

The disaster profiteers

August 11 2015, by Kevin Krajick

In his new book *The Disaster Profiteers*, Earth Institute professor John Mutter argues that natural disasters are bad for the poor—and can be great for the rich, who often seize resources meant for recovery, when no one is looking. From post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans to Myanmar after 2008's Cyclone Nargis, Mutter shows how the elites prosper from suffering. Mutter directs the PhD. in sustainable development program at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), and teaches in the university's Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences. He trained as a marine geophysicist at Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, where he retains an appointment. He spoke with SIPA News about the book; below, excerpts.

You've said that physical sciences are very much predictive, social sciences less so. What's the relationship between the two with respect to natural disaster?

A natural disaster involves a physical phenomenon like a hurricane or an earthquake. The consequences are social—multiple deaths and [economic losses](#). After the natural spasm, the natural scientists often leave the scene, and the social scientists take over. But you can't think about problems that affect humans from the perspective of just the natural sciences or just the social sciences. Scientists, for instance, try to predict where and when earthquakes will occur and how large they might be. Predicting everything that a scientist can predict [even in the most accurate case] won't predict the death toll, economic damage, recovery

time, or tell us how to recover.

The book notes how disasters have disparate impact in one region versus another, or even within different parts of the same disaster zone.

The world is a very uneven place. If you land an earthquake in a poor place, the outcome is sure to be different from the outcome if it hits a rich place. At least 100,000 people died in the Haiti earthquake in 2010. For Superstorm Sandy, the best estimate is that 171 people died in total. Most people were more inconvenienced by Sandy than seriously impacted. In poor countries, residential and commercial structures are relatively weak, and institutions to ensure otherwise don't exist—or, if they exist, they don't function well. After the Haiti earthquake, people said there were no building codes. There were building codes, just no ability to enforce them. What confuses people is that so-called economic losses are greater in wealthy countries, but that is simply because the capital stock has greater value. It says nothing about the ability of a country to absorb a disaster shock.

What did you see in the aftermath of various disasters?

There's a lot of media coverage at first because [disasters](#) are usually spectacular, but then it gets boring. They take 1,000 feet of film of houses falling down, and then it's not a story any more. Coverage moves from the front page to the inside, then toward the back until it's gone. And the next time you see anything, it's an anniversary. In a disaster, inequalities get taken advantage of. For instance the media exaggerate behavior like supposed looting. That changes the narrative profoundly – victims who need help are transformed into criminals who don't deserve assistance. Using quasi-logic, [people argue that] the places most

damaged must be the most vulnerable, and therefore the wrong place to build back. That's where all the poorest people live. Over decades and centuries, the rich have figured out where high safe lands are, and left the poor people the low lands. Inequalities are further exacerbated because the rich can cope and the poor can't. Some people see [crisis] as an occasion to solidify their own control. That means that disasters are part of the reason why inequalities are as large as they are today. It's not the whole reason, of course, but may be an unrecognized driver. The wake of a disaster is a time when nobody's watching. The media aren't watching, governments weaken; a lot of action happens that's largely out of sight.

At the same time, you observe that disasters can have positive outcomes in addition to the obvious negative ones. Can you elaborate?

In a society with rich and poor, a disaster preferentially destroys [poor people](#)'s assets and weak infrastructure. So then, for example, if you replace a rickety old one-lane bamboo bridge with a cement-and-steel structure with two lanes in both directions, all of a sudden commerce is better, immediately and for years. Beyond the temporary bump for the building industry that almost always happens, new airports, better ports, schools, and hospitals are lasting things that can provide direct public good. If you can rebuild in a way to improve commerce, you can improve the economy, in theory. But there are not many places you can show where this has actually happened, where the average person was better off. A colleague told me it would be great to fill in the New York subway system and start from scratch, but you can't. Disasters allow you to start over again.

And the same outcome can take place whether the disaster area is in an authoritarian system or a democratic government or somewhere in

between.

I thought I would look at x, y, and z and see differences between Myanmar and New Orleans. But you find they're almost identical. The Myanmar junta didn't fix the delta there, just like the lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans. It floored me that there would be this sort of analogy.

If a certain group suffers disproportionately in a disaster, what distinguishes whether you should rebuild?

When a place turns out to have been dangerous, we look at homeowners as if they were stupid to be there in the first place. But they weren't there out of hubris. At Breezy Point in the Rockaways, nobody had told these homeowners that this was a dangerous place to live. In New Orleans, people had been herded to the Lower Ninth Ward below sea level. If you can protect people, you should. In New Orleans there's now a huge system that's going to protect against storm surge, which should have been in place before. The levees have been strengthened. New Orleans is worth preserving. If you can't protect it, like you can't protect the Rockaways without a sea wall, you shouldn't. Haiti remains prone to large earthquakes. If you can't protect people in Port-au-Prince, you should make an effort to relocate the businesses that brought people there. It's not a city of strong allegiances or great historic importance; if you give people a job elsewhere they'll go.

Does the publication of this book mean you've shifted from natural science to social science?

It's not a shift, it's an addition. I try to add to how I think. This need to straddle two forms of intellectual inquiry comes from the nature of the problem. If you've got a problem that cannot be solved by one or the

other alone, you're forced into it.

Provided by Columbia University

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