Crisis, Polycrisis and Global Disaster Governance

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In February 2023, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake in south-central Türkiye led to more than 53,000 deaths and estimated recovery costs equaling 9% of GDP. Just under two years later, the wildfires that destroyed portions of Los Angeles caused damage and losses exceeding US$250 billion. In 2024, natural disasters and severe weather cost the global community US$417 billion. Globally, the number of emergencies, disasters, and crises is on the rise. By definition, emergencies are “unforeseen but predictable, narrow-scope incidents that regularly occur” while disasters include “the loss of life and/or substantial long-term damage to property and infrastructure.” In contrast, crises and catastrophes are disaster events on a larger scale. A crisis is a “serious threat to the basic structures or fundamental values and norms of a social system” while catastrophes are “exceptional events ‘believed to have a very probability of materializing’ but capable of producing a harm so great and sudden as to seem discontinuous with the flow of events that preceded it”.

While no emergency or disaster feels small or less relevant to an affected community, crises and catastrophes impact more lives and have the potential to upend (temporarily or permanently) prior community structures. To illustrate, four examples of natural disasters that evolved into crises with catastrophic impact are shared. The first is the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004. Widely understood as the deadliest disaster of the twenty-first century, an earthquake of 9.2 magnitude struck off the coast of northern Indonesia. The earthquake triggered a tsunami in which more than 220,000 people across multiple countries died. In 2024, the British Geological Survey suggested that if early warning systems had been in place, nearly 80,000 lives could have been saved in India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

Just three weeks later, the World Conference on Disaster Reduction was held in Hyogo, Japan. Its output, the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005-2015), replaced the Yokohama Strategy of 1994. Unlike the Yokohama Strategy, the Hyogo Framework focused on a need for systematic action globally along with addressing challenges related to country-specific governance frameworks, risk identification, monitoring, and early warning, education, and preparedness.

In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans. Not only were large portions of the city flooded, but nearly 1400 people lost their lives. This disaster was elevated to a crisis with catastrophic portions when the governance systems of New Orleans faltered just as the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency also botched its early response. Despite the Hyogo Framework, global commitment to disaster reduction continued to suffer incomplete implementation.

In January 2010, an earthquake of 7.0 magnitude struck outside Port-au-Prince, Haiti. In the days and weeks that followed, 222,000 Haitians lost their lives. The earthquake’s cost would soon equal 120% of the country’s GDP. As the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti’s weak governance infrastructure, fragile sociopolitical environment, and nearly non-existent emergency response capacities were quickly overwhelmed. Haiti’s misery was amplified when cholera was transmitted in October 2010 by UN Peacekeepers sent to help Haiti’s recovery. Cholera would end up killing another 9,700 and infecting nearly 820,000 Haitians. In the fifteen years since the earthquake, Haiti has become even more fragile. On 17 April 2025, Al Jazeera shared a Human Rights Watch report in which Haiti was said to be in “free fall” as criminal gangs control 90 percent of the capital.

As global temperatures rise, the size, frequency, and impact of hurricanes and cyclones also rise. For the small island-states of the South Pacific and Caribbean, their vulnerability is on the rise. Between 1987 and 2023, the mean economic cost to Vanuatu *per cyclone* was 18.9% of its GDP. Average annual cyclone costs to Vanuatu are predicted to rise to 21-22% of GDP if ocean temperatures rise 0.6d0 C and 23-26% of GDP if temperatures rise 1.2degC. In Antigua and Barbuda, the 290km/h winds of Hurricane Irma in September 2017 flattened the island of Barbuda, with more than 90% of its houses destroyed. The estimated recovery cost exceeded US$222 million or 14.9% of its 2016 GDP.

No country, no matter how wealthy, can absorb such recovery costs on an annual or even quadrennial basis. The ability to put aside monies that a low-income country does not have for a future event is an option not available to many countries. In response, the International Monetary Fund created a Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust in April 2015 to help low-income countries impacted by large-scale disasters (including epidemics and pandemics) to help pay debt service owed the Fund. This is a start. But understanding that many countries hold more commercial than IMF debt, Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados led what the *New York Times* called a “Barbados Rebellion” to work with the international community to help ensure that the commercial institutions that hold much of the country’s debt (and that of similar countries) do not profit off a “debt-climate collision.” Progress toward that goal is ongoing.

The above discussions illustrate at least three points. The first is that the connections among and between natural- and human-caused disasters are increasingly linked. The second is that this article only listed three disaster events that became crises: earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes/cyclones. In the recent *Routledge Handbook on Crisis, Polycrisis, and Public Administration* (Mar 2025) our introductory chapter lists another 54 natural- and human-caused disasters which, along with or in combination to, other local-to-global crisis events create widespread challenges. The third point arises from the first two points. In 2016, the then-President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, coined the “polycrisis” term. He observed that our global community is facing crises that “feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of people”.

Polycrisis is a global constant. The tsunami of 2004 was a natural disaster with an intensity amplified by limited early warning systems and insufficient shoreline defenses. The earthquake of 2010 was not helped by Haiti’s poverty, its governance challenges, and its pre-earthquake neglect by the international community. The regularly occurring cyclones and hurricanes which impact Vanuatu, Antigua and Barbuda, and other small island states are worsened by climate changes the affected countries did not create. Recovery is challenged by their small size and the relationships among and between foreign creditors to their economies. One disaster can be amplified by an underlying crisis, be confounded with regional or global crises (e.g., pandemics, recessions), and create spiraling national, regional, and/or global polycrises of varying size and impact.

It is not enough for countries to attend world conferences and endorse outcomes. While the Hyogo Framework was replaced in March 2015 with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030, Sendai is stepping ever-closer to 2030. As things stand, there are delays among countries to integrate disaster and crisis management into annual budgets and planning exercises, identify risks for crisis and polycrisis events, work together to mitigate underlying causes, and help countries less able to plan for and mitigate against polycrises.

There is some hope on the horizon. One output of Sendai was to create an UN-led Global Platform for Risk Reduction. “Systemic Risk in the Age of Polycrisis” is a thematic session planned for the main program at the Platform’s upcoming conference in Geneva. The polycrisis interplay among and between countries, the global community, a multiplicity of non-state stakeholders, and our current polycrisis era are just beginning to be understood.

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