



## Media's role in disaster risk reduction: The third-person effect<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This conceptual modeling exercise shifts the theoretical foundation for our understanding of the politics of international disaster risk reduction (DRR) policy efforts out of the development-oriented frameworks that dominate the subject. The resulting model focuses on an interacting set of necessary causes that show when and how the mediated observation of distant disasters can create opportunities for political entrepreneurs to push for the adoption of disaster risk reduction policies. This dynamic is called the Third-Person Effect and it also offers an explanation for the puzzle of why disaster stricken communities often fail to adopt disaster risk reduction policies even when ample resources are made available from outside sources. It presents a new perspective on how and when exogenous actors might facilitate the adoption of disaster risk reduction policy. While the model is specific to disasters and disaster policy, it appears to be generalizable, with particular applicability to environmental policy and resource management policies such as fisheries management where stake holding and rational choice collective action dynamics are significant factors.

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### 1. Introduction

For those who engage the policies and politics related to disasters, there is nothing more confusing and frustrating than the fact that stricken communities so often do not seem learn from the experience. Disaster stricken communities almost always seem reluctant to pursue or enact policies that will significantly reduce their risk of future losses. In fact they are often hostile to efforts to integrate disaster risk reduction (DRR) into recovery efforts. Barring significant external intervention, the result is that the same houses and businesses are rebuilt in the same place that was just flooded, burnt or blown away. That lack of DRR action in so many disaster stricken communities is even more puzzling when set in contrast to all of the communities around the world that have significantly reduced their vulnerabilities through DRR policy efforts.

The February 2011 Christchurch earthquake that devastated significant parts of New Zealand's second largest city provides a clear example of both of these phenomena. Prior to the earthquake, Christchurch could have been offered as a model for the adoption of DRR policies. Even though Christchurch was thought

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to have only a modest risk of a catastrophic earthquake [18] and New Zealand as a whole had not suffered a disastrous quake since 1931, the city had a long history of disaster risk reduction policies primarily focused on the earthquake hazard that is common across much of New Zealand. This DRR effort included but was not limited to the rigorous enforcement of strict building codes, significant efforts at retrofitting non-compliant buildings and the complete rebuilding of the main hospital to make it quake resistant. Further, after the earthquake struck, there was clear evidence that this extensive and expensive effort had saved thousands of lives. Despite an intensity of ground motion that was the highest ever recorded [18] and exceeded any practical building design parameters [9] all but three of the major buildings in the city retained sufficient structural integrity to allow all occupants to evacuate safely and easily. Most notably, the new hospital, built on a base isolating foundation suffered absolutely no disruption in service.

The New Zealand news media recognized this clear evidence that DRR policies minimized the human impact, frequently comparing the Christchurch quake to the devastating quake that struck Haiti in 2010 and discussing how DRR policies saved lives. Still, in the wake of Christchurch earthquake, it was impossible to miss the often-strident local opposition to the DRR elements included in the national government's recovery and rebuilding effort. There were objections, sometimes pushed to the point of legal challenges to anything that appeared to be an attempt to react to the quake in ways that would minimize the threat posed by future

quakes. At some time in the extensive television news coverage of the recovery, everything from the enforcement of building codes in the repair of older buildings, to requiring retrofitting of non-compliant structures was challenged. These challenges were occurring even when the economic burden had been minimized or completely eliminated by government funding.

Most contentious was the red-zoning of areas that suffered severe liquefaction and were deemed unsuitable for rebuilding. This particular element of the DRR aspects of the recovery effort lead to an indelibly ironic TV news moment, where a significant number of protesters were gathered in front of homes that had been completely destroyed by liquefaction. All of the homes seen in the segment were tilted at odd angles, some looked broken in half, and some had sunk as much as a meter deep, yet the crowd was demanding that the government let the residents rebuild instead of relocate. The segment ended with a tearful resident waiving what appeared to be an insurance policy and asserting that it guaranteed her the right to rebuild her home exactly as it was, not build the same house somewhere else.

The Christchurch case is particularly intriguing in that it provides an example of both extensive pre-event DRR adoption and strident post-event DRR resistance in the same community. That astounding contrast presents a profound conceptual challenge to any social, developmental or cultural explanation for post-event DRR resistance. Further, observing that contrast served as both a catalyst and a starting point in this effort to reconceptualise the development theory foundations of DRR policy. Such a profound shift in such a short time in a community could only be explained by looking at the immediate forces, actions and reactions involved.

It was already clear that a rethinking of some sort was needed because even after roughly four decades of academic and policy efforts addressing the issue of DRR<sup>1</sup>, no satisfactory explanation has been offered for some perplexing variations in how, when and if communities adopt or fail to adopt DRR efforts. Further, the human development theoretical perspective that is commonly applied to the subject has struggled to explain the disparities in DRR uptake across similarly developed communities and it offers no obvious way to engage the puzzle of post-event DRR resistance. The latter, as it occurred in Christchurch, is particularly interesting because it indicates that neither resource availability nor social attitudes toward development and DRR policies are likely to provide sufficient insights to help governments and NGO's push DRR uptake forward at a more robust pace.

The rough conceptual model outlined below presents an alternative theoretical approach to the question. It is a radical re-think, informed by extensive observation of disaster stricken communities and professional engagement with disaster recovery efforts, aid processes, NGOs and civil defense officials. Methodologically, it is a combination of qualitative observation and rational choice modeling.

Many of the insights that drove this effort were the result of an unusual confluence of events and situational factors created an opportunity for the extensive but passive observation of the policy, media and public experiences of the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. Changing perspectives in this way, examining all of these familiar subjects from a step back brought some unexpected aspects of the political and social response to disasters into focus. It was possible to simultaneously watch both what was unfolding in Christchurch and what was happening in other locations in New Zealand. That not only revealed the phenomena of Response Exhaustion, it also indicated that a process of aggregated individual

rational choices was occurring. The dynamic was astoundingly similar to what is modeled in the rational choice approach to collective action [36] and that realization helped organize many of the thoughts offered here.

With the concept of response exhaustion in hand, the research emphasis for a planned tour of North American disaster stricken communities shifted from the process and politics of reconstruction, to a study of the social and psychological dynamics of recovering communities. During the tour, I avoided saying anything other than mentioning I was in the area to study the recovery from disasters. Waitresses, taxi drivers, farmers gathered at the breakfast counter of the local diner, school teachers at the local bar, there were always plenty of people with a story to share and I simply and passively listened to what they had to say. I also listened to how they told their tales. How did they frame descriptions? Did they mention DRR in the recovery efforts? How did they refer to local and external officials involved? The tour was also augmented with an examination of communities with extensive DRR uptake but no recent disasters. It was by no means rigorous or empirical, but it proved to be incredibly valuable in the development of this conceptual model.

The concept of response exhaustion offers an explanation for why stricken communities do not pursue DRR and in fact often oppose it as part of the recovery process. That discussion is then incorporated into a more comprehensive model of necessary conditions for DRR where the agenda setting role of the news media is integrated into an aggregated rational choice approach, the Third-Person Effect model. In this model, the mediated observation of an event occurring elsewhere is combined with local conditions and local political actions to create opportunities for DRR in the third-person (observing) location explains how and why some but not all vulnerable but non-stricken communities adopt DRR policies. These factors and how they interrelate in turn provides some new insights and offer some clear indication of when and where external DRR resources such as foreign aid might be most effectively employed. Perhaps more importantly, the third-person effect provides clear guidance for when the provision of external DRR resources will be wasted. Because the necessary conditions identified in the model are largely non-compensatory, they also explain some of the difficulties encountered in aid-driven DRR efforts. If one of the necessary elements is missing, it cannot be compensated for with another. Therefore, if any of these factors is absent then no amount of aid or effort is likely to produce significant DRR results.

### 1.1. Human development and disaster risk reduction

Theories and concepts from development dominate the way that both the academic and applied policy communities approach the politics of disaster risk reduction. In fact the subject is so thoroughly enmeshed in the development conceptual framework that on the very first page of the introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction* the editors simply state, "It is impossible and fruitless to try to distinguish between human development and DRR" [40]. Indeed, pretty much every one of the 65 chapters in the massive handbook is written from that perspective. However, that emphasis in the handbook is hard to critique because it is unquestionably an accurate representation of the academic approach to the political and policy side of DRR. It also reflects the predominant approach of the NGO and policy making communities (see [34,35]). Human development defines the bulk of the DRR policy community's underlying concepts and presumptions (see [33]) and most of the case study material researchers examine developing or underdeveloped communities (e.g. [27]).

DRR's association with the development literature is most

<sup>1</sup> A "start date" for DRR research is a bit difficult to pin down. The early 1970s probably the most appropriate date, with reference to work cited in Michael H. Glantz's *The Politics of Natural Disaster* [10] and Ian Davis' *Shelter After Disaster* [7].

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