupled with the support of social innovation (meaning innovative initiatives that are social both in their means and their ends) and applied in a post-disaster background, then it is highly possible that Europeans will have at their disposal a wider array of choices as to which can be the most economically, environmentally and socially sustainable way to rebuild a city (both physically and socially). This does not mean that any discussion comparing top-down and bottom-up approaches should be halted, but it is more to discuss how the coexistence of both processes can produce the optimal social outcome.

What Lessons for Homelessness can be Learned from Disaster Discourses?

An integration of disaster knowledge and homelessness is not yet fully adopted or understood in all social policy debates. This can be partly explained by the fact that both phenomena are already individually complex and dynamic. However, I argue that a critical epistemology to generate information about vulnerability to natural hazards in order to assist crucial developmental problems such as homelessness is necessary to better conceptualize urban complexities and synergetically address some of its social pathogens. This is a politicized acknowledgement of the co-production of environmental knowledge and social values in ways that, albeit in a wavering manner, attempt to reconstruct environmental interpretations and interventions in favour of vulnerable people, including homeless people. The latter are, thus, empowered by political ecologists through careful participatory research or through building political arenas where they can speak and shape the future knowledge generation (Escobar, 1996, cited in Forsyth, 2008). In this think piece, I deal with homelessness as a manifestation of social vulnerability to natural risks.

This provides the discussion on homelessness with new insights as to how the phenomenon can be conceptualized and addressed through the eyes of the ongoing disaster vulnerability/resilience paradigm.

Traditionally, vulnerability to hazards has been viewed and treated as more of a physical exposure to a natural threat. As such, there has been a dependence upon technological solutions to respond to disasters. Attempts to control floods, for example, have largely involved the construction of dams, reservoirs, levees and flood-protection structures (Anderson and Woodrow, 1989, cited in Delica-Willison and Willison, 2004). This pragmatic view of how to deal with disasters makes the natural hazard itself the principal object, and often treats the underlying causes of the dangerous situation as irrelevant and immaterial (Blaikie *et al.*, 2005). The scale and nature of vulnerable groups, as well as the complexity of urban processes and their capacity to increase or decrease risks from disasters, are generally ignored, and any links to jointly address urban problematics are inevitably missed.

However, not all extreme weather or geological events result in disasters (Bull-Kamanga *et al.*, 2003). Disasters only occur when a physical hazard meets a vulnerable population. People living certain types of housing – poor quality housing; insecure, hazardous and overcrowded housing; housing located on dangerous sites such as flood-plains, steep slopes and soft or unstable ground – are more vulnerable to disaster risk. Such housing is at greater risk from storms/high winds, earthquakes, landslides, floods and fires, and can also help facilitate disease transmission, which may lead to epidemics (Satterthwaite, 2010). Disasters thus produce even more homeless and vulnerable people. These are the ones who have survived but are unable to recover their livelihoods and do not have access to safe and affordable housing, credits and insurance (Walker 1989, cited in Wisner and Luke, 1993). Traditional risk assessment, focusing on magnitude, fails to account for the higher relative burden born by low income populations and those excluded from housing (Adger, 1996, cited in Masozera *et al.*, 2007).

The tendency to see an earthquake or flood as the disaster rather than the catalyst for disaster means missing the opportunity to conceive of disaster as an emblematic moment that sheds light on societal inequities witnessed both in pre-existing patterns of community settlement and in post-disaster recovery and reconstruction processes (Morrow 1999, Bull-Kamanga *et al.*, 2003). Natural processes need to be understood in conjunction with the social production of vulnerability. People who are economically marginalised (such as rough sleepers or urban squatters) tend also to be vulnerable in relation to their access to livelihoods and resources before and after a disaster hits, yet are likely to be a low priority for government interventions intended to deal with hazard mitigation (Blaikie *et al.*, 2005).

In order to overcome disaster vulnerability, the root causes of poverty and homelessness must be addressed. Even though there are many practical and political obstacles, there is, at least, a clear agenda for the required changes (Green and Warner 1999, cited in Hilhorst, 2003). Homelessness is identified as a major factor in increasing vulnerability to hazards, and homeless people or the housing excluded are more exposed to the risk of disaster. As homelessness is the most extreme manifestation of poverty, a poor, homeless individual or family does not have sufficient income to buy or rent safer housing or improve their dwellings, either before or after a natural disaster. Thus, when a major cyclone or strong earthquake hits a poor area, there is a high probability that their house will be damaged and that they will be rendered even poorer. Poverty will therefore always be a problem and addressing vulnerability also necessitates addressing poverty, and hence homelessness (Watts, 1983, cited in Delica-Willison and Willison, 2004).

For people who cannot afford to pay for repairs, reconstruction or relocation, it may take years to recover from the aftermath of disasters. In fact, the effects of a disaster may still be felt by the next generation because of a lack of resources to recover (Adger, 1996, cited in Masozera *et al.*, 2007). Newly homeless people run the risk of getting into the 'homeless system', which is largely centred around service provision consisting mainly of temporary accommodation and emergency interventions. This type of provision (required due to, *inter alia*, natural disasters) should serve only as a short-term gateway to a permanent accommodation solution within a reasonable time frame, wherein people are not left in a vicious circle of precarious conditions and insecurity. This logic could simultaneously apply both to a disaster mitigation strategy and to a homelessness prevention tool. Hence, safe housing with security of tenure can be seen as the initial step for, and the gluing element between decreasing vulnerability and resolving situations of homelessness.

The difficulty with the vulnerability discourse comes when one tries to apply the concept of vulnerability to concrete situations. How can disaster and urban planners as well as social workers effectively work together and socio-spatially identify and appraise the unique patterns that result in accentuated risk for some categories of people in their communities?

A first step could be the development of a community vulnerability inventory (Geis, 1997, cited in Morrow, 1999) or access profile (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994; Morrow *et al.*, 1994, cited in Morrow, 1999). Planners could maintain databases reflecting the extent to which highly vulnerable groups are represented in each locality. An example might be the mapping of rough sleepers and people living in precarious settlements and pin-pointing where these high-risk groups are concentrated. The resulting community vulnerability maps can become invaluable tools for emergency

managers and disaster responders, allowing informed estimates of anticipated community needs at all levels of crisis mitigation, response and recovery (FEMA, 1997, cited in Morrow, 1999).

The proposed identification and targeting of at-risk groups does not imply a lack of agency on their part. Truly 'disaster-resistant communities' (Geis, 1997, cited in Morrow, 1999) depend on meaningful grassroots activism. Effective hazard mitigation and emergency response must begin with an acknowledgement and understanding of the complex ways in which social, economic and political structures result in important differences in the vulnerability of those they are meant to protect and serve. One example of a grassroots strategy would be to use the current movement towards sheltering people in their local neighbourhoods as a basis for organizing neighbourhood response networks. Planners and managers who make full use of citizen expertise and energy will more effectively improve the safety and survival chances of their communities (Morrow, 1999). And this participatory process is the building block of the notion of resilience.

Resilience is understood to be the degree of disturbance an urban socio-ecological system can absorb while maintaining its essential structures and functions. Returning to the same state that existed prior to the event demonstrates a failure to utilize the knowledge gained through the experience to address previous dysfunctions. Thus, a resilient community can be seen as one that, while similar in many respects following a disaster to any other community, will intentionally use what it learned to change itself (including the limitation of pre-disaster structural homelessness, and the prevention of new, post-disaster homelessness).

A combination of interaction, coordination and an understanding of the organizational capabilities of homeless people themselves helps build social capital and provides the basis for coordinated prevention and rehabilitation planning and enhanced resilience (Baker and Refsgaard, 2007). There are many examples demonstrating the resilience of homeless people around the world, especially in the less developed world, where these form federations in order to negotiate right to land, shelter and basic services within their cities. Their aim is to rebuild communities in the post-disaster era and safeguard the right to safe tenure. The latter is of particular importance because there are worries about the increased risk of eviction for those that did not have secure land rights before the disaster. Homeless people engage with micro-finance instruments and are involved in developing life-size models of houses that can be low-cost, can satisfy governmental safety regulations and can be built incrementally (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2009).

Access to permanent housing is a shield both against natural risks and a vicious circle of poverty. Socially innovative initiatives in the housing domain have the potential to give people the self-confidence and organization to demand more at a

later stage in relation to other spheres of their predicament (such as access to health care, livelihood opportunities etc.). Therefore, housing-led approaches could be considered the starting point for a circle of resilience in which different elements of development support and augment each other through improvement in the quality of life of the homeless community (Baker and Refsgaard, 2007).

Conclusion

Natural disasters put the social spotlight on affected communities, but also open a window of opportunity to address fundamental problems such as homelessness that during normal times seem impossible to address (Pomeroy *et al.*, 2006). There is thus a need for a better understanding of how social, economic and political structures construct urban risk. Following that, disaster prevention or recovery provides the best platforms on which pro-active and pro-poor approaches can be adopted to address urban risk in the most integrated way.

Starting from the perspective of the housing domain, individual and community empowerment can be central to building resilience through social mobilization, coordination, participation and social innovation. People can take their destinies in their own hands, join with other social actors and develop innovative ways to address their predicaments. Echoing Blaikie *et al.* (2005), a simple limitation to voting every few years is not a sustainable approach; the sustainable reduction of disaster vulnerability, of which homelessness or risk of homelessness is a core parameter, requires the full, day-to-day participation of ordinary people and their affiliated organizations, and an ongoing struggle to increase choice.

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