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Reaction Paper 1

Response paper to the readings assigned for Session 2

In my view, all texts (apart from the case study for Santo Domingo) fail to appropriately address a question that I consider crucial when talking about disasters and vulnerability, which is the diversity of this problem around the world. Furthermore, I think it is problematic to try to come up with general “rankings” of vulnerability or resilience. Vulnerability has very different characteristics and exhibits various patterns in diverse regions of the world.

More specifically, the following points stroke me during the reading:

§ When talking about vulnerability and disaster preparedness, it is problematic to not differentiate between the various types of disasters. The vulnerability and resilience of a community depends very much on the nature of the catastrophe and its frequency in the region (generally, I would claim that resilience is higher the more frequent the event). As desirable as a holistic view on disaster might be, I doubt that this is possible. An alternative approach might be to try to categorize disasters by their nature and impact. In this context, I found the paper “From everyday hazards to disasters: the accumulation of risk in urban areas” focusing on the less spectacular but more frequent catastrophes particularly interesting.

§ Despite the importance of the social component of vulnerability, I had the impression that the cultural dimension was not sufficiently addressed. Partly, this problem arose because the discussion was rather general and not referring to a specific region. However, I think the importance of this aspect is broadly underestimated. Several disaster management schemes (typically designed by foreigners) failed because such considerations were not taken into account.

§ Furthermore, I consider the statement that communities in rural areas are more prone to losses than those living in cities too general. The problems arising in the case of a catastrophe are dramatically different and depend very much on the region in question. In many Small Island States, the remote islands are very vulnerable in the sense that they are not connected to the information networks, such that the central government does not usually know about the damages.

§ Although technological methods for risk mitigation are not the primary focus of the texts, I would like to stress, that in my opinion the problem in this context is not the method as such, but the way it is applied by the decision-makers. I will not elaborate on this, I suppose there will be enough possibility to discuss this later in the course.

§ Industrialized countries do have a very high vulnerability towards catastrophes. The disastrous earthquake in Kobe is one of the more recent examples for that. In many developed countries, the destruction of material value might be more problematic than the loss of human life, but the strong increase of insured (disaster-prone) values is one of the challenges that modern politics has to address. Additionally, industrialized countries are becoming more and more vulnerable in the sense that modern society is often unable to cope with even minor malfunctionings (such as a power cut). Such events can have economic impact on a global level (on re-insurance companies or likewise).