

This book has been expected for a long time: a book dedicated to presenting academic studies and essays on risk and disaster in Brazil, elaborated from social and critical perspectives, many of them following the guidelines of what is called “the paradigm of vulnerability” and notions as to the “social construction of risk”. In addition, the development of a large and growing group of academics and practitioners is also extremely hopeful and pertinent, as they assume visions and commitments that question both the traditional connotation of the phrase “natural disaster” and an exclusively technocratic approach focused narrowly on physical threats by themselves as causes of disaster. Writing the preface to a venture of this nature that expands the foundation of critical research on the subject of disasters is both a pleasure and an honor, and I congratulate all involved.

There is an interesting background regarding the progress made in studies on risk and disasters in Latin America and the Caribbean and on advances and changes in the assumptions and concepts that underlie government action in this region of the world. This is, among other things, the relative – or absolute – backwardness in the largest countries in our region – Brazil, Argentina and Mexico – as compared to the Andean and Central American countries concerning the advance towards critical understanding of disasters. Up until a short time ago, progress in critical understanding of disasters was also below the Latin American and Caribbean regional average in other Southern Cone countries: Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay.

It is a known fact that an important, if not fundamental, stimulus for the paradigm shift in the interpretation of risks and disasters in the Latin American and Caribbean region (LAC) was the creation of the Network of Social Studies in Disaster Prevention – LA RED – in 1992, in San José, Costa Rica. The inaugural meeting was attended only by 15 people, reflecting the very small number of identifiable people who advocated critical work and interpretations with a view from the human sciences and with an emphasis on the social. Responding, elaborating, expanding, socializing and localizing ideas and concepts from the Northern Hemisphere and Europe, LA RED managed to promote a radical transformation in the discourse and proposals for action of many countries in the LAC region. LA RED’s publications, meetings, research and training have been influential to the point that today the contents of many of the new laws and public policies developed in Central America and the Andean countries from the mid-1990s onwards have reflected the basic concepts that LA RED developed (see

Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Central America in general, for example). It is different in the Southern Cone countries where such transitions can be seen only much more recently (see Paraguay and Uruguay, in particular).

The inaugural LA RED meeting was attended by a representative from the Centre for Research on Disasters at the Federal University in Campina Grande in Brazil's Northeast region, with support from the International Development Research Centre in Canada. However, this was the only person present from the Southern Cone countries and identification of socially-oriented, critical research in Brazil and the other Southern Cone countries was more difficult than in other parts of the LAC region. Although in the early to late 1990s a number of foci of critical research were identified in Brazil, the risk and disaster thematic has been dominantly approached until recently on the basis of technocratic and "physicalist" concepts, and humanitarian response concerns. Exceptions include work at the Lutheran University in Canoas in the south of the country focused more on technological risk. This was the case in Argentina also where the work of persons such as Hilda Herzer, rest in peace, from the 1980s onwards, was pioneering and innovative but almost unique and isolated from mainstream in that country.

Explaining this "anomaly" or delay in Brazil, other Southern Cone countries and a good part of Mexico is important and could be the subject of a specific research endeavor. How can we explain the overall lack of a critical approach in countries that contributed so much to the development of critical thought in the social sciences in the LAC region before, during and after the cruel dictatorships they suffered for years? Several hypotheses may be offered that help explain why these countries were so slow to take up critical work on the subject of risk and disasters.

A common feature among the Southern Cone countries was their experience of an era of brutal dictatorship. This could help explain the post-dictatorship domination of the armed forces in the constitution of the disaster theme, as well as in the domain of emergency response actions, but with little concern for prevention and mitigation of risk. Dealing with disasters could have been seen to be a socially relevant and humanitarian role for armed forces so identified with social domination and suffering for so many years.

A second hypothesis concerns the large size of many of the countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Mexico). Size might help explain their regional domination and intellectual isolation concerning thoughts generated abroad, in opposition to their own intellectual productions. This is the nationalism of knowledge and its autonomy, impenetrable from outside, and even less so by ideas generated and disseminated in small countries in other parts of the same region.

A third aspect of importance to the Southern Cone countries, except Chile and the Andean region of Argentina, was the perception that they were less disaster-prone because there were no volcanoes or major earthquakes. The

importance and impact of floods and droughts did not generate much interest in prevention issues at a time when engineering and structural measures applicable to earthquakes were the dominating ways of thinking and principle interventions among disaster management professionals.

A fourth hypothesis is that the creation of a nation-wide, transregional community of thought is more difficult in the case of large countries than in small countries. The relative isolation between the South, Northeast and Center-West regions of Brazil is large in the case of communication and intellectual discussion.

Fifthly, one may hypothesize that large countries have remained relatively isolated from the influences of projects and programs stimulated by international external agents such as PREDECAN (Project for Support to Disaster Prevention in the Andean Community) and through CEPREDENAC (Coordination Center for the Prevention of Natural Disasters in Central America). In Central America and the Andean countries these programs were important for introducing ideas based on the new concepts developed internationally through LA RED.

Finally, in the specific case of Brazil, a sixth factor could be that the linguistic academic and intellectual distance between the country and Hispanic Latin America has contributed to the lack of dissemination and integration of new ideas and notions.

The critical intellectual production that is presented in this book proves that the historical situation changes step by step, and a growing number of researchers from different parts of Brazil have been concerned with research according to new premises and schemes. It is laudable and important to have the results of a part of this research presented in a single volume, because it shows that there is a thinking community that transcends regional and local boundaries in Brazil. Proposals to create networks of researchers at the national level also confirm this. We know that the reform of laws on disasters in Brazil has been coupled with the ideas and recommendations present in the Sendai and Hyogo agreements, although in practice disaster response actions still dominate over prevention, showing what exists also in other countries with a long tradition of reform: the concept says one thing and actions in practice follow visions of the past. Path dependency and *status quo* are two patterns that are difficult to break within disaster risk management, now conceptually driven by *thinking about risk* but still dominated *in practice* by disaster *response* needs.

The basis of critical thinking based on the understanding of a continuum of risk – and hence of disaster – is the understanding that development, carried out in an unsustainable, unequal, exclusionary, marginalizing and increasingly transnational way, drives construction of risk in society. The “development”–risk relationship is nowadays becoming more and more a concatenation of causalities and impacts with a negative synergy created by the interrelationship

among threats of natural, socio-natural, technological and social basis, intensified by climate changes. The latter is a subject of great importance in Brazil, due to the incidence of hydro-meteorological and hydrogeological threats in the country.

The incorporation of theoretical and methodological contributions from the PAR (Pressure and Release) framework and FORIN (Forensic Investigations of Disasters) method in this book is of great importance and complements the significance of research presented here in different chapters, giving what I hope will be a renewed momentum in national research. Moreover, the published research results re-open, in several aspects, discussions about risk drivers and about how we understand of hazard, exposure and vulnerability. The themes of territorial and urban planning, environmental management, poverty reduction and investment transected by and integrated with risk knowledge and governance are present and illustrated through studies developed in different regions of the country.

What is the challenge to government and all of society presented by such comprehensive and critical research? And, what are the actions needed to reduce risk and disasters in LAC and the actions that should be adopted and strengthened in Brazil as the result of the emergence of a critical investigative base? Undoubtedly, this challenge involves inculcating the view of disaster risk as a collateral context accompanying particular forms of economic growth, of unequal “development”, where risk can often be seen as an inevitable product, even “congruent”, with the objectives and goals of “development” itself, and in which the double trend poverty-greed marks the poles and counterpoints of the construction of risk.

The spatial or territorial site that best expresses the construction of risk will be the urban, the city in its macro, micro, and every day expressions. With a current society more than 75% urban, Brazil promises to increase this percentage with the growth of both consolidated marginal areas, many located in areas of high exposure to hazards, as well as areas of luxury and high standards of construction and infrastructure. All these areas will gradually face greater risk as a combination of natural and technological hazards interact with vulnerability in urban systems and their residents’ livelihoods. The interrelationship and synergy between all parts of a city guarantee the horizontal and vertical transference of risk. The city reflects contrasts of luxury and poverty under conditions of poor governance: a context of urban income disparities combined with social and spatial segregation.

A challenge and dilemma for disaster risk reduction (DRR) or for whomever promotes risk reduction, is to understand to what degree and how the disaster risk materializing in the territory is linked to the development process, how it has become established and continues to establish itself in LAC today. Historically constructed already existing risk, constructed by root causes and by

more recent risk drivers that concern processes of territorial planning, environmental management, poverty, public investment and bad governance, is already real and announces or is a prelude for future loss and damage. The options for its reduction are limited due to the high cost and the lack of real alternatives in the face of the economic, social and political limitations of most of the countries today and competing demands for increasingly scarce public resources.

With regard to future risk (risk that will still be constructed by territorial and sectoral, social and economic growth and change along with the expansion of infrastructure and housing), what are the real options for a prospective management that can predict or control it? The question is complicated by the fact that current conditions of risk are likely to persist and be extenuated by the forcing driver of climate change, recalling that hydro-meteorological threats are still triggering more than 80% of the impacts in the region. To what extent are the basic conditions of risk intrinsic to the model of development promoted by society, and so, inevitably, become part of that model? What options exist, acting on the margins of this development model, to mitigate the effects, although the old model persists? There *are* options for action, working at the margin, to control risk under such conditions as the neoliberal development model imposes on residents of the previously excluded “informal” city as it expands and dominates. However, what are these options when the gap between rich and poor increases, income from primary products and export minerals decrease, the “agricultural” border expands and broadens the irrational exploitation of natural resources in countries such as Brazil and Peru?

These questions must be asked in a context where the evidence shows risk has been constantly on the rise over the last decades with a dearth of sufficient action to impede it. In such conditions what really are the options for control in the future if control in the past was not overly successful and the development model has changed very little. These are questions meant not to discourage, but rather to encourage us to think more dynamically, in a far more integrated fashion about risk and development processes. If risk reduction or its control in the future depends on a change of development model, and DRR experts are generally not “political”, how can we ensure effective action or, at least within the limits of the development model, reduction of its negative effects on thousands of people, through the action of technical, academic, non-governmental organizations and civil society? How can we move towards a more agile and conscientious relation between technical expertise and political astuteness?

It is glaringly urgent to take up the challenge of building evidence and disseminating concepts of disaster risk in such a way that they are not seen in society and by governments as marginal issues, as disconnected from or in competition with other problems for attention and resources. The effort to put the issue on the table for discussion has caused risk and disaster to suffer hyper-sectorization, that is to their becoming yet something else that joins the

queue of subjects or concerns to add to policy agendas, rather than something that is fully integral with and central to economic and social development: both a cause of unsustainability and, with reduction, a contribution to sustainability. Research and education are required that re-conceptualize disaster and risk, incorporating and integrating risk into routine discussions of development and management. The advantages of Disaster Risk Management (DRM) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) should be presented as contributions that go beyond risk reduction and include potential benefits such as wealth creation, reduction of inequalities, job creation, improved access to basic services as well as other aspects of DRR's triple dividend.<sup>1</sup>

We hope that this collection of essays will be useful in stimulating and arousing greater interest in this subject of risk and disaster in the Brazil and all of LAC, as well as greater research efforts. We are sure it will be.

1. (1) Avoiding losses when disasters strike; (2) stimulating economic activity thanks to reduced disaster risk; and (3) development co-benefits, or uses, of a specific DRM investment. See: <https://www.odi.org/publications/9599-triple-dividend-resilience-development-goals-multiple-benefits-disaster-risk-management>.