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Reaction Paper 1

Pelling's "Assessing Urban Vulnerability" paper focuses on how CBOs can play a role in building resilience, as well as responding to, disasters. His case study of Los Manguitos showed some of the difficulties facing CBOs but clearly highlighted their role in disaster resilience in this barrio and how they had been able to build on social capital. However, support of CBOs should not be expected to replace the role of governments in reducing vulnerability. Pelling's "Vulnerability of Cities" chapter looked at the importance of assets in vulnerability and resilience, both in terms of exposure to disaster as well as ability to cope with disaster. This analysis is important in showing how poverty reduction is a key strategy to mitigate the impact of disasters. Non-material assets were also included in the discussion, highlighting the importance of both social assets and political power. Bull-Kamanga et al.'s "From everyday hazards to disaster" article discussed the lack of attention that policy makers and disaster agencies have given to urban disaster resistance, noting that processes affecting rural areas in Africa tend to receive more attention than those of urban areas. Additionally, there is a focus on preventing large-scale disasters but not the smaller ones. The authors conclude that all these factors must take local contexts into consideration and develop strategies accordingly.

### **My reaction**

I recently read an author that put forth the view that the poor and the rich are equally affected by disasters, but that the rich are more resilient in the long-term and able to quickly rebuild from disaster, while the poor are forced into what Pelling would call the "ratchet effect" of disaster. I thought about this idea while reading through the papers, which don't fully discuss this phenomenon. I think that in some situations it has a lot of merit. The example of a hurricane was used in the "Assessing Urban Vulnerability" paper—in such an event, the poor and rich are very likely to be equally affected, since a hurricane is not as dependant on geographic location as, say, a flood is, and I think there is less of an ability to circumvent its effects through building codes than there is when trying to mitigate the effect of earthquakes. Therefore, I could argue that both groups are likely to be affected in an urban area by a hurricane. However, the rich may have businesses in another part of town, have savings or an education—all of which will help them to rebuild. The poor, however, are often likely to have a home-based business (as was pointed out in one of Pelling's papers) and to hold all their assets in the home. A disaster would likely wipe out their entire asset base, and they may have no outside savings. Additionally, since people tend to have social networks of others within the same income bracket (if we're putting people into categories of just "rich" and "poor"), the rich might have networks of other rich people who weren't affected by the disaster, while the poor may also have these networks but other poor people would not be able to offer loans or help in rebuilding assets since they are themselves poor. It was interesting to me to read about the lack of consideration of long-term policies to decrease poverty as a way to increase resistance to disasters, since that is what I automatically think of as the best strategy. Of course environmental and structural interventions are important, but they can't work in isolation from long-term social change. It was also interesting for me to see the differences in the way that the same terminology that I use (e.g. coping strategies) is used by those working in the natural disaster field.