

**International Roundtable Conference
JTCDM**

Researching Disasters: Prospects and Dilemmas

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It is increasingly accepted that risk reduction and disaster recovery both have fundamental international dimensions. A template is offered with relative ease by international agencies and accepted without interrogating the basic assumptions contained in the emerging discourse around disaster management. The universal nature of international disaster response and the principles governing such work, in practice pans out in diverse forms which both inform and challenge the very idea of the structuring of humanitarian response and what goes into it.

International institutional practices on disaster management and humanitarian aid often reflect inherent ambivalence and contradictions which are not always discussed or consciously debated. For example international processes promote cultural and scientific exchange without recognizing the fact that in facilitating co-ordination between ethically and ideologically polarized institutions or development organizations (local community based organizations, governments, donors and implementers); they often destroy local cultural practices and adversely impact traditional economies in the long run.

This Roundtable on **Researching Disasters** is organised with the intent of drawing expertise and ideas from four key interrelated disciplinary areas- development studies, institutional arrangements and technology sharing, international relations, community and cultural studies. It is based on the premise that the conceptualization and critique of contemporary disaster practices are shaped by a number of cultural, institutional and political processes and must be debated and contested.

While it is acknowledged that an analysis of the local situation must accompany broader analysis at the regional and global levels -what forces drive the disaster management agenda, its practices and its research framework? What is included and what is omitted? An exploration of these dimensions would provide valuable insights. Disaster researchers' sensitivity and awareness of emerging trends and challenges will be enhanced by examining not only the field of disaster risk reduction but also by the recognizing how macro-economic forces of globalization and management of discourse determine funding patterns, policy statements and institutional practices, undermining or enhancing local and cultural practices across the world. It is within this broad framework that two broad themes are proposed for this Roundtable Conference on Disaster Research.

Theme 1: Reviewing the Geopolitical situation and Disaster Response (Analyze the present context and identify unexplored areas, trends in Disaster Financing, the significance and challenges of climate change issues, development deficits and vulnerability reduction)

Theme 2: Disaster Management Trends in South Asia (Nature of techno-fixes, research and policy initiatives, how are they driven, role of UN processes)

Population Settlements, Vulnerability, and Development: The Societal Impacts of Disasters

Havidán Rodríguez

Abstract

Disasters are social constructions. They are highly influenced by the social and political structure, the availability of resources, by stratification and inequality, population pressures (i.e., population growth, density, and distribution), and environmental degradation, among other factors. Moreover, the changing demographic landscape calls for a reassessment of how we understand the societal impacts and consequences of disasters. Previous disasters, such as the Kashmir or Northern Pakistan earthquake, the Indian Ocean Tsunami, and Hurricane Katrina substantiate the differential impacts of disasters on certain communities, particularly those that do not have the resources to cope with and recover from such events. This paper focuses on some of the key and emerging issues and challenges that impact our vulnerability to disasters. It is argued that if we fail to generate effective policies aimed at enhancing disaster mitigation, preparedness, and recovery, which also take into account population composition and distribution, inequality, and disaster vulnerability, we will continue to experience disasters with greater regularity and intensity.

About the author

Dr. Havidán Rodríguez is the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and International Programs and Professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice at the University of Delaware. He is also a core faculty member and former Director of the

Disaster Research Center (DRC), the oldest and one of the leading social science disaster research centers in the world. He obtained his Ph.D. in Sociology at the University of Wisconsin.

Dr. Rodríguez received a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) Outstanding Achievement Award for 2004, and was recognized as one of the *Hispanics of the Year* in the state of Delaware for which he received the Professional Achievement Award (2007). He has served on a number of committees for the National Academies of Science, including the Disaster Roundtables of the National Research Council and several other Committees and panels of national significance. He has published extensively in the areas of disasters, diversity in higher education, and Latinas/os in the United States.