

ASP Spotlight September 2007

Ilan Kelman - Disaster research.

Disasters affect people worldwide every day, even when the events do not reach the headlines. Millions of children die each year from disease. During the 2005 Atlantic hurricane season, Tropical Storm Stan killed more people than Hurricane Katrina, yet the latter received much more attention than the former. Despite decades of attempts to create an Indian Ocean tsunami warning system, it was implemented only after hundreds of thousands of people perished on 26 December 2004.

Why do disasters happen? Or, more to the point, why do those with power, influence, and money in society do comparatively little to try to prevent disasters? How can individuals and communities, irrespective of their social and economic status, bypass these political shenanigans and deal with disasters themselves? My research explores these questions, highlighting good practice when it is seen and seeking improvements where problems are identified. I have two main topics of interest.



Damaged wing of Rosita Valley Elementary School, Texas after tornadoes killed ten people across the USA-Mexico border on 24 April 2007 (photo: Ilan Kelman).

Disaster diplomacy examines how and why disaster-related activities do and do not reduce enmity. Disaster-related activities occur before a disaster, such as reducing vulnerability and preparing for events, and after a disaster, such as response, recovery, and reconstruction. These actions often provide opportunities to promote peace.

Yet the general pattern is that disaster-related activities can influence an ongoing diplomatic or peace process which had an existing basis; for instance, secret negotiations or culture or trade links. But where a previous connection does not exist, even a major disaster is unlikely to reduce conflict. At times, a major disaster can exacerbate conflict. Additionally, the influence of disaster-related activities tends to happen in the short-term whereas many other factors tend to dominate in the long-term; for example, a leadership change or playing up historical grievances for political gain.



Åland in the Baltic Sea, taken in May 2007 during field work investigating the contribution of island heritage and islandness to vulnerability reduction and sustainability (photo: Ilan Kelman).

My second area of interest is building and maintaining safer and healthier communities on islands and in other isolated locations. That covers topics as diverse as sustainable tourism policies and using heritage--culture, nature, and history--for creating and perpetuating livelihoods. Other examples of my island-related research publications have combined disaster diplomacy and island studies.

One paper described the decision-making process for, and international political implications of, evacuating low-lying islands due to climate change and sea-level rise. Another study explored the successes and failures when non-sovereign islands, such as overseas island territories or island provinces, tried to address disaster-related activities at the international level--a form of diplomacy involving non-sovereign political entities.



Sunset over Twillingate, Newfoundland, taken in October 2005 during a conference on island life and rural development (photo: Ilan Kelman).

Beyond islands and disaster diplomacy, my research also investigates who is killed in disasters and why they are dying. An example is the social expectations which society places on different genders, leading to more men being killed in flash floods in the USA but more women dying in coastal floods around the Indian Ocean. I have also worked and published on warning systems, refugee shelter, hazard-resistant construction, school safety, disaster risk reduction education, and the philosophy of risk, vulnerability, and disasters.

Such work does not reside in only the narrow realm of academic peer-reviewed journals and conferences, but also encompasses non-academic venues and non-written media. Examples are photography, newsletter articles, public presentations, websites, and media interviews. In addition to researchers around the world, audiences have been emergency managers, the United Nations, high school students, non-governmental organizations, and subsistence farmers and fishers. Everyone has contributions to make to a safer world.