Publisher's/Editor's Note

This is the first issue of the "Emergencies Bulletin" (EB) the electronic newsletter of the Website on "Disasters and Social Conflicts"

The purpose of the Bulletin is to facilitate exchange between Greek and foreign scholars, researchers and practitioners on theories, research, policy and practice concerning disasters, crises and social conflicts. A special focus will be disasters and conflicts that are also relevant to the Greek society. The ultimate aim is the prevention and/or mitigation of disasters and the negative aspects of social conflicts.

The Bulletin publishes brief articles -theoretical, empirical or of practical import- on disasters, crises and conflicts and has columns with brief presentations of resources and publications; book, manual and other types of reviews; studies, surveys and research; reports; selected websites; and announcements of conventions, conferences, seminars and workshops relevant to disasters, crises and social conflicts.

The publisher welcomes brief articles and materials that promote the aims of the "Emergencies Bulleti"n and the website (www.erc.gr) and are guided by the methods and ethics of social science.

Caveat: Materials accompanied by a name reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the publisher.

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Conclusion. The present progress report suggests a significant mobilization of public and private agencies in the rehabilitation and reconstruction process, although it may not be an exhaustive analysis. Furthermore, it suggests that most of the assistance packages were not restricted to emergency relief but also included measures calculated to protect the forests and prevent forest fires, using the August 2007 forest disaster as a "window of opportunity" for incorporating prevention measures in the reconstruction process, within the context of "sustainable development." This is somewhat of a corrective to the general policy that gives emphasis to suppression rather than prevention or to the social-structural causes of forest fires. Nonetheless, the current brief analysis needs to be supplemented with more in depth analyses of the program impacts, especially from the viewpoint of the survivors, using more systematic social science tools.

Overcoming Island Vulnerability

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Island Challenges and Opportunities

Islands are mysterious, romantic, tranquil, dazzling, inspiring, and exquisite—or so island myths and literature tell us (Lewis, 2003b). Even where reality mirrors this idyllic image, islands face immense challenges while providing important opportunities for better understanding how to resolve the challenges—for the islands and for the rest of the world.

Island communities—whether tropical or at higher latitudes, coastal or inland, salt water or freshwater—display rich and diverse cultures, languages, societies, histories, governance forms, and livelihoods (Baldacchino, 2007). Yet inherent island characteristics such as isolation, restricted land area, small populations, and limited domestic land-based resources frequently bring about significant environmental and social challenges.

A normal, and ecologically useful, environmental process such as a minor storm or small volcanic eruption can cause devastating proportional losses, far in excess of what islands' continental counterparts usually experience (Lewis, 1999). For example, in the Caribbean, most of Montserrat's infrastructure was destroyed and 2/3 of the population left in the years following 1995 when the volcano started relatively minor rumbling. Meanwhile, island languages and cultures are being lost as youth migrate to mainland cities and local island knowledge is devalued by the onslaught of cultural homogeneity.

The same island characteristics which breed these challenges also yield opportunities for tackling them (Gaillard, 2006; Mercer, 2008). Small, isolated populations form tight kinship networks, a strong sense of identity, and unique cultural heritage, often bolstered by remittances from islanders overseas. Millennia of experience of dealing with environmental and social changes in isolation provide islanders with the flexibility to adjust, to some degree, to contemporary changes such as human-caused climate change, improving internet connectivity, and swifter transportation modes. Despite the hurdles, islands present impressive advantages for building and maintaining healthy and prosperous communities.

At times, trying to understand such characteristics in order to better apply them leads to difficulties. Fixed definitions for the terms "island" and "isolated" do not exist. King (1993) and Ratter and Sandner (1996), for instance, have discussed these definitions using such criteria as population size, land area, arable land area, economic criteria, influence on climate or ecology, and the presence of a unique people or culture. Royle (2001) goes through some practical problems encountered when defining an "island" according to the dictionary.

Irrespective of the definitional challenges, the importance of islands emerges at many levels. More than 10% of the world's population are islanders. That is far from the majority, but is far from insubstantial. More than 20% of sovereign states are islands or archipelagos along with over 90% of non-sovereign territories, with a variety of governance forms ranging from Svalbard to Tokelau to Aruba (Baldacchino and Milne, 2009). International policy and practice often highlight the special interests and uniqueness of islands, with three examples being:

• The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation from the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in August and September 2002 in South Africa (see Chapter VII).

• The Hyogo Framework for Action agreed at the World Conference on Disaster Reduction in January 2005 in Japan (e.g. paragraphs 13g and 25).

• The Gozo Statement on Vulnerable Small States from the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in November 2005 in Malta.

Island knowledge and experience does not apply just to themselves. Analogies and parallels appear with non-islands. Mountain villages can be as isolated while cities comprising islands such as Stockholm and New York are themselves worthy of island-related study. Deltas and arctic communities display multiple island characteristics as well.

Despite the fascination and importance of islands, their physical and psychological isolation tends to marginalise them and to keep them lower for many priorities than they deserve to be (Lewis, 1999). The challenges range from being ignored after a disaster to local culture and people being overwhelmed by those treating the island as nothing more than a holiday home. How can these island vulnerabilities be better understood and tackled?

The Vulnerability Process

Examples of definitions and key references for vulnerability are provided at http://www.islandvulnerability.org/vulnres.rtf The best analysis of vulnerability, from contemporary climate change impacts to deep-rooted social and historical processes comes from Hewitt (1983), Lewis (1999), and Wisner et al. (2004). Rather than interpreting vulnerability as a snapshot of the present, described by the number of people or type of buildings in a location at a specific time, they use field evidence and solid theory to show how vulnerability accrues over and represents the long-term.

An oft-cited maxim is that earthquakes don't kill people, buildings do. The buildings collapsing represents the earthquake disaster, whereas the earthquake is a normal, environmental process. Although the earthquake happens rapidly and the buildings collapse rapidly, constructing the buildings took much longer. A long time was also required to set in place and to fulfil the societal processes related to urban planning, building codes, monitoring, and enforcement—or, more often, the lack of those—coupled with processes such as corruption, lack of transparency, lack of accountability, and cover ups (Lewis, 2003a; Wisner et al., 2004).

These societal elements cause the disaster, not the earth shaking. In fact, sometimes these elements cause building collapse disasters without an earthquake, such as the November 2008 sudden school collapse killing dozens of children in Haiti, which shares an island with the Dominican Republic. These elements exemplify the vulnerabilities that cause disasters and that took a long time and a lot of misguided effort to build and maintain. Hence, they can be termed "the vulnerability process", highlighting their long-term nature along with the deep-rooted societal processes that create and maintain them. To avert the disaster, the entire vulnerability process must be tackled—also requiring a long time and a lot of effort.

Vulnerability is not only about the present state, but is also about what we have done to ourselves and to others over the long-term, why and how we have done that in order to reach the present state, and how we might change the present state to improve in the future. The vulnerability process refers to the actions, behaviours, values, ideas, and paradigms which have created fragilities, weaknesses, and susceptibilities—it does not refer to just the resulting fragilities, weaknesses, and susceptibilities—and which can perpetuate or absolve these concerns according to society's own choices and decisions.

As exemplified by island case studies (e.g. Lewis, 1999), the vulnerability process demonstrates that disasters can be identified beyond specific events, such as earthquakes or train crashes, and encompasses conditions that are part of daily life. Examples are poor water supply, energy overuse with dependence on non-renewable supplies, inadequate waste management, gender and ethnic discrimination, corruption, inequity, and injustice. These disaster conditions, or disastrous conditions, result directly from the vulnerability process.

The discussion of island challenges and opportunities therefore meets vulnerability, in that island characteristics exacerbate the vulnerability process—which can then be tackled by applying those same island characteristics.

Island Vulnerability and Vulnerability Reduction

Focusing on vulnerability is often criticised as being too technocratic, too negative, or too disempowering. Avoiding overemphasis on these connotations is important, as is recognising the reality of the many vulnerabilities faced by many islands and the continual manifestation of that vulnerability as seen through disasters. Furthermore, the reality is that vulnerability can and should be addressed and that island strengths and island advantages support vulnerability reduction.

Smallness, such as in diseconomies of scale or economies of smaller scales, provides elegance and avoids the cumbersome expanse of larger scales. Isolation breeds a culture of self-help and self-sufficiency which is a fundamental tenet for vulnerability reduction. Lefkada Island in Greece demonstrates how heritage conservation and local seismic resistance construction practices can be melded for reducing vulnerability and supporting sustainability (Karababa, 2007). Jamaica illustrates the importance of local involvement, including community-based teams, for disaster risk reduction practice (Østensvig, 2006).

These island traits enhance creativity in generating livelihoods that can be used for long-term vulnerability reduction. Examples are developing and testing vehicles that run on coconut oil on Vanuatu along with branding and marketing bottled water from St Vincent and the Grenadines. Similarly, daily and seasonal difficulties, such as a limited freshwater supply threatened by waste and salinisation, could be tackled as opportunities, such as to develop economic small-scale desalinisation processes plus innovative water conservation measures.

The richness and diversity of these examples show that the theory of island vulnerability reduction is neither isolated nor remote from reality. Instead, they profess that isolation and remoteness create advantages: the beauty, poetry, and allure portrayed in the island myths and literature. Perhaps the challenge of being an islander is not to emulate, nor to become closer to, the mainland—and is certainly not to "improve" the "backward" island way. Instead, the challenge is to maintain viable islandness without succumbing to vulnerability, but using islandness to reduce vulnerability.

Island strengths can turn the vulnerability process into vulnerability reduction opportunities to resolve island challenges on the islanders' own terms—with further opportunities for exporting island expertise and experience to apply island lessons elsewhere around the world.

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