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Montagne, marginalité et catastrophe

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J.-C. Gaillard et Ilan Kelman

## Foreword

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## Foreword

- 1 In many parts of the world, mountains have long been marginalised in popular discourses on the sole basis that they are often inaccessible and remote from the major centres of power (e.g. Funnel and Parish, 2001; Cosgrove and della Dora, 2009). This picture of marginality has been accentuated by the alleged “extreme” hazardousness of mountainous environments struck by spectacular earthquakes, landslides, flash floods, droughts and avalanches, amongst others, which are often embedded in local legends and myths (Price, 1981; Reyt, 2000). As a consequence, mountain communities are frequently suggested as highly vulnerable in the face of natural hazards (e.g. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1992; Renaud and Jansky, 2008).
- 2 In reality, few studies have investigated the particular (or not) vulnerability of mountains and mountain communities in facing natural hazards, although mountain areas bear the brunt of some disasters (Hewitt, 1997). Examples of extensive reviews of vulnerability and disasters in mountainous areas are Hewitt (1992, 1997) and Gardner and Dekens (2007). Noteworthy too are special issues of *Mountain Research and Development* (2007) and *Revue de Géographie Alpine* (1994), plus many significant but isolated case studies (e.g. Oliver-Smith, 1986; Oven, 2009). Some case studies (e.g. Kelman and Karnes, 2007; Kelman, 2008) are of mountain communities yet neither engage with the mountain literature nor highlight the case study’s mountain context.
- 3 Beyond these, most research reflects the influence of the so-called hazard paradigm, emphasising the contribution of natural processes in mountain disasters (Gaillard *et al.*, 2010). One may therefore argue that the paucity of vulnerability studies is a form of marginalisation, especially in comparison to the greater attention received by other environments such as coastal and urban areas. As an example, the section on “Mountain habitats” in United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2005) is the shortest of all sections dedicated to particular environmental contexts.
- 4 Marginalisation does not seem to stop at the edge of the academic realm, but extends to policy. The recent mid-term review of the *Hyogo Framework for Action* or HFA, which is the United Nations blueprint programme for disaster risk reduction (DRR) signed by 168 countries in 2005, makes no direct mention of mountainous areas (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, 2011a). Regional policy documents such as the *Incheon Regional Roadmap and Action Plan on DRR through CCA* (Climate Change Adaptation) *in Asia and the Pacific* or the recommendations to implement the HFA in Europe (United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction *et al.*, 2011) are similarly silent on the issue. This lack of attention in policy documents comes as no surprise since reports supporting policy makers similarly overlook the case of mountains. For example, a search for the word “mountain” in the latest Global Assessment Report of the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2011b) yields no results (apart from geographical names in one figure), despite the use of some mountain examples and even though the report frequently mentions coastal and urban areas.
- 5 This issue of the *Journal of Alpine Research* contributes to assessing whether the relative disinterest of science and policy for mountainous areas reflects 1/ the marginal position of mountains and mountain communities within the society or 2/ a lack of specific forms and dynamics of vulnerability. The articles draw on existing studies which have attempted to decipher the intricate links between marginality and vulnerability in facing natural hazards but with limited attention to mountains (e.g. Winchester, 1992; Wisner, 1993). All emphasise that those who suffer from disasters are disproportionately drawn from the already marginalised segments of the society, being members of some form of minority group and/or poor, so ultimately their voice is disregarded by those with political power. Yet marginalisation does not end with the occurrence of a disaster. Instead, a disaster frequently leads to even more

marginalisation and vulnerability as those who lost their homes and livelihoods are often unable to recover.

- 6 In the initial paper, Hewitt and Mehta set out the conceptual and contextual background for the special issue. They especially challenge stereotypes often associated with mountains and mountain communities when confronted with disasters. It appears that, in many cases, mountains and mountain communities are far from being marginalised through isolation and backwardness. In fact, some mountainous regions are suffering from an increasing, rapid and unbalanced integration into the large-scale market economy and its lingering skewed development process. As such, it reinforces the struggle by economically and socially marginalised people to access resources for dealing with natural hazards.
- 7 Case studies by Wangui *et al.* in Tanzania, Ye *et al.* in China and Kelly and Smith in New Zealand, three contexts seemingly quite different, provide further empirical data. They concur that poor governance and inappropriate development erode traditional coping mechanisms, increasing the vulnerability of those at the margin. In that context, Reyes and Lavell in Bolivia along with Garcia in Italy, show that standardised and hazard-focused risk assessment, early warning systems and post-disaster needs assessment designed by outsiders are doomed to fail, as they usually overlook the everyday realities of skewed development and vulnerability – thereby enhancing marginalisation.
- 8 This unique set of papers provides a powerful testimony that vulnerability to disasters in mountain areas is first and foremost a matter of skewed development and social and economic marginalisation, as it is in many other environments (Blaikie, 1985; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). They also highlight how the particular mountain environment still matters in providing distinct and essential resources to communities for livelihoods (Funnell and Parish, 2001), be it subsistence farming in Tanzania, commercial agriculture in China, cattle and sheep breeding in New Zealand, mining in Bolivia, or tourism in Europe.
- 9 Yet the interplays, connections, and distinctions between marginality and vulnerability still require deeper exploration to truly understand how mountain peoples and communities could be helped to help themselves deal with hazards and disasters, including climate change. From volcanic ash affecting Papua New Guinea's highlands to neoliberalism eroding community action in Colorado's Rockies, prime attention should be given to the long-term social and economic contexts – and ultimately to governance, culture, and political-economic ideologies and strategies. That will tease out underlying factors causing vulnerability and marginalisation, and the vulnerability-marginalisation nexus, for understanding and reducing disaster risk in mountains.

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