

ON DISASTERS AND DISASTER KNOWLEDGES.

A conversation about the Pasigala 2018 Earthquake in Indonesia.



Daniela Paredes Grijalva and Rahmadiyah Tria Gayathri

In September 2018, a powerful earthquake and tsunami struck the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. More than 1.200 people were confirmed dead, many of whom were swept away by the huge waves. But disasters are not 'natural'. The ways we inhabit space matter. What voices are heard before and after a disaster? How could spatial planning prevent disasters? Two women on different continents tackle these questions in a conversation.

Rahmadiyah, from Central Sulawesi, witnessed the 2018 disaster. Daniela, born and raised on the other side of the tropics in the Ecuadorian Andes, lived in Indonesia for many years. Both women work at the intersections of disaster, research and art, expanding on what is recognized as knowledge, especially when it comes from the Global South.

Rahmadiyah (R): The oral tradition of the people of Sulawesi manifests itself in legends, myths, poems and songs about past disasters. Despite this rich history, disaster knowledge today is very limited and is reflected in the weak management of disaster preparedness in vulnerable areas in Indonesia. Many of us draw on the knowledge contained in our countless cultural expressions of how our ancestors dealt with certain environmental

conditions for millennia. It is important for our survival to preserve, listen, to inspire and be inspired by this wisdom. So that we can decide how we want to live in the present.

In 2018, we experienced a disaster. It was horrible, so many lives were lost, so many people suffered, so much was touched by destruction. But no disaster comes out of the blue. Disasters are not natural. When a natural hazard, such as an earthquake, occurs it does so in a complex mix of environmental, social, political and economic conditions. This mix may result in what we call a disaster. We have had a relationship with space, with the land, with the sea for years, passed down for generations. Therefore, the physical and social structures we build and the way we relate to them are vital to us.

Disasters are particularly harmful to women, and 2018 was no exception. Women are the primary caregivers for children, the elderly and vulnerable groups. So, when disaster strikes they have to look after their own survival and that of others. In planning our set-

tlements, no matter what they look like, these important questions need to be considered. What are the different needs of the people who will use the spaces? If women aren't part of that conversation, of spatial planning and decision-making, how can we know their needs?

Daniela (D): That is a very good question to ask during the post-disaster reconstruction and actually in any kind of planning. In the immediate response to the earthquake, we saw thousands staying with relatives or in emergency shelters. The use of space was not always adapted to the needs of women and girls. And today we are seeing an increase in gender-based violence in these dense and shabby constructions. Some exceptions are, for example, the autonomous camps for internally displaced persons, which have a participatory dynamic. Of course, one never knows how long "temporary" will be.

R: That is correct. Hundreds of people are still living in emergency shelters today – almost 3 years after the disaster! Can you imagine how they feel? In addition, now with the COVID-19 pandemic, there are simply no safe spaces for survi-

vors. A few weeks ago, I visited a shelter with only 6 toilets for hundreds of families. Children were playing in cramped spaces. No one was wearing a mask. The latest disaster, the pandemic, comes on top of the already existing disasters of the past.

D: Yes, conditions in urban and rural areas are different. Even though Palu, the capital of Central Sulawesi Province, is an urban project with shortcomings, it provides more services to residents compared to rural areas. For example, in some indigenous communities in the hills, the state does not provide schools. That is why some move to the bigger cities like Palu. Others send their children to Palu to spend their school years there. Many of them do not want to return to their villages, but stay in Palu or move to other cities in Indonesia. Some villages are now worried that there will be no next generation to carry on their way of life, which is also threatened by environmental degradation and climate change.

Women's double burden becomes even heavier when they have to do their work in several places, causing transport and time costs. And meetings with government representatives have not yet led to concrete actions. In one village, the Indigenous Women Leaders Association has taken matters into their own hands: crowdfunding and building an autonomous school. The traditional architecture of "Sekolah adat" (indigenous school) has open windows to allow air to circu-

late in the humid tropics. The wooden stilts and joints are strong enough to last for years and flexible enough to move during earthquakes. Because the house is on stilts, the floor and its contents are not affected by minor flooding.

R: Exactly, the knowledge inscribed in these houses is also found in our cultural expressions and art. That's why there are several community-based collectives working at the intersections of research, art, history and traditions. If only we could use more of them to develop our villages and cities. Especially in the cities, it is important to have open spaces for air circulation and as a place to retreat to in case of an earthquake or other threatening events. Instead, I fear that most cities will be overcrowded again. This is especially true for areas like the seafloor. It is the most exposed to a tsunami, but you can already see that the economic drive of tourism is pushing people to build one business after another right on the beach. Only three years ago, thousands lost their lives on this beach. Some internally displaced persons continue to live in temporary shelters because the local authorities cannot allocate land for their resettlement.

At the same time, concessions for mining and palm oil plantations have been approved.

Shared knowledge and solidarity

It is important to amplify women's voices, especially indigenous women who carry generations of knowledge about living in a place. In Indonesia, patriarchal and hierarchical ways of thinking dominate disaster management regulations, often relegating women to a secondary role. In the Central Sulawesi region, we see that while there are encounters with the state, initiatives on the ground only become a reality thanks to strong female leadership and their tireless will to change their reality. Even though we live on different continents, we engage in transnational conversations and solidarity practices to recognise different forms of knowledge. Because disaster risk reduction in spatial planning concerns us all.

About the Authors: Daniela Paredes Grijalva is a researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences and a DOC-ÖAW Fellow. She is working on her PhD on environmental migration at the University of Vienna. She loves collaborating across borders, disciplines, and continents. She lives in Vienna and digitally connects to Sulawesi, Indonesia. // Rahmadiyah Tria Gayathri is a cross-media artist and disaster literacy activist. She is the founder of Forum Sudut Pandang Collective based in Palu City, Central Sulawesi and a member of the U-INSPIRE disaster mitigation platforms from Indonesia. After surviving the disaster in 2018 in Central Sulawesi she worked on intervention projects on knowledge production and disaster risk reduction in Indonesia.