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Culture shapes knowledge, policy, and practice for risk assessment and disaster risk reduction to atmospheric, hydrologic and geologic hazardous events. But does culture come to the fore in understanding the vulnerability of the built environment – social (including housing) and economic infrastructure – including the very creation of the vulnerability of the built environment components which is a harbinger of the human vulnerability?

The built environment is a stark yet often unrecognized or methodologically invisible component when discussing acceptable risk and risk reduction outside of technical, engineering and scientific forums. Culture is the medium through which the built environment comes about. Culture explains which powers come to bear in the depths of “disasters by design” (Mileti 1999), but also risk by design (Bender forthcoming). Understanding that other risks take precedent over the threat of natural hazard events on populations and/or their built environments is culture in its most discerning and anthropological sense.

As exemplified by the Sendai Framework for Action, national declarations and globalization strategies - most often in the name of economic development – are moving forward to integrate their chosen policies and practices through multi-disciplinary approaches. Beyond reluctance, there is avoidance to assess the cultural context of how risk of the built environment comes about, by whom, at whose expense, whose benefit and with what resulting inequalities. Among the many engaged in the risk management enterprise, disciplinary dominance as well as scale of analysis and application for acceptable risk taking and risk reduction policies and practices are not well recognized and understood.

In an attempt to address these themes, the following emerging issues, particularly in the context of multi-disciplinary research projects, will be discussed. First, how do risk assessments of the built environment – what is already built, what is to be built in the name of development and what is built in disaster recovery – come about? Second, who actually assesses risk and on whose behalf (building codes, landuse zoning, and insurance risk pools as examples of many assessments through legislative, executive and judicial actions). Third, in dealing with risk, what can be overriding risks taking precedent in decision making over the threat of impact of natural hazard events on populations and/or their built environments? And fourth, how should the role of the vulnerability of social and economic infrastructure to natural hazard events be understood in the social, economic and other described vulnerabilities of persons and populations?

Deep cultures of disaster: The significance of the anthropological perspective for understanding the interstices of hazards and disaster