



## Policy forum

Reframing disaster policy: the global evolution  
of vulnerable communitiesL. Comfort<sup>a,\*</sup>, B. Wisner<sup>b</sup>, S. Cutter<sup>c</sup>, R. Pulwarty<sup>d</sup>, K. Hewitt<sup>e</sup>, A. Oliver-Smith<sup>f</sup>, J. Wiener<sup>g</sup>,  
M. Fordham<sup>h</sup>, W. Peacock<sup>i</sup>, F. Krimgold<sup>j</sup><sup>a</sup>Graduate School of Public & International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA<sup>b</sup>Department of Geography, California State University, Long Beach, Long Beach, CA 90840, USA<sup>c</sup>Department of Geography, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208, USA<sup>d</sup>National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Office of Global Programs, Silver Spring MD 20910, USA<sup>e</sup>Department of Geography, Wilfrid Laurier University, West Waterloo, ONT N2L 3C5, Canada<sup>f</sup>Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 326117305, USA<sup>g</sup>Program on Environment and Behavior, Institute of Behavioral Science, Campus Box 468 University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0468, USA<sup>h</sup>Geography Department, Anglia Polytechnic University, Cambridge CB1 1PT, England, UK<sup>i</sup>International Hurricane Center and Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Florida International University, Miami, FL 33199, USA<sup>j</sup>University Outreach, Virginia Tech Graduate Center, Falls Church, VA 22043, USA

## 1. The social construction of disaster

A disaster is widely perceived as an event that is beyond human control; the capricious hand of fate moves against unsuspecting communities creating massive destruction and prompting victims to call for divine support as well as earthly assistance.<sup>1</sup> Surely these people would have acted differently had the risks been known and now they must depend on others for humanitarian aid with which to rebuild their shattered communities.

We challenge these notions and argue that, instead of helping us to understand and ameliorate the root conditions of disaster, they actually perpetuate and worsen them (Hewitt, 1997; Blaikie et al., 1994; Mileti, 1999). In an era when most relief agencies stop short of examining the policies and practices that contribute to disaster, we call for an explicit analysis of the circumstances that

make human communities vulnerable to unforeseen natural and technological events.

Disasters have become a policy problem of global scope precisely because what humans do, both in the normal course of their lives and in response to disasters, frequently magnifies the vulnerability of communities. There is a widespread failure to recognize and address connections between changes in land use, settlement policies, population distributions and the accompanying degradation of habitats on the one hand and dramatically increased levels of hazard exposure and vulnerability on the other. We propose that human vulnerability—those circumstances that place people at risk while reducing their means of response or denying them available protection—becomes an integral concern in the development and evaluation of disaster policies. We must change the policies of today that rely heavily on sending assistance only after tragedy has occurred.

Our argument is based on four premises:

- The increasing number and costs of disasters demonstrate a rate of social and environmental change that exceeds the management capacity of existing organizations
- Overtaxed management systems are exacerbated by inadequate understanding of the components and consequences of change, including impacts on affected communities
- Individuals, organizations and governments that interact in an uninformed manner create a cumulative pattern of interdependent practices that leads to

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1-412-648-7606; fax: +1-412-648-2605.

E-mail addresses: lkc@pitt.edu (L. Comfort), bwisner@csulb.edu, bwisner@igc.apf.org (B. Wisner), scutter@garnet.cla.sc.edu (S. Cutter), rsp@cdc.noaa.gov (R. Pulwarty), khewitt@mach1.wlu.ca (K. Hewitt), aros@nervm.nerdc.ufl.edu (A. Oliver-Smith), wienerj@spot.colorado.edu (J. Wiener), mfordham@bridge.anglia.ac.uk (M. Fordham), peacock@fiu.edu (W. Peacock), kringgold@mail.vt.edu (F. Krimgold)

<sup>1</sup>For example, President Arnoldo Aleman recent called upon Nicaraguans to pray for deliverance from the consequences of Hurricane Mitch but conspicuously avoided mentioning the responsibilities of the government. See: Centro de Coordinacion para de Los Desastres Naturales en America Central (CEPREDENAC), <<http://www.sinfo.net/cepredenac/mitch>>