



The politics of scale and disaster risk governance: Barriers to decentralisation in Portland, Jamaica



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ABSTRACT

Good governance has been clearly identified as a priority for deep disaster vulnerability reduction and resilience-building. In particular, decentralisation has been lauded as a mechanism to democratise risk management decision-making, by redistributing power across scales in favour of local actors. However, in practice, decentralised risk management frameworks have often been critiqued for being incomplete and exclusionary. This paper argues that the politics of scale offers a neglected yet highly valuable framework to understand the construction of limits to decentred power and agency, which cause these apparent gaps between decentralisation as ideology, policy and practice. Scale theory offers this by providing an insight into the dynamics which define where power is located within risk governance regimes, and why. With reference to a case study of Jamaica's decentralised disaster management system, the paper illustrates the processes through which scaled risk governance systems can be used, distorted, and shaped by their constituent actors. The analysis identifies three processes of incomplete decentralisation, scale-jumping, and scalar disconnect, as being responsible for the reinforcement of a state-centric power asymmetry within the national disaster management system and the stripping of local agency. Hence, these processes are highlighted as fundamental barriers to the aspirations of a framework that claims decentralisation as a normative goal. The conclusions drawn in this paper are significant for critical geographers and policy-makers interested in the conditions for equitable and effective risk governance policy, and who view local leadership as being necessary for long-term vulnerability reduction.

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1. Introduction

Vulnerability, exposure and losses from disaster events are known to be escalating worldwide, and in increasingly uncertain ways as a result of climate change (IPCC, 2012). Many have identified good governance as being fundamental to meet these present and future challenges, in order to ensure the timeliness and effectiveness of disaster risk reduction (DRR), emergency preparedness, and climate change adaptation (Adger et al., 2009). Ahrens and Rudolph (2006) identify institutional failure as *the* fundamental source of disaster vulnerability, because of its inseparability from geographies of underdevelopment. Wisner et al. (2004) argue governance underlies the reversal of many 'root causes' of vulnerability, supported by others who agree that good governance practices set the pre-conditions for deeper vulnerability reduction (Tompkins et al., 2008; Cannon, 2008). Adger et al. (2009) state that governance responses are made more urgent by climate change, and will have fundamental implications for its social, economic, and political outcomes in the long-term. These views reflect the wider 'good

governance' discourse which emerged in mainstream development literature in the 1990s and has since infiltrated the disasters field (Batterbury and Fernando, 2006; Wisner et al., 2004). Particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of decentralisation as a strategic priority in disaster risk governance, on the basis that it democratises and increases the efficiency of disaster risk management (DRM)¹ (Ahrens and Rudolph, 2006). In response to these arguments, decentralisation has become a popular policy tool within global development discourse (driven in no small way by the neoliberal agendas of many transnational aid institutions).

However, questions remain about what 'good governance' means in practice. In particular, an ongoing debate surrounds which actors are best equipped to design and deliver the most effective and equitable DRM activity, and at what scales – in other words, to what degree of decentralisation (including delegation to *non*-state actors) should governments aspire. Without denying the many challenges of decentred and participatory development (see Cooke and Kothari, 2001), few would deny the moral and practical

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¹ DRM encompasses disaster risk reduction (DRR), preparedness, relief and rehabilitation. The use of this term is favoured here to capture all risk management activities and emphasise the responsibility of institutions for these.

advantages of incorporating the voices of actors operating at scales below the national in development and environmental decision-making. Indeed, disaster geographers have long argued that community-based DRR, enabled by a nurturing and responsive local government, is necessary for meaningful vulnerability reduction (Blaikie et al., 1994; Allen, 2006). Nevertheless, decentralised environmental management has often been criticised for being exclusionary and incomplete (Pacheco, 2004). Whilst there have been successes, many community-led DRM programmes have been observed to fail due to inadequate infrastructural, financial, technical and enforcement support from national and local government (Blaikie, 2006; Allen, 2006; Wisner, 2001).

These observations raise two important issues. Firstly, determining the ‘right’ balance between ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ governance evidently remains a priority for long-term and sustainable risk reduction. The solution can, perhaps, only be known through iterative policy development and academic analysis with the benefit of hindsight. Further work is warranted on this question directly. However, if we take as a minimum the assumption that some degree of sub-national scale agency is desirable in DRM (for reasons outlined in Section 2), then the second – and rather more pressing – question becomes: what are the barriers to cross-scale power-sharing, and what is causing the current gap between DRM decentralisation as an ideology, policy and practice? As stated above, previous research has highlighted some of the practical challenges of institutionalised local participation, yet the *political* processes preventing ‘real’ decentralisation of power to sub-national levels in DRM remain poorly understood. It is these challenges which this paper seeks to explore.

Specifically, this paper examines the nature and construction of barriers to the fulfilment of claims to cross-scale and decentred governance, with reference to a case study of Jamaica’s decentralised DRM platform in the north-eastern parish of Portland. The paper argues that the nature of actor interactions within the Jamaican DRM framework has produced and reproduced scalar disparity, which restricts the agency of local actors to participate in DRM either strategically or operationally. This inhibition of the local scale has resulted in a disconnection between the places where disaster decision-making takes place, and the goal and purpose of decentralisation. Lying behind this disconnect is a geography of entrenched – yet non-inherent – power relations.

This paper adopts the politics of scale as an analytical frame to unpack the ways in which this power gradient is constructed and legitimised, revealing the processes through which the state maintains its relative empowerment over local-level actors. The contribution of the politics of scale in understanding this geography of relative empowerment is its constructivist lens, wherein the agency of any one actor is viewed as dynamic and contingent on multiple and competing inter-actor relationships. Scalar hierarchies are understood to arise through processes of ‘scale structuration’, whereby actors vie with one another for their relative positioning (Brenner, 1998), and can become entrenched over time since “power is reflected in, and reproduced by, the capacity to control and capture resources from different levels” (Lebel et al., 2005, p. 2).

This paper observes three processes of scale structuration in Jamaican DRM governance: (1) incomplete democratic decentralisation of resources and enforcement capacity (drawing on Pacheco, 2004); (2) scale-jumping between the national disaster agency (ODPEM) and communities; and (3) the isolation of communities due to weak chains of accountability, representation, and communication. These three processes both legitimate, and are legitimated by, the perceived weakness of local government – a dynamic which reproduces scalar inequity between national and sub-national actors. These processes have resulted in the persistence of low capacity for DRR within local government, and community dependency on

the national disaster agency (ODPEM) before, during, and after disaster events. These findings resonate with Grove’s (2013) Foucauldian conclusion that community-based DRM in Jamaica has constituted a means for the state to perpetuate existing norms through ‘biopower’, whereby local agency is channelled by the national agenda in a way which stifles the emergence of radical alternatives from the bottom-up. Nevertheless, despite these critiques, the system has successfully reduced disaster fatalities over its lifetime and ODPEM maintains a positive reputation amongst communities – largely the product of linking social capital (Aldrich, 2011).

The application of the politics of scale to disaster governance research in this way responds to repeated calls for empirical cross-scale disasters research (Adger et al., 2005; Baker and Refsgaard, 2007; Osbahr et al., 2008; UNISDR, 2012), as well as Grove’s (2013) appeal for a re-politicised disasters research agenda which moves disaster studies beyond objective assessments of policy or project outcomes. Thus, in order to “reopen the question of politics and power in hazards and vulnerability studies” (Grove, 2013, p. 571), this paper shifts the debate away from structural description of DRM policy, towards the coproduction of institutions and agency. The question therefore becomes not whether a particular policy succeeds or fails, nor whether ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ is better for vulnerability reduction *per se*; rather, it emphasises *how* scaled governance systems are used, distorted, and shaped by DRM actors. Improved understanding of these processes is intended to stimulate innovative pathways to improved risk management policies and practice.

This paper focuses on scalar limits to decentred disaster risk governance as a product of interactions between levels of the formal state infrastructure. Analysis of additional limits imposed by non-state actors (particularly transnational donor organisations and non-governmental institutions) is not the focus here; however these represent important avenues for further research. The arguments in this paper are relevant to disaster geography as well as political ecology more widely, the latter of which shares this paper’s interest in the mutual constitution of power, institutions and environmental outcomes, and has witnessed mounting interest in the politics of scale (Neumann, 2009; Rangan and Kull, 2009; Zimmerer and Bassett, 2003). The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a summary of the key principles of scale theory and its relevance to understanding DRM governance, followed by Section 3 which outlines the geographical context and field methodology. Section 4 presents a scalar analysis of DRM governance in Jamaica, identifying three processes of scale structuration and their political significance. Section 5 draws conclusions about scale and DRM, and considers lessons learnt about the development of improved DRM governance regimes in light of these.

2. The politics of scale in disaster risk governance

2.1. *Scalar limits to DRM*

Governance is defined as far more than ‘government’. Much more broadly, it is the entire framework of social control, stewardship, and regulation which exerts power over and within society (Batterbury and Fernando, 2006). The character of a governance regime, and the distribution of power, dependence, and provision that results, is determined by the balance of powers, rights, and responsibilities between a plethora of stakeholders which may include public and private, formal and informal, collective and individual actors (Wisner et al., 2004; Ahrens and Rudolph, 2006).

Influenced by the participatory development paradigm that emerged in the 1990s (Chambers, 1995), there has been a sustained push within DRR and CCA towards more ‘bottom-up’ approaches which seek to offer local people a leadership position in the manage-

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