

UNDERSTANDING DISASTERS AS SOCIAL PHENOMENON: CALL FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVES

Dr. Sunita Reddy

Assistant Professor

Centre of Social Medicine and Community Health

School of Social Sciences

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Phone- Res. (011-26742248) Off (011-26704735)

E.mail- sunitareddy@mail.jnu.ac.in / sunita_iit@yahoo.co.uk

There is no doubt left that the Disasters are social phenomenon and it will be myopic to look at them from uni-disciplinary conclaves and as isolated phenomenon. Despite the publication of increasing numbers of research projects in disaster issues, there are still gaps in sharing experience through scientific papers, and systematic evaluation of activities in different phases of disaster situations¹. Hazards have become more frequent, particularly weather related events². The impact of natural disasters has increased in severity in recent decades due to the increasing vulnerability of populations as a result of, inter alia, rapid population growth, urbanization, environmental degradation, poverty, and social inequalities³.

The contribution of man-made and natural disasters to the global disease burden is expected to climb from twelfth place in 1998 to eighth place in 2020⁴. Natural disasters adversely impact the public services and such as water, sewerage, energy, and is acknowledged as public health problems⁵.

*The recent disaster tsunami too had a lot written but has not been a sustained body of scholarly **social science work**. Most of the analysis and writing has been from natural scientists, engineers and other disaster management and policy specialists. While such perspectives are perfectly understandable, as there is an enormous loss of property and material devastation, the fact remains that there is an acute social dimension to the breakdown and devastation. This social dimension has long term implications and the trauma and anomie may persist long after physical and material infrastructure has been restored.*

¹ Yesil, Sidika Tekeli (2006) 'Public Health and Natural Disasters: Disaster Preparedness and Response in Health Systems' *Journal of Public Health* 14: 317-324

² IFRC (2003) World Disasters report 2003 <http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2003> (01.09.2003)

³ Arnold JL (2002) Disaster medicine in the 21st century: future hazards, vulnerabilities, and risks. *Prehosp Disaster Med* 17(1):3-11

⁴ Global Forum Health Research (2001) 'Health effects of conflicts and disasters: where is the evidence?' – Forum 5 conferene of the global forum for health research Geneva, October 9-12, 2001,. <http://www.who.int/disasters/repo7443.pdf>(20.10.2003)

⁵ Noji EK (1997) The nature of disaster: general characteristics and public health effects "Earthquakes". In: Noji EK (ed) The public health consequences of disasters. Oxford University Press, New York, pp 3-20, 135-178.

This social disruption calls for a social science perspective within a regional political backdrop to address a range of issues including the primary one of 'displacement' as a result of disaster. Some of the issues could be the loss of cultural traits and practices, the recasting of family ties and the very notion of neighbourhood resulting from displacement and subsequent rehabilitation at the newly built shelters; the emergence of new forms of social networks etc. Similarly, given the existing gender cleavages, in the case of surviving women and children, how modes of rehabilitation may disadvantage them. Further, how caste, class, race and ethnicity interplay with disaster relief and rehabilitation.

This is a theoretical paper drawing from various evidences and literature available and my research in Andaman and Nicobar Islands post tsunami too informs the arguments.