

Decolonizing Disaster Preparedness in the Caribbean: The Role of Non-Sovereign Territories and Efforts at Regional Cooperation

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The Caribbean has the largest concentration of “Partially Independent Territories” (PIT’s) in the world. These islands, most of which have histories defined by colonial settlement and plantation slavery, have opted to maintain political ties with larger metropolitan states thousands of miles away, creating what Malcom Ferdinand et al have called a “last, never-ending phase of colonialism”. As Ferdinand and his co-authors argue, an awareness of the vulnerabilities produced by both the islands’ geography and history inform the continued acceptance of these fraught, often deeply unsatisfactory arrangements. While inclusion in European markets and social welfare systems alleviate vulnerability in these territories, it also alienates PIT’s from neighboring islands, which undermines regional efforts to coordinate and improve disaster preparedness. In this paper, I consider the examples of Martinique and Guadeloupe, which have been full overseas French departments (DOM’s) since 1946. Using a transhistorical approach, I argue that the French Antilles’ experience with multiple, large disasters in the years leading up to WWII, including the eruption of Mount Pelée in Martinique in 1902, conditioned support for full integration. Antilleans realized the urgent need for disaster relief following these events, and that access to aid was contingent upon achieving administrative parity with metropolitan French departments.

Today, however, national and EU oversight of risk reduction is often out of step with local realities. Government structures responsible for developing and implementing preparedness plans bear a striking resemblance to hierarchies of response that existed when the Antilles were still colonies. National administration of risk reduction precludes participation in pan-Caribbean efforts to prepare for disasters while reducing the pool of resources available to regional organizations such as CARICOM (The Caribbean Community) to respond to disasters that often impact the entire region, negatively affecting poorer and less-developed countries in the region. While the pressures of climate change today reaffirm certain advantages of non-sovereignty; nevertheless partial independence also reinforces a form of colonial fragmentation of the region along cultural, political and economic lines. I argue that this impedes the articulation of a more geographically-situated, cooperative, and regional response to disaster planning.

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