



## Disaster risk at the margins: Homelessness, vulnerability and hazards



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### ABSTRACT

Many marginalised groups have received significant attention in disaster literature and disaster risk reduction policy, however others, such as the urban homeless, have stirred much less academic and policy interest. There has also been limited consideration among disaster specialists, who tend to concentrate on large-scale disaster risk, on the significance of everyday hazards and small-scale disasters for those living at the margins. Drawing on a scoping study that explored homelessness and hazards in Delhi, India, this paper contributes to closing these gaps as well as emerging discussions on disaster risk at the margins. The study focuses on the linkages between the multi-faceted marginalisation of homeless people and their various vulnerabilities to disaster associated with both everyday small-scale hazards and large-scale natural hazards. Highlighting the complexity and acute vulnerability of homeless people to disaster from a multitude of man-made and natural hazards at different scales, it argues for more attention and integration of homeless people's needs and everyday hazards in disaster research and policy. Some specific areas for future research are provided.

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### Introduction

Hazards, in their many diverse forms are variously experienced (Hewitt, 2007; Wisner, Blaikie, Cannon, & Davis, 2004) with the possibility of a hazard culminating into a disaster more pronounced for some individuals and groups over others. Marginalisation and destitution leads to high vulnerability (Edgington, 2009; Sturgis, Sirgany, Stoops, & Donovan, 2010; Wisner, 1998), with those who are at the margins suffering the most when faced with natural and other hazards (Wisner, Gaillard, & Kelman, 2012). Homelessness is one of the uttermost states of marginalisation and reflects an advanced level of destitution and denial of basic rights (Tippie & Speak, 2009). The fate of homeless people in facing natural hazards has been put forward by a few scholars (Settembrino, 2013; Wisner, 1998). However, the homeless have not been adequately differentiated or considered within the disaster literature and the work of disaster risk reduction and management agencies (Wisner et al., 2012). They have also been totally overlooked in policy geared towards reducing the risk of disasters (e.g. United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction 2011a, b).

This paper raises issues regarding disaster risk at the margins and the linkages between homelessness, vulnerability and hazards. It draws on a scoping study conducted in Delhi, India in 2013. Field research entailed focus group discussions and interviews with homeless people across eleven locations in the city, site observations as well as discussions with the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA). The field research was jointly conducted with the Indo-Global Social Service Society<sup>2</sup> – a Delhi-based Non Government Organisation (NGO) that works with homeless people in the city. The eleven locations included six homeless shelters and three locations where people sleep in the open. The shelters were a mix of women's, men's and shared shelters as well as both permanent and semi-permanent. The selection of the locations was made to reflect the diversity of living and sleeping arrangements and gender differences. The locations were also selected because of the NGO's existing relationships with the homeless in these areas and the ability to recruit participants. The study differentiated homeless people from other groups of urban poor such as slum dwellers who have their own distinctive array of vulnerabilities and are, at least to some extent, considered in disaster risk reduction literature, practice and policy (e.g. Pelling & Wisner, 2009; The World Bank, 2011).

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Cities have been described as ‘*crucibles of hazards*’ (Mitchell, 1999), and Delhi, like other large cities in Asia, faces a wide diversity of hazards ranging from the everyday and small-scale to the large-scale and low-frequency. These hazards have tended to be regarded separately, with urban specialists focussing on routine risks to urban populations and disaster specialists concentrated on large-scale disaster risks (Bull-Kamanga et al., 2013: 193). In this paper we aim to bridge this divide by examining the vulnerability of homeless people to both everyday and large-scale hazards and disaster risk. This is essential to better understand the needs of homeless people in facing natural and other hazards, and hence to design disaster risk reduction and management policies which address those concerns.

### Marginality, vulnerability and disaster

Marginality is a controversial concept (Perlman, 1976). In its social acceptance, it broadly reflects unequal relationships between one or several groups with power, whether economic, political, social or all together, and a minority or non-members of the said group (Cullen & Pretes, 2000). The latter thus lack access to all kinds of resources available to the most powerful. In everyday life, limited and fragile access to resources is often materialised by weak livelihoods, poverty, social exclusion, discrimination, and the absence of political voice (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987).

When faced with natural and other hazards, people who lack access to resources, lack means of protection are hence, are vulnerable. In fact, those who are affected by the harmful effects of hazards are disproportionately drawn from the segments of society which are chronically marginalised in daily life (Wisner, 1993; Wisner et al., 2004). They are marginalised geographically and physically because they live in hazardous places and spaces (e.g. informal settlers); socially and culturally because they are members of minority groups (e.g. ethnic or caste minorities, people with disabilities, prisoners, and refugees); economically because they are poor (e.g. homeless and jobless); and politically because their voice is disregarded by those with political power (e.g. women, gender minorities, children, and elderly) (Gaillard, 2010).

People's incapacity to safely face natural hazards therefore results from their inability to control their daily life and to choose the location of their home and their livelihoods (Blaikie, 1985). In that context, disasters highlight or amplify people's daily hardship and everyday emergencies (Baird, O'Keefe, Westgate, & Wisner, 1975; Maskrey, 1989). Disastrous events can thus not be considered as accidents beyond the usual functioning of the society (Hewitt, 1983; Wisner, 1993). Instead, disasters reflect development failure where the root causes of vulnerability merge with the origins of other development-related crises. In that sense, the most marginalised are particularly vulnerable not only to large-scale events but also to small-scale, high-frequency hazards which easily impair their fragile livelihoods and hence their ability to sustain their daily needs (Collins, 2009; Wisner et al., 2012). These events are often neglected by disaster risk reduction academics, policy makers and practitioners all together (Wisner & Gaillard, 2009). In fact, a recent campaign by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Cross Crescent Societies (2013) make reference to silent disasters. Nonetheless, these events are suspected to have a larger cumulated impact than that of rarer large-scale disasters (Lavell, 2000; Lewis, 1984).

Pre-disaster vulnerability and the extent of resources available to individuals and groups to recover after a disaster mean that marginalisation, and the structures that create and sustain marginalisation, will continue to exist after a disaster. People who were rich before will still be the most well-off after the event while the poor are likely to remain poor (Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner,

1994; Quarantelli & Dynes, 1972). In other words, marginalisation does not stop with disasters as disasters do not have equalising impacts or outcomes (Gaillard & Cadag, 2009). Furthermore, post-disaster aid and relief is often unfairly distributed to the benefit of the most affluent segments of the society (Cuny, 1983; Middleton & O'Keefe, 1998). Therefore, disasters frequently lead to the marginalised remaining marginalised, as well as more marginalised people whose livelihoods have been affected and who are often unable to recover (Winchester, 1992; Wisner, 1993).

If many marginalised groups have received significant attention in the disaster literature and disaster risk reduction policy, e.g. women in some societies (e.g. Enarson & Morrow, 1998; Phillips & Morrow, 2008), children (e.g. Anderson, 2005; Peek, 2008), elderly (e.g. Ngo, 2001; Wells, 2005), people with disabilities (e.g. Alexander, Gaillard, & Wisner, 2012; Kailes & Enders, 2007), ethnic minorities (e.g. Bolin & Bolton, 1986; Perry & Mushkatel, 1986), lower castes (e.g. Boshier, Penning-Rowell, & Tapsell, 2007; Ray-Bennett, 2009), others such as prisoners, gender minorities and homeless people have stirred much less academic and policy interest.

### Hazards and disasters in Delhi

Urban hazards and vulnerability to hazards are not natural but constructed and shaped by the character of development, governance and management structures as well as complex social, economic and political processes (Jha, Bloch, & Lamond, 2012; Mansilla, 2000; Pelling, 2003). Delhi is the fastest growing city in India (Singh & Shukla, 2005). Since 1951 the population has increased from just over 1.7 million to over 16 million (National Informatics Centre, n.d.), and the city's land area has expanded from 201 to 792 km<sup>2</sup> (Ahmad & Choi, 2011). Delhi is also the most densely populated city in India with 11,297 persons/km<sup>2</sup> compared to the national level of 382 (Government of NCT of Delhi, 2012). Accompanying this growth has been a proliferation of illegal and unauthorised colonies and informal settlements with some 76% of the population living in unplanned settlements which do not comply with government building standards (Ahmad & Choi, 2011).

Delhi's growth trajectory has created a wide range of everyday small-scale hazards. Illegal or substandard building is a significant cause of fires and building hazards. From 1995–2000 there were more than 75,000 fire incidents in Delhi with the largest number of fires occurring in slums and residential areas. Approximately 17% were caused by carelessness and 70% by short circuiting due to illegal connections, substandard wiring and overloading (Delhi Government, n.d.). Growth in the city's population and economy has contributed to the presence of 7.5 million vehicles in Delhi in 2012 which represents a 135.6% increase in just over ten years (Delhi Government, 2013). Delhi has more fatalities from traffic accidents than any other city in the country (Mohan, 2009). Furthermore, it estimated that every year 10,000 people die prematurely as a result of air pollution and that respiratory illnesses from poor air quality number in the hundreds of thousands (Anand, 1998 cited in Faiz & Sturm, 2002: 242). Lack of universal access to water and sanitation in the city also presents a multitude of everyday hazards. Only 75.2% of households in Delhi use treated water through a piped water supply system (Delhi Government, 2013) and 10.2% of urban households in the NCT of Delhi have no latrines.

A complete inventory of everyday hazards in Delhi is beyond the scope of this paper and we have mentioned just some. However, it is clear that while everyday hazards may have a low impact on a city they can be the cause of premature death and serious injury for many urban inhabitants, cumulatively killing or injuring more people than a large-scale low-frequency event (Bull-Kamanga et al.,

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