Risk and Society

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A disaster can be thought of in three distinct event timeframes: before, during, and after (Allen, 2007). Disasters are termed based on quantifiable and subjective terms. It depends on whether your homes are destroyed or business is affected. It is the question of scale defined by your own values. The vulnerability of societies in risk-adverse societies makes disasters much more impactful and consequential. Before a disaster, governments employ the use of the precautionary principle. Experts and elites predict and try to prevent disasters by adopting strategic planning and implementing policies. Yet, often or not, disasters still occur and the main issues that arise are usually the aftermath of the disaster.

Climate change has been a major cause of concern for many scientists and environmentalist for the past few decades. For instance, climate change has caused European heat wave 2003, Russian heat wave of 2010 and Texas/Oklahoma heat wave of 2011. While these disasters may seem as though they are natural, the odds of them happening actually increased numerous folds due to man-made risks. The role of science and additional research will facilitate smart decision making by reducing the uncertainty in severity, timing and spatial pattern of impacts.

Risk assessors treat risks as one that is voluntary or involuntary risk (Perrow, 1984), however, this assertion is problematic as while the choices we make might be voluntary and we have no control over external forces. With regards to the sense of control over performing activities, active risks (Perrow, 1984) gives the individual some form of control where they are able to address and mitigate them. Yet, for some activities, they are beyond our control and require the government to step in. Economic disasters such as urban flooding in Singapore in 2011 has affected numerous businesses and resulted in thousands of dollars lost in revenue. Professor Balmforth mentioned that for every dollar spent on small localized projects like these, the government can avoid spending two and a half dollars on larger, more expensive projects such increasing water pathways and their capacity levels, or building bigger localized storage infrastructure (Perreault, 2011). Thus, while shop owners have a sense of control over their businesses, floods are beyond their control and
this would require the swift and effective measures from the government to take precautionary actions.

Indeed, investments in infrastructure and policies are going to make a difference in the long term. The respective parties need to take responsibility and liability for its actions. For example, in East Java, a careless management of the exploratory well that was drilled to search for natural gas led to a blowout of hot mud that affected thousands of families in 12 villages. The Indonesian government has been unwilling to acknowledge that the mudflow amounts to a national tragedy. Without the acknowledgement by the responsible parties, who denied legal liability, who is then going to fund all compensation and resettlement payments? There needs to be a collective group in the region that is not affiliated in the corruption and politics of the country to bring adequate justice and solutions.

One might argue that it is due to the lack of leadership and information sharing that hinders efforts in rebuilding communities and address the aftermaths. In my opinion, sharing knowledge and expertise between countries – coordination and cooperation in sharing responsibility and experiences is mandatory in managing disasters. The longer we wait, the more residual impact and complication we face. In order to build resilience, it will require policies that include coordination of organizations and international efforts. Moreover, the engagement of the citizens and scientists (Allen, 2008) is vital in finding answers to the most urgent issues. The gap between the authorities and local communities needs to draw closer, as seen in the incident of the nuclear problem in Fukushima.

Another key point to note is the polarities of the rich and the poor. Vulnerability to impacts of disasters is concentrated especially in communities that are poor, lack advanced infrastructure, or have ineffective governance. In pursuit for economic growth, many poor countries have a deadly trade-off towards higher risk engagements. This results in a greater future problem as these poor communities do not have the capital to rebuild homes and infrastructure, nor provide welfare to the victims. A probable solution would be for
community groups to takeover and bring local knowledge (Allen, 2008) to the areas and put in place national and regional coordination. However, the challenge for disaster affected communities is the issue of who are they working with and if they know the needs on the ground. Also, their willingness to accept international aid. Thus, in order to reduce security risks linked to economic and environmental challenges, we need to take comprehensive approach that are sensitive to the needs of the communities.

In conclusion, we have lived in the false security that probable security meant actual security (Schiller, 2008). I feel that societies need to be more educated and actively challenge expert decisions before a disaster strikes. Instead of staying ignorant, communities need to build resilience and adopt strategies to mitigate such risks on their own. This essay began with the before-planning of disaster through the role of the government in investing in infrastructure and policies. Followed by the issue of responsibility and liability of stakeholders, who is in charge of holding the guilty parties responsible for compensation and restoration? Then pushing the need for coordination and cooperation between not only the public and experts but also between countries and regions. Finally, addressing the vulnerabilities of risks between the rich and the poor and how they may manage the aftermath of disasters.

Bibliography

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