

A REPORT to an international aid organization on how the concept of 'socially-produced vulnerability should inform its operations

Socially produced vulnerability has been under continuous refinement and change since the 1950s. According to this concept the after-effects of a natural disaster is under the influence of socially induced vulnerability which may actually result in inappropriate human action or intervention being taken in the event of a flood or an earthquake or a tsunami.

The culture and the social principles that exist in the disaster zone play a very important role in determining the future course of action and also determine the extent of success that a disaster management team can meet. Anthropologists and researchers in the developing countries have found that the studies done in the conventional disaster management methods do not yield the correct results and the concept of a political-economic perspective is missing. The fundamental assumption that nature can be controlled solely by human reasons takes a lower rung when compared to the social and political environment that exists in the concerned region. The approach to understanding the socially produced vulnerabilities and their effects hinges on the link between the rising number of natural disasters amidst the contemporary processes and practices established in today's modern world.

It can be traced to the principle assumption and justification that everything in the natural world is at our disposal and we can in all ways utilize the resources to further our race and for the welfare of our race. This gives us the assumed right and will to destroy nature and feed our advancement. Thus the people actually live within this man made system of which utilizes nature for providing mankind. This relationship between nature and the system can be misinterpreted by many. In the case of a hurricane prone area or a Tsunami prone area rich people might want to believe that it is completely safe to build a beach house overlooking the sea and live in style. This is a fine example of socially produced vulnerability where culture and societal perceptions have influenced rationale to produce a vulnerability which nature can wreak havoc on. The combined effects of technology, society, demography and ideology have increasingly resulted in rising number of people settling in disaster prone and dangerous areas. The political system is another reason why vulnerabilities are produced by the society.

Some of the region in the world like Indonesia and Bali has age old traditions which cannot be defied by the local people. There are local customs which go beyond the reasoning and logic of the modern world and technology cannot help appease the local population to take a reasonable decision regarding their settling near a dormant volcano. Let us take the case of Mt. Krakatoa, a small uninhabited volcanic island in Indonesia, which was one of the world's biggest natural disaster. (Boer and Sanders 2002)

The recent inventions of the telegraph and international newspaper agencies assured that the news about the volcanic eruption in the Indonesian island reached all parts of the world within a day.

Indonesia was occupied entirely by European colonies when the volcano erupted and the eruption is closely linked to the demise of colonialism in Indonesia. The Dutch had previously been in control of Java and Sumatra, which were very close to Krakatoa. After the disaster their control over the Indonesian colonies weakened considerably and it started the movement of the Dutch from Indonesia. (Simon Winchester 2003)

Taking into account the political and social scenario that existed at that time an international aid organization would do well to first study the consequences and social unrest that will be triggered by such a natural disaster. The Muslims who dominated Indonesia during that time were already angered by the treatment meted out by the colonizers and were on the verge of breaking loose.

An aid organization should first study the center of power and examine how the power would tilt so that they can provide relief and aid in the most effective fashion possible. In the case of Krakatoa there was a sudden spike in the anti-western violence by the Muslim extremists. The west never did anything to reduce the misery and suffering of the victims and the Indonesians started grouping together to rise against the Dutch and throw them out of their country. A strife torn situation requires the Aid organization to be more cautious and adopt a neutral stand since supporting any group would result in a dangerous situation which they would find themselves unable to handle.

This is seen as a classic case of socially induced vulnerability because of the existing tension between the locals and the rulers. The aid organizations would find it difficult to negotiate and provide aid to the victims in this situation because

cause of the fear and safety of its own employees and staff. Thus the people of Krakatoa are a victim of socially produced vulnerability and resulted in close to thirty six thousand people losing their lives due to the volcano and its after effects. It must be noted that all the people who dies except for one thousand alone were victims of Tsunami waves which hit all the nearby islands.

The next case of socially induced vulnerability is the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 which killed close to 3000 people though estimates at that time were concocted and projected as close to 600 in view of the downturn in real estate prices. One of the social factors here was Racism. San Francisco had a huge population of Chinese located in an area called Chinatown. Due to the high racist attitude prevalent in those days this area was entirely neglected and did not receive any aid or help. Close to 300,000 people were left homeless after the quake. In this case an aid organization must seek the social hierarchy and the various segments of people residing in that area to gain an understanding of which pockets and which segment of the people are more vulnerable than the rest. A quick study would have shown that the Chinese were not valid citizens but were residing in Chinatown and racism was prevalent. The aid organization could have then allocated some of its staff to providing help for the Chinese who would have been neglected by the army and the government.

We have thus seen two major cases of natural disaster where socially produced vulnerabilities claimed lives and how some sections of the residents did not receive the necessary aid. The international aid organizations must sensitize their staff and employees to the local climate and environment in terms of political and social factors and then take decisions as to which course of action might be the most effective under the circumstances.

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