

Ben Wisner, Irasema Alcántara-Ayala, JC Gaillard, Ilan Kelman, and Victor Marchezini, *Understanding and Addressing Disaster Risk*, London and New York: Routledge, 2025, 261 p.

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In the past half-century, the sociology of disaster has undergone a paradigmatic shift, moving from a hazard-centric physicalism to a nuanced understanding of social vulnerability. This transformation was cemented by the assertion that “disasters are not natural,” a thesis famously articulated in the seminal 1994 text *At Risk* (Blaikie et al., 1994). Ben Wisner, a co-author of that landmark work, returns in *Understanding and Addressing Disaster Risk* alongside a distinguished cohort of scholars—Irasema Alcántara-Ayala, JC Gaillard, Ilan Kelman, and Victor Marchezini. This volume does not merely reiterate established critiques but expands the theoretical horizon to confront the “chronic societal processes” that manufacture risk (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 4). By interrogating the intersection of power, colonial legacies, and capitalist development, the authors offer a rigorous examination of why disaster risk reduction (DRR) initiatives frequently fail to arrest the accumulation of catastrophe. This review evaluates the book’s contribution to the field, focusing on its theoretical innovations regarding “Disaster Risk Construction” (DRC) and the tensions inherent in its proposed solutions.

The book is structured into ten chapters that systematically deconstruct the traditional binary of “nature” versus “society.” The authors explicitly aim to provide a tool for decision-makers and researchers to “shatter the vicious cycle of repeating



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known mistakes” (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 4). Early chapters are dedicated to a linguistic and philosophical excavation of key concepts—hazard, risk, vulnerability, and resilience. Here, the authors challenge the universality of Western scientific definitions, arguing that dominant epistemologies often obscure local realities and indigenous ways of knowing.

A central feature of the book is the evolution of the “Pressure and Release” (PAR) model. While the original PAR model traced the progression of vulnerability from root causes to unsafe conditions, this volume introduces refined heuristic devices to capture the dynamic interplay between structural constraints and human agency. One such innovation is the “Circle of Abilities.”

By shifting the terminology from “capacity” to “ability,” the authors emphasize the performative and active power of communities (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 33). This is not merely a semantic adjustment but a sociological critique; “capacity” is often treated by international agencies as a commodity to be built or transferred, whereas “ability” is presented as an inherent, culturally embedded power to act. This framework attempts to bridge the gap between structural determinism and individual agency, acknowledging that while macro-forces constrain local actors, communities possess inherent “tactical wisdom” and “hidden transcripts” of resistance (Scott, 1990).

The primary strength of the work lies in its relentless interrogation of the political economy of disasters. The authors succeed in demonstrating that risk is not merely an accumulation of neglected vulnerabilities but often the profitable output of “distorted development.” This is most forcefully articulated in Chapter 9, where the analysis of Disaster Risk Construction (DRC) reveals how elite interests and “corporate sovereignty” drive the creation of risk.

The authors utilize the “Triangle of Vulnerability” to visualize these dynamics.

This diagram illustrates how political, economic, and social structures intersect to deny access to resources, thereby manufacturing marginalization (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 219). Through case studies such as the Brumadinho dam collapse in Brazil and the Belt and Road Initiative, the text exposes the complicity of financialization and corruption in generating “megaprojects” that displace communities and concentrate hazard exposure (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 226). This contribution is significant for sociologists and political scientists, as it reframes DRR not as a technical problem but as a struggle against systemic “root causes” like neoliberalism and colonialism (Oliver-Smith et al., 2017). By framing risk creation as often intentional—or at least a foreseeable byproduct of profit accumulation—the authors challenge the neutrality of governance and development planning.

The text traverses a vast array of hazards, from microbiological threats (Chapter 4) to geohazards (Chapter 6), and even extraterrestrial threats (Chapter 8). However, these physical phenomena are consistently framed through a sociopolitical lens. The discussion on biological hazards, for instance, treats the COVID-19 pandemic not as a biological inevitability but as a failure of social protection systems and ecological stewardship (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 86). Similarly, the chapters on geohazards emphasize how “natural” processes are mediated by human decisions, such as zoning and building codes.

While this breadth is impressive, one might argue that the inclusion of cosmic hazards (asteroids, space weather) in Chapter 8 sits somewhat awkwardly alongside the terrestrial, political-ecological focus of the preceding chapters. However, it serves a pedagogical purpose by illustrating the limits of human agency and the necessity of global cooperation for existential threats, mirroring the logic required for climate change mitigation (Beck, 1992).

A profound tension exists between the diagnosis and the prescription. The diagnosis—that root causes such as colonial history, systemic corruption, and global capitalism drive disaster risk—is compelling and rigorously supported. The authors propose a solution in the form of the “Progression of Safety” (POS).

The POS model effectively reverses the PAR model, mapping a theoretical pathway toward sustainable livelihoods and safety by addressing root causes and reducing dynamic pressures (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 235). While conceptually sound, the prescription feels aspirational when set against the overwhelming weight of the structural forces described in Chapter 9. The authors acknowledge that achieving POS requires a “hard slog” of political negotiation and the “overturning” of historical oppression. However, the roadmap for how marginalized communities can effectively challenge the “corporate sovereignty” and “grand corruption” described is less distinct.

Furthermore, while the critique of Western science is robust and necessary, there are moments where the valorization of local knowledge risks creating a stark dichotomy between “Western” and “Indigenous” epistemologies. Although the authors advocate for a hybrid integration of knowledges—referencing the “Manifesto for Power and Inclusion”—the practical mechanism for this integration within rigid institutional frameworks remains somewhat elusive (Gaillard, 2019). The book is more diagnostic than prescriptive; it brilliantly elucidates *why* we are at risk but offers no easy technological or administrative fixes—precisely because it argues such fixes are illusory.

Conclusion

Understanding and Addressing Disaster Risk is an uncompromising and essential text that pushes the boundaries of the field. It rejects the comforting illusion that disasters are accidental interruptions to development, revealing them instead as intrinsic features of our current socio-economic order. For scholars of sociology, geography, and development studies, it offers a refined theoretical toolkit (PAR, DRC, POS) for dissecting the social production of risk.

The book's rigorous demand that we look beyond the hazard to the power dynamics that shape exposure makes it a significant contribution to the literature. It successfully argues that to understand risk, one must understand power. While it may leave practitioners grappling with the difficulty of implementing its radical proposals, it serves as a necessary indictment of "business as usual" and a call to abandon the "neglect of neglect" (Wisner et al., 2025, p. 208). It is a mandatory acquisition for academic libraries and a critical resource for those willing to confront the political roots of human suffering.

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