

# Disaster studies and its discontents: the postcolonial state in hazard and risk creation

Ayesha Siddiqi

## **Abstract**

Recent work on disasters, in postcolonial, communities dealing with conflict and underlying insecurity is providing robust evidence to re-work and re-imagine a postcolonial disaster studies. From insurgency affected Southern Philippines living with typhoons, to post-accord Colombia suffering from floods - these disasters are only the most recent manifestation of the long-standing violence inflicted on these communities by Imperial state and/or market forces. In the peripheries of the postcolonial state these typhoons, drought or floods cannot be seen as isolated processes: climate disasters caused by natural hazards that intersected with contexts of local vulnerability. Rather they must be seen as part of a much broader system of denial of rights and a history of Imperial domination and control. Here, natural hazards are not separate or apart from the conflict, nor is the conflict contributing in unique and distinct ways to local vulnerability, rather it is spanning both, dissolving the line between global *natural* hazard and local *social* vulnerability.

For the postcolonial subject the 'lived experience' of hazard-based disasters, is not a neat interplay between natural and social phenomenon but a messy continuum of marginalisation and brutalisation of dominant state and market forces that define the state-citizen relationship in the postcolony.

## **Introduction**

This paper draws on two and a half years of research examining disasters in areas affected by conflict and insurgency. The project started in the southern island of Mindanao, in the Philippines and was later extended to Colombia. The 'lived experience' of disasters in

communities living with the everyday physical and structural violence of armed conflict, reveals a cultivated and long standing relationship between ‘natural’ hazards and the dominant forces of state and market. This continued experience of marginalisation, is at points lived through ‘natural’ hazards and at different other points experienced as displacement and dispossession, forcing one to re-think the extent to which disasters are a mix of hazards and vulnerabilities and implicating the postcolonial state in the process.

Over the last two decades much has been written on the relative historical neglect of political questions, within the study of disasters (Olson 2000, Cohen and Werker 2008, Carrigan 2013 etc), this has also been accompanied by a lively debate informing a more fundamentally political study of disasters, particularly in their ability to “transform” political systems in the post-disaster moment (Pelling and Dill 2010, Pelling 2011, Pelling and Blackburn 2018). Much of my own work has, been an examination of the latter, through a state-citizen relationship framework trying to better understand how disasters impact social contracts in the postcolonial world (Siddiqi 2013; 2014; 2018; 2019 and Siddiqi and Canuday 2018). The argument in this paper emerges from this analytical framework, one that understands risk and vulnerability as defined and ‘lived’ through the state-citizen relationship. Here though, I want to draw on Oliver-Smith’s (2000) work to challenge the mainstream understanding of processes that make disasters, and use Bonilla’s (2020) “coloniality of disaster” to question, the role of dominant forces such as the state – especially the state - in not just creating the vulnerability but also the very hazard that drives disasters in the postcolonial world.

Qualitative data for this research was collected at local Barrio (*Barangay*) level in the southern island of Mindanao in the Philippines in 2016-2017. The focus was on one municipality in southeastern Mindanao that was affected by Typhoon Pablo (2012), a Category 5 cyclone, the strongest ever tropical storm to make landfall on the region since records began. This municipality has also been at the centre of the longest running armed insurgency in Asia, between the Marxist armed group the New People’s Army (NPA) and the Filipino state.

In Colombia, data was collected at a town/village level in northern Antioquia Department – in the north west of the country - and Putumayo Department, on Colombia’s southern border with Ecuador. Research participants in the towns and villages in the two different regions studied were living with similar forms of conflict dynamics, driven by armed insurgencies such as (now officially demobilised but with dissidents active) *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), *bandas criminales* (BACRIM), narco-traffickers and various paramilitary groups, while the hazards that resulted in the disasters were slightly different. In northern Antioquia, research participants had suffered from flooding in May 2018 that displaced tens of thousands of people and left hundreds other homeless (Daniels, 2018). While in the capital city of Putumayo Department, communities had been affected by a deadly landslide that resulted in over 200 casualties and thousands affected.

### ***Re-thinking disasters***

Literature tracing the genealogy of disaster studies follows a somewhat familiar path. There is usually some mention of the discipline emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, primarily out of the ‘Strategic Bombing Surveys of World War II’ (Bolin 2006) and the ‘US military’s practical concerns about wartime situations’ (Quarantelli 1992). Then there is a nod to the growth and development of sociological research in this area that took place primarily against the backdrop of ‘Cold War militarization’. Evidence of military thinking and its significant influence in disaster studies can be seen well into the 1970s (Carrigan 2015, 119), from ‘contingency’ plans taken from war-time scenarios, to the reactive command-and-control style interventions, or even in the extent to which disaster planners were being drawn from the armed forces (Galliard 2019). Finally, it is acknowledged that this historical evolution of the discipline tends to cast a long shadow over the first few decades of work on disasters, which was disproportionately dominated by a focus on studying (i) geophysical processes responsible for hazards, (ii) engineering physical and social ‘solutions’ to manage these hazardous processes or (iii) emergency and crisis planning to manage the fallout of these processes (Hewitt 1983).

There is also consensus that the critiques of this literature in the 1970s, from a number of contributors to this volume, were instrumental in bringing about a paradigm shift in disaster studies. Carrigan (2015) refers to this scholarship as emerging from “materialist-inspired geographers, anthropologists and historians such as Kenneth Hewitt, Anthony Oliver-Smith and Ben Wisner” who reframed thinking on disasters, from focusing primarily on the “natural” *agents* responsible for environmental destruction to the socio-political *processes* putting people in harms way (120). This vulnerability paradigm moved the conversation away from the physical and extreme events that overwhelm society to the study of power and resources that determine who in society is impacted by disasters and how (Wisner, Westgate, and O’Keefe 1976 and Hewitt 1983).

Such an agenda was not only a ‘critical departure’ from the mainstream understanding of disasters but was also radical in the way it placed politics at the front and centre of any study of disasters. Reflecting on the last forty years of disasters research, a recent piece pays tribute to the pioneering works on the vulnerability approach by emphasising their direct relationship to another movement that emerged in the post-war era - postcolonial theory (Fannon 1961 and Said 1971). The latter was instrumental in shaping a conceptual understanding of hazard based disasters, centring on unequal power relations, within societies and especially between the Global North and the postcolonial states of the Global South (Bankoff 2002, Galliard 2019). The vulnerability approach has come to be known as the single most important development that enabled the field of disaster studies to move forward by opening it up to all types of scholarly engagement from outside technical sciences, from literature and cultural studies to economics and political science, hence the importance of this agenda cannot be overstated.

If the study of disasters is a study of complexity, no where is this complexity more evident than in trying to grasp the utility of the vulnerability paradigm itself. Recent scholarship, has raised important questions on what were once considered the most sacred principles of the study of disasters. In particular, by asking if we have indeed “grasped the full implications of our critique of the hazard paradigm, or, rather, are we perpetuating some of its core and most problematic tenets? Have we actually taken on the challenge set up for us 40 years ago by the pioneers of the vulnerability paradigm?” Questions that have even led to the

worrying conclusion that despite lofty ambitions, radical agendas and the significant influence of postcolonial studies, “disaster studies still mirrors a Western hegemony that we were meant to contest in the first place” (Galliard 2019).

This recent critical work has tended to particularly highlight the ways in which the ‘vulnerability approaches’ have been co-opted as systems of knowledge that render ‘life amenable to government interventions’ (Grove 2014a, pg 199). These knowledge systems focus on preparing people and societies to manage exposure and discursively construct life as a problem that must be secured against unpredictability. An understanding of vulnerability that assesses degree and scope of exposure to hazards has been hollowed out of its social and political roots (Galliard 2019). Instead, what remains is a ‘biopolitical’ knowledge system that has been systematically depoliticised (Grove 2013 & Galliard 2010), most recently with the emergence of the resilience agenda (Grove 2014a).

The *radical* agenda that the vulnerability paradigm was espousing in its earlier days seems to have been either lost or neoliberalised along the way (Grove 2014b). Thus in spite of its vision, disaster studies has neither ended up being as radical, nor as critical as had been originally anticipated. In fact in a departure from its postcolonial theory inspired roots, disaster studies has even in some instances perpetuated the hegemony of Western thought and ideas in the Global South (Galliard 2019). Even at a time when interventions are increasingly being driven by national authorities, the policy discourse around disaster response is primarily dominated by Western agencies and finances, and “the postcolonial conception of disaster response as something ‘we’ do on behalf of ‘them’ has proved stubbornly difficult to shift” (Folley 2019).

The critique that disaster studies has busied itself in setting ‘realistic’ rather than the ‘radical’ expectations, set out by the vulnerability agenda, is a valid one. Scholars have defended this position in stating that “realistic expressions recognise that disasters are too powerful to be prevented, and thus societies need to adapt themselves and their actions to reduce their effects. As a result, climate change adaptation has been used since the mid-1990s” (Davis 2019). In some ways this thinking echoes the theoretical foundations of the hazards paradigm by accepting that society can only improve its learning on how to live and

deal with disasters, rather than challenge the very structural elements that create hazard and risk in the first place. Voices from the Global South have also tended to remain largely absent or under-represented in this area (Folley 2019).

Going further, this chapter illustrates that in complex postcolonial contexts a clear distinction between the *physical* hazard and *social* vulnerability (Cannon 1994) is neither obvious, nor helpful as an analytical tool. This division between a *physical* process that cannot be challenged and a *social* system that can, tends to provide a rationale for thinking that disasters are “too powerful” and overwhelm society. Thus, it shifts collective goals towards ‘building resilience’ and ‘adapting’ to hazard related devastation, rather than addressing the unequal historical processes that result in disasters. This framework that sharply splits a disaster between *natural* hazard and *social* vulnerability has received increased attention in literature tying disasters to anthropogenic climate change. In this context climate change is viewed as the mother of all natural hazards imbuing a renewed urgency and primacy to hazards thinking and its agenda (Ribot 2014). The problem with this increasingly dichotomised discussion of disasters is that the global is the site where the inevitable and overwhelming hazards take place, while the local is defined almost exclusively by its vulnerability. “The local is constructed as divergent from the developed North through its vulnerability, defined by its lack of the North’s resilience” (Branch 2018, S310).

This dichotomy between a global, natural hazard and local, social vulnerability in the climate change disaster discourse generates a new urgency around disasters that are seen to be linked to impending changing climate and those that are not. Thus locally significant environmental destruction of varying origins is rendered invisible or less important due to the, perceived far more, urgent threat of global warming related climate disasters. Even though the vulnerability approach makes clear the need to take the past, the local, and the social into account, the influence of climate-change thinking has inevitably resulted in a disciplinary evolution that privileges this *future*, the *global*, and the *natural* in contemporary disaster studies scholarship (Branch 2018) .

Dichotomies – temporal (past versus future), scalar (local versus global), ontological (socially constructed versus natural) have been central to the study of disasters. In fact newer perspectives have emerged that challenge and critique some of these dichotomies. Increasingly, “postcolonial disaster studies” (Carrigan 2015), “disaster colonialism” (Rivera 2021) and “coloniality of disaster” (Bonilla 2020) literatures seeks to resolve the tensions between (environmental) event and (historical) process by situating the former firmly within the wider processes of exploitation and subjugation. Yet it has also been noted that dichotomies present “the greatest obstacle” to a nuanced understanding of hazards related disaster today (Branch 2018). The sharp analytical breaks between social and natural, local and global, and past and future results in disaster thinking seeking to address those parts of the equation that seem most amenable to technical interventions, rather than engaging with a more “multi-dimensional, context specific and historically relevant understanding of climatic disasters” (Siddiqi 2014). Drawing on this critique of dichotomised disaster analysis, I want to suggest that hazards and vulnerability are better understood as interwoven, deeply overlapping phenomena subject to similar constitutive social processes that emerge from the very nature of the social contract between the postcolonial state and it’s (subaltern) citizens.

In the ‘complex’ and ‘compound’ disasters taking place in the postcolonial world, hazards are often far less *natural* and can only be adequately understood within the context of long existing racial and colonial inequalities (Bonilla 2020), formalised by the state-citizen social contract in the postcolonial world. Recognising the politics of *hazard creation* enables disaster studies to address two of it’s most primary critiques. Firstly it enables a better representation of the concerns, if not the voice, of the subaltern who does not speak of the floods and typhoons as singular and isolated events but rather as part of a longer history of oppression and marginalisation by state and market forces – the disaster of colonialism. And secondly, it provides another analytical toolbox for moving attention away from the inevitable physical and natural hazard that overwhelm state and society.

My own work in areas where people have lived experience of disasters amidst conflict and violence illustrates particularly powerful cases of why and how there is a need to go beyond these dichotomies and towards the oppressive powers of state forces. In fact this

relationship between political violence and climate disaster highlights the need to rethink very concept of disaster as an single event and towards what scholars have called “devastation” (Branch 2018), “catastrophe” (Carrigan 2015), “slow violence” (Bonilla 2020) and “structural violence”. A reading of “multi-scalar vulnerabilities” and “multiple histories” (Mika 2018) of hazards that culminate in deliberate and orchestrated forms of violence through disasters. The remaining chapter will present two empirical case studies based on fieldwork done in the Philippines and Colombia, situating the postcolonial citizen’s relationship with its state at the centre of the politics of hazard creation in these local municipalities.

### **Methods**

My research in the Philippines was primarily ethnographic. I did fieldwork with local researchers and NGO partners in a *barangay* devastated by Typhoon Pablo (2012), over a period of five months between December 2016 – September 2017. This was also complemented by digital storytelling workshops in two neighbourhoods. Interviews were also used to collect perspectives of policy makers and practitioners working on disasters and the conflict with the NPA, at the municipal, provincial and national level.

In Colombia, interviews with policy makers were conducted primarily in Bogota and Mocoa, while interviews with community members took place in Mocoa and four towns in Northern Antioquia (Sabanalarga, Toledo, Ituango and Puerto Valdivia) affected by flooding in 2018, due to dam construction. Undertaking fieldwork in the latter is particularly complicated for non-Colombians due to accessibility and security issues and the dangers of political and state violence have to be “managed” (Sluka 2012, Sluka 2015) . It was therefore essential, for the purposes of speaking to affected people and constructing their narrative, to accept the invitation of a local civil society organisation, *Rios Vivos* (Living Rivers), taking international observers to the most flood affected towns.

This method of engaging with flood-affected residents in northern Antioquia had some obvious limitations. As researchers, we were primarily able to speak to residents connected to this activist civil society organisation, pursuing a very particular anti-dam political agenda.



In all four localities, these were people who had come to participate in the town hall meetings organised by *Rios Vivos*, we were able to document the testimonies of these residents and follow-up with more individual interviews after the meetings. At the same time recognising the impossibility of undertaking this research independently and as ‘outsiders’ in communities people receive frequent and regular death threats, a calculated decision and “pragmatic strategy” (Kovats-Bernat 2008) was made to use the help of *Rios Vivos*, while at the same time being reflective, to whatever extent possible, of its impact on data collection.

### ***The state and the politics of hazard creation in the Philippines***

In the aftermath of Typhoon Pablo in 2012, the municipal state in one province of southeastern Mindanao relocated an entire village community of disaster affected people to a high gradient ‘plateau’ citing safety concerns. Forest cover was quickly removed from the ‘plateau’, and close to 100 brick and mortar houses were constructed. The state provided cash grants to purchase building materials necessary for the construction of these homes and labour was provided free of charge as goodwill by family and friends. While doing interviews in this community it became evident that the municipal state – from local council representatives, municipal DRR officers, the mayor and department of social and welfare - was pushing the rapid development of this residential housing community on the ‘plateau’. The public narrative widely encountered in this area was that this state level push for relocation was based on the results of scientific assessments carried out by the national hazard mapping agency, the Mines and Geological Bureau (MGB). These assessments had classified the original, pre-disaster location of the neighbourhood, devastated by Typhoon Pablo, as ‘extremely hazardous’ and deemed unsafe for human settlement.

An issue that was never raised in the official state narrative was that resettling these households away from their typhoon affected homes was also clearly linked to another political agenda. A “hydro company” had moved into the area, a year after the typhoon, to dam part of the river and a new military checkpoint had been established in the abandoned village to protect the equipment and investment of the company, Euro Hydro Power. Residents now living on the ‘plateau’ sometimes implied that their resettlement away from

their old village had more to do with protecting corporate interests rather than ensuring their safety from hazards. As one elderly woman in the resettled community said:

*The military checkpoint has not been based near our abandoned home for us. It is not us that they are guarding its the hydro company. They are the protector of the company, Euro Hydro. Moving everyone to this 'plateau' will make it easy for them to protect that area (from insurgents).*

Over the time that the research team spent during fieldwork in this region other motives for re-settling an entire residential community away from the original village started becoming clearer. This move to a high gradient forested 'plateau' seemed to not be driven entirely by "risk reduction" motives. The state also needed to open up the hydroelectricity market for the company Euro Hydro Power, Asia Holdings. Interviews with the local municipality revealed how ill-advised and hazardous the re-settlement on the 'plateau' had been. The Municipal Disaster Risk Management (MDRM) Officer explained that this plateau was in fact highly vulnerable to landslides.

*One of the problems we now face and it is a challenge to our office, because we have recently assessed the area, the 'plateau' is a landslide prone area, considering the slope and mountaineous region...*

There was also some recognition amongst staff at this local level that removing natural vegetation and forest cover to construct new buildings has definitively increased hazard-risk in this area. At the same time, local residents were also expressing their own feelings of living with increased risk. In fact some individuals were clear, that in planning such a residential development on this plateau, one that resulted in deforestation and increased inundation every time it rained, new forms of hazards were being actively being created by the state. A disabled middle-aged resident from the area, who walked with the help of crutches, was particularly concerned about the way their re-settlement had placed them in the path of a new kind of 'natural' hazard and would also result in creating this hazard to begin with.

*I worry about our house because we live on the gradient of the hillside and I worry this (construction) will inevitably cause a landslide. I also observed that the culverts at the bottom of the hill "overflow" during heavy rains. I know these are small worries but I still worry about them. I also know these are just my speculations. That is why when there are signs of flooding we get very scared, considering we live on a steep hill. Since there are no trees here any more the ground also gets water-logged and turns muddy so we have to stay on guard and be ready (to evacuate) when it rains hard.*

Research suggests that "heavy rainfall transform(s) simple local floods and debris flows to large-scale landslides and 'compound disasters'" (Chen et al 2011, 1). The term compound disasters refers to the process whereby multiple environmental drivers, such as small-scale floods, debris flows, landslides, and landslide lakes converge, creating a single disaster. This research also suggests that in case of typhoons in the Philippines this is not only a common occurrence but also one that is increasing in frequency and intensity due to human interventions (Chen et al, 2011). It is almost certain that in the coming months, or years the 'natural' hazard of heavy rains, will converge with all these other environmental variables to create a compound disaster on the "plateau". Most people on the field site, from officials working at the MRDM office to residents living on the "plateau", are acutely aware it is going to happen and are expecting its devastation. There is little doubt that this hazard too will be part of the longer story of state marginalisation and dispossession of the indigenous peoples in Mindanao.

### ***Infrastructure and the politics of risk production in Colombia***

The floods in and around Ituango, were the result of structural failures in Colombia's largest Hydroelectric dam project under construction on the Cauca River. The dam was being built by Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM), a public utility corporation owned by the City of Medellín in Colombia. Historically bajo Cauca also has a high proportion of coca cultivations, making it a focal point of armed conflict, which has continued in the post-Accord years. The years 1996 and 1997 were particularly bloody and painful, during this time the

paramilitaries committed massacres against the civilian population, including in El Aro and La Granja (in Ituango municipality), claiming they were guerrilla sympathisers (Rutas del Conflicto 2018). According to a well-known disaster risk reduction specialist in Colombia, the perceived link between the massacres that took place about 10 years before the dam project started and the environmental disaster as a consequence of this anthropogenic intervention on the river, makes this Colombia's most complex disaster ever. In fact, he somewhat cynically remarked that "whenever there is a massacre, we know that a mega (development) project is coming", implying that the violence is directly perpetrated by state led forces pushing this vision of development.

Primary research included testimonies gathered in different 'town hall' style meetings in four particularly badly affected communities, followed up by individual interviews. These conversations revealed that the history of armed conflict and the displacement and dispossession due to the flooding disaster, is one unbroken continuum of violence in people's narratives. The hazard of heavy rains (and dam malfunction) is not separate, unrelated or an additional event that happened, apart from all the others relating to the conflict and violence in the region. It is part of the same process that includes wider denial of rights and marginalisation by state and market forces. People in northern Antioquia and Bajo Cauca feel they are subjected to this oppressive experience of citizenship for being '*campesinos*', considered 'FARC sympathisers' and marginal to the interests of the political elite in Bogota. Residents in this part of the country are no strangers to state brutalisation and violence, historically acting through paramilitary forces during the dark years, at the peak of the armed conflict in the 1990s. The degree to which local citizens hold the state accountable for the extreme violence of yesteryears varies area to area and household to household but at the very least it is believed that the state is complicit in looking the other way when these atrocities were being committed. During fieldwork in these towns we encountered numerous individuals who had survived, or fled massacres in the late 1990s, early 2000s in Northern Antioquia. Their narrative of the floods was only one part of their wider story.

As one man in Puerto Valdivia, the town most evidently and visibly destroyed by the flooding of May 2018, said "we have lived with massacres our whole lives". In his view,

historically, the paramilitaries came, committed their atrocities on local residents thought to be siding with guerillas and then moved on. Locally, he believed people had learnt to live with that 'normal'. What was far less usual or normal for him, was the scale of the displacement experienced during these floods in May 2018. Branch's (2018) work on Northern Uganda poignantly captures the various ways in which the experience of a climate related disaster, in a region with a long and tortured history of violent insurgency and equally brutal state counterinsurgency, dissolved the line between a "global natural hazard" and "local social vulnerability". He refers to the drought in Northern Uganda as embedded within the legacies of war – "a form of violence that continued into the post-conflict period". There is little doubt that the narrative around the flooding of River Cauca that our interviewees were constructing – with the help of an activist movement such as *Rios Vivos* – was one where this disaster was a continuation of state violence, through other means, in the postcolony.

In fact, one middle aged man in Ituango said that despite being led to believe that the peace deal signed with FARC in 2016 would lead to an improved security and a better life, he had only seen things getting worse. This was because a large number of environmental defenders and leaders of their movements either disappearing or winding up dead. In all testimonies and interviews it became evident that those addressing the research team and international observers, wanted to express how deeply painful and difficult the flooding disaster – and going back further the construction of this dam – had been in the face of a state and EPM narrative that was "de-catastrophising" the disaster (Warner 2013). At the same time, interviewees were making clear the fact that this was not an isolated or unusual case of marginalisation experienced by them at the hands of the state.

In most cases interviewees were clear in their implication that the state is an enabling agent for EPM (a public corporation owned by the city of Medellin), much like for decades it managed to enable paramilitaries to fight the war against the guerrilla groups. As Branch (2018) points out then, "it is not the state's response, or lack thereof, to climate disaster that has political meaning; rather, the drought itself is seen as political, as a continuation of state violence. By being part of longer processes of social–natural devastation, climate

disaster may not comprise a disruption, but rather an intensification of, and continuity with, these existing political arrangements and structures.”

In the town hall meeting in Toledo one woman said that even when people began to arrive at town meetings in the early days after the floods, they were unable to find their words to speak. After being terrorised by the conflict for so long, they had no idea how to write petitions and engage with the state. In a particularly moving moment in the meeting in Puerto Valdivia an older man in his sixties and a survivor of violence and torture at the hands of paramilitary forces, said it was so traumatic to see his whole town washed away by floodwaters he had to seek professional help from a psychologist. The fact that these devastating floods were another chapter in the wider story of state marginalisation and oppression of those who consider themselves ‘campesinos’ was never far from the surface of these conversations.

“People’s desperation and insecurity in the face of state-violence-driven climate disaster thus does not lead to conflicts among rural people, but to a confirmation of their oppression by the state. One should not view potential future violence as resource conflict in response to climate disaster; instead, it should be seen as a continuation of the violence of the war, perhaps even involving new armed opposition to the state.” (Branch, 2018)

In some interviews the anger towards the state, particularly opposition to the sorts of development paradigms it was following and the ways in which it was evolving the methods through which to perpetuate violence against these citizens, was palpable. One middle aged woman, who had been relocated to a local gymnasium with a number of other families affected by flooding, said that she felt trapped in her makeshift home by the state. Over the last twenty-five years she had lost three family members to the conflict. Her husband had disappeared and was presumed killed after which two of her brothers had been tortured and killed by unknown forces, believed to be paramilitaries. She was emphatic in stating that the armed conflict, in this region, was linked to the flooding of May 2018, through the dam. In her interview she stated that the paramilitaries killed all the young men who could present a challenge and then ‘the company’ (EPM) came in. “The state helped the company

– you can't see it any other way. They have killed many, many men.” In this narrative, it was repeatedly stated that the state uses legality and markets to justify oppression. As the case of Bajo Cauca makes evident disasters are not just the result of vulnerability but of multiple and compounding hazards created by imperial state and market forces.

### ***Competing visions of risk reduction and risk creation between the state and its citizens***

In both field sites in Philippines and Colombia relocating people away from 'high-risk' hazard areas was a regular policy pursued by the state. Conversations with government officials and those at the helm of policy-making also regularly referred to re-settling and re-locating people, away from high-risk areas to reduce their vulnerability to 'natural' hazards. This has been fairly standard state policy, especially in informal settlements as noted by other scholars (Fraser 2017, Zeiderman 2016). In these interviews the fact that the people living with disasters, saw this as a much longer process of victimisation and brutalisation of the state was never a subject of official reflection or introspection.

In fact, there seemed to be a single-minded determination on the part of state officials to move forward with technical 'planning' and implementation of official 'risk reduction' in disaster affected localities in both field sites. On the ground, this agenda seems to be pushed along even at the expense of those whom it is meant to protect. While an official from Putumayo was confident of his well resourced agency and the technical 'knowledge' they had available, he suggested that it was in fact people who were the problem.

*More than that, every day, more people locate themselves in zones of risk... if the community doesn't take a role in risk management, the risks will continue. It is hard to kick people out of the high-risk zones. People can be dangerous as well.*

When speaking of how the re-settlement land, where the community affected by the landslide in Mocoa was re-located to, was acquired

*The UNGRD<sup>1</sup> bought it. The municipality is autonomous in saying where, but people need the UNGRD because it has the resources to buy it. There are various mechanisms. 1) you sell it to me. 2) If you don't want to sell it, I'll expropriate it under a judicial sentence. When it is of public interest and if you don't want to sell it, I'll expropriate it.*

A hard engineering driven disaster risk reduction paradigm that over-emphasised re-location and re-settlement at the expense of other strategies, was often the clearest message coming from state authorities. Seemingly, partly as a result of high-modernist state policies “best conceived as a strong, one might even say muscle-bound, version of the beliefs in scientific and technical progress” (Scott, 1998), and partly a legacy of decades of conflict and millions of displaced and re-settled people (Zeiderman, 2012).

Beyond simply differing perspectives on vulnerability between the postcolonial citizen and the state, Foucauldian ideas on the politics of life suggest something quite different. The imperative to “make life live or let die” are directly linked to sustaining life of value to the market (Andersen 2011). This work enables an understanding of the philosophical foundations for how hazards much like war are needed to ensure security – killing life to protect *valued* life. Not all life but *productive* life must be secured from unexpected and unanticipated disruptions to productive activity. Yet, “it is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them” (Foucault 1978 143, in Andersen 2011) and the state - as the centre of political control - must constantly evolve and mutate for the successful “subsumption of life”. In other words, re-location and re-settlement are not just tools for governing emergencies but instead by ensuring some peoples lives are moved ensures other *valued* lives are protected and cared for (Andersen 2011).

A media analysis of five regional and national newspapers<sup>2</sup> in the aftermath of Typhoon Pablo reveals over twenty news stories indicating that the state was moving people from

---

<sup>1</sup> Unidad Nacional para la Gestión del Riesgo de Desastres (National Unit for Disaster Risk Management)

<sup>2</sup> SunStar Davao, Davao Today, Mindanao Times, Philippine Daily Inquirer, the Philippine Star over three months from 5 December 2012.



the highlands and affected *barangays* to “evacuation centers” and “relocation sites”. These new sites were always reported to be safely away from Davao – the capital of Mindanao and most other urban centres. Placing these indigenous and marginal communities in “structurally strong and environmentally friendly shelter units which can withstand wind velocities up to 180kph, earthquakes upto intensity four...” (SunStar Davao, 4 February 2013) in previously forest covered and non-habitable areas is likely putting them on the frontlines of new hazards, while ensuring *valued* life in Davao is secure.

In historically ‘periphery’ regions of Colombia and Philippines the ideational and ideological conflict over hazards created by state and market forces, what is often articulated as a brutal state or ‘company’ destroying local ecology, can be understood as dominant forces protecting, caring for and sustaining valued lives by abandoning, damaging and destroying other lives (Andersen 2011).

Nowhere was this more evident than in the town hall meeting in Toledo, a town in northern Antioquia, destroyed by flooding in 2018. Every single resident who spoke about their experience of the disaster, first and foremost mentioned the devastating impact on local ecology. There were regular references to parrots whose habitat has been destroyed by flooding and honey bees, that disappeared overnight because trees were mercilessly cut for dam infrastructure. Residents were distraught that coca production in the region, grown by armed groups to fund the conflict, had already resulted in significant deforestation making them more vulnerable to the flooding. Similarly, in the Philippines, interviewees who had been relocated to the new settlement repeatedly spoke of a lack of understanding at the state level of local habitat and vegetation that had been bulldozed to the ground to create this new residential community. For a number of respondents living without any natural vegetation in a tropical climate in a naturally forested area was a deeply traumatic experience forced upon them by the state.

In these countries where there is a history of state violence against citizens this ideational conflict evidently put the state-citizen relationship under further stress. In fact, these incompatible visions of DRR were often experienced by people in the form of an ‘uncaring’, even ‘brutal’ state, whose policies result in dispossession and displacement and result in

creating 'natural' hazards that continue the victimisation of citizens. In both, Colombia and Philippines the narrative around a state that is not concerned in the well-being of the *campesinos* (peasants) or the people of the *bukit* (highlands) respectively, was prevalent.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued for complicating the understanding of hazards as 'natural', demonstrating through empirical data that on the margins of the postcolonial state, the physical events (of the landslides or floods) are created by dominant state and market forces, based on life that is valued and that which it can "let die". It has illustrated this, using the case of contentious re-settlement in southern Philippines likely to result in landslides and infrastructural interventions in northwestern Colombia that resulted in large-scale floods. Hazards that cannot simply be attributed to natural forces but rather to political choice made by an active and engaged state. Citizens on the peripheries of the postcolonial state (and of marginal relevance to the market) have highlighted that these hazards are only the most recent form of violent disaster they have experienced in the history of their relationship with the state.

In an interview with the head of the *Rios Vivos* movement we asked her, "do you think if the dam was built somewhere else in the country, the displacement and dispossession would have...". Even before we could finish the question she replied, "but that's our point, make no mistake, some where else in the country - this dam would never have been built." In small towns and villages of the postcolonial state, away from the high-rises of Medellin or Manila, communities self-identify as *dispensable* - lives that are chosen to be placed in harms way – almost as much as they identify as indigenous peoples, or belonging to a particular ethnic group.

Recognizing that creating hazards and risk are active tools of governmentality to manage subaltern populations enable a deconstruction of the politics of hazard creation. In so doing they provide the tools and the language with which to address some of the shortcomings of contemporary disaster studies. Citizens on the margins of the state experience the coming

together of familiar processes of exclusion, denial of rights and disempowerment in these floods and landslides. Subaltern voices in Philippines and Colombia discursively construct hazards as a political choice, illustrating their own dispensibility to the postcolonial state and market forces continuing their long-standing marginalisation by these dominant actors. For disaster studies to reconcile with postcolonial subjects, on the margins of the state, it must open itself up to ontologies that see hazard creation as less physical and more part of a longer history of oppression in the postcolonial world. Thus in this way it takes away some of its power as overwhelming physical processes.

This chapter therefore demonstrates how hazards and risks can be understood as deeply rooted in the state-citizen social contract, part of long-standing social processes of exclusion and marginalisation in the postcolony.

DRAFT

## **Bibliography**

Anderson, Ben. 2011. "Population and Affective Perception: Biopolitics and Anticipatory Action in US Counterinsurgency Doctrine". *Antipode* 43, Issue 2: 205-236.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2010.00804.x>

Bankoff, Gregory. 2001. "Rendering the world unsafe: "Vulnerability" as Western discourse", *Disasters* 25, Issue 1: 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00159>

Blackburn, Sophie and Mark Pelling. 2018. "The political impacts of adaptation actions: social contracts, a research agenda". *WIREs Climate Change* 9, Issue 6: 1-8.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.549>

Bolin, Bob. 2006. "Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Disaster Vulnerability". In *Handbook of Disaster Research*, edited by Rodriguez, Havidan, Enrico Quarantelli and Russell Dynes 113-129. New York : Springer

Bonilla, Yarimar. 2020. "The coloniality of disaster: Race, empire, and the temporal logics of emergency in Puerto Rico, USA", *Political Geography* 78 (1-12).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2020.102181>

Branch, Adam. 2018. "From disaster to devastation: drought as war in northern Uganda".

*Disasters* 42, Issue S2: S306-S327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12303>

Carrigan, Anthony. 2015. "Towards a postcolonial disaster studies". In *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughery, Jill Didur and Anthony Carrigan 117–139. Routledge, Abingdon.

Chen, Yu-Shiu, Yu-Shu Kuo, Wen-Chi Lai, Yuan-Jung Tsai, Shin-Ping Lee, Kun-Ting Chen, and Chjeng-Lun Shieh. 2011. "Reflection of Typhoon Morakot — the Challenge of Compound Disaster Simulation." *Journal of Mountain Science* 8, no. 4: 571–81.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11629-011-2132-5>.

Cohen, Charles and Eric D. Werker. 2008. "The political economy of 'natural' disasters". *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, Issue 6: 795–819.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002708322157>

Daniels. Joe. Parkin. May 16, 2018. "Colombia: tens of thousands ordered to evacuate after floods at dam". *The Guardian online*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/16/colombia-tens-of-thousands-of-ordered-to-evacuate-after-floods-at-dam>

Davis, Ian. 2019. "Reflections on 40 years of *Disasters*, 1977 – 2017". *Disaster* 43, Issue S1: S61-S82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12328>

Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *The Wretched Of The Earth*. New York: Grove Press

Folley. Matthew. 2019. "Editorial introduction: 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary special issue of *Disasters*". *Disasters* 43, Issue S1: S3 - S4. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/disa.12329>

Galliard, Jean-Christophe. 2010. "Vulnerability, capacity and resilience: Perspectives for climate and development policy". *Journal of International Development* 22, Issue 2: 218-232 <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1675>

Gaillard, Jean-Christophe. 2019. "Disaster studies inside out". *Disasters* 43, Issue S1: S7-S17 <https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12323>

Grove, Kevin. J. 2013. "From emergency management to managing emergence: A genealogy of disaster management in Jamaica". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 103, Issue 3: 570-588 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045608.2012.740357>

Grove, Kevin. J. 2014a. "Adaptation Machines and the Parasitic Politics of Life in Jamaican Disaster Resilience". *Antipode* 46, Issue 3: 611-628. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12066>

Grove, Kevin. J. 2014b. "Biopolitics and Adaptation: Governing Social and Ecological Contingency through Climate Change and Disaster Studies". *Geography Compass* 8, Issue 3: 198 - 210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12118>

Hewitt, Kenneth. 1983. "The idea of calamity in a technocratic age". In *Interpretations of calamity from the perspective of human ecology* edited by Kenneth Hewitt 3-30. London Allen & Unwin

Kovats-Bernat, Christopher. J. 2008. "Negotiating Dangerous Fields: Pragmatic Strategies for Fieldwork amid Violence and Terror". *American Anthropologist* 104, Issue 1: 208 – 222. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.1.208>

Mika, Kasia. 2019. *Disasters, Vulnerability and Narratives: Writing Haiti's Futures*. Abington, Routledge

Oliver-Smith, Anthony. 1994. "Peru's Five-Hundred-Year Earthquake: Vulnerability in Historical Context." In *Disasters, Development, and Environment* edited by Ann Varley. Chichester: John Wiley and Son

Olsen, Richard. S. 2000. "Towards a Politics of Disaster: Losses, Values, Agenda, and Blame". *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, No 2: 265–287.

Pelling, Mark. 2011. *Adaptation to Climate Change: From Resilience to Transformation*. Routledge, Abingdon.

Pelling, Mark and Kathleen. Dill. 2010. "Disaster politics: tipping points for change in the adaptation of sociopolitical regimes". *Progress in Human Geography* 34, Issue 1: 21–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132509105004>

Quarantelli, Enrico. 1992. "The importance of thining of disasters as social phenomena". *Disaster Research Paper Preliminary Paper 184*. Newark, University of Delaware

Ribot, Jesse. 2014. "Cause and response: vulnerability and climate in the Anthropocene". *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 41, Issue 5: 667 – 705.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2014.894911>

Rivera, Daniella. Zoe. 2021. "Disaster Colonialism: A Commentary on Disasters beyond Singular Events to Structural Violence". *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12950>

Rutas del Conflicto. 2018. "Masacre de El Aro." *Rutas Del Conflicto*.

<http://rutasdelconflicto.com/interna.php?masacre=25>.

Said, Edward. W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Scott, James. C. 1998. *Seeing Like a State: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. Yale University Press. New Haven, London

Siddiqi, Ayesha. 2013. "The emerging social contract: state–citizen interaction after the floods of 2010 and 2011 in southern Sindh, Pakistan". *IDS Bulletin*. 44, Issue 3: 94–102.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1759-5436.12036>

Siddiqi, Ayesha. 2014. "Climatic disasters and radical politics in southern Pakistan: the non-linear connection". *Geopolitics* 19, Issue 4: 885–910.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.920328>

Siddiqi, Ayesha. 2018. "'Disaster citizenship': an emerging framework for understanding the depth of digital citizenship in Pakistan". *Contemporary South Asia* 26, Issue 2: 157–174.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2017.1407294>

Siddiqi, Ayesha. 2019. *In the Wake of Disaster: Islamists, the State and a Social Contract in Pakistan*. Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press

Siddiqi, Ayesha & Jewel P Canuday. 2018. "Stories from the frontlines: decolonising social contracts for disasters". *Disasters* 42, Issue S2: S215-S238.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12308>

Sluka, Jeffrey A. 2012. "Reflections on Managing Dangerous Fieldwork: Dangerous Anthropology in Belfast". In *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader* edited by Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben 283-297. Berkley, University of California

Sluka, Jeffrey A. 2015. "Managing Danger in Fieldwork with Perpetrators of Political Violence and State Terror". *Conflict and Society* 1, Issue 1: 109-124.

<https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2015.010109>

Warner, Jeroen. 2013. "The politics of catastrophisation". In *Disaster, Conflict and Society in Crisis: Everyday Politics of Crisis Response* edited by Dorothea Hilhorst 76-94. Routledge, Abingdon

O'Keefe, Phil. Ken, Westgate & Wisner, Ben. 1976. "Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters". *Nature* Vol 260: 566-567

Zeiderman, Austin. 2012. "On Shaky Ground: the making of risk in Bogotá." *Environment and Planning A* 44, Issue 7: 1570-1588 <https://doi.org/10.1068/a44283>

Zeiderman, Austin. 2016. "Prognosis Past: The Temporal Politics of Disaster in Colombia." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22, Issue S1: 163-180

<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12399>