

Disaster risk management: sustaining cultural integrity – the key to societal resilience

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Abstract:

With the effects of climate change increasingly becoming apparent, the global community is experiencing and is likely to experience natural disasters at exponential rates. In addition to natural disasters, the incremental and accumulative effect of climate change is predicted to lead to consequential social disasters due to societal disruption, dislocation and threats to the capacity of communities to maintain their traditional modes of existence, or at worst, to even subsist. Resultant social tensions will give rise to responses in the form of increased warfare, border conflict and potentially a climate change refugee crisis in many regions across the globe. In short, cultural heritage and the stability of extant social systems are fundamentally jeopardised by climate change.

With the first response strategy to disaster inevitability and understandably directed at subsistence: food, water, health and physical wellbeing, as well as law and order, I maintain that more assured resilience to disaster will only be achieved if the cultural integrity of people is also sustained. Risk management in response to potential and actual disaster, both natural and social in character, must proactively address the means to sustain the core cultural values of affected communities. The UN's Sustainable Development Goal 11, which focusses on "making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable", reinforces my proposition that sustaining cultural integrity is of fundamental importance.

The history of warfare and cross-cultural conflict confirms how dreadfully effective the destruction of culture can be in suppressing opponents. Oppressed people have inevitably seen their societal values suppressed by conquering forces. Human rights are quashed as the repressed are forced into a disconnection with their cultural roots. So too it will be with climate change: disasters will be so much more comprehensive and devastating if risk management strategies do not pre-disaster address the means to retain cultural integrity and, post-disaster, address the means to reinforce the importance of people staying true to their value systems, providing the means to sustain in a changed and disrupted world their identity, their connectedness to places, things and beliefs which are at the heart of their culture.

In the context of education, sustaining cultural values is indeed a lifelong learning experience. Explaining values, fostering "pride in place" and reinforcing that sense of belonging should be a key component of all community education. It is the culture of each individual and groups of individuals, be they families, villages, towns or regions, which provides that all-important sense of belonging – connectivity. Culture is the glue that binds groups of people together. In turbulent times post-disaster there can be no greater means of containing further risk than to pro-actively seek to strengthen resilience by leaving embedded in each and every individual and community their connectedness to their origins, their history, their customs and all their manifestations of cultural identity.