

Cheryl Lowry

Reaction Paper 2, Vulnerability, contestation, collaboration

Mary Anderson, Vulnerability to Disaster and Sustainable Development:

Mary Anderson's chapter was a good review from last week's class. She discussed the historical perspective of vulnerability, dividing it into 1) nature as a cause (hazard/natural events related to risk/exposure), which focused on predicting natural events and controlling their effects; 2) cost as a cause, factoring in cost-benefit type analysis to determine which disaster reduction technologies should be used in a given location/situation; 3) humans as a cause, incorporating income and psychosocial factors into the vulnerability analysis (also suggesting that the choices humans make affect their vulnerability). Poverty is a link to vulnerability, but is not always causal. Anderson sites development trends that have increased vulnerability, including: urbanization, transformation of resources, pollution, population growth, the attitude that anything's possible, and the widening of the poverty gap. Vulnerability patterns are changing as the number and magnitude of significant natural events increases.

Nakagawa reiterates the importance of human behavior and interaction in disaster recovery. He uses cases to illustrate how cities with strong social/cultural bonds can facilitate the recovery process and thus be more resilient. He states that social capital and leadership are the "most effective elements" in enhancing disaster recovery. Although he lists various definitions of social capital, the common thread is the ability of a community to work together (relying on individual strengths and networks) to achieve a common goal; in this case responding to and recovering from a disaster.

The Political Responses to Natural Hazards article focused on a more narrow area of social capital – the ability of a community to rally together in protest when a "protective" technology failed. He contrasts this event, where humans lost control over a controllable system, to natural disasters, which are not controllable. Therefore, natural events do not drive community protest in the same way that man-made or technological disasters do. Both, however, require a degree of social movement following the disaster. Humans' view of what's "controllable" in nature is changing as we invent more advanced technological interventions. Human expectation is (increasingly) that man-made systems should be able to control or protect against the forces of nature. Failure of these systems (or failure of policy regulating the systems) will create conflict (not necessarily negative) and social mobilization. The author suggests political conflict and disaster interpretations be included in studies of natural disasters.

This last point is interesting – how eager society is to find a system or institution to "blame" for damage subsequent to a natural disaster. It seems that the city knew this area was flood-prone, and was taking steps to mitigate risk. The residents of the area were aware of government improvement activities; therefore, it follows that they knew their homes were in a flood-prone area. They could have bought elsewhere, or sold their homes when they became aware of system problems, yet they didn't. So, in addition to possibly being a failure of the protective system, it's also possibly a failure due to human behavior and choices.