

Whose views matter? For a pluralistic approach to understanding disasters

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Abstract

Disasters have been defined, understood and managed by so-called “experts” in a way that disaster risk reduction and management has become a problem-solving task. There are three main paradigms that aim at apprehending the concept of disaster. First, disaster is seen as an analogy of war resulting from an external agent: a hazard. Disaster is thus merely function of the magnitude, duration and speed of onset of the hazard which impact people and result in damages and losses. Second, disaster results from the vulnerability of society which reflects social, economic, cultural processes. Lastly, disaster relate to people’s resilience and their capacity to absorb shocks, cope with hazards, and adapt to stresses and changes. The bottom line of all these paradigms in that the concept of disaster usually reflects Western constructs and is often disconnected from the reality experienced by many societies who do not have the same values, culture, or scientific background. For example, disaster as war emphasises rare and extreme events, which approach is disconnected from the everyday struggle faced by people. Furthermore, the concepts of vulnerability and resilience often mean little to local people and, in fact, there is no translation for these words in many societies. This chapter aims to challenge the dominant approaches to defining disaster and provide a different strand on this concept by emphasising the need for more diverse ontologies and epistemologies that better integrate insiders’ perspectives on disaster.

Introduction

What is a disaster? Generations of scholars have struggled with this question and a couple of books have been written with the sole purpose to review possible answers (Quarantelli, 1998; Quarantelli and Perry, 2005). Yet, to date, no consensual definition has emerged and the most accepted ones either reflect the disciplinary backgrounds of their proponents or the purpose of their studies. These definitions hence reflect ontological and epistemological assumptions that scholars carry with them when engaging with the concept of disaster.

Let us take the examples of three disciplines across the physical versus social sciences divide. In 1961, sociologist C. Fritz's (1961: 655) defined a disaster as "*(...) an event, concentrated in time and space, in which a society, or a relatively self-sufficient subdivision of a society, undergoes severe danger and incurs such losses to its members and physical appurtenances that the social structure is disrupted and the fulfilment of all or some of the essential functions of the society is prevented*". A couple of decades later, geographer P. Susman and colleagues (1983: 264) looked at the "*interface between an extreme physical event and a vulnerable human population*". Finally, many earth scientists, in all their diversity, have long labelled natural phenomena such as floods, cyclones and earthquakes 'disasters'. All these very diverse definitions make sense in the eyes of their proponents. Sociologists look at the social fabric, geographers at the nature/society interface, and earth scientists study natural hazards.

Despite their obvious dissimilarities one may argue that all these definitions share in common that they all reflect the scientific legacy inherited from the Enlightenments, hence a Eurocentric (or Western) academic tradition. In fact, the very concept of 'disaster' mirrors a Greek etymology that suggests an unfortunate positioning of planets and stars, ultimately leading to harmful consequences. Such ontological and epistemological heritage seems sensible when framing studies located in Europe and other societies that have embraced Eurocentric worldviews. More problematic is that the concept is also widely used elsewhere in regions of the world where European colonisation has clashed with still predominant non-Western values. In these places, where the concept is hard to translate, the relevance of many studies is challengeable if not dubious.

This chapter discusses challenges associated with the hegemonic heritage of Eurocentric approaches to understanding and studying disasters. It builds on a case study from Vanuatu to argue that disaster studies need to be grounded in more diverse ontologies and epistemologies to be relevant not only to science but also to better inform policies and practices geared towards reducing risks.

Exploring the three main paradigms in disaster studies: hazard, vulnerability and resilience

Until the 1950s, disasters were understood as resulting from external natural forces independent of the social, cultural, historical and political context that they hit. The importance of the human dimension in disaster had been identified since the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake in an exchange

between Rousseau and Voltaire (Rousseau, 1756) and later, at the beginning of the 20th century, with the work of S. Prince (1920) on the 1917 Halifax shipping explosion. However, it is only with the doctoral thesis of G. White (1945) on people's adjustments to floods in the Mississippi river basin that the human dimension of disasters started to be accepted, thus challenging the dominant hazard paradigm. The hazard paradigm emphasises extreme and rare natural hazards that surpass people's ability to deal with them (White, 1974) and the regions affected are often considered unable to cope with such natural forces and underdeveloped, overpopulated and underprepared (see Hewitt, 1983 for a critique). This has created a divide between the so called 'developing' countries portrayed as dangerous and underprepared and 'developed' nations depicted as safer and more prepared (Bankoff, 2001).

The hazard paradigm has implied a central role played by physical scientists and engineers in disaster studies to predict, monitor, and calculate probabilistic occurrence and associated impacts of natural hazards. At the same time, social scientists have focused on people's perception of risk associated with natural hazards and how they 'adjust' to such events. With this approach, individuals who have a low perception of risk – generally poor people - are said to do not adjust adequately to potential risks, while those with high risk perception – generally wealthier people - supposedly prepare well to face natural hazards (Burton et al., 1978). The hazard paradigm and study of risk perception and adjustment have resulted in highly technical measures to reduce disaster risk, generally emphasising engineering improvements, upgrading of building codes and norms, climate modelling, and technical improvement for early warning systems. Social scientists have focused on development of insurance schemes and communication strategies to raise awareness about the risk associated with natural hazards (Kates, 1971; Cutter et al., 2015).

The role of natural hazards and risk perception in disasters' occurrence has been progressively questioned and re-assessed since the 1970s. For example, in an article entitled 'taking the naturalness out of natural disasters', O'Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner (1976) highlighted the unequal impacts of disasters on those most vulnerable within society. Vulnerability refers to the susceptibility to suffer from damage if a hazard occurs, in other words, the characteristics of a society that make a hazard become a disaster (Wisner et al, 2004). What has been termed the *vulnerability paradigm* emphasises that disasters are political, historical and socio-economic in their origin, underlining the unequal access to resources among members of society (Hewitt, 1983). Vulnerability is the result of limited access to land, information, infrastructure, social security system, institutional support, social networks and financial resources (Chambers and Conway, 1992). The vulnerability paradigm stresses that people can be vulnerable in different ways, economically, socially, geographically, politically, and often a combination of these (Wisner, 1993). P Ultimately, vulnerability originates in people's limited ability to have control over their daily lives (Wisner et al., 2004). Disasters are thus understood as amplifiers of people's everyday hardships, including food insecurity, health conditions, precarious or weak shelter, and poverty (Wisner, 2016).

The vulnerability paradigm represents a radically different approach from previous understanding of disaster. Yet, it has also been critiqued for putting too much emphasis on

people's weaknesses and too little on their capacities in the face of hazards and disasters (Bankoff, 2001; Kelman, 2018). Those vulnerable in the face of hazards and disasters are not passive nor helpless 'victims' but always display factors of resilience to deal with such events. Resilience indeed has a long history (Alexander, 2013). It became popular in environmental studies with Holling's (1973) paper on the resilience of ecological systems that underlines the ability of a system to absorb a temporary shock and its capacity to reorganize itself entirely into either its pre-existing or a new recovered state. The concept of resilience eventually emerged in disaster studies in the late 1970s (i.e. Torry, 1979), then spread quickly throughout the following decades. Today, resilience is a priority of most agendas for DRR at many scales. The Sendai Framework for DRR uses the term resilience 35 times (while the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 used resilience 9 times) and national policies place an increased emphasis on disaster resilience. Both International organisations and local NGOs and government agencies also use frameworks, tool kits and reporting systems that are largely informed by the concept of resilience.

Despite its extensive utilization, the concept of resilience is poorly defined with no common definition and diverging views on its meaning and applications (i.e. Twigg, 2009; Oliver-Smith, 2009; Pelling et al., 2015). The concept has thus been the subject of many critiques. Resilience suggests to focus on people's resources, skills, knowledge and by extension notions of self-efficacy, self-organisation, and self-reliance (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2013). Therefore, many scholars recognize the positive nature of enhancing resilience since it suggests 'building something up' rather than just 'reducing something' such as vulnerability or poverty (Manyena, 2006; 2011). However, other scholars and practitioners argue that resilience actually reframes the exact same challenges that have been previously conferred as vulnerability and DRR (Weichselgartner and Kelman, 2015).

In recent years, resilience has been increasingly criticized for being part of a Western discourse that reflects neoliberal values and agenda. Bankoff (2019: 219) states that "it [resilience] recasts the world according to culturally-specific dictates. Depending on the context in which it is evoked, resilience either tries to restructure non-Western societies according to prescribed economic formulae or it looks for salvation in the social structures of traditional communities that it defines to its own intent". Resilience is in fact generally defined, assessed and measured by outsider experts rather than by those directly concerned – in other words local people (Gaillard and Jiyatsu, 2016). Moreover, the concept tends to be used for labelling places, people, and societies as 'resilient' or 'non-resilient', which either avoids supplying external support and reduces governments' role in development work or justifies external aid intervention based on an outsider-driven agenda (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2013; Kelman, 2018).

On the limits of (Eurocentric) theory

All the foregoing paradigms reflect Eurocentric approaches to studying disasters ultimately inherited from the Enlightenment. Their rolling out across the world constitutes a cultural imposition, to use Fanon's (1952) words, which ultimately underpins the Western hegemony that

characterises contemporary disaster studies (Gaillard, 2019). This is problematic for both ontological and epistemological reasons.

All three popular scientific paradigms exposed in the previous section indeed assume that there is such a universal concept as a disaster, as conceived in (Indo-)European languages. This shows in the increasing popularity of the concept within academic circles all over the world (Figure 1). It is now taught as a subject or programme in many universities on all continents and there are more than 80 academic journals, publishing in English only, that focus exclusively on disasters and cognate fields such as natural hazards (Alexander et al., 2020). As such, the very concept of disaster has been imposed upon people who have been struggling to make sense of its scope as if adopting the language of the West was a symbol of higher status and values (Fanon, 1952). This happened despite early calls for caution. Four decades ago, James Lewis (1979:116) challenged that disaster could be “*a wholly Western concept, introduced by alien administrations from alien sources and adopted for practical and pragmatic advantages?*”.

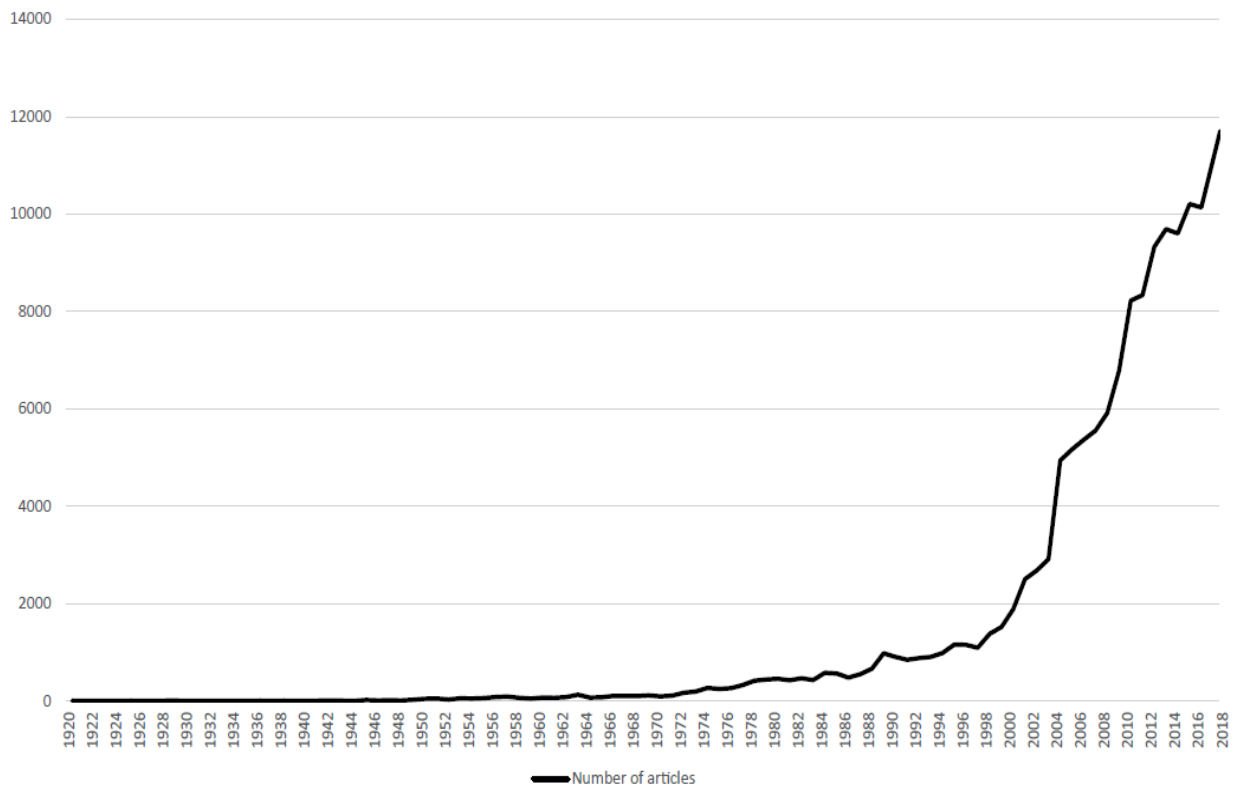


Fig. 1. Yearly number of journal articles referring to 'disaster' between 1920 and 2018 (according to Scopus)

In their majority, the methodologies that have accompanied the increasing popularity of disaster studies similarly reflect Western epistemologies. Four decades ago, Eric Waddell (1977:75-76) was also alerting fellow scholars that the then dominant interpretation of disasters, which was relying heavily on standardised questionnaires, was “*dictated by the constraints of the methodology*” that was not “*necessarily dictated by reality, but rather by a social scientific*

tradition in the West which fragments reality and which promotes a type of functional analysis that is profoundly ahistorical". Chambers (1981) coined these studies quick-and-dirty in reference to the so-called tarmac and dry-season biases where outside researchers mainly focus on places that are easy to access at convenient times of the year. Twenty years later, Mihir Bhatt (1998, p. 71) reminded us that these studies are "*filtering what she or he (i.e. the researcher) reads through the conceptual framework, assumptions, and values of her or his culture and, as a result, is creating false 'stories' that fit her or his expectations*".

These early calls for reconsidering disaster studies away from Western ontologies and epistemologies have remained unheard. The "*change in the whole approach to disaster*" (Lewis, 1976: 8) that was deemed necessary to complete a "*revolution in thinking about disasters*" (Wisner et al., 1976: 548) has not happened. The study of disasters remains a modern form of academic Orientalism (Said, 1978) through which Western concepts such as disaster as well as methodologies to study them are diffused and popularised across the world so that they become common sense. A process that reflects Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony whereby Western researchers are essential producers and diffusers of a dominant form of Eurocentric knowledge that mirrors dominant world views. The world of disaster scholarship therefore has a core and a periphery, the West and the rest of the world.

This hegemony of Western approaches to study disaster ultimately sustains policies and initiatives geared towards reducing disaster risk. Indeed, a strong and dominant pool of knowledge allows for the exertion of power through policy and their everyday implementation (Foucault, 1981). In DRR, these policy and practices draw upon the transfer of experience and resources from the West to the rest of the world, assuming that the former suffers fewer casualties because it has a better command of science and associated technology (Bankoff, 2001; 2019). As such, disaster scholarship has contributed to an imperialist agenda that is no different to other sectors of the broader development agenda (Escobar, 1993).

Such approach to studying and addressing disasters obviously remains problematic with regards to the diverse realities of the world and people's countless perspectives to understand and deal with events that may look hazardous or harmful through a Western lens. In this perspective, we can only agree with Kenneth Hewitt (1994: 8) who claimed that disaster studies "*seems to involve and require a different modus operandi, methodologies and perspectives: a view from within rather than outside communities, a participation in the sense of crisis. One requires insight rather than oversight; a capacity to listen to, comprehend and interpret experience and circumstances expressed in vernacular language rather than technical ways. In sum, one will have to recognise, assess and express the 'view from below'*". The subsequent brief case study of Vanuatu confronts both insiders' and outsiders' view of disasters to challenge the latter's assumptions.

Insiders' and outsiders' understanding of disaster: Vanuatu as case study

This short case study is a self-reflection on both insiders' and outsiders' conceptualisation of disaster using Tropical Cyclone (TC) Pam in Vanuatu. Insider/outsider status within and across cultures is complex and is subject to debates (Merriam et al., 2001). It influences not only

positionality but also power relations and representations of reality, knowledge and truth, which differ between insiders and outsiders. In the context of this study, we consider ‘insiders’ those directly concerned with disasters and DRR – in other words local people and their kin overseas who often assist them during and after disaster. On the other hand, ‘outsiders’ are those external to the places, people or societies where they conduct research, carry out project or develop policies aimed at lifting insiders’ well-being. Despite such stark distinction, neither 'insiders' nor 'outsiders' are homogeneous groups. It is therefore essential to consider the opposition beyond a blunt binary understanding of the world. We indeed argue later that our approach to disaster should be pluralistic.

Category 5 TC Pam hit Vanuatu on the 13th of March 2015. Winds were estimated to be 250 km/h with gusts of 320 km/h accompanied by heavy rainfall. The event caused serious damages to agricultural production such as traditional crops like kava, taro and yams, which are important to the livelihoods of people living in rural area. Eleven people died and 70% of the country’s population was affected (SPC, 2016). During and after TC Pam, Vanuatu received international assistance to levels rarely seen in the country. Barber (2015) highlights the sudden influx of international aid with little understanding of the local context and Vachette et al. (2017: 322) talk about a “massive foreign intervention”. Both the magnitude of the event (i.e. category 5 on Simpson Saffir scale) and the fact that it occurred during the launch of the Sendai Summit seem to have contributed to the surge of international assistance.

We, as members of a group of French researchers, developed a proposal to investigate the impacts, response and recovery of people after the disaster and ultimately appraise their resilience to disaster. The project received funding from the French Institute for Research and Development and local support from the French Red Cross based in Vanuatu. While we had experience working in the Pacific Island Countries (PICs), we were not specifically familiar with the ni-Vanuatu context. Although PICs share similar vulnerabilities and challenges, they all differ in many ways (Campbell, 2009), and we clearly identify ourselves as outsiders. Fieldwork was conducted in two villages of Tanna Island in 2015 three months after TC Pam and in 2017 about two years after the event. In the two villages, local inhabitants have developed and maintained social practices and knowledge, including medicine, territorial organization, ancestral way of life and beliefs which is named *kastom*.

We used participatory tools to appraise the views of disaster affected people on the event and their own recovery. Participatory tools such as carousel activities, Venn diagrams, scoring, ranking, and group discussions can be used to explain the qualitative and quantitative information generated (see Le Dé et al., 2018). Participatory approaches and methods seek to integrate local people’s views, values and priorities in the production of knowledge, including from those who are the most vulnerable and marginalized (Chambers, 2003). This methodological approach was preferred to more extractive methods (i.e. questionnaire-based surveys, interviews) that would reflect outsiders’ pre-conceived ideas on the disaster and associated responses from people during and after the event. Findings indicate different conceptions on this event and disasters at large (Table 1).

First, it is important to note that there is no vernacular word for disaster and only the Bislama (Pidgin) term 'disasta' exists to express such a concept. More than 95% of Bislama words are of English origin, whilst the remainder come from French origin, thus reflecting the colonial history of Vanuatu by the English and French from 1906 to 1980. Besides, 'disaster' and 'disasta' often have different conceptualization for ni-Vanuatu populations (Warrick, 2011; Calandra, 2019). As outsiders we were focusing on TC Pam and the severe impact of this large-scale event, expecting people to face huge challenges. The previous most damaging cyclone to hit Vanuatu was the Category 3 Cyclone Ivy in 2004 and the last Category 5 cyclone occurred in 1987. There had been multiple reports and media coverage emphasising the importance of damages and losses. Reports from UN OCHA (2015) stressed that TC Pam had terrible impact on people's houses (i.e. 75,000 people in need of a shelter), access to drinkable water and agricultural productions. While this was confirmed by disaster-affected people, the study revealed that, for insiders, the recurrence of multiple small-scale events was ranked as equally challenging to TC Pam. These included drought, heavy rains, landslides, small cyclones, insects, diseases, and volcanic ash falls occurring within the two-year period that followed TC Pam. This does not dismiss the importance of TC Pam and the struggle people faced post-event. However, it highlights that insiders did not see such event as rare, extreme and beyond normal but rather part of a continuum of challenges faced on a day-to-day basis (Campbell, 1990; Warrick, 2011).

In this context, insiders had not been passive and did not wait for external aid (which only arrived one month after TC Pam), but displayed mechanisms and drew on resources that existed prior TC Pam, including mutual help intra- and inter-villages, extended social networks (in other islands and overseas), traditional knowledge, etc. Insiders also challenged the Western idea of disaster recovery phases, which usually include relief, early recovery, recovery and development (i.e. Kates and Pijawka, 1977; UNISDR, 2015). For example, we found that two years after TC Pam, most outside agencies considered it to be the end of the recovery phase. Yet, for local people, drawing a line between those different phases did not make any sense as the challenges associated with TC Pam could not be dissociated from many other challenges linked to recurrent small-scale hazards and access resources (i.e. health care system; drinkable water, school fees, social security system). Breaking down recovery into phases is usually helpful to guide external aid in designing, funding, implementing and evaluating their respective programs. Such partitioning of well-defined boundaries reflects outsiders' understanding of recovery with disasters being dealt with as special 'events' that are different from the daily challenges faced by insiders. About 30 years ago, focusing on the Banks Islands in Northern Vanuatu, Campbell (1990:23) already challenged the notion of disaster as 'event' with specific pre- and post-disaster phases, versus 'normalcy' arguing that *"it should not be assumed that the 'normal' activities that make up disaster pre-conditions develop independent of disaster. From the historical perspective pre-conditions may be seen as the 'post-conditions' of the previous disaster. It is perhaps not surprising then, that traditional disaster response, [is] rooted in normalcy."*

Western/outside's construction of disaster focuses largely on damages and losses which has led to building back better the housing and infrastructure impacted by large scale events. During both fieldworks we noticed that most, if not all, houses and buildings using imported construction

material were destroyed. Two years after TC Pam children were still studying under tents since schools had not been rebuilt. Surely for insiders the impact of TC Pam on housing, infrastructure, and agricultural production was a critical challenge. Yet, focus group discussions revealed that some of the main preoccupations of local people were on issues we had not thought about: TC Pam had destroyed most of the plantation fences, meaning that their cows, pigs and goats could access their plantations, eating and damaging the replanted crops that would be consumable within about 3 months after being planted (e.g. cabbage, cucumbers, and corn). This aspect was taken seriously in one of the villages where a village meeting had been held. Insiders also highlighted the importance of clearing debris as they now had to travel long distance to reach unaffected medical centres, exchange seeds and plants' cuttings with neighbour villages, and access natural material to rebuild their houses that had not been affected. These aspects did not appear in any outsiders' reports published post TC Pam, nor did we expect these issues to exist and be that important to the affected people, highlighting clearly a divide between insiders' and outsiders' construction of disaster.

Table 1: outsiders' and insiders' views on TC Pam and disaster

	Outsiders	Insiders
Concept / term	Disaster	No vernacular language 'Disasta' is used in Bislama (Pidgin)
Hazard exposure and scale	Rare and extreme TC Pam category 5	TC Pam as well as many smaller scale events
Impacts and damages	Focus on losses, damages and associated cost for reconstruction and recovery (i.e. housing, infrastructure)	Impacts are both tangible and intangible (i.e. animals eating replanted crops in people's gardens, debris on pathways and roads affecting cooperation and access to natural material for reconstruction, etc.)
Disaster 'phases'	Clearly identified phases (i.e. relief, early recovery, recovery and development)	Ongoing struggle with multiple threats rooted in daily life

Towards a pluralistic approach to understanding disaster

Studying disasters through the lens of Western paradigms is clearly problematic because it lacks the diverse realities and people's perceptions on disasters. In the short case study of Vanuatu,

insiders were focused on the scale of the disaster and the visible and quantifiable impacts of TC Pam on the built environment and agricultural production. For insiders, TC Pam had been highly devastating but was perceived as one of the many challenges faced daily. Surely the impacts on housing and their agricultural production were of high concern, but other less visible aspects – alongside multiple smaller scale events – were just as challenging, yet not seen as extraordinary by locals. People dealt with TC Pam from day one, applying mechanisms that are shaped by their knowledge of hazards and disasters and rooted in their culture, values, and *Kastom*. More generally, their understanding of disaster, the challenges faced, and priorities in terms of recovery were very different from that of outsiders.

Practitioners and scholars have long advocated for the participation of local people on matters that affect their lives (Chambers, 2003). As such, they have contributed to the emergence of participatory pluralism as a credible paradigm alternative to Western approaches to DRR (Chambers, 2007; Maskrey, 1984; 1989). Participatory pluralism in DRR sits within to a broader postcolonial agenda that has challenged the relevance and imposition of Western values and norms outside of Europe (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1998). Central to participation and this postcolonial agenda is the idea that power and knowledge are inseparably linked (Freire, 1970; Said, 1978). Creating a body of knowledge is a precondition to make use of power, and knowledge reflects power relations (Foucault, 1975). Participatory approaches thus aim to empower local people with the decision-making process so they have a voice in defining what disaster means to them and can shape or control the decisions intended to lift their well-being (Saxena, 1998). This is in opposition to the Western reductionist and positivist approaches and methods where local people, who first and foremost face hazards and disasters, only have a passive role in this process, generally through providing information about themselves via questionnaires and other censuses designed by outsiders.

Participatory pluralism rather draws upon approaches and tools that favour people's knowledge, including those who are marginalized and generally excluded from mainstream research and DRR. It thus emphasises downward accountability towards those at risk (Chambers, 1983). For the last few decades, government agencies, NGOs and academics dealing with disaster research and DRR have increasingly used participatory approaches and tools (Maskrey, 1989, 2011; Luna, 2001). The visual dimension of participatory methods is one of their main strengths as it allows to overcome cultural and literacy barriers (Chambers, 2007). Participatory methods are indeed easy to set up and flexible but require facilitation skills and experience to encourage genuine participation and transfer of power.

Participatory pluralism thus recognises that people who are labelled 'vulnerable' by outside researchers have resources, skills and knowledge to deal with phenomena seen from the outside as hazardous. This alternative paradigm further acknowledges that the same allegedly 'vulnerable' people can also be valuable researchers, should need be for more knowledge in the first place. Both people's ability to deal with possibly hazardous phenomena and generate new knowledge builds upon traditional and local knowledge, social organizations, solidarity networks, skills, and technologies (not an exhaustive list) (Gaillard et al., 2019). Everyone holds a unique set of such knowledge, resources and skills that are usually shared and combined with those of their

neighbours and kin. Taken all together, people's knowledge, resources and skills form a collective bundle that not always place-based. They often incorporate transnational connections such as for remittances that migrants send to their homeland on a regular basis or in time of hardship (Le Dé et al., 2013).

As such, participatory pluralism reflects the diversity of people's realities. It challenges the metadiscourses that are characteristics of disaster scholarship as inherited from the Enlightenment and the nature-culture divide emphasised by Rousseau in his correspondence with Voltaire about the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. Both the hazard (nature) and vulnerability (culture) paradigms' Eurocentric and homogenising views of what disasters are prove irrelevant in many contexts outside of the Western world. In fact, forty years ago, Lewis (1979:113-114) emphasised that *'preoccupation with Western concepts and Western disasters and Western outsider response to overseas disaster has hindered any study and analysis of the perception of and response to hazard in third-world countries, and in societies and cultures different from our own'*. It therefore seems imperative to henceforth critically challenge dominant approaches to the way we study disasters by using more diverse ontologies and epistemologies that integrate local perspectives or as Hewitt (1995, p. 330) put it *'letting those in hazard speak for and of themselves, is one of the few possibilities for keeping the faces and pain in the foreground of interpretation and response'*.

Conclusion

Understanding (and defining) disasters leads to question power and power relations. In other words, what disaster are studied, how, by whom, and for whom? Studying disasters from the viewpoint of Western outsiders and eventually assessing whatever it means (i.e. vulnerability, resilience) from an outsider's lens may just, most often unintentionally, address the needs of the latter rather than addressing local people's concerns and priorities. Indeed, Western scholarship remains dominant in disaster studies and influences non-Western countries, maintaining centuries of combined hegemony and diffusionism (Said, 1978; Blaut, 1993). Western countries are where research ideas are developed, where resources are available, where many researchers who research disasters in non-western countries come from, and where those who lead publications are affiliated. The current academic publication and research funding system is not set up to encourage more pluralistic views on disaster. Scholars studying disasters are pressured to publish in high impact journals as fast as possible after large scale events. Those who publish first are likely to get attention from the media and amongst scholars in disaster studies, contributing to the reputation of their institution, while, often, also contributing to practices that are ethically questionable (Gaillard and Peek, 2019).

The study of disasters requires more diverse ontologies and epistemologies to be grounded and relevant locally. Local researchers, who are more knowledgeable about local contexts, should therefore play a prominent role in researching disasters. They should be encouraged to use concepts, epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies that fit their local context and reflect diverse local realities (Gaillard, 2019). There are enough excellent researchers in Africa, Latin America and Asia and the Pacific to spearhead this process and raise consciousness amongst their

peers. Consciousness is crucial to resist the hegemony of Western scholarship and draw upon local knowledge and skills (Freire, 1970). In Vanuatu, there are several universities and research institutes with local researchers who have in-depth knowledge and extensive experience of disasters as well as the willingness to conduct research on their own place and people. Promoting local researchers does not exclude outsiders from studying disasters in places they are not familiar with, but rather encourage collaboration in a way that recasts the power relationship in designing proposals, studying, publishing and disseminating the findings related to the study of disasters. Such collaboration requires to build rapport and trust in each other.

More locally grounded perspectives on disasters are also essential to better inform DRR policies and practices. DRR frameworks, international policies and practices are largely informed by outsiders' roles, views, values, and understanding of disaster, which often emphasise the transfer of skills and resources from Western countries to non-western nations as for the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Perpetuating such an approach, to the detriment of local knowledge, perceptions and actions in the face of hazards and disasters often increases risk instead of reducing it. The example of TC Pam in Vanuatu illustrates this well: while local people actively faced the event, external aid sent post disaster was massive with a high number of international agencies suddenly providing food cans and Western construction material. The event was seen as exceptional by international aid agencies, requiring exceptional aid support. The limited understanding of the local context led to disaster responses competing with local initiatives, potentially undermining local capacities on the long term (Barber, 2015; Le Dé et al, 2018). Understanding disasters thus requires to better integrate and interpret the experiences and views from local people. This implies a shift in the way we apprehend, assess and interpret disasters and people's experience of such events, with local people playing a prominent role on the production of knowledge and solutions to tackle disaster risk, that is participatory pluralism.

Flipping power relations in researching disasters ultimately requires to reclaim the political dimension of disasters. In consequence, both disaster studies and DRR should be political endeavours. The progressive abandon of the political in disaster studies has contributed to DRR becoming an 'anti-politics machine' (Ferguson, 1993). Technocratic and technical solutions continue to be the norm because disasters are only seen through the reductionist and positivist lens of Western scholarship, whereas the latter is not embedded within all societies and cultures. Worryingly, the practice of participatory research and DRR is also getting ridden by the same flaw. Participatory initiatives are often *facipulated* and skewed to serve the interests of outside stakeholders who need to justify the participation of local people in activities they have designed beforehand (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

To conclude, asking whose knowledge and studies benefit whom should be at the centre of a more politically-grounded disaster research agenda. Sharing power with local researchers so that they lead studies of what is locally considered a disaster should be the first symbolic step in this direction, that is the direction of a path that meaningfully informs policies and practices to reduce existing risk and prevent the creation of new ones (Lewis and Kelman, 2012; Wisner and Lavell, 2017).

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