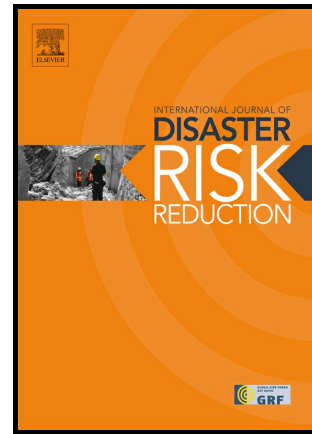


Author's Accepted Manuscript

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www.elsevier.com/locate/ijdr

PII: S2212-4209(16)30598-2

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2016.10.006>

Reference: IJDRR429

To appear in: *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*

Cite this article as: Anthony Oliver-Smith, Irasema Alcántara-Ayala, Ian Burtor and Allan Lavell, The social construction of disaster risk: Seeking root causes *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2016.10.006>

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The social construction of disaster risk: Seeking root causes

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Over the past 50 years, scientific understanding of hazards and the potentially dangerous physical events they precede has grown substantially. This knowledge covers natural, socio-natural and technological hazard events, and there has been increasing concern not only with their extreme manifestations but also their smaller-and medium-scale and more regular occurrences. Much more is known about the frequency and magnitude of events, and where they are most likely to occur, although today climate change introduces new uncertainties as climate variability is modified in its expressions from place to place. In many cases forecasting ability has improved, and better communications have enabled forecasts to be turned into warnings, and more effective disaster response plans have been formulated. This has been particularly so with hydro-meteorological events, where significant advances have been made, in some places in reducing human loss from events such as hurricanes and flooding.

At the same time there have been improvements in our capacity to guide human settlements away from dangerous, exposed places, and for the large number of cases where building in hazardous locations does occur there have been improvements in the capacity to design and build higher quality, more resistant infrastructure, housing and public facilities. Consciousness has increased and actions taken with regard to the role of environmental degradation in the construction of disaster risk. And, the overall role of poverty and skewed development in the creation of this risk has also been increasingly recognized by many stakeholders [1, 2]).

Yet, large-, medium- and small-scale disasters are becoming more frequent, and damage and loss continue to increase at a rapid rate [1, 3, 4, 5]. Reference has been made by some to a “disaster epidemic”. This use of the term “epidemic” to characterize the spread of disasters is, of course, metaphorical; it does not refer to the widespread incidence of a single triggering event and its impacts on a susceptible population, but rather to a set of similar social and economic processes now at work around the world that lead to disaster risk. Like an epidemic, the physical triggering events of a disaster can vary widely, but the existence of similar approaches to development that privilege economic growth over social and environmental values and priorities is a key factor in their occurrence.

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