

Post-disaster research: challenges and opportunities conversation on disasters: deconstructed on 11th of June 2021

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Abstract

Purpose – This conversation presents the reflections from five prominent disaster scholars and practitioners on the opportunities and challenges associated with research following disasters and explores the importance of ethics in disaster research.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on the conversations that took place on Disasters: Deconstructed Podcast livestream on the 11th of June 2021.

Findings – The prominent themes in this conversation include ethical approaches to research, how we-as disaster researchers and practitioners—collaborate, engage, and cooperate, and whose voices are centred in a post-disaster research context.

Originality/value – The conversation contributes to ongoing discussions around the conduct and practice of disaster research.

Keywords Disaster, Ethics, Opportunities, Challenges, Manifesto

Paper type Transcript

Ksenia Chmutina (the co-host; from herein Ksenia): Today we'll be talking about the Power, Prestige and Forgotten Values Manifesto [1]. And in particular, we will be focusing on perspectives for opportunities and challenges that we, researchers and practitioners, need to reflect upon when we do post-disaster research. If you haven't seen the Manifesto yet, please check it out.

Jason von Meding (the co-host; from herein Jason): One of the discussions that was borne out of our reflections on the Manifesto—maybe some of you have been following the podcast—is something that a lot of us have been chewing on the past few years: a deeper reflection on how we do research. For instance, the work that JC [Gaillard] and Lori [Peek] have been doing



around discussing ethics in research and an ethical code of conduct in their piece published in *Nature* [2]; I know a lot of you will be aware of that piece. JC and Lori wrote that disaster zone research needs a code of conduct because if we're to study the effects of hazards, it needs to be done with sensitivity to ethical dilemmas and power imbalances. There are so many practices around the world that we need to reflect on – and today we've brought together some amazing voices to do just that. Do you want to tell us a bit about the idea of the code of conduct, JC?

JC Gaillard (the co-host; from herein JC): Yes, sure Jason. First and foremost, thanks for having me and for dedicating some time to this important topic, which I think deserves due attention. So you said that Lori and I had the privilege to write this short piece for *Nature* a couple of years ago: I think it was reflecting the growing concern that the two of us, and many more people we know around us, have been feeling about how we conduct research immediately following disasters. Lori is going to correct me afterward if I misinterpret her intentions, but from my perspective, there were four issues or questions that we wanted to raise in view of eventually getting people to think about a potential code of conduct, or accord, or whatever we call it.

The first one is “What we research following disasters”, and the so-called idea of perishable data and whether there's something that needs to be researched after a disaster because otherwise, we would miss out on something important that might inform the practice of recovery and disaster risk in the long term.

The second one is “Why we're doing this”. I guess all of us in this field are driven by genuine goodwill, no question about this, but whether this goodwill actually reflects the concerns and the priorities of those who have been affected by the disaster, is another question. And that's something we need to think about, I guess.

The third is “How we do research following disasters”, and that's one of my main concerns at the moment. How from a methodological perspective – and how, from a more epistemological and ontological perspective. Whether the concepts we use, whether the frameworks we use to understand what's happening following disasters, actually reflects how people view the world, especially beyond the West. This is something we need to put more attention to, for sure, from my perspective.

And the fourth one that probably explains most of the three previous points is, “Who actually researches following disasters”. And if the first three points have been an issue for us, all of us, it is because I personally believe, at least, that post-disaster research, and I would almost say disaster studies research at large, are skewed towards researchers based in, let's call them Western countries. And at the same time, most disasters occurring in the world (and we can debate what a disaster means, and there's an issue around that), tend to occur beyond the West. So there's a sort of dichotomy and paradox there that explains why we're using Western epistemologies and ontologies in researching disasters, why our priorities may not be for those affected, and the “What” we research may actually not be the top priorities for the local places where disasters occur.

So I think these are the four key questions and key motivations for writing this paper, and I think it's been, to some extent, overwhelmingly well received. Lori and I have received a lot of support afterwards. The limited amount of criticisms or challenges that we've faced, I think, stem from misunderstandings, and this is why I very much like the idea of having this event today – and more [conversations] around the Manifesto at large. Misinterpreted or misunderstood in the sense that some people have thought that we were arguing for a rigid list of strict guidelines or strict dos and don'ts, to be endorsed by the UN because we mentioned the UN and UNDRR at the end of the paper, and this is absolutely not our intention, and I'm pretty sure Lori will agree with me on this. Our intention was to raise the issues and to have this kind of code of conduct or accord. I'm moving away from the ‘code of conduct’ myself because I think it may look too rigid. But it's to make sure we have ethical principles that are grounded. Nothing that would look like a universal set of bullet points that would

apply anywhere in the world. That's the opposite. We're arguing for some loose principles that would fit the local context and that would not be endorsed by any institution or adopted by any institution, and that's why we were kind of suggesting to have a sort of neutral place which could be a UN event, but not to be endorsed by the UN. A neutral place for the document, whatever it is in the end, not to be co-opted by one particular organization or one particular set of people. But I'm sure Lori will talk more about this afterward.

Ksenia: We have an amazing and truly global panel with us today: Lori Peek, Mihir Bhatt, Terry Gibson, Djillali Benouar and Sarah Beaven. We have asked our guests to reflect on the opportunities and challenges associated with research following disasters in the context in which they work – as they all work in different contexts in terms of disciplines, but also geographically.

Our first speaker today is Mihir Bhatt. Many of you will know Mihir's work, and he joined us on the podcast in Season 3 [3]. Mihir's contributions are well-known in disaster risk reduction. Mihir works with the All India Disaster Mitigation Institute (AIDMI) and has conducted action research during and after some of the defining disasters of our time, such as the Gujarat 2001 Earthquake in India, the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean and many more. Mihir, welcome. It's great to have you here.

Mihir Bhatt (from herein Mihir): Thank you so much for this opportunity which I really appreciate. It's a really important topic that you've brought to us all to consider: post-disaster research, reflecting on challenges and opportunities. And let me share some reflections on this topic as they emerge in my mind from my work on action and learning in post-disaster research work.

First, what is post-disaster? Or how and when disasters end? This is an area that has haunted me again and again since the 2001 Gujarat Earthquake recovery follow-up, and also to my team. We are still conducting research and learning from site visits to-date about what has happened post Gujarat 2001 earthquake, or 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami. As technologies, social context, political processes and the economy changes at an accelerated rate, it becomes even more important to come to terms with this rapidly changing concept of what is post-disaster. And I think in 2001 it meant one thing. Now in 2021, it means something else. We have found there is "past-post" and "current-post" and "future-post" depending on the context, event, nature of hazard and sequencing among other things. So that's something I'd like to know and do more research work on: What is post-disaster and who defines it?

Second, how we do research? I think there has been, as far as my understanding is concerned, too much focus—recently even more—on evidence and data. Both are important and we all benefit from that. But I think there is a need to look at reflection as a centrepiece of research, by the researcher and what is being researched and who is being researched. I would like to underline that we do more "reflective research" as a process as well as a product. We can have questions on that subsequently.

Third, is this separation of the challenges from the opportunities a useful way to move ahead? Maybe we shouldn't separate the two. Is it not more useful to think of challenges as opportunities? And look at our post-disaster research there as a starting point? Will it help to us as researchers and more importantly, to them, the victims, if we locate not either in challenges or opportunities, but locate us to view challenges as opportunities?

Having raised the overarching above three concerns, I'd like to come to something else, and that is the "what" part of post-disaster research. I've said it several times: this neoliberal economics offers desired results or opportunities, but I don't think it will offer any more in the coming years or the next decade. What is going to happen is the rate at which the neoliberal economic development will produce risk, would become far higher than the rate with which the risk is being reduced within the neoliberal risk reduction framework. And that gap keeps on increasing, and soon risk reduction will be an even more marginal and ceremonial activity.

So what would be useful to do in terms of post-disaster research from my point of view is to see what the limits of this neoliberal economics are, within which post-disaster related actions and learnings are taking place. Is there a way out? Perhaps feminist economics, circular economics, economy as nurturers are some directions I know we can look at as a way out. We must look at post-disaster recovery, and post-disaster research in that direction as soon as possible.

The reasons we need to conduct more research, and we don't know enough as far as post-disaster is concerned, is what is called, "co-location of disasters" and it's happening more and more. How do we actually conduct the post-disaster research when often two, but it can be three or more disasters are co-located, when they are cascading, when they are extreme, radically different than they have been before. For example, when the 2006 floods and tsunami affected communities in Tamil Nadu in India, that is an area for post-disaster research to urgently explore.

Now adapting to climate change in the post-disaster period is becoming more important. There are new disasters such as heat waves, and we hardly know what happens post-heat wave in terms of two years, three years or five years. We know that disasters behave differently, such as the recent two cyclones in India: in one week, both coasts had cyclones "*Tauktae*" on May 18, 2021 and "*Yaas*" on May 26, 2021. This is a rare and unsettling occurrence.

And that's why panel studies post-disaster are very important. Not much is done on that. AIDMI has started some work in Kerala with FXB Centre, Kerala State Disaster Management Authority, and Kudumbashree after the 2018 floods, not only studies in terms of quantitative and hopefully qualitative data collection, but post-disaster studies by victims themselves. Panel studies looking at what has happened to affected people and giving a scorecard to the performance in terms of achievements and what has not been achieved is an important area to look at for post-disaster research.

The need to look at post-disaster research in terms of visions and promises of what I may call mystical tradition of recovery is overdue. Sort of, what's an Asian vision of post-disaster, African vision of post-disaster, what is minority vision in various countries, global north or south, and how do they seek recovery? In India, for example, how do dalits and minority religious groups, including LGBTQ+ and ethnic groups, envision post-disaster recovery? Migrants—not the minority in many states, but still—what is their vision of post-disaster? And that's the area that would be very useful to research?

And last, and I would like to end there: when will we start looking at the spiritual and philosophical aspect of post-disaster life? I know we are talking about food and water and that's something very important. Shelter, settlement planning, infrastructure are important too. But still, life is not a life if things beyond the above are not looked at. I'm not referring to religion and faith only—and they are important; but what is around and beyond that and that is something that is very important to people who are affected by disasters, but also important to researchers such as us to have ways of seeing this thing called "post-disaster"?

These are the real post-disaster opportunities which I see are very useful to research on. Thank you very much for this invitation.

JC: Thank you Mihir. Always fantastic to listen to your insights and practitioner's perspectives on these issues. I'm always amazed by your ability to pull things together in such a short period of time. So thank you so very much for that.

Now we'll move on to our next guest, who is my partner in crime somehow, in writing this short piece for *Nature* a couple of years ago. Professor Lori Peek is a professor of sociology and the director of the Natural Hazards Center at the University of Colorado Boulder. Lori also leads a large National Science Foundation-funded initiative in the US called CONVERGE [\[4\]](#), which coordinates researchers and is developing ethical guidelines and practices around disaster research at large. It's been an amazing experience to watch that from the outside, from my side of the world. Over to you, Lori. Looking forward to listening to your thoughts on these issues.

Lori Peek (from herein Lori): Thank you JC. I want to offer an enormous thanks to you and Ksenia and Jason for convening this conversation. And Mihir, following on from you and your moving description of what happened in 2001, that was also a year where I was going to begin my remarks. It was the year of the Gujarat Earthquake and also the year of the 9/11 attacks in the US. That year was my first experience with doing field research, and it's been followed by many, many more opportunities to travel to the field and to learn from disaster-affected persons. It's hard to believe that it's been 20 years, and I'm so glad that even two decades on, we are having this conversation and conversations like this are being held around the world. It is just so important that as researchers we don't lose sight of the heart of disasters and what disasters do in terms of upending lives, the trauma they may cause and the social solidarity they can generate. Disasters reveal the social world in all of its complexity, and I am so honoured to be a part of this panel and to have an opportunity to talk about our approaches as researchers in the post-disaster timeframe.

Ksenia and Jason have put us on a strict timeframe! I have about six minutes remaining, and in those six minutes, they've asked that we cover three big challenges and three big opportunities, as Mihir has just done so eloquently. I'm going to start with what I see as three major challenges that we are currently confronting in our research field.

The first big challenge has to do with the number of compound, complex and cascading disasters that are occurring around the world and that are upending tens of millions of lives every single year. The sheer number of disasters that we are confronting in this evermore turbulent world has challenged our research community and has stretched many researchers, research teams, centres and institutions to the limit in terms of resources that are available and our capacity to study these disasters.

The second big challenge is related to what disasters we are able to study given the resources, capacities and time limitations among our small but incredibly mighty research community. On average, a disaster happens somewhere around the world every day. But not all disasters get studied. At present, the disasters that researchers tend to study are high impact, high attention and in high income countries. To underscore this point, I wanted to share a little bit of data, which I'll talk about more in a moment. Through CONVERGE, I'm very privileged to lead the Social Science Extreme Events Research or SSEER, Network, which now includes more than 1,200 researchers from around the world. One of the questions we ask SSEER members is about the specific disaster events you have studied. Our analysis of that data found that SSEER researchers have studied 1,166 discrete or named disaster events [5]. Here are the top 10 most studied events: (1) Hurricane Katrina, (2) Hurricane Harvey, (3) Hurricane Maria, (4) Hurricane Sandy, (5) Hurricane Irma, (6) 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, (7) Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami, (8) Fukushima/Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, (9) COVID-19 and (10) BP-Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. While SSEER is not yet representative of all researchers globally, and we know there are more SSEER researchers from the United States than any other country, which is undoubtedly shaping this list, it still tells us something important about where researchers are focussing their attention. Specifically, 7 of those 10 named events occurred in the United States. And all 10 are high impact, high consequence events. What that means is that low-impact, low-attention disasters, oftentimes occurring in low-income countries or communities, may not be getting the focus and attention and the research that is needed and deserved. So that is the second big challenge.

The third big challenge has to do with the size and composition of our research community. I simply do not think we have the number of researchers, the diversity of researchers and researchers who have the resources and capacity to respond in the riskiest places in this world. Given the evermore turbulent world we are living in, and the extreme 21st century challenges that we are facing, growing the research community and ensuring that we are prepared to be thinking across systems and structures is one of the greatest challenges, but also opportunities of our time.

That leads me to my three final points in relation to Jason and Ksenia's request that we also address three opportunities that can lead us forth in response to these challenges.

The first major opportunity that I foresee has to do with what is happening with the movements for global justice that have swept countries around the world. Here I'm talking about movements such as Black Lives Matter as well as other movements for various human rights, for democracy. We are living in a historical moment when justice and ethics are at the fore in terms of much broader conversations that are far outside of our field—but are also deeply connected to it. This is such an opportunity as a field, as we are thinking about our research agendas and our forward movement, to also be thinking about justice and equity. This means putting justice, equity and ethics on a common plane and elevating them to the same status as our research agendas—this will allow us to think about these issues simultaneously and as deeply interconnected. This is what I've been referring to as the opportunity for *just reconnaissance* in our post-disaster fieldwork.

The second big opportunity that we now have, as JC mentioned, in the United States, is a group of research coordination networks that have never existed before. Thanks to the funding of the National Science Foundation, we have extreme events reconnaissance and research coordinating networks for the social sciences, the earth sciences and engineering. These networks have brought research communities together in new ways that will help us to carry out more ethically-informed, coordinated and rigorous research. With the Extreme Events Research Networks as well as with the CONVERGE facility, we've been able to develop trainings and other resources that centre ethics as well as research findings [6]. We've been able to bring researchers together, such as after COVID-19, in order to get organised and to move forward with questions of crucial importance. This has led to enormous progress in the research coordination and training space, but we need CONVERGE funding in countries around the world to ensure this research coordination is occurring in all of the world's major regions and that we are mobilising researchers and ensuring they have access to training and resources.

The third big opportunity that I foresee is for us to come together as researchers to co-construct our ethical principles. Now that we have research coordinating networks that have allowed us to identify where researchers are—literally putting them on the map, as we've been doing in the SSEER network—this is an opportunity like never before for us to come together as a community to identify our core ethical principles. As JC said at the outset, we're likely never going to get one singular code of conduct that is going to work across all times, places and disciplines. But I think this is a moment to start this conversation about ethics across regions and to work to identify our guiding principles. With that, I know I'm out of time. Thank you for giving me the time, and I cannot wait to learn from the rest of this panel. Thank you.

Jason: Lori, thank you for sharing your time today, and these beautiful thoughts. We're very happy to have with us Djillali Benouar, who is a Professor of Earthquake Engineering and Disaster Risk Management at the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Director of Research at the Faculty of Civil Engineering as well, at the University of Science and Technology – Houari Boumediene, in Alger. He's a founding member of the Algerian Academy of Sciences and Technologies and has been a member of the Integrated Research on Disaster Risk Science Committee and a member of the Algerian Hazards Network, and Coordinator of the Periperi U. So Djillali, thanks so much for joining us, and I'll hand it over to you now for your thoughts on this topic.

Djillali Benouar (from herein Djillali): First of all, thank you very much for inviting me to this panel. I'm very honoured to be able to speak as an engineer of course, and not a social scientist, just an engineer working with the hard technologies on this matter. First of all, I want to say about learning from the past—but how far should we go in the past? Disasters were taken before as events. Now we are understanding that disasters are not events, they are rather a process which maybe has started 10 years ago or 20 years ago. Because when you study and you go back in time, you see all these chains, all these conditions, all these factors,

that contributed to the event (disaster). If we understand that, then disaster research, or past disaster research would be easier to understand what is a disaster. Now the first priority of Sendai [Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction] is understanding risk, where you take risk as a vulnerability and a hazard. I believe this time it is to understand the disaster itself, deconstruct the disaster. And that is, to better understand and to learn the lessons. If we take the disaster as a process, we have to go back in time as much as possible. It's not the engineering which is the only responsible when you see a building collapse. Sometimes you have to go to legislation, sometimes you have to go to institutions, you have to go to the administration, of course you have also to go to humans. At the end of the day, after your research, you will see that humans are the main cause of the disaster. With this, you have to go really, not to the causes, but the root causes of the disaster that will help us to understand better and apply disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management.

I talked about ethics and engineering which is the moral decision that needs to be made by engineers in the course of engineering practice for new buildings or for past disaster. What we do really, for engineering aspects, and quickly after the disaster and before the damage is removed by the government or something else, is to take samples of the damage. Samples of everything, the building itself, the soil, the occupants, all these we have to take them to the research labs and try to simulate the damage. If we really achieve that, then we know what the causes are. Maybe the causes are not engineering, maybe the causes are from the administration because of the site they have selected to implement the building is not adequate, despite what is written and said by scientists. But these days, particularly politicians, they don't believe too much in science, and that's a big problem today. I think later they call the scientists – it's too late to call us after that. What we try to do, the difficulty that we still have, is not the physical phenomena—this can be studied—but the combination of the physical phenomena and the vulnerability of the exposure, whatever it is. Humans, populations, buildings, the soil, of course, which could make things a bit complex. All these soils, buildings, people and infrastructure, where there is now complex connectivity and we should take into account all these connectivities, dependencies, especially in urban sites; which makes urban sites a complex system that need to be solved as a whole. Looking back in time, this is a puzzle, trying to put the pieces together to have the full picture on what happened. And this will help us to learn the lessons and to draw conclusions and, of course, draw a recommendation for a code, not a code of conduct, because this is more moral than a technical code of construction which is strict and this is what we should do.

Of course the main problem with scientists today, is that the people don't respect it; if we call it the code of conduct, the engineering ethics or ethics as a whole. Because if you don't respect ethics you may do whatever you want with your data. You may play with your data and you calibrate your model as you want and you find the good results and please somebody who likes them. Maybe not you, but a politician may like them. That's why ethics in engineering or any other research, especially in disaster deconstruction, is crucial and very important. It is very important to talk about ethics, and try to be sensitive or raise awareness of people doing that, that they should be honest and respect the moral decision you should get, because your decision will maybe cause harm to some other people because of money or because you're going to please somebody. Then it's important for the engineers to stick to the professional code, because we have professional codes but not everybody would accept them or adhere to them. We should stay legal and we should be honest. This is very important, because if people play with the data, with the model, with the calibration, even with the validation, to say this is a drawn conclusion and a drawn recommendation, and, of course the disaster will continue to occur.

And of course we need to have the relevant information before we draw conclusions. This is very important and to have integrity. Integrity is also important. Be responsible, because we are professionals, at a certain age, we're not students anymore. We don't like to play with

that. We have to be responsible, because our decisions may kill people. And also we should tell the truth. Teach people to tell the truth. This is a great value. Give credit to where credit is due. This is also a quality of humans. Do no harm. And because you should benefit the others, no matter what the cause. This is also a quality of humans. Also, I don't have time to go further, but morality is everything, like moral awareness, moral reasoning, moral consistency, moral imagination, moral communication, moral respect to persons, tolerance and diversity. Your decisions should not depend on the religion or culture or anything. More hope and integrity. This is what I would like to say for today. If there are questions, I'll try to answer. And thank you very much again for inviting me to this panel.

Ksenia: Thank you so much Djillali. It really warms my heart to hear you and more engineers, in general, talking about people, ethics and honesty. We know these conversations were not very salient before, but I think they are so important in everything that we do. So I am happy to see engineering moving away from being seen just as a common "building shelter" sort of thing to something that is moral and ethically important to everything that we do.

And now it's my absolute pleasure to welcome Sarah Beaven, thank you so much for joining us. Sarah Beaven is a Senior Lecturer in Disaster Risk and Resilience in the School of Earth and Environment at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. Sarah's research focuses on the use of formal governance arrangements to manage the institutional misalignments that can make it very difficult for scientists to engage productively with wider cross-sector coordination efforts that are required to reduce disaster risks and to respond and recover from disasters. So, Sarah, we look forward to hearing your reflections today.

Sarah Beaven (from herein Sarah): Thank you Ksenia. I've organised my contribution as three opportunities and three risks. I'll start with the opportunities, because I think they do address the risks to some extent. The first, and this is from someone who is particularly interested in working across sector and disciplinary boundaries, arises out of the innovative, upsurge of coordination and collaboration required by disasters. This surge of activity provides valuable opportunities for researchers to join in with that broader collaborative effort, to become part of it, and develop skills and networks. Secondly, that emergent activity also provides valuable research opportunities for those researchers, like me, who are interested how those coordination processes emerge and work. And I think the third thing that's really important, as Lori was saying, is the opportunity to build capacity. People who are involved in disasters often become very interested in this field. So disasters provide an opportunity to develop research capacity. I completely agree with her that it's particularly critical to build capacity in countries where it can be much harder for researchers to publish in international journals, and become part of the global community.

I think that the risks that are posed by research after disasters really come down to the sorts of things that Lori and JC have been talking about. I'm particularly concerned about the risks associated with the larger picture. In post-disaster zones, and particularly in the months or early years after a major disaster, you get the effect of a compression of space, caused by the convergence of actors into that area. Laurie Johnson and Robert Olshansky [7] have also demonstrated that the need for so many more decisions and actions creates the effect of time compression for those impacted by disasters, making them time-poor. So people in post-disaster zones have to cope with the primary effects of the disaster (injuries, loss, damage to homes, disruption to lives), and then as well they struggle with these secondary impacts after the disaster. I worry that researchers can make these secondary impacts worse. That, to me, is one of the huge issues, and it's particularly an ethical issue, from my point of view, because all researchers gain from gathering data. The data they gather is usually of more value to them than research findings are to those from whom the data has been gathered.

I was very moved by Djillali's comments, as an engineer, because in many cases you have sequences of different scientists, including geoscientists, engineers and social scientists,

who will often all need to interact with people on their properties and sometimes in their houses after disasters. There's a high risk that this cumulative pressure can significantly augment secondary disaster impacts on populations, and so have an opposite effect than the one we wish it to have. The problem is that this is such a large-scale effect. It's not the fault of individual researchers, or easily addressable by individual researchers, it's about the way research is coordinated. It's particularly important to make sure that research after a disaster is coordinated in such a way that it provides maximum benefit to those trying to recover from that disaster, including communities and the agencies working on the ground. The best way to do that in my opinion is for everyone to be trying to work together, including researchers able to take the opportunity to contribute to that wider effort. It follows that research needs to be conducted after disasters so that it's of primary, direct benefit to those in the post-disaster zone and not conducted to provide more general benefits. For me, taking part in the larger coordinated effort, and building capacity, particularly locally, are the two really key things that researchers can try to do in a post-disaster zone.

And the last thing I'd like to say in this context is that whenever researchers are publishing findings based on data gathered in a disaster zone, it's really critical to co-author those publications with as many of the local researchers and actors as possible. This is one way that researchers can help to build local capacity, by sharing with locals some of that benefit that researchers gain from publishing in peer reviewed journals. That's all I planned to say – I hope that I've kept to time. Thank you very much again for the opportunity to present here today.

JC: Thank you so much, Sarah. For those who don't know Sarah, she's very low profile and modest, but she's been a huge source of inspiration for me at least in thinking about all these issues. And I remember some conversations we had in Christchurch after the earthquake. Sarah hasn't mentioned it, but she's speaking as someone who lives in Christchurch and who has experienced the series of earthquakes from within, and who has been researching from within, and who has developed such thing as some ethical guidelines for research on disasters in New Zealand. This is amazing always to listen to your thoughts on these issues. So thank you very much for being with us early this morning.

Let's turn onto our next guest, Terry Gibson. Terry is a practitioner/writer/researcher/many other things! He's been working with networks of civil society organisations for years, decades. He used to be the key person driving the views from the frontline, survey from the global network for disaster risk reduction, and I have to mention your book, Terry, "Making Aid Agencies Work" [8] because it's been a key reading for my postgraduate students. And for those who don't know Terry's book, it was published a few years ago, maybe three-four years ago. It's really an important book that practitioners and researchers conducting research in that broader space of disaster studies, humanitarian studies and conflict studies, should read because this is informed by practice and is super insightful already. So over to you Terry, we're very keen to listen to your thoughts.

Terry Gibson (from herein Terry): Thank you very much for those kind words, JC. I'm really grateful to be part of this event. I found it really insightful listening to the contributors. I hope I can add something in a small way. The focus of what I want to talk about is opportunities and challenges in action research among practitioners. I'm going to mainly talk about a particular case study of a small-scale piece of work we did recently during the [COVID-19] pandemic. In order to talk about that, I want to mention some of the learning from previous work. JC mentioned "Views from the Frontline" [9]; and we also, about three years, with a group of eight practitioners, took over an issue of the *Journal of Disaster Prevention and Management*, a special issue [10], and that was authored by a group of civil society organisation practitioners. I want to talk about the opportunities and challenges that we detected in doing those pieces of work.

Regarding opportunities, one of the other speakers hinted at this—there are certainly “output effects”; for example, Views from the Frontline produced reports which were intended to be influential. But we talk about “process effects” as well. When we’ve gathered participant feedback, the participants in this work talk about the way being involved in practitioner research supports skills development, helps them build relationships, helps them to do network building, helps their learning, so it spins off to their own work. Also in the nature of it, it focusses on contextualised, localised DRR [Disaster Risk Reduction]. Many disasters are pretty small scale and they’re very localised in nature and local experiential knowledge creation provides valuable insights to support effective contextualised DRR. So those are a few general opportunities.

A few general challenges: first of all, the very basic one, mobilising practitioners to research. They’re activists, they’re not researchers; they’re very busy. They don’t naturally reflect, they often don’t have time to! It’s hard to mobilise practitioners to participate in knowledge co-creation. Linked to that, they’re often pressed to produce “success stories”, to support the funding loops they’re tangled up in. That makes it difficult to be reflective, to think critically, to talk about failure. And the trouble is that failure is often where learning starts. Following up from that—trust. Practitioners are often individual, isolated and have little confidence that what they can share will be striking to people. And so they can be resistant to sharing in such work.

Some ways we mitigated those challenges were by focussing on time constrained shared actions, rather than general discussion. For example with Views in the Frontline or with the special issue, people could engage with something that was focussed and have a clear output. We found that these projects needed to work in an iterative way. The first cut didn’t get very far, and we sometimes went through a number of iterations as people gradually deconstructed what they were saying and learnt to think about things more deeply. These are ways we mitigated the challenges.

I’m going to turn now to a piece of work we did in December 2020 through to March or so of this year [2021]. We reached out to a range of contacts and asked, “What’s going on at local level, in terms of the pandemic?” Because those voices and those experiences are often unheard. We circulated 25 of our contacts, local CSO practitioners, of which 18 participated and started with a discussion paper. Over 16 iterations of messages and responses which were aggregated and circulated back we developed a discussion paper, turned it into a report, was presented that at a webinar, and then turned that into reports and blogs that had been circulated regionally, nationally and internationally [11]. This dissemination is ongoing.

A couple of opportunities we found from that work are again about the “output” and “process” themes. Clearly I’ve mentioned the outputs there, but I also received a lot of spontaneous feedback, talking about how much the participants value the learning gained from the process and also the sense of solidarity, working together with their colleagues, distributed among a number of countries across a couple of continents. We also found challenges, the challenge of mobilising practitioners to research. The iterations helped to nudge people who are busy and often reticent in putting themselves forward. It took time to build trust, encouraging people to take the risk to share their thoughts. A technical aspect of building collaboration was that we found a much greater level of participation through a centrally led facilitated process, sending messages through mailmerge so that participants received personalised messages, than through open forums and email groups. It seemed that people were more comfortable with a personal approach that doesn’t necessarily expose them to everybody straight away. These nuances can affect how successful practitioner collaborations are.

I’m going to give a couple of conclusions in terms of opportunities and challenges and then I’ll just read out the headlines of the findings that the group gathered in the work I’ve just described [12]. The opportunity in this particular piece and earlier pieces that I’ve mentioned

is that of local level knowledge creation through action research as it foregrounds local experience and knowledge and at the same time has these process benefits of feeding back directly on the participants and benefitting them. The technical and social challenges are those of often working online and rarely face-to-face with people who are isolated, don't necessarily feel comfortable sharing their thinking and are often very busy.

Those are my kind of conclusions, so we'll just read out the headlines of the reports they created. The things that they thought were things to be faced in their learning from involvement in COVID-19 to date: Number one: avoid creating disasters within a disaster; Number two: tackle trade-offs between health and economics; Number three: increased reliance on local capacities; Number four: increase rather than decrease local funding to support local capacities; Number five: build a partnership to strengthen coordinated responses; Number six: adopt a long-term perspective. Those headings on their own may not make a lot of sense, but if you go to the background document, they'll make a lot more sense. Thanks very much.

Jason: That's fantastic, thank you so much, Terry. We really appreciate everybody's contribution today, it's just been incredible to listen to. We're going to open up the discussion now with all of you. I think we've had some prominent themes that have been coming to the surface here around ethical approaches to research, how we collaborate, how we engage, how we cooperate, whose voices are centred, and something that I've been thinking about, and I wonder if anyone has thoughts on this is about, "Who needs whom?" in this post-disaster research context. Do the people that we are claiming to help need us, or do we need them? That's something on my mind as I listen and reflect on this issue, and I was just thinking how recovery needs to be grounded in the humanity of people affected by disasters, rather than on their humanitarian need, as we may frame it. And I think we do a lot of harm in the way we frame people and label people, so I wonder if anyone wants to speak to that. Maybe Lori and JC, you could speak from the position that you were coming from the work you were doing on post-disaster ethics?

Lori: Jason, that's an incredible synthesis of some of the cross-cutting themes of these comments. You raise such a powerful question, "Do they need us, or do we need them?" That really gets to what Sarah was saying as well. In answering that question, I wanted to name one tension that I also picked up in the discussion. Specifically, it is something JC and I highlighted in our *Nature* article regarding the need to ensure that research is beneficial, locally-grounded and meaningful to affected people. But something I've been grappling with is this: Obviously, at the heart of research is the need to pose a *question*, and you don't know the answer to the question, that is why you are doing the research. There lies the tension, because what if the answer to the question you have posed isn't of benefit or, in fact, may be of harm to the communities we study? What if what we find might marginalise or stigmatise them? It is important to be real and be honest about that tension when we're calling for research that is beneficial, that is locally-grounded, and that is meaningful to the people who have been most affected. We have to have this recognition that research is messy, and it's complicated, and we don't know the answer at the beginning if we're doing research. So how do we reconcile that reality of the messiness of research with the common reality that I think that most researchers are genuinely trying to do good. There are real tensions that emerge in the process of this. So JC, I'll hop it over to you, because Jason, this is a really provocative and important question, thank you.

JC: Yes, thanks, Lori. I agree with all of what you said, of course. I think to me, the next step is that everything comes down to what a disaster is in the first place. And what's a disaster in whose eyes I'm arguing in an upcoming book [\[13\]](#) towards the latter part of the year, that disasters are a western invention anyway and what we feel is a disaster may not be a disaster for the people we "research". To me, that's the bottom line issue, because if we do not agree on what we are researching and whether what we are researching is something that is an issue,

and whether we actually researching what others may feel like “is” something like a westerner, there is a mismatch in the first place, which means eventually having a mismatch of everything in terms of the methods, the epistemology, who does what and what we publish, etc. So I think it comes down to what a disaster is and whether there is such a thing as a disaster in the first place, a concept we can’t translate to most languages in the world, anyway. Until we address this issue, we can’t get very far further in our journey in terms of understanding how we should research post-disasters.

Ksenia: Thank you JC. Many of you have reflected on morals and honesty and justice and ethics, but all of these ideas and concepts are very much western. So how do we start the conversation about justice and morals and honesty in a way that we don’t impose the ideas of enlightenment that often affect the way we understand them. Mihir, can I start with you?

Mihir: Well, that’s an overwhelming question, but that wouldn’t stop me from responding. I don’t think justice or other words, that these are necessarily Western concepts. I think the definitions are often Western in a sense if we take justice for example, we can almost go three thousand years back and have descriptions of what justice is. So going back to my last point, which was about what I was calling mystical traditions, whatever label we want to use—but in terms of open up to that come into our discussion, our understanding, our research. That is important. Yeah, I don’t think justice and some of the other things are necessarily Western, the way they are perceived is very Western. I’ve been recently doing some work on the Ottoman Empire and the separation that the Suleiman the Magnificent did, and the law and justice and what the Shariat said. And it did a fantastic opening of how the worldview can be so meaningful yet so different as well. So thank you.

Terry: Okay, this is just maybe reflecting on what JC was saying and it’s just an anecdote really, that in the Views from the Frontline’s first iterations, the questionnaires were linked to the priorities in the ISDR [14] Hyogo Framework [for Action]. We were asking questions to people about a Western framework, and disasters through a Western lens. Working with Ben Wisner, we said this isn’t really what we were intending to do, getting Views from the Frontline. We redesigned the process so that it became an open consultation of just four questions: What do you think are the greatest threats facing you? What are the consequences of them? What are the opportunities and what are the barriers? We got people to talk and the data we gathered had to be analysed qualitatively, but it was listening to people’s voices. We piloted this in an informal community in Honduras and talked to a couple of women, whom we talked through this process and went through it. And we said, “What do you think of this?” And they said, “Well, it’s really interesting because loads of people come and do surveys with us, UN agencies and all sorts of people, but this is the first time someone has come and asked what we think”. And I think that’s just a practical illustration of the tension between shoehorning people’s experience into a construct as opposed to actually hearing from people “what is the thing that’s actually bothering you in terms of the pandemic”, like what we’re hearing from people in West Africa for example, is that often government interventions are causing more harm than the pandemic itself. It may or may not be true, but I just thought I’d shove that one in. Thanks.

Djillali: I’d like to come back to when you said that justice and morals are Western. I don’t think so. Because if you said that these two terms are Western, people will just go away. Where if you go back to history, all the cultures, all the civilisations and all the religions, they have justice. Good justice. But the problem with the politicians is their ego of interests, like corruption. There is no civilisation and no religion which will tell you to go to corruption. Corruption is bad for all civilisations. The main problem we have is with politicians. They don’t respect any ethics, it’s like they don’t have ethics, These politicians everywhere are almost the same in their behaviour, look at them around the world. It looks like they’re making all the harm to the people, according to our standards. And I believe what we need, like Lori said, is education, maybe education from the beginning. Because if you have a good

student with ethics and morals, when he goes to the professional world, he will have the necessary ethics, he will have also the morals. But if we start, like now, we are trying to make gender, everybody is talking about gender, and people think, really think this is Western. They said, "what are they doing? We have different culture. This is gender, this is Western culture". I think if they speak about maybe better about human justice. I mean, women are not other things other than human, and this will bring together people instead of saying "gender, gender". People are tired of gender, especially the UN, even the UN played the game. I think somebody has to think out of the box and like JC said about disasters, about this gender, about this justice, about these human rights, and they're playing with them, and they're making more harm than benefits. Even for disasters, politicians are playing because like JC said, for whom are we going to make these post-disaster analysis? For whom? Just to publish? Just for oneself? Because if tomorrow someone finds that the cause of the disaster, like damage to buildings or people fatalities, is the responsibility of the administration because they implemented the buildings or the city, on alluviums. It is their responsibility. If we may say that, that these buildings should go, all of them, like a city. What's the solution? The government won't let it go, they won't accept it because there's a lot of money and a what to do. Or if you go for the example, Algiers, which was built in the early 20th century, most of the buildings, 50%, we know that these buildings, some of them don't even have foundations and science was not good at the time. What to do with these buildings? We know Algiers is an earthquake zone what to do with it? Even politicians will tell the scientists what to do with this part of the capital, should we move it away? And these questions not only why we are doing this post-analysis. Of course we have to choose or we have to work with politicians, all stakeholders, let's say, to make this post-disaster benefit to all of us, to the country as a whole. If not, I don't know why we are doing that. Because when you start collecting the data, some data belong to the government and the government says, "Oh, what are you going to do with this data?" We have the responsibility, and I think we have to think about how we approach all the stakeholders to help us in this big project. Thank you.

JC: I very much like Djillali's point about some of these, and I would probably go beyond concepts here, but in terms of values, and you referred to justice, but it could be for human rights as well. I think we need to be careful. I think it's not an issue of these things only being Western. If you look at human rights for example, and you look at human rights in Africa. The Manden Charter from the Mali Empire dates back to the thirteenth century, for example, and it clearly refers to droughts and hunger. And it's embedded within the charter. The point is that when we talk about human rights nowadays, it's from the European perspective, and how one single tradition of human rights is being imposed on the rest of the world. But there are other traditions that are more appropriate in different contexts, and I think that takes us back to what has become the main paradox of disaster studies is that we all agree now that disasters are a social construct. I think no one would disagree with that. At the same time, we are rolling out and applying concepts and frameworks we take as universal, all around the world. So how can we consider that one thing is a social construct and at the same use the same concepts in very different social environments. That seems to me to be epistemological nonsense. And how do we get beyond that? And that's my question, somehow. How do we open up spaces for local voices to be expressed in the first place? To be listened to? In the context of these traditions of justice, human rights and other cultural values and norms that matter locally. And acknowledge suffering, acknowledging harm. When I say disaster is an invention, I'm not saying people are not suffering, people are not struggling. But it's a matter of recognising what the struggle is in the first place, from an insider's perspective. So it's a question for everyone, how do we open up that space, how do we listen to people on the ground? Mihir, yes, go ahead.

Mihir: No, I'm glad you asked that, and that's something one has been struggling for quite some time. I think there are three areas, which I don't know how to do it, but I think something needs to be done as far as post-disaster research is concerned. One is the area of time. How do we

deal with time in post-disaster research. And my first point, is what is “post-disaster”, but not only that, and going beyond that, when does a disaster end? Then it becomes a post-disaster. So there’s the one part. And there’s also a second part, the experience of time during the various stages of disasters or the various stages of post-disaster is different. And how do we account for the different experiences of time for the affected populations and other stakeholders, if not sequentially, then how to you represent it in research and findings? So one is our treatment of time in disaster research, which seems very important for me to work on. Secondly is clarity, and I don’t know why there is so much fussiness about things that have to be clear. Things are never clear, we know that, and we make it clear for our understanding, but things we make unclear. What do we do with that, especially in a disaster situation. How do you begin with this blurriness about things not being clear, how do you come to terms with what is not clear to the affected populations as well as to the researchers? And third is the area of labelling. Quickly you find something and it’s a subcoding and coding, and this is part of this and this, and of course this is important, because how else would you capture it. But I think one needs to do it tentatively and find out more about it. Is there a need for a label, and what if we didn’t label it what it is? And let it, as I said previously, let the description be there. And in the end, where do we locate ourselves as a researcher or practitioners? And that becomes important. I think we end up sitting in the same seat, and the same location in the room if there is a room of seats. Can we relocate ourselves to gain a different perspective or view of that? And that doesn’t happen. Because there’s so much tyranny of “What is your research question?” “What does it build on?” “How does it relate to other ongoing research and all?” And so research that is meant to open up the world actually keeps closing it and makes it narrower and narrower one feels. Thank you.

Jason: Thanks Mihir. Sarah, I’m interested in your insights working across different organizations and different groups and the obvious power dynamics that are inherent to that. And it seems like a lot of work is being done, even beyond research, like community development, ends up being done to communities, or for them in this charity model. And they become a consumer or a client. What does it look like to try to navigate those spaces and advocate for a model to do work with people, or even standing back or not doing it, allowing them to do the work and providing resources for them to do the work.

Sarah: Thanks Jason, that’s a great question. I tend to draw from fields like environmental management, where they’ve done a lot more work in terms of managing different sectors, and I completely agree with Lori in that one of the big problems identified in that literature is that researchers are trained to have their own interests and needs, and need to ask particular questions. And so I think the problem for me, in a way, is the need to have a coordination structure that tries to manage that tension, so that the local communities, and the way that people are trying to respond and recover are always given priority over the immediate researcher need – always depending on the context, and the way that the disaster has unfolded. When we were working at the interface between researchers and response efforts during the Canterbury Earthquakes there was an overwhelming pressure from researchers here, particularly after the most damaging earthquake in February 2011. It was hard to communicate with research communities, and could also be hard to get researchers to hear the message “Well, communities need this”. At the moment we don’t really have a way to reach research communities, or to coordinate research activity after a particular disaster so that it is responsive to community needs. At the same time, there were communities in Christchurch, particularly in the most damaged areas, who needed more research support (particularly in terms of engineering reports, and information about their land and houses) than they were able to get. Achieving a balance between the needs of researchers and those of local communities is always going to be difficult, and really needs to be driven from the perspective of those responding to the particular disaster. So I agree with what others have been saying – rather than an ad hoc process in which researchers come in to gather data to answer their research questions, you really need a coordinating framework that explicitly allows for research, and

uses processes that give researchers a place to participate and contribute to efforts to recover from disasters, in a formal way and in a transparent way. Because at the moment, research operates invisibly. After the Kaikōura Earthquake in 2016, which was significant but impacted largely rural areas, there was a much more coordinated process among researchers, particularly engineers involved in assessments. As Djillali says, I think there is a real need. People after these earthquakes in New Zealand for example needed to know if their house was safe to live in, and if it needed work. But what tended to happen, particularly during the Canterbury Earthquakes was that a series of engineers came through and gathered the data, about houses and properties, that was required by different organisations, like government agencies and private insurance companies. To me, it would be more ethical to recognise that the data that is being gathered belongs to the individual or the community it is gathered from, and so should be given to them in the first instance, as well as to the organisations that require the data for response or insurance purposes. I agree with JC and Lori that an international code that required detailed compliance across disciplines and contexts would be not feasible or appropriate. But I do think that in principle, it would be good if research communities were to recognise and agree that local communities, social structures and systems should be the priority after disasters. They are the ones that are suffering from the effects and trying to recover. The simple message for the research community is to try and serve that, rather than bringing in other interests to pursue. I really liked Terry's story about the four questions and the people who had been surveyed heavily and were surprised to be asked about their opinions for the first time. I have a colleague who collaborated in a project in Africa, which found that a small rural community had given research teams access to their well to assess drinking water quality, but were not provided with any information by any of the research teams involved about the quality of water in the well that they continued to drink from, where a small rural community were the focus of research about water quality, but none of the research teams involved had provided the locals with information about the quality of water in the well that they were drinking from. This tendency to leave locals out when reporting findings is a real problem, and not just after disasters. It's always critical to remember that every disaster is different, and research needs should be defined by the community that has experienced the disaster, rather than internationally, or by those of us who come in to research it.

Ksenia: This is wonderful, Sarah. It's been the most insightful conversation. As always, I cannot thank you enough for everything that you do and for coming together today to discuss this with us. For the audience, thank you so much for joining us. I really hope you enjoyed this conversation as much as we did, and that you you've learned as much as we did today.

Notes

1. The Power, Prestige and Forgotten Values Manifesto can be found at <https://www.radixonline.org/manifesto-accord>
2. Gaillard, JC and Peek, L., 2019. Disaster-zone research needs a code of conduct. *Nature*. Available at: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03534-z>
3. You can listen to S3E14 "Learning from Communities" featuring with Mihir Bhatt here: <https://disastersdecon.podbean.com/e/s3e14-learning-from-communities/>
4. More information about CONVERGE can be found here: <https://converge.colorado.edu/>
5. Peek, L., Champeau, H., Austin, J., Mathews, M. and Wu, H. (2020). "What methods do social scientists use to study disasters? An analysis of the Social Science Extreme Events Research (SSEER) network", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 64 No. 8, pp. 1066-1094, doi: 10.1177/00027642209381.
6. Peek, L., Tobin, J., Adams, R., Wu, H. and Mathews, M. (2020). "A framework for convergence research in the hazards and disaster field: The Natural Hazards Engineering Research

Infrastructure CONVERGE facility”, *Frontiers in Built Environment*, Vol. 6, doi: 10.3389/fbuil.2020.00110/full.

7. Johnson, L.A. and Olshansky, R.B. (2017). *After Great Disasters: How Six Countries Managed Community Recovery*. Columbia University Press.
8. Gibson, T. (2019). *Making Aid Agencies Work: Reconnecting INGOs with the People They Serve*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
9. For more information about Views from the Frontline, please see: <https://global-report.vfl.world>
10. Norton, J. and Gibson, T. (2019). Special Issue: Disaster prevention–Doing it differently by rethinking the nature of knowledge and learning. *Disaster Prevention and Management*. Available at: <https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/issn/0965-3562/vol/28/iss/1>
11. Kossivi, A. *et al.* (2021). Civil Society Organisations responding to COVID-19: A critical role and how to support it. Available at: <https://inventing-futures.org/covid-civil-society-organisations/>
12. You can find out more about the projects Terry outlined here: <https://inventing-futures.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Disasters-Deconstructed-Webinar-V4.pdf>
13. Gaillard, J.C. (2022). *The Invention of Disasters*. Routledge.
14. Now UNDRR.

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