

Reflections on Radix Year One: Small Thoughts from a Small Researcher

By Ilan Kelman

As we look back over a year of Radix, which has included some terrible disasters, it is important to ask what Radix has achieved. The outstanding feature for me is that Radix goes beyond the interdisciplinary nature of the debate and information resources, which are available to some extent in other fora, and instead seeks to forge linkages amongst the different fields and processes. Radix does not simply bring earthquake engineers, human rights specialists, and business managers together, but actively tries to determine how the fields interact and could build upon each others' work.

Furthermore, all locations and disasters are treated equally, as must be (but is rarely) the case. Lessons from earthquakes in El Salvador and India are applied to analysing flooding in Algeria and Cuba. Drought in Namibia links to terrorism in the U.S.A. Catch phrases such as "sustainable development", "human rights", "disaster management", and "minimum standards" form an interactive network superposed on global maps of nations, states, disasters, development, and-the fundamental issue of disasters-people.

The latter word must be emphasised. Disasters and development are about people and Radix has brought together an impressive diversity of people to deal with people. When injustice, more than ground movement, buried El Salvadorans in mud, we were all El Salvadorans. When poor preparation and environmental damage, more than rainfall, drowned Algerians, we were all Algerians. When insularity and arrogance on both sides, more than blind hate or madness, brought us September 11, we were all Americans. When a generation of war and five years of the Taliban, more than snow or a single bombing campaign, brought famine to Afghanistan, we were all Afghans.

Disasters, vulnerability, and development are often described as deriving from the local condition. Yet, paradoxically or logically, they are also truly global. Tornadoes don't show passports at border checkpoints. El Niño doesn't send an envoy to Lima to apologise for affecting fisheries. Hurricane Michelle didn't stake a position on Elian Gonzalez. Mount Nyiragongo enters no peace negotiations. Yet these are all hazards. What about the vulnerabilities?

I am learning through Radix that disaster management for sustainability is common sense. The ideas are neither original nor brilliant nor innovative. So why are we not doing it? Why do we make the same mistakes? Why do we not see the obvious? Bihar floods parallel Icelandic avalanches emulate Sydney forest fires. Is the human condition the same everywhere? Are disasters truly cross-cultural, bringing the same corruption, errors, and lack of caring without regard to race, ethnic origin, language, or religion? Should we simply give up differentiating human beings because they all create the same vulnerability?

I do not know how to properly explain such questions, never mind answer them. I would, though, try to merge the themes mentioned here by suggesting the Radix-global view for tackling the local issues. Radix brings together topics, professional

fields, and people to create ideas and to build on each others' work. A hydrologist is not working with a behavioural scientist; the hydrologist and the behavioural scientist are becoming less labelled and less field-specific. They are part of a group, drawing upon their specific expertise to tackle the massive problem of humanity.

Hazards don't have citizenships and vulnerabilities are potentially a common thread throughout humanity. In Radix, we can throw away our disciplinary passports and cross the borders we construct-borders as artificial as many political and administrative ones. We have Doctors Without Borders, Teachers Without Borders, Engineers Without Borders, and Clowns Without Borders. The implication is that these groups work internationally, any location, any country, any condition. Should we add any discipline? Practically, of course, doctors, engineers, journalists, sociologists, and geographers have important skills which cannot be done by all. They are labelled as such for good reasons. But conceptually, is it time to suggest that "Without Borders" also applies to discipline borders and the labels which accompany it? And even if such an approach were welcome or practical, would it achieve anything?

My Master's degree covered social vulnerability to volcanoes. My Ph.D. studies physical vulnerability to floods. With much help from many others, I am attempting to coordinate Disaster Diplomacy which combines political science and international affairs with disaster management, environmental management, and development. I am making modest contributions to a project related to emergency shelter named shelterproject.org

As a young, naïve researcher, I have crossed disciplinary boundaries without thinking. It just sort of happened. Now, as I seek a post-doc, I am running into difficulty. My proposals must be pigeonholed into a specific category. I must choose highly specific fields of classification. 300-word abstracts must cover background and future innovation over three separate fields. When a reviewer sees that the names of my degrees do not reflect the topic of my proposal and that my references and publications are scattered over so many topic areas, what are they going to think? A recent application named five referees: a volcanologist, an architect-consultant, a development-worker-now-researcher, an emergency-manager-civil-servant-and-researcher, and a human geographer. Except that all five (who will likely read this essay and hopefully will not be insulted) would probably never classify themselves in the way in which I have done. So I am confused. As will be the reviewers who consider the application (and these referees).

What could be done? Should we start a peer-reviewed journal entitled "Radix" to cover this area in the way we would wish to see it? Should we campaign for departments and research councils to stop building barriers against research which does not fall under their remit? Should I just charge ahead, unthinking, hoping that someone will be foolish enough to provide me with a grant on my own terms rather than on theirs? And would any of these "solutions" actually help the people in need?

The last question is clearly the most critical. Radix continues to focus on the people, communities, and societies affected by disasters. Irrespective of the politics, shenanigans, self-interest, and blinkered views surrounding, Radix heads beneath the surface for root causes and fundamental ideas. An axiomatic geometry of

vulnerability, perhaps. Conceptually, it is easy to identify the principles which have struck me from being involved in Radix. I have appended them below, despite the ill-formed, raw notions they encompass. These thoughts are not my own, although I am responsible for misrepresentation and misapprehensions. They are certainly more obvious than they are radical (radical?).

One year of Radix has taught me plenty and I hope it has taught others as much. Yet learning by itself does not produce solutions and, as noted already, little is new or particularly challenging conceptually. Yet it does seem to be challenging in practice. Terry Jeggle wrote "We all know what needs to be done". Ben Wisner, in his reflections on Radix Year 1, provided examples of "successes in applying knowledge". We are doing what needs to be done, albeit slowly and scatteredly. Nonetheless, the antonyms of the adverbs in the previous sentence would be preferable. We have come from a long way, but have a long way yet to go.

Four potential tenets of disaster management:

1. Natural disasters do not exist.

i.e. All disasters are created by humanity. Hazards are necessary inputs and natural hazards obviously exist, but the root cause of disaster is vulnerability which is created by society.

2. All disasters are slow-onset.

i.e. Hazards may be rapid-onset, but the disaster results from humanity's decisions over the long-term.

3. Response and relief must be completed for sustainability.

i.e. If a community is rebuilt to the pre-disaster state, it is simply rebuilt to the same vulnerable condition which caused the disaster in the first place, so it is a waste of resources. "Returning to normal" and "recovering" are meaningless phrases. No "normal" exists and recovery to the same state as before is pointless. Thus, use disaster to achieve sustainability (and this concept expands beyond relief, response, and recovery into using the entire disaster management cycle-including prevention, mitigation, and adaptation-for achieving sustainability).

4. Exceptions to the above exist.