One disaster after another: Why we must act on the reasons some communities are facing higher risks
23 August 2022, by Bruce Glavovic, Shinya Uekusa and Steve Matthewman

Extreme weather is making life increasingly precarious in many other parts of the world, often with a terrible death toll.

As we prepare for a more turbulent future, fueled by a changing climate, we can learn from the experiences of another New Zealand city, Ōtautahi Christchurch.

People there have lived through a decade of extreme events. They have experienced devastating earthquakes, floods, a terrorist attack, the COVID-19 pandemic, air pollution, growing social inequality and more.

In a new book, A Decade of Disaster Experiences in Ōtautahi Christchurch: Critical Disaster Studies Perspectives, we argue that our traditional response to disasters is no longer sufficient and we must begin to address the underlying causes that make some communities more vulnerable than others.

The failures of 'traditional' disaster studies

Traditionally, disaster studies and practices have centered on putting in place measures to contain natural hazards. For example, stop banks are erected to contain flooding.

Risk analysis and treatment options enable specialists to determine the probability and consequences of extreme events and prescribe optimal solutions. In Aotearoa New Zealand, robust legislation and policy such as the coastal policy statement are in place to improve natural hazard management and build community resilience.

These measures have unquestionably helped to reduce the impacts of extreme events. They have minimized loss of life. However, traditional
approaches have not prepared our communities for the disruptive events we face now and in the future.

Climate change is a game changer. Sea-level rise is unstoppable. Flooding is commonplace.

We describe a new approach to research, policy and operational practice, based on a critical disaster studies perspective.

**Focusing on underlying causes of vulnerability**

The book provides an account of what people in and around the city of Christchurch have lived through in the face of disaster upon disaster upon disaster.

It reveals important lessons from real-world experiences and shares vital insights from M?ori and migrant communities on response and recovery efforts as well as by individuals, civil society, the private sector and government.

Rebuilding a city after a disaster is about much more than physical reconstruction. Credit: Shutterstock/NigelSpiers

It leverages the social sciences and humanities. It works in cross-disciplinary ways to better understand and address the influence of power, inequity and injustice in constructing vulnerability. It uncovers the everyday reality of disasters for those most susceptible to harm.

**Disasters hit some people harder than others**

Traditionally, a disaster is framed as an abnormal situation in which people, cities and regions are overwhelmed by extreme natural hazard events that exceed coping capacity.

A critical disaster studies perspective recognizes that disasters are much more than naturally occurring ruptures. It views disasters as socially constructed and mediated.

In other words, historical and contemporary conditions, like social marginalization and oppression, impoverishment, racism, sexism, inequity and injustice, predispose some people to much more harm than others in the face of shock and disruptive changes.

Vulnerability is not merely periodically revealed by occasional extreme events. It can be an "everyday reality" for some people—made much worse during extreme events.

Inevitably, the root causes of disasters are manifold and interconnected. This was laid bare in the decade of disaster experiences in ?tautahi Christchurch from 2010. The lessons from these experiences should inform future responses to unfolding climate-compounded disasters and help us navigate the challenging times ahead.

**Lessons from past disasters**

?tautahi has become a laboratory for the world—a prelude to a turbulent future. Our book reveals several lessons.

First, vulnerability has a history. Building a city in a drained swamp, at sea level and by a capricious river, made it a disaster waiting to happen. Many of the problems the city's rebuild has had to reckon with predate the earthquakes. They include
colonization, the declining central city, car
dependency and the well-being of communities in
poorer parts.

Second, rebuilding the city is much more than
physical reconstruction. Recovery is chiefly the
reconstruction of the city's soul, its culture and
social fabric. It involves ongoing restoration and
rebuilding of the lives of individuals, wh?nau,
communities and more.

Restoring and building trust to enable innovation
and collaboration turns out to be even more
important than marshaling bricks and mortar. And
crucially, who is the city for?

Third, disaster recovery cannot be dictated from on
high. A critical disaster studies perspective
recognizes the limits of central government. It
underscores the importance of mana whenua and
local communities to be supported by both local
and central government. When it comes to
recovery, it is neither top-down nor bottom-up, but
both.

Fourth, authentic public engagement and a
common vision and purpose are foundational to
revealing and addressing the drivers of
vulnerability.

From these lessons, we can draw conclusions and
advice for future planning and disaster response
and recovery:

- do not allow new development in hazardous
  locations and avoid putting people in harm's
  way
- take action now to contain the compounding
  impacts of climate change, which is driving
  more intense and frequent extreme events,
  such as storms, floods and unavoidable sea-
  level rise
- create space for young people to be part of
  planning and preparedness—it is their future
- leadership by women enables empathy and
  emancipation
- reinvigorate local democracy
- avoid privatization of disaster risk, because
civil society holds collective responsibility
for past, present and future choices about

human development—it is best supported by
the private sector and government
- resilience (within limits) is founded upon
diversity of people and the ecosystems on
which we depend
- put vulnerable people first. This is the
cardinal rule of a critical disaster studies
perspective.

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