POLICY BRIEF

Disaster Risk Reduction in the Caribbean: Opportunities and Challenges for Achieving Greater Resilience

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Abstract: *The Caribbean experience of natural hazards and disasters has continued to increase over the last half-century. The intensity and number of weather-related disasters combined with existing social, political and economic vulnerabilities form a complex arrangement that threatens the livelihoods of individuals and communities. Global attention to at-risk regions, such as the Caribbean and the Pacific, has intensified in the last decade as an array of international and regional actors have advocated a set of prescriptive action points based on the Hyogo Framework Programme for Action (HFA). As the decade of HFA draws to a close, and as the international community prepare to negotiate the post-HFA in March 2015, it is timely to ask whether the HFA has reached the societal level as its targeted audience. Based on extensive interviews with members of the international community, local disaster managers and intellectuals in the Caribbean region, this paper emphasises the limited success of the HFA and the importance of culture as a long-term strategy for ensuring a safer future.*

Keywords: Disaster Risk Reduction; Development; International Relations; Caribbean; Resilience

The Caribbean region has weathered a long history of re-occurring disasters. Natural hazards, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes and communicable diseases, have torn economies apart,

wiped away communities, and desolated towns and villages. Risk levels in the Caribbean remain high. The increasing intensity and frequency of weather-related hazards from global warming, rising urban density and economic, political and social related vulnerabilities, create a potent mix that needs to be seriously addressed to ensure a safer future.

Global awareness on the plight of the Caribbean and other vulnerable regions, such as Southeast Asia and the Pacific, has contributed to the establishment of a global agenda on how regions, states and societies can become more resilient from the effects of natural hazards. This began with the first world conference on disaster risk reduction in Yokohama in 1994, as part of the UN International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). Developing out of the IDNDR, the Secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) was established in 1999, which continues to advocate organizations, states and individuals to take Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) seriously: to focus on ex-ante risk solutions rather than reactive (mis-)management.

Perhaps the most significant event for global awareness on risk reduction was the second world conference in Hyogo, convened only a few months after the 2004 Southeast Asia Tsunami. The result of this conference was the Hyogo Framework Programme for Action (HFA) that defined five action points to be implemented by organizations, states and societies. The HFA has since provided a blueprint for many organizations that aim to promote DRR strategies. These include, for example, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the International Federation of Red Cross Societies (IFRC) and the World Bank's Global Facility for Disaster Risk Reduction (GFDRR).

What affect has the global community had on the Caribbean region and has this contributed to an increase the resilience of communities from the effects of natural hazards? Based on extensive interviews with disaster managers, international donors, financial institutions, regional organizations, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and intellectuals in the region, the following pages provide an overview on challenges and opportunities the region face in their journey towards becoming a more resilient region. Significantly, the preliminary findings draw attention to the role of culture as a major determinant of societal resilience.

This paper begins by outlining what DRR is, who the main advocates are and how ideas on risk reduction are diffused. This is followed by a discussion on the outcome of this global diffusion process, which is evaluated along three levels of analysis: the regional, national and societal. The final section concludes with some tentative suggestions on what ought to be done in order to strengthen resilience in the region.

WHAT IS DISASTER RISK REDUCTION?

A suitable phrase that encapsulates the essence of DRR is: 'there is no such thing as natural disasters'. Natural hazards, such as floods, earthquakes and hurricanes, only turn into disasters when they affect the vulnerability of society. Earthquakes will cause poorly built structures to collapse, floods will damage houses and affect the lives of people who choose to build on a flood plain, and mudslides will affect those who have built a home with a view. Due to the intrinsic human element in disasters, poorer communities are often more vulnerable because they can not afford to meet building standards, often have no choice but to settle in geographically vulnerable spaces and may not be prioritized in the event of an emergency. These social and political issues reflect the heart of DRR, which aims to reduce societal vulnerabilities. This is what DRR attempts to do: to create a culture of prevention.[1]

THE DIFFUSION OF DRR

Who are the main advocates of DRR? A plethora of international actors have adopted particular agendas on supporting national and local capacity to prevent and prepare for disasters. The most prevalent international actors in the region include the United National Development Programme (UNDP), the European Union (EU), the World Bank, the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), UNISDR, the United National Environmental Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). These organizations are most active in terms of their existing issue salience (the most inter-linked and prevalent organizations working on DRR according to 'Google Scraper' and 'Issue Scraper', respectively). While the IFRC does not feature in the top ten organizations according to the abovementioned method, interview results reveal the important presence the IFRC have in the region. Unlike other

international organizations, the IFRC and Red Cross societies provide a unique global-to-local connection.

The World Bank, the EU, the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) and the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) are the major donors in the region who have offered DRR-related financial support to the Caribbean over the last 23 years. Other important donors include the US, Spain and France.

Table 1 - HFA Priorities for Action

1. Ensure that DRR is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation
2. Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning
3. Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels
4. Reduce the underlying risk factors
5. Strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels

How does the global DRR model diffuse? This process occurs primarily through a number of diffusion mechanisms that require relational forums of exchange, such as inter-national disaster management meetings hosted by the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA), national and regional UNISDR DRR platforms, the Caribbean development partners group on disaster management, and global conferences on DRR. These arenas provide space for learning best practices and for the emulation of appropriate behaviour and policy implementation. Coercion is another mechanism that is used to encourage DRR practices through conditional loans provided by international donors, such as the EU. Another connected mechanism is the role of regional organizations as conduits of ideas that aim to connect the local with the global level, and the engagement of credible actors at the local level who legitimate and modify external ideas according to local traditions and customs.

DRR IN THE CARIBBEAN REGION

At the regional level, one can observe a strong alignment with regional disaster risk management frameworks and the key components of the HFA. This is clearly seen in CDEMA's Comprehensive Disaster Management (CDM) strategy that, like the

HFA, promotes an integrated approach to DRR. That is, it promotes DRR as an ethos for relevant state departments to adopt (multi-sectorial diffusion) as well as a focus on increasing awareness and knowledge to local communities. It is about establishing appropriate institutions to increase resilience and preparedness efforts as well as ensuring more coordinated response when a disaster occurs (see Table 1). According to the director of CDEMA, the adoption of the HFA was not a result of direct emulation or isomorphism but came about through deliberation at the global level, whereby the CDM strategy – which was created prior to the HFA in 2001 – had an important influence in structuring the eventual outcome of the five priorities for action. It is for this reason that the HFA provides a strong family resemblance with guiding strategy document for CDEMA.

CDEMA is not particularly unique in terms of its association with the HFA. There are a large number of regional organizations that have explicit or implicit connections to the HFA as a guiding document for their agendas. These include *inter alia* the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), the Organization of East Caribbean States (OECS), and the Organization of American States (OAS), the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre (CCCCC), and the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility (CRIF). Major regional donors who support DRR projects include the CDB the IADB and the Development Bank of Latin America (CAF). These regional financial institutions, along with a plethora of regional organizations, aim to increase the resiliency of Caribbean states through various programmes that range from education in Grenada to the maintenance of sea walls in Guyana.

Attempts to coordinate the Caribbean spaghetti bowl of organizations have been made by CDEMA and the Eastern and Northern Caribbean donor groups. The latter consists of a range of major international donors such as the World Bank, the CDB, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), the UNDP, UNICEF, USAID and the World Food Programme (WFP). These meta-regional groupings have certainly helped to limit the amount of duplication, however, much more coordination needs to be achieved in order to create more effective tools. It is also important to link DRR projects with organic initiatives that may not be connected into traditional regional coordination, such as the important role the University of West Indies Seismic Centre plays in its on-going awareness and education campaign for the region, projects carried out by the

Harpy Eagle Music Foundation in Guyana, and coastal preservation projects by the Central Caribbean Marine Institute. Creating more space for cross-sectorial and intra-regional dialogue is also important for: (i) enhancing awareness on the link between DRR and environmental protection, women's and children's rights, education, and unemployment; (ii) for reducing duplication; and (iii) creating collective programmes that will share the burden of costs.

NATIONAL ADAPTION TO DRR

Most Caribbean states use the CDM/HFA as their blueprint for arranging national activities on DRR. While this is a generally accepted part of the national structure of disaster management in the region, when compared to other regions its significance becomes clear. The issue of promoting region-wide disaster preparedness and prevention activities in Europe, for example, is a fairly sensitive topic that is seen to interfere directly with a core function of state sovereignty, namely the protection of citizens. This is presumably why there has been very little mention of prevention in EU framework agreements on disaster risk management, which have tended to focus on preparedness and response activities. While the most recent EU framework agreement that came out in 2014 includes a chapter on prevention for the first time, it nevertheless lacks specificity. In stark contrast, much of the CDM has been downloaded wholesale, which is somewhat surprising considering the development of regional integration in the Caribbean.

It remains to be seen if national enthusiasm for the CDM will result in deeper integration and a more secure region. The current state-of-affairs would suggest that while there may be similarities in the organizational structure of disaster risk management (and as a colliery, DRR), the socio-political system tends to direct investment away from DRR. The prioritization of limited resources in other sectors has resulted in heavily underfunded and understaffed national emergency management agencies. High staff-turnover is also an issue for many islands, which is particularly apparent when the agencies are given a low status in the echelons of government civil service. Even when some agencies are connected to the prime ministers office, the tendency to largely re-structure government sectors after elections also compounds challenges for establishing a sustainable emergency management

agencies. As knowledge on how to affectively mitigate and respond to disasters takes a long time to master, staff shuffling and agency re-structuring can add to a more vulnerable society.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

How do national changes in organizational behaviour on DRR, and advocacy from regional and global organizations, help to empower society to become more resilient to the effects of natural hazards? To put it slightly differently, how does prescriptive advice on DRR resonate with existing cultural norms and practices? The complexity of cultural life in the Caribbean is too intricate to accurately define particularly as it is always evolving. What the following analyses provides is thus *an* interpretation of everyday customs, traditions, habits and perceptions that are emphasised by interviewees and historical and political commentaries. They are ideal types that help us order and make sense of culture *as it relates to societal resilience*: the 'ability of a community of people living in a particular country or region',[2] that share particular customs, laws and traditions, to 'resist disorder'.[3]

One feature that many Caribbean islands share is a turbulent and painful past of oppression. Slavery, indentureship and colonial rule have applied layers of historical experiences that provide difficult grounds for establishing a common story and, hence, a cohesive and strong self-identity. Deliberate attempts to abolish the indigenous peoples of the islands, the suppression of African traditions and customs during colonial rule, a present-day mixture of beliefs and ethnicities, and relatively newly claimed independence, represent some important features that have severely affected the ability of communities to ground their customs in a historically defined script. This issue is raised in a number of Derek Walcott's poems, for example, which is neatly captured in an ending line of his 1969 poem *Air*: 'there is too much nothing here'.

How society copes with the past is directly associated with the first ideal type that typifies much of the Caribbean, namely a *culture of non-preservation*. An awkward association with history means that there is often less enthusiasm to preserve the past: to preserve a common story that reifies a community's identity. By way of illustration, the current state-of-investment in local museums and art galleries is meagre. In some cases important

historical artefacts and architecture are literally crumbling away from modern memory.

Importantly, a culture of non-preservation not only reflects an awkward coping with the past, but also limits the depth of vision for the future. If there is little interest in preserving the past to reify self-identity, preserving the present will also be of limited concern. For example, when a local taxi driver was asked why rubbish is discarded into the forests, gutters, sea or streams he replied: 'because the immediate affect is unseen'. Arguably, if inter-generational thinking were more pronounced less rubbish would be littered.

A relaxed attitude towards the present and the future reflects a second ideal type: a *culture of non-maintenance*. When asking questions on maintenance, one commonly hears the phrase 'you fix it when it breaks'. There appears to be little concern, for example, with insuring gutters a properly fixed to houses to reduce soil erosion and land movement, and a relaxed attitude to building standards, legislation and enforcement. The existence of recovery funds, handouts, or a 'gimme gimme culture' may also strengthen this attitude towards the future where 'repeat offenders' may become the norm at the local or national level.

The outcome of past and future based observations on culture is a final ideal type that typifies the present as an *ephemeral state-of-being*. There is fluidity among large portions of the population, which is constituted by a struggle with the past and an unclear vision of the future. A gaze towards the North – in terms of perceived or real embetterment, family connections and remittances – would most likely strengthen the existing ephemerality in society and repress any emerging ideational cohesiveness.

An ephemeral state-of-being emphasises the trajectory of society in terms of its future levels of vulnerability. If society is indifferent to historical preservation and, as a consequence, is disinclined to invest and think in the future, prescriptive advice on DRR is less likely to be internalized by individuals and communities. A culture of complacency is also more likely to set in particularly if no large national disasters have occurred in the last few decades.

The argument that a major disaster will heighten awareness and provide a window of opportunity for DRR education only goes a short distance, however. Modern memory of the past is fairly short and even when international projects seize on the

opportunity to impact communities, it is not always sustainable. Whatever knowledge is gained will be lost if it is not iterated over time. It is argued, however, that a more cohesive society would be more likely to remember and internalize DRR, as concern for future generations would be more of a pressing concern.

So how does a society become more cohesive? Ideally, this could be achieved by, firstly, coming to terms with a complex and difficult past. By forming a common story out of the multiplicity and diversity that has emerged out of a turbulent past, ideational stability and common self-worth can be formed. Secondly, a more cohesive society can also be attained through the realisation that a wellspring of creativity is nested within this ideational complexity. Through the effective management and channelling of this creativity a greater sense of self-worth among peoples can be achieved. This would in turn encourage the desire to pass on this creativity and sense of community to the next generation. Slowly, the past would re-shape the ideational status quo leading to a greater appreciation for a more secure and less vulnerable environment in the future.

In more concrete terms, creative solutions are needed to encourage a desire to preserve the past and present for a more secure future. Investment in cultural traditions, such as establishing a museum of Carnival costumes and mask making, or a promotion of the rich musical traditions of the Caribbean, would encourage cohesiveness. Rohan Sagar's ethnomusicology work with indigenous communities in Guyana is a good example of a culture-based initiative that can encourage 'pride-in-preservation' and hence a more cohesive identity. The uniqueness and vibrancy of the Caribbean, which is often reflected in the arts, provides a firm foundation for ensuring a brighter future.

The use of visual, literary, and performative arts not only provides a source of cultural celebration and ideational self-worth, but it can also be used as useful medium to internalize DRR in communities. For example, the IFRC and UNDP Youth have supported song contests by local musicians in Grenada and Barbados, reflecting a creative and useful way of propagating DRR. The use of visual and performative arts could also be used constructively. Dean Arlen's proposal to build a playground for a local community in Trinidad, for example, encourages a sense of community for parents and creativity in children. While this may not be directly tied to DRR, it can contribute to a more cohesive society that in the long term can provide for a safer society.

A 'WISH LIST': POSSIBILITIES FOR ATTAINING GREATER RESILIENCE

The aim of the HFA is to make societies more resilient, more adaptive to the environment, and less vulnerable. The international community and regional organizations have helped to advocate this message to the local level. However, there are a number of political, economic and social issues that prevent the ability of some Caribbean states to affectively take on DRR-related principles. This paper has provided a brief overview on some of these challenges and hinted towards possible (creative) solutions. These are expanded in the following bullet points that will hopefully encourage effective DRR in the future.

Globally:

- Emphasis on sustainable solutions, i.e encourage a culture of maintenance by instilling knowledge before providing large structural projects
- Donor-recipient coordination: many projects do not capitalize on aid funding due to lack of resources
- Get emotional! Link cultural-based self-worth with DRR. Cohesive societies will be more likely to invest in the past/future and less likely to shift responsibility. This will require greater coordination of UN agencies and the international community that can support local cultural institutions.

Regionally:

- Learn best practices: do not commit the same mistakes as your neighbour!
- Encourage intra- and inter- regional cooperation and coordination
- Encourage research and development

Nationally:

- Change in institutional structure of national emergency management agencies, i.e. make them more independent from political fluctuations

- Enforcement of regulations
- Move from volunteerism to paid professionalism
- Advocate DRR as an ethos for all government sectors
- Education and awareness on *all* types of natural hazards
- Invest in cultural activities to encourage social cohesiveness
- Invest in research and development: cost-benefit analyses are important tools for DRR advocacy

Many of these suggestions will clearly need political support and financial backing: two inter-related hurdles that are difficult to surmount. The very logic of prevention – convincing governments to invest in something that may not happen – is often hard to sell. This is particularly the case when there is a cultural of complacency among society in terms of thinking about future events. It should not be concluded, however, that short-term political thinking and a tendency to divert funding away from risk reduction is an insurmountable barrier. As DRR encourages an integrated and multi-sectorial approach to risk reduction, one strategy would be to re-frame or connect the goal of prevention into related sectors that provoke more immediate political concern, such as unemployment, environmental sustainability and crime. These related issue areas might provide more useful and direct frames of reference for encouraging investment in DRR. By speaking more directly to these and other issue areas a focus on cultural-based investment as a contributing solution provides something of a segue between short- and long-term solutions and underlines the need for change to ultimately occur at the local level. This may then assist in changing political priorities in terms of historical preservation, cultural celebration and ensuring against contingencies in the future.

TOWARDS A CREATIVE AND COHESIVE FUTURE

The Japanese city of Sendai will soon host the third world conference on Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR). A new agenda will be set, modifying the HFA, that will provide a blueprint on how societies ought to be resilient in the face of increasing natural disasters. This paper brings to light the interconnectedness of global, regional and national levels of advocacy that is needed to support societal resilience. In particular, it emphasises cultural solutions for making societies more cohesive. It is argued that if this can be achieved, there will be greater emphasises placed on

inter-generational policies: a 'thinking for the future' that will insure that greater risk reduction efforts can be realized. While many voices will be heard and various agendas debated in Sendai, it is hoped that sustainable solutions with a focus on empowering cultural cohesiveness will emerge. A long-term strategy that invests in the self-worth and uniqueness of individuals and societies in the Caribbean region and beyond will be an important step forward for establishing a safer society for our children's future.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

Simon Hollis received his PhD from the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin in 2012, and is postdoctoral researcher at the Swedish National Defence College. He has written numerous international peer-reviewed journals and recently published, *The Role of Regional Organizations in Disaster Risk Management: A Strategy for Global Resilience* with Palgrave Macmillan. For all correspondence, please contact Simon by email at: simon.hollis@fhs.se

NOTES

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