

## **Culture and Risk:**

# Understanding the Sociocultural Settings that Influence Risk from Natural Hazards

Synthesis Report from a Global  
E-Conference organised by  
ICIMOD and facilitated by the  
Mountain Forum

Prepared by Kenneth Hewitt

# Summary

An e-conference was held in late 2008 to discuss 'culture and risk' or 'understanding the socio-cultural settings that influence risk from natural hazards'. Participants were invited to do this through sharing and documenting concrete examples, stories, and best (or bad) practices to show how culture and the social setting can affect disaster management. Participants also reflected on how to effectively bridge, or overcome, cultural differences whenever they constitute barriers to vulnerability reduction and disaster relief efforts. The outcomes of the discussion were used to formulate policy recommendations on how cultural aspects can be addressed in disaster management, and to identify experienced practitioners, key issues, gaps and research questions. More than 450 participants registered from over 70 countries representing a wide range of aspects and responsibilities within the fields of disaster and risk management.

Participants agreed that cultural matters must be taken seriously in risk assessment, and disaster prevention and preparedness. Peoples' concerns and actions or inaction, and the extent and value of local knowledge, are linked to culture. Cultural norms and values influence the readiness to adopt, modify, or reject safety measures offered through outside assistance. However, caution was advised about misreading the real meaning of specific cultural traits or expressions. Some participants referred to economic, institutional, and political influences that can enter cultural systems and become the dominant factors in influencing vulnerability to natural hazard risks. Overall, there was considerable optimism about what can be done to improve safety and knowledge when there is a commitment to cultural understanding. Participants also looked at 'bridging gaps', discussing people's experience of approaches and tools that can be used in contexts where persons of differing cultural backgrounds must work together and what has happened in projects and in encounters with communities with distinctive socio-cultural norms, hazards, and settings. Some of the strongest support for cultural sensitivity was not because of how 'lay', local, and traditional cultures can create impediments, rather participants stressed the negative impact of interveners, officials, or professionals who fail to behave appropriately towards communities at risk. Some emphasised the problems that arise from ignoring the language and belief systems of others and the danger of failure to respect and earn the trust of vulnerable groups.

In summary, most contributors favoured an approach to risk and disaster in which culture is an integral part and felt that it should be taken into account as an element of good practices. They stressed the need to listen to the concerns of communities at risk, and strive to understand and benefit from local knowledge of the given environment. However, the factor of culture was considered to be part of a 'package' of societal and environmental influences. In any given case other factors, especially outside influences or economic and political authorities, may override or shape cultural forms and viewpoints. The consensus was that cultural issues become more important and problematic when ignored or misunderstood.

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## Introduction

The main victims of disasters tend to be people who are already among the most vulnerable, with livelihoods that are under threat and living in areas that are impoverished and degraded. These people live and work in places at risk because they cannot afford to be where it is safer. They lack the protection that others have, and the ability to influence everyday safety and emergency preparedness. They are often excluded from the discussions and studies that determine disaster management policy, and live far from where health, power, modern expertise, and research are concentrated. This distance increases the likelihood that socio-cultural problems will arise when efforts to assist them are deployed. This is the main context in which cultural difficulties and clashes are likely to occur, and in which inappropriate measures may actually magnify danger.

Although the influence of socio-cultural factors is being discussed in many fields, in disaster management there is still a strong focus on technical solutions, and a lack of awareness of, or even resistance to, the idea that socio-cultural factors can play an important role. An e-conference was organised in 2008 by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development and facilitated by the Mountain Forum Secretariat and Asia Pacific Mountain Network (APMN) to promote discussion on this topic. Mountain Forum is an electronic network for mountain development with nodes in the Asia Pacific region (APMN), South America (Infoandina), N. America, Africa, and Europe. An invitation to participate was sent out through the Mountain Forum as well as through other networks and personal contacts. The discussion was held on the Mountain Forum platform and moderated by Kenneth Hewitt. The conference ran from 22 September to 6 October 2008 in two parts: one week with a focus on establishing how important socio-cultural settings are; and one week under the theme of 'Bridging Gaps', focused more on questions of practice and especially approaches and tools appropriate in contexts where persons of differing cultural backgrounds must work together.

The goal of the E-conference was to improve understanding of the linkages between cultural and social factors and risks from natural hazards. Participants were invited to do this through sharing and documenting concrete examples, stories, and best (or bad) practices to show how culture can affect disaster management. Participants also reflected on how to effectively bridge, or overcome, cultural differences wherever they constitute barriers to vulnerability reduction and disaster relief efforts. The contributions were used as a basis for developing policy recommendations on how socio-cultural aspects can be addressed in disaster management, and to identify experienced practitioners, key issues, gaps, and research questions.

To judge from the participants, the subject is of interest to a wide range of people. More than 450 people registered for the conference from more than 70 countries. They represented a wide range of different aspects and responsibilities within the risk and disaster field, and many contributed their own experiences and concerns. The complete documentation of the conference can be found on the conference website at <<http://www.mtnforum.org/rs/ec/index.cfm?econfid=16>>. This paper provides a brief summary of the main findings.

The main concern was to identify and evaluate the role of cultural conditions in risk reduction and disaster management. It might seem odd to have to emphasise or defend this concern, as few will doubt that human actions are critical to whether or how well most risks are addressed. But it seems that even so there is still a lack of awareness on the specific role played by cultural conditions in disaster management.

There are clear correlations between relevant social programmes and the safety of food, consumer products, and highways; between the quality of public health or medical systems and the health of citizens; in coping with economic change, or protection from crime and armed violence. But there has been a tendency to treat natural hazards differently. They are more likely to be described as beyond human control; the product of unstoppable forces, unplanned, 'Acts of God!'. The focus is on great earthquakes and tropical cyclones, landslides, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, droughts and floods, locust plagues, and epidemic disease. The sense of powerlessness or merely lucky survival is reinforced by dramatic news reports and disaster images. In the face of such forces and events, human activity appears ineffective or of only secondary relevance. Is this really the case?

It is generally agreed that natural disasters have been increasing in number and total losses for a century at least, but there is much less agreement over what this means. Even where climate change is involved, increased losses cannot be clearly traced to larger or more frequent environmental extremes. It does seem that lethal and costly disasters show little respect for political systems, economy, or culture. However, there is plenty of evidence to suggest the latter greatly influence the scale of losses, the persons or groups affected, and quality of response. A challenging issue is that of the disproportionate casualties among certain groups in most disasters<sup>1</sup>. That applies globally, and to virtually all regions and countries. However, it is rare to see exceptional losses among all members of groups defined as, say, children or the elderly, women or racially, or of all housing or schools in the disaster zones. Victims usually come from the least wealthy and influential within these groups; those in unsafe buildings or engaged in more dangerous activities, who had limited options or entitlements, or who were neglected in the crisis itself. Powerful as they are, the earthquakes, hurricanes or tsunami cannot explain these social profiles of death. Social conditions enter in, singling out certain areas, groups and types of person within the disaster zones.

Pre-existing vulnerabilities are always more critical. In fact, the extent and types of risk people face; their ability to avoid or oppose disaster, differ greatly between and within most societies. Thus human agency and social conditions emerge as very important in so called 'natural' disasters.

Meanwhile, when the damage in these and other disasters is examined, it is found that much could have been reduced or prevented by well-known protection or other strategies – and that the damage was in fact avoided in other communities and other parts of the *same* disasters, *even where the natural forces were as great or greater than where serious damage occurred*. It is not that there are never forces and conditions against which there are no known measures for protecting people and property, but for the most part the disasters we hear about are not of such scope or type. Subsequent reports leave little doubt that the schools which fell down in the Gujarat, Northern Pakistan, and Sichuan earthquakes would not have done so if they had met well-established, often mandated, design, site, and upkeep standards.

However, it seems that, even among those who believe social conditions are important, the tendency is to focus on physical and hazard-dedicated factors such as structural safety, flood plain land use, evacuation and warning systems, and rapid response of relief agencies. The background document to the e-conference identified a certain 'negative bias' towards cultural factors in hazards work; *a sense of them as more part of the problem than of the solution*. Sources were quoted that treat perceptions, beliefs, and any viewpoints outside a professional and scientific mainstream as impediments at best; and mainly as sources of increased danger and loss.

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the Kobe earthquake of 1995, there were exceptional casualties among women and the elderly. The 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami killed two to three times more women than men in communities from Aceh to Sri Lanka and India. In the Bay of Bengal cyclone of 1991, reports suggest 90% of some 140,000 deaths were women and children. At New Orleans in hurricane 'Katrina', 2005, casualties were concentrated among the elderly and Afro-Americans. In the October, 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan, between 17,000 and 20,000 'students' were reported killed, mainly due to the collapse of some 10,000 school buildings. Children comprised half of more than 75,000 deaths. A similarly tragic and disturbing loss of children in unsafe school buildings occurred in the recent earthquake in Sichuan China.

On the whole, therefore, cultural matters have received a very limited or sceptical treatment in much of the hazards literature. By contrast, however, the e-conference participants challenged and sought to alter these negative views of the role of culture. On balance, their perspectives and experience suggest that cultural concerns should be much more important in this work and even, in some contexts or respects, central.

## **Theme 1: the role of socio-cultural settings in risk and natural disasters**

### **Cultural settings do matter in disaster risk management...**

Most participants insisted that cultural matters are essential for assessing peoples' concerns and knowledge of hazards. It was felt that they contribute substantially to influencing people's readiness to adopt, modify, or reject safety measures, especially those offered through outside assistance. However, a split existed between those participants who feel culture can be separated from, or exists as an autonomous element of risk and response; and those who argue it is just one, and generally a subordinate, element or expression of the influence of others.

Among the strongest views was the statement of Mohammad Zaman (freelance consultant, Canada) that: *People's perception, knowledge and 'world-view' shape their understanding of disasters and thus influence their responses significantly.* Arrey Mbongaya Ivo (African Centre for Community and Development, UK) believes that: *Cultures have tangible and intangible influences on people [but] are vital in designing holistic policies for risk and natural disaster management.* Prof. P.C. Joshi (Department of Anthropology, Delhi University, India) suggests that: *Culture, as a shared, learned, and transmitted body of knowledge, beliefs, and practices, plays a very important role in our (here by 'our' I mean all the stakeholders in a situation of disaster) perception, understanding, and activities undertaken to mitigate, manage, and face the disaster.*

Mohammad Ahsan Khan (Rural Development Project, Pakistan) finds that: *Socio-cultural settings do affect the ways in which people choose to respond to any disaster. Proactive, passive, or poor responses to any disasters are inextricably linked with different socio-cultural settings. Culture, the way of living (set of values, norms, beliefs, and social organisation) of any community plays a catalytic role in developing people's responses. Different social settings within a given culture not only shape people's knowledge but also influence their skills and practices thus affecting their behaviours towards a given situation... [and] are the key driving forces to shape people behaviours to respond to any disaster like situations.*

P.G. Dhar Chakrabarti (National Institute of Disaster Management and SAARC Disaster Management Center, India), emphasising that much of the problem has to do with the neglect of cultural factors, is concerned that we stay focused on them, arguing that while: *...geographical settings and socioeconomic system may shape cultural practices...culture is not necessarily synonymous with society. By 'society' we mean the way social relationships are organised through family, kinship, stratifications, gender relations etc. 'Culture' is the web of beliefs, perceptions, rituals, mores, world views etc. There is not always a one-to-one relationship between culture and society. The same type of geo-physical and socioeconomic conditions may have different types of culture. Therefore religious systems, history, traditions, past disaster events, influence of opinion leaders, etc, play their role in shaping culture.*

### **... but culture, geographies, economics and politics are often intertwined**

A slight majority of submissions, while regarding cultural matters as important, thought that they are usually subordinate to other social conditions. They see 'culture' as expressing, hiding, or compromised by more basic causes – geophysical, economic, political, or technological. As such, they conclude, it is probably impossible and certainly dangerous to try to interpret cultural ingredients without reference to these other matters. Necati Dedeoglu (Medical Faculty, Akdeniz University, Turkey) clearly experienced that: *We have come to realise that ... social and economic conditions influence disaster preparedness much more than culture does.*

Many cautionary statements and stories were not so much against cultural concerns themselves, but how they are misread or substituted for other factors. Emmanuel Maceda (Department of Geography, University of the Philippines)

summarises the grounds for caution: *Vulnerability is produced by certain structural, socio-cultural-economic and political formations independent of natural hazards...because of difficult access to resources, poverty, low social protection, and the larger political economy system. It is important to realise how our lives are revolving around the powers-that-be and our access to knowledge.*

### On geography, cross-scale linkages, networks, and multi-cultural contexts

A number of submissions emphasised the roles of geography and regional particulars of terrain, climatic variations, vegetation cover, and the history of environmental change. Mohammad Zaman states: *The 'locale' of events or settings plays an important role in shaping responses – for instance, rural versus urban, riverine, mountainous, etc. Mohammad Ahsan Khan echoes the same sentiment: Geographical location plays a key role in developing and influencing ... and shaping peoples' behaviours towards risk management [and] in information and knowledge management.* Xu Jianchu (World Agroforestry Centre, China) adds: *There is an inextricable link between cultural diversity and knowledge systems that emerges from historic ties to particular landscapes such as mountains, islands, and deserts.* For the most part, there was a stronger sense of 'geography' as the places and contexts of lived and shared experience. Two or three submissions found that new methods such as geomatics and computer-based visualisations of local environments can be very instructive.

Meanwhile, nearly all cities and most countries have become 'multi-cultural' through migration, social upheaval, and modernisation. Programmes or measures to address risk and disaster involve both contact and inter-dependence among people of many different cultural backgrounds, and in different stages and networks of trans-cultural influence.

David Etkin (York University, Canada) concludes that: *While much of this work needs to attend to 'local coping strategies', it is essential to be aware of how 'larger scales are (increasingly) significant'.* The current financial systems crisis provides a compelling example of how risks play out in the modern world, with its local, national and international ramifications; and its differentiation through webs of civil, governmental, corporate, and global institutions. Even this rarified realm of high finance has severe material impacts on well-being and vulnerability for people far removed from the centres and decision-makers.

### On livelihoods, day-to-day risks and existing vulnerabilities

Many contributions reflect preoccupations in the hazards and disasters field. Indeed, it is (culturally?) remarkable how common the language and concerns seem to be in so many submissions from so many different places. A broad concern was with differences between disaster and long-term or everyday risk management, and how different cultures might recognise or address this. A range of distinct phases or contexts of risk and emergencies engages cultural issues according to possible and appropriate choices of coping, planning, mitigation, preparedness, protection, and prevention. It is important to decide which persons and institutions are or could be more effective in which situations. The contrasting potential and styles of management were identified with 'living with risk' – as the context of longer term safety measures and safe development – as against emergency and relief measures, or reconstruction after disaster. The 'living with risk' approach is important for understanding how natural hazards often reinforce already existing vulnerabilities.

It does seem important not to underestimate the extremity and terrors of disaster. No one who survives such events will be the same again. In this sense 'the disaster' does not end when the flood subsides, the wind drops, or the landslide stops moving. The traumas and losses can persist long after as dangerous and damaging conditions – in survivors' minds as much as in economic indicators. Communities, their attitudes and landscapes can bear the marks and sorrows of calamities for generations.

Then again, Ben Wisner (Benfield University Hazard Research Centre, University College London) argues that: *...not only is it impossible and unwise to separate out culture (in the phrase 'culture and risk'), but equally problematic to differentiate between the risks of daily life and what are conventionally seen as 'disaster risks.'*

## On power and politics

Nripal Adhikary (Nepal) states: *In my studies...I found that vulnerability [to natural hazards] is a political issue. Culture is a response to politics. [...] It is necessary to address the root causes of vulnerabilities. Studies have shown over and over again that the people from marginalised and poor communities are more vulnerable to disaster than the people who have better access to the State mechanism.*

Various statements illustrate how 'perception', 'culture', or beliefs may be misused to excuse or divert attention from mismanagement or 'bad actors'. Emmanuel Maceda says: *In the Philippines, religion (the 'Act of God' notion) and the government (looking upon disasters as 'natural') play a key role in reinforcing the (mis)representation of disasters as natural, uncontrollable events.* James Lewis (Datum International, UK) is very clear: *Politics [is] a powerful influence upon vulnerability that remains hidden and often excused as 'culture' until exposed. [...] One answer to 'why people do/do not do this or that for the sake of their own safety', is often that they do not have the political influence.* Ben Wisner: *remains convinced that it is impossible and unwise to try to separate culture from the other constraints and influences on human behaviour. Among these...is power in many forms: economic power for outsiders to displace people in order to build tourist facilities, political power to allocate funds for infrastructure and services in ways that favour one group and disfavour another.*

These responses reconfigured our questions. They say yes, that culture is important, but that it should not be treated as a separate matter. Indeed, the same arguments look to more 'holistic' or, at least, more open approaches.

## **Some special concerns**

### Religious beliefs and 'fatalism'

A number of submissions emphasised the importance and neglected role of religious beliefs. Narayan Prasad Kafle (St. Xavier's College, Nepal), for example, referred to the recent flood disaster in the Koshi Basin in India and Nepal. He observed that the survivors prayers to the Kosi God after disaster are a necessary way in which people of faith cope psychologically with loss and survival. Ernest Amoussou (Laboratory Study of Climate, Water Resources, and Ecosystem Dynamics, University of Abomey-Calavi) argues that in Benin: *The voodoo is an example of a traditional system of risk management* and that it should be recognised as such and incorporated into newer styles of response.

Jen Shaffer (Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia, US) provided a compelling account of the use of *rain ceremonies as just one other risk management strategy* in Mozambique among people who are suffering from drought. Citing Mary Douglas and Ulrich Beck (see e-conference Bibliography in the main Compilation Report) she suggests that confusion about the origins of a risk and risk concerns are in themselves threats to social order. The rituals serve to offset them and feelings of impotence that can, perhaps, undermine the other creative adaptations people do engage in.

A small number of submissions placed the meaning or causes of disaster literally in the realm of divine intervention, or suggested that peoples' belief systems require that they do so. That is, as against modern notions of the independent, impersonal forces of planetary environments, or material consequences of social life. A particular concern, however, was whether 'fatalism' is typical of traditional and faith-based societies. This is a word that comes up again and again when 'modern' folk try to understand 'traditional' especially religiously based communities or statements. What is, supposedly, wrong with it goes to the heart of our concerns when people appear to accept preventable risks or damage as inevitable. However, the consensus seems to be that, while the words may sound fatalistic, they are not necessarily or usually indicative of peoples' behaviour or unwillingness to take action, so much as of the conditions under which they have to act.

J-C Gaillard (University of Grenoble, France and University of the Philippines) suggests: *In people's minds 'fatalism' is a convenient way of pointing to someone or something which is out of their reach... a coping strategy and thus differs from helplessness...It is a complex and ambiguous point to manage in the field.*

Albert Bercilla Banico (Earthsavers Movement, Philippines) says: *There is an observation that Filipinos often improvise and make productive and innovative use of whatever is available... However, the so called Filipino faith [in] bahala na ('It's up to God' or 'Leave it to God'), [is] incorrectly equated with...fatalism... [rather than] determination in the face of uncertainty or stressful, problematic conditions.* From the Indus valley, Wasim Wagha (Centre for Indigenous Peoples of Indus, DAMAAN Development Organization, Pakistan) counters a common stereotype about indigenous/traditional people, assuring us: *[they] have a strong belief in hope that things turn better one day or the other.* P.G. Dhar Chakrabarti comments: *No doubt every religious system has elements that are fatalistic, but these are not essentially fatalistic. They have many other elements that have given strength, resilience and courage to the communities and people to rise above their selfish interests and come to the service of others.*

### Relocation and conflicting perceptions of safety

A dozen submissions raised the issue of people resisting relocation and conflicting perceptions of safety. Antony Berger (Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada) posed the relevant questions: *...why do people persist in living in the shadow of an active volcano, above active faults, on floodplains, along low-lying storm-bound coasts, or at the foot of unstable slopes? Is it that boundaries (political, national, property) are now much less porous to 'environmental refugees'?* On the one hand, if people refuse to abandon seemingly risky sites on grounds of their history of unbreakable ties to the land, the ancestors, their identity... cultural factors appear decisive. And it is especially challenging when their home sites were recently destroyed in a disaster. Rather than insisting such disasters will not happen again, survivors speak of their sense of loyalty or guilt towards those who died or their heritage, or how the destroyed home has become even more special in memory. They often stress that, though the disaster was terrible, the same land had sustained them for centuries; is a known quantity.

This attachment to the land and ancestors (or sense of place) may seem far removed from modern planning and risk assessment, but the results are not necessarily so. Fred Bauder (Rio Grande Basin Roundtable, USA) would like to: *... draw everyone's attention to the City of Galveston, Texas, built on a sandbar in the Gulf of Mexico. Galveston suffered a devastating flood in 1900, but was then rebuilt. Hurricane Ike hit recently and, despite warnings that those who failed to evacuate would 'face certain death', many did not. It turned out that only about 60 were killed, but the toll could have been much higher. What explains the continued attempt to maintain a city on a sandbar?* Again, the insistence on a heroic reconstruction of high rise structures at the Twin Towers in New York site following 9/11 – as much as an act of defiance and remembrance – may also give pause for reflection for those focused on 'remote' villages.

Antony Berger almost reverses the sense of danger here by asking: *...do people have a visceral attraction to the land they 'own' despite hazards and threats? [Do] cultural factors discourage moving away from threats? ... Or are the vulnerable simply unable to move because of poverty or lack of space elsewhere? ...In former times, the vulnerable were more easily able to leave places undergoing rapid landscape change because political, legal and security concerns about borders were [less than] today...* With so much talk of 'environmental refugees' responding to climate change, it seems important to decide whether refusal to move is the issue, or a reflection of fundamental constraints on (safe?) mobility, reliable resettlement, or migration.

On the other hand, many submissions suggested that resistance to relocation is a way of coping with, or masking, other social vulnerabilities and, perhaps, other environmental experience. This refers especially to conditions which the typical victims of disaster feel powerless to influence. Jyoti Adhikari (Earth System Science and Policy Department, University of North Dakota, USA) cautions: *Very often, natural hazard-prone areas are inhabited by low income and socially marginalised groups of people...reluctant to evacuate their place even when there are signals of natural disasters because...it is a risk to their livelihood. Fleeing from the familiar and somehow manageable land to live in an unfamiliar land carries a bagful of uncertainty.*

Albert Banico says it is important to look at: *... the role of political culture ...where the socio-cultural aspects are really determined by the power structures that make people more superstitious and fatalist because they are not only ignored but totally disregarded...this angle needs to be looked at seriously (emphasis added).*

An appropriate comment of J-C Gaillard's applies here, and throughout such apparently 'cultural' issues: *People neither assess risk only according to the threat of hazard, nor through the sole cultural filter but always consider a large array of losses and benefits for their everyday life. Noteworthy is that social organisations, economic contexts, and political frameworks are hazard-independent, structural constraints both referring to inside/outside interactions and temporal dynamics.*

Meanwhile, the 'cultural' language of attachment to a place or acceptance of fate, may also encapsulate other kinds of knowledge missed by outsiders. Other submissions argue that such knowledge is useful and worth exploring as a way to engage with other cultures.

## **Theme 2: Bridging gaps: towards culturally aware and effective practices**

The second part of the e-conference highlighted some operational concerns for achieving culturally aware and effective practices in disaster risk reduction. Submissions focused on what has happened in projects in encounters with communities of distinctive socio-cultural norms, hazards, and settings. In contrast to much of the hazards literature, some of the strongest arguments for cultural sensitivity were not so concerned with how the other culture can create impediments. Rather they stressed the dangers of interveners, officials, or professionals who fail to behave appropriately towards communities at risk; who do not listen to their concerns or strive to understand and benefit from local valuing and knowledge of the given environment. The debates about methods and protocols that have featured in cultural debates in the past seemed to be of much less concern. Many simply advocated a commitment to listening to and working with those whose risks are the issue, and described positive experiences from doing so. They reported mutual learning and improvements. With appropriate give-and-take, an encouraging sense emerged that combining 'traditional' or local, and 'scientific' or technical understanding is not so rare or difficult. The following summarises some major operational concerns highlighted during the conference.

### **Ethnocentrism**

Prof. P.C. Joshi's comments on a perennial theme of cultural encounters is important here: *The concept of ethnocentrism, wherein the tendency to view our own viewpoint, practices, and technology as superior to or better than any other alternative model is the biggest pitfall in a cross-cultural situation of community action. This ethnocentrism can also be reflected within people belonging to the same culture but guided by a different theoretical orientation, for example, the gap between the viewpoint of a doctor, scientist, engineer, and common villager... it is important that we develop enough sensitivity towards cultural beliefs, practices, and indigenous knowledge and guide our plan, policies, and activities through it rather than turning a blind eye towards it.*

An issue raised by Ben Wisner attracted a lot of attention, that: *Local knowledge and practice is hybrid. It takes in and appropriates elements from 'outside' knowledge systems...this 'blending' of local and outside specialist knowledge goes on all the time. The problem, as he sees it, is why this 'blending' often leads to conflict as well as compromise. The experience of Jessica Mercer (Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, UK) supports this: There is a constant hybridisation of local and 'outside' knowledge as communities adapt to an evolving environment and new risks... In some cases the incorporation of 'outside' knowledge is as a result of a wish to advance 'culture' and to improve a community's situation. However, in some cases the integration of 'outside' knowledge may be detrimental to a community in the long term.*

Tesfaye Beshah (Haramaya University, Ethiopia) argues strongly against seeing what is often designated as 'traditional' or 'indigenous' knowledge as fundamentally different from, or less valid than, 'scientific' or modern knowledge: *Looking at these two designations, the battle...should go to the extent of shaking the grounds of the polarisation that is widespread, and that directly or indirectly guides our attitude towards knowledge from the non-formal centres.*

Much of the discussion was engaged above all by endeavours and problems involving contact and interaction among people from different cultures and what distinguishes them in the modern, especially a 'globalising', world.

While it seems all humans share the attributes and qualities necessary to culture, in practice these are also the main sources of difference or 'otherness'. Indeed, they can be very divisive! Many of the sources of risk and disasters in today's world involve very uneven and unequal relations among different peoples and sectors.

### Trust and transparency

*Suppose you lived in a slum that is experiencing police brutality, comments Otavio Silva (Universidade Federal Fluminense, UFF, Brazil), and suddenly you received information from a police officer that the place you lived your whole life is now in danger, would you trust him? Wasim Wagha on Indus valley indigenous people emphasises: ...the experience that 'modern safety measures' are not trustworthy; instead sometimes they bring trouble.*

So how do we go about recognising, looking as directly and openly as possible at, other languages, meanings, stories, forms of knowledge, and concerns that affect people's safety? Ben Wisner concludes: *Trust (meaning 'mutuality') is the key issue. And it is not an issue only for East Africa or South Asia, but is a global one.* It seems to be so, but how is it engendered? Can one devise and enforce a peaceful 'rules of engagement' too?

Quite a few comments stressed the dangers and bad experiences that have arisen in cross-cultural or 'contact' situations, where the language and belief systems of others are ignored or misread. They emphasised the dangers of failure to respect and earn the trust of vulnerable groups. Concerns were raised with initiatives rooted in development agendas that ignored risk implications and end up costing and endangering those on the receiving end. 'Crossed wires' and solving the wrong problem are a major problem within cultural groups or among co-religionists; but also within disciplines and professions.

How much more urgent is the need to sort this out, when diverse and hybrid cultures interact in contexts of unusual threat such as emanate from rapid environmental and social change? Karen Taylor (University of Alaska Fairbanks, USA) mentions that: *We are in a time of rapid change. [...] Traditional forms of knowledge and risk assessment don't always include a mechanism for rapid updating.*

### Time and resources commitment

Now, suppose individuals, institutions, or governments make this commitment to cultural sensitivity and engagement. Can it possibly be done without a considerable commitment of time and resources to the process itself? It is generally unlikely that an outsider, whether an official, professional, news reporter, or student, will reach a fair degree of understanding in another culture without considerable commitment. David Butz (Department of Geography, Brock University, Canada) has spent many years in a particular valley and group of people, and feels only because of that has he come to better understand their concerns and let these frame policy. However, he adds: *A problem with the approach I am advocating is that it is terribly time-consuming, and predicated on the notion that we can't situate hazards in their socio-cultural context in a hurry...[nevertheless] I stand by the importance of the sort of deep, situated, long-term, and introspective knowledge that ethnography produces, and the sorts of productive cross-cultural relationships that it can engender.*

The challenges are not just a matter of learning to fit in; sensitivity to proper behaviour or the courtesies of the other culture. Usually, if cultural contact is important, another language or language group is involved. There may be members of the given community educated outside and able to act as interpreters. But are they representative of, or able to gain the confidence of, other members of their own community? In many communities outsiders must use male interpreters. Even if they are allowed to interact with women, this can be an impediment to what women themselves can and will report. It leads back to the earlier comment about the fundamental role and struggles over communication; whether of safety information or broader environmental and social knowledge.

Even after taking all this into account, Nripal Adhikary (Kathmandu University, Nepal) warns that: *Many of the authors have agreed that intervention should be [from the] ground up and very sensitive to the local context... [but] it remains very controversial. Some [say] intervention is a way of controlling other people's resources. Others ...that the intervention should be in the form of facilitation; it should help in capacity building and it should stop once the community can sustain itself.* In this regard a few submissions cited 'bad experiences' having to do with

cultural insensitive and exploitative powers. James Lewis described his experience in two different places where: *The prevailing culture of each of these cases was, I submit, preconditioned by a governmental 'culture of greed' and lack of concern and/or understanding of the issues involved. He comments that: Appropriate political contexts include understanding of the issues; experience, contact and understanding of local contexts; and a political will to implement solutions and to support those proposed by NGOs and others. If these contexts don't exist then how can the rest of us achieve the many objectives described?*

### **Role and responsibilities**

Interventions by a wide range of actors or institutions are virtually epidemic everywhere in the modern world – and a critical source of risk. In this sense there is no choice. One must be part of the intervention process with the aim of moderating risks and challenging dangerous developments, or forget about risk and disaster reduction. Recognising the dangers is important; refusing the task is unacceptable. Most 'interventions' are by persons and institutions concerned with development, safety, or disaster everywhere, but Inter-cultural exchanges are constant and intense wherever they work.

This is, perhaps, where Ben Wisner thinks such a discussion should lead: *...for a start, it is vital to define who 'we' are! WHO ARE WE? This is where ...the many contextual issues, especially those concerning POWER and its use (politics and political economy) come back in with a vengeance. If 'we' are employees or agents of the nation state, there are histories of relationships between 'us' (generations of 'us') and the ordinary people (chemical factory workers, farmers, herders, fishers, market women, etc.) that structure the 'encounter' (as you call it)...*

A problem arises from assuming that culture is relevant only when it seems that some group, usually 'the others', have a clearly distinct and separate culture, and assuming it is somehow both uniform and an impediment. There is a tendency to assume that any given culture is traditional or modern. In fact, few of even the smallest communities have remained unaffected or unchanged by recent, even global, history; few do not differentiate the roles and treatment of their members by age, gender, etc. It is a mistake to assume that everyone in a given culture has identical concerns, knowledge, or capacities. It is important to ask not only 'Who are 'we?'' but 'To whom are we talking?' In a Himalayan village context, Ian Davis (Humanitarian Resilience Centre Cranfield University, UK) points out: *The ... need for community-level risk assessment to include local personnel responding to local problems, since they are the only persons to know about the complexity and subtlety of local micro level risks and capacities.*

In this respect it is worth emphasising that networks of influence on all geographical scales now permeate risk-related conditions. Under the heading 'influence of geography' Roman Lahodynsky (Geoconsult, Austria) points out that, for example: *...there already exist networks among village communities, mountain partnerships, in the Alps but also an exceptional model in the Peruvian Andes, via internet access. In my opinion, many local residents have gained a specific knowledge and are aware of their abilities and responsibilities. We should not treat them as petitioners, but we should encourage them to demand their rights and to establish a better legal framework, also on provincial, district, and community level.*

It still remains to say how the goals of risk reduction in a cultural context can be achieved in the face of so many 'interventions' that are indifferent to the risks they involve for those 'targeted', or that create greater risks. There were many specific suggestions that turned on a knowledge of context, and effective communication between members of the relevant cultures.

Katherine Donovan says: *Pro-active long term mitigation is essential and working with communities should be a 'two-way' process.* Quite a number of submissions report positive experiences in this regard. For example, Ida Ansharyani (Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne University, France) came away with a positive view of community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) in Indonesia: *The local people I met at the training were very eager to learn. They comprehended the risks of living side-by-side with the volcano of Kelud, and they realise that they need other people, other parties and organisations to help them live more securely... and to improve their capacity. Therefore, societies themselves are assets of successful CBDRMs. The thing that matters is how the efficiency and effectiveness of the CBDRM efforts are organised by outsiders.*

While echoing the enthusiasm for CBDRM, Jonathan Lassa (Institute for Environment and Human Security, United Nations University, Germany) found, later on, that: *None of the project [findings were] sent back to the community, the risks maps being developed together with the people at risk. Most maps are kept in the office to be shown to donors.*

### Learning and memory

People's ability to learn from previous disaster events and to memorise those lessons is a powerful tool for effective disaster preparedness. The discussion raised the importance of better understanding the differential transmission of hazard cultures. In the context of the differential transmission of tsunami subculture in Indonesia, J.C Gaillard suggested that a combination of factors contributed to the loss of oral memory of ancient tsunami among Acehese in comparison to Simeleue communities. They included time depth, degree of influence of dominant mainstream Indonesian culture, and for a specific ethnic group, recent migration to the area. In this context, we should investigate: *What processes account for the interruption of transmission of a culture of [say] tsunami or culture of [other natural hazards]? Given political will on the part of government, once aware of the processes that tend to erode valuable elements of a culture of prevention, is it possible for the government to be proactive in countering such erosion?* (Ben Wisner)

### Innovation

*It is not enough to think about and try to utilise existing sites of cultural contact, says Ben Wisner. Since the entire world of human beings is highly stratified by class, gender, and age, as well as linguistically (and by other cultural characteristics), there is a tendency toward segregation and often spatial isolation...I draw the inference that it is important to PRODUCE new and more open sites for cultural encounter. Another emphasis relates the need to develop innovative approaches to bridge indigenous knowledge and formal science: ...in order to address societal problems in a holistic manner (Tefaye Beshah).*

Xu Jianchu says: *A rights-based approach to local development liberates people by creating a space of local discretionary power in which people can make decisions on their own behalf. Such a space requires some form of mechanism to integrate the needs and aspirations and to bring into decisions, the knowledge spread throughout local society. [BUT] marginalisation of local people is through a set of laws and institutions – policies and regulations – that usually concentrate powers with outside actors [and] favour their set of environments and interests. Local institutions that represent the central state rather than local people are chosen to administer rather than empower local people... Ultimately, local people have few means of control over surrounding resources and managing local risks.*

So, two kinds of efforts were felt to have had more enduring success and support. First, there were those of individuals and agencies who have made the commitment to a long term and sensitive engagement with another culture. However, it was seen up to now to be mainly about a personal and professional commitment that few institutions yet support. Second, there were efforts relating to a proliferation of local organisations and government commitments in some of the worst-hit places following great disasters: for example, after the Indian Ocean tsunami. This, of course, raises an old problem that with time the political and social priorities created by a disaster fade, and so does the funding.

### Communication and education

Cultural awareness challenges our confidence in the causal frameworks of the dominant culture. Ian Davis recalls a Himalayan hazards project in which: *Our perception of these communities' risks was fundamentally different from theirs. We were preoccupied with macro hazard threats... They were far more concerned with everyday threats to their livelihoods, welfare, and health. We had missed these.*

Here, perhaps, a core cultural issue comes before talk of how disasters are caused or to be confronted: namely, communication, getting the meanings right, and appropriate translations between contexts and cultures. How much more urgent is the need to sort this out, when diverse and hybrid cultures interact? Another urgent matter mentioned in several submissions (e.g., Malti Goel, India) is how knowledge, perhaps built up over the years, is quickly lost in modernising contexts.

David Manuel Navarrete (King's College London, UK) links these concerns back to the arguments cited earlier about not missing the political underpinnings of 'culture': *As far as possible, science should deal with reality instead of creating conceptual 'realities' and try[ing] to make the world fit into them. For instance, in my experience, communities' notions of risk are often linked to power issues which are often (almost always) overlooked by either academics, or governments or aid organisations. Power is perceived as not being their/our business (and by the way it is very difficult to study and sometimes dangerous), even though power relations are at the root of differential vulnerability.*

In a similar mode, other contributions were concerned about another common dilemma; the assumption that 'culture' only arises, or is only an issue, in encounters with 'traditional or 'pre-modern' societies; when 'experts' or agencies assume that this is a problem that arises from programme 'targets' or 'clients'.

Albert Banico finds: *In the Philippine context, it is not 'modernity' or 'being scientific' that cause vulnerability of the misunderstood people... but the arrogance of those who are knowledgeable and those in power to determine the course of the disaster situations. Tesfaye Beshah says: Based on my experience in agriculture and rural development I also agree that outsiders (scientists, extension agents, among others) are responsible for the growing gap between [indigenous and modern] knowledge that have a great potential to complement each other... I question our educational paradigm that relegates knowledge outside the normal science as inferior at best and useless and superstitious at worst... He believes this requires bridging or rejecting a deep-seated belief in difference that goes back to the rise and dominance of the West, where science: ...is characterised by impersonality, logically deduced, analytical, articulate, universal, cerebral, theoretical, verifiable and egalitarian process, whereas [other forms of knowledge], are [supposedly?] characterised by a personal, intuitive, non-analytical, implicit, contextual, tactile and emotional, practical and discovery oriented process.*

Returning to a basic cultural issue raised above, Katherine Donovan's (Geosciences, University of Plymouth, UK) comment is central here: *The importance of communication not only between scientists and at-risk communities but also among scientists.*

## Concluding remarks: towards an ethics of engagement

Participants enthusiastically addressed the concerns raised and many expressed approval of the direction taken. Generally positive views were expressed of the need to address this topic and a great many suggestions were made. Many pilot projects were discussed that show promise. Some particular recommendations came from participants with intensive, long-term, comparative experience, but with many cautions about the risk of bad outcomes.

A consensus converged around the need to facilitate greater involvement and influence of those at risk over policies to improve their safety. Drawing together various stories and arguments, a four-fold commitment seems to have emerged that recommends:

- 1 **Openness** – An approach which brings DRR into the broader context of development and climate change; and conceives natural hazards and risks not as being purely environmental and technical issues but also, and mainly, as being socio-cultural, economic, and political issues; disaster risk reduction requires reducing already existing vulnerabilities
- 2 **Partnerships** – In a globalised world characterised by rapid change, growing uncertainties, and complexities, partnerships between and among different groups and sectors acting at different scales simultaneously or not are necessary to develop innovative solutions and allow resources exchange for improved disaster risk reduction.
- 3 **Empowerment** – Finding ways to give greater power and resources for (mainly 'local') communities to take on more of the tasks of vulnerability reduction and safety measures; a rights-based approach to knowledge and safety initiatives, intended to guarantee that local and outside knowledge will not be abused and full participation of people at risk

- 4 Involvement** – An ethic of contact, translation, facilitation and ‘intervention’ for all of us professionally identified with the risk and disaster field, especially where new initiatives are being introduced, supporting effective and sensitive ‘cultural’ respect and dialogue; this will contribute to better understand and account for communities’ needs and priorities in order to reduce already existing vulnerabilities.

However, these principles relate as much to negative experiences and recommendations for overcoming them. One of the reasons for emphasising rights, ethical conduct of interventions and giving decision-making powers to those at risk, relates to widespread evidence that even culturally sensitive research ends up not being used to help the vulnerable.

Debates about methods and protocols that have featured in the cultural field in the past seemed to be of much less of a concern. Many simply advocate a commitment to listening to and working with those at risk, and describe positive experiences from doing so. They reported mutual learning and improvements. There was an encouraging sense that, with appropriate give-and-take, it is not so rare or difficult to combine ‘traditional’ or local, and ‘scientific’ or technical understanding.

The four recommendations may seem more like a declaration of intent or wish list, than a programme. The reason may be that no one seemed to think that the usual preoccupations of risk and disasters research are the problem. Hazards knowledge – whether called scientific, indigenous or hybrid – was not represented as inadequate, in and of itself. There was no outcry about the lack of techniques for risk assessment and reduction; or for discovering ‘new and improved’ disaster responses or prevention measures. Rather, unequal, inconsiderate, repressive or exploitative relations came out repeatedly as ‘the real problem’. These frustrate work in all areas of risk and disaster mitigation efforts, and are acutely damaging to any effort to engage with socio-cultural contexts.

Not surprisingly, the four pillars of a suggested approach confront those problems head on. They take us back to the initial discussions of the role of wealth and political influence in hazards knowledge and the management of risk. As proposals for bridging the socio-cultural ‘gaps’, they suggest that ethics and rights are of overriding concern – something that mainstream perspectives on risk and disasters have tended to ignore or regard outside our professional responsibilities. We will try to craft a ‘Policy Note’ around these recommendations and some of the more specific suggestions, and they also seem to provide a basis for what the proposed workshop in 2009 might address.

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The E-conference team included: Julie Dekens (ICIMOD), Coordinator; Vijay Khadgi (ICIMOD), Editor; Santosh Nepal (ICIMOD), Assistant Editor; Ujol Sherchan (Mountain Forum Secretariat), Technical Moderator; Tek Jung Mahat (APMN-ICIMOD), Assistant Technical Moderator; Bijay Raj Bagale (APMN-ICIMOD), Moderator support and Kenneth Hewitt (Cold Regions Research Center, Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada), Content Moderator. This synthesis report was prepared by Kenneth Hewitt and reviewed by Julie Dekens. We thank I. Kelman and J. Mustelin for their useful comments on the draft report, A. Beatrice Murray for editorial support, and Dharma R. Maharjan for layout.

# About ICIMOD

The International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, ICIMOD, is a regional knowledge development and learning centre serving the eight regional member countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas – Afghanistan , Bangladesh , Bhutan , China , India , Myanmar , Nepal , and Pakistan  – and based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Globalisation and climate change have an increasing influence on the stability of fragile mountain ecosystems and the livelihoods of mountain people. ICIMOD aims to assist mountain people to understand these changes, adapt to them, and make the most of new opportunities, while addressing upstream-downstream issues. We support regional transboundary programmes through partnership with regional partner institutions, facilitate the exchange of experience, and serve as a regional knowledge hub. We strengthen networking among regional and global centres of excellence. Overall, we are working to develop an economically and environmentally sound mountain ecosystem to improve the living standards of mountain populations and to sustain vital ecosystem services for the billions of people living downstream – now, and for the future.

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