

Power, Prestige & Forgotten Values: A Disaster Studies Manifesto

We want to inspire and inform more respectful, reciprocal and genuine relationships between “local” and “external” researchers in disaster studies. This Manifesto calls for rethinking our research agendas, our methods and our allocation of resources.

We recognise that, while every researcher in our globalised system struggles with complicity and contradiction, the manifesto reflects principles that we as a collective aspire to. It is not by any means a claim of having achieved these objectives in our past work.

We, the undersigned, are committed to these principles and call others to join us in putting our words into action.

1. Our concerns

1.1 Disaster studies *is not always informed by local realities*: researchers are sometimes operating from a cultural deficit, and the everyday risk that people experience is ultimately inappropriately articulated.

1.2. Consequently, disaster studies often lead to ‘discovery’ that is the *common knowledge* of people who live with risk. At worst, this can become an intellectual conquest - research done ABOUT people experiencing risk, rather than BY, WITH and FOR them.

1.3 *Methodologies* are broadly embraced which were inspired by Enlightenment thinking and implemented by researchers from countries steeped in such traditions. Even the language that we use (today, mostly academic English), our prevailing narratives, our cultural lenses and the framing of our research problems rely heavily on Enlightenment origins as opposed to local and indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. These are well reflected in expectations of peer reviewers of proposals and publications.

1.4 The *impact and success* of research is generally *measured* based on the priorities of institutions valuing Enlightenment-type thinking including the agenda/values/reporting needs of similarly thinking funding agencies and donors.

1.5 The research agendas in disaster studies is too often driven by *fleeting institutional interest* in concepts, buzzwords, industry and political agendas that appear to present the greatest opportunities for research funding. In addition, mechanisms for funding tend to favour research proposals that serve a *neoliberal status quo*, promote interests outside of the local (studied) contexts and ultimately fall short scientifically and ethically.

1.6 Agendas are also formed by *foreign policy and development aid interests*, and often take the form of research grants that promote diplomatic and trade interests of donors irrespective of others’ needs. Capacity building projects can be neo-colonial. There is a lack of resources available for research FOR and BY local people.

1.7 External “experts” taking the lead (and the credit) for researching “vulnerable” “others” is widely normalized. In such instances people who are subjected to these investigations and local researchers that should actually be leading such work are disempowered and patronised. This unhealthy approach is modelled by many experienced researchers, universities and donors.

1.8 Individual researchers are often motivated not only by funding opportunities, but also by the chance (and pressure) to develop and publish ostensibly *unique findings in ostensibly high-impact journals* - and the perceived prestige that follows - based on research of “the vulnerable”, the exotic, the Other, who do not necessarily get to hear of the research outputs.

2. The future we want

2.1 We want disaster studies to *model respect for and trust in local researchers*, their knowledge and abilities, no matter where they come from. Those who are usually researched or who are currently used to assist outside researchers recognise that they can and should lead research and that their knowledge and skills are as valuable as those from other places in the world.

2.2 We want *local researchers to study their own localities at risk* and local disasters wherever they happen. Local researchers tend to know local contexts better than anyone else and thus should become principal investigators of any research project that deals with risks and disasters. They should lead academic and non-academic publications, both oral and written.

2.3 We want outside researchers to come and support locally-driven initiatives *only when needed*. When such collaboration is warranted, local researchers and/or local people must retain power in leadership and decision making, including through genuine participatory research led by people at risk where there is no local research capacity. Collaboration between local and outsider researchers should advantageously build on pre-existing partnerships and dialogue while seeking mutual interest in new partnerships and dialogue.

2.4 We want local research epistemologies and indigenous constructs of disasters to be central to our field, to better reflect diverse local realities. Local researchers should thus *value local ontologies and epistemologies*, whenever appropriate, to decolonise disaster research and move beyond the Enlightenment-based sources, concepts, methodologies and languages that dominate the field. Local and non-local researchers should be encouraged and supported to not only publish in international journals, but also to value local publications, both as an outlet for their research and as a reference for their studies.

2.5 We want our field to reaffirm that disaster research carries a political agenda, that is *to address the root causes of vulnerability and recognise the capacities* of local people. Our research should therefore be geared towards reducing the risk of disaster, rather than towards building academic reputation. Putting local researchers at the forefront of

scholarship should be the first political and symbolic move in this direction, recognising that disaster research is neither apolitical nor detached from historical heritages.

2.6 We want our field to *not only get our stories right, but also to tell them right*. The dissemination of research outputs and outcomes must occur in a way that demonstrates collaboration, local leadership and appreciation for local knowledge and ways of collecting and presenting knowledge. We should also share and present knowledge in languages accessible to people who can/want to make use of this knowledge. Our peer reviews of publications should thus be sensitive to non-Enlightenment-based ontologies and epistemologies.

3. How do we get there?

Change HOW we research:

3.1 Stop assuming the role of “expert” as part of research on local conditions and people outside of our own culture and instead ensure that local researchers and people experiencing risk can tell their own stories and develop their own methods, in their own ways, for their own purposes. Disaster studies research can then push against normative approaches that largely benefit external scholars and rather promote the idea that research should be undertaken principally for the local benefit.

3.2 Research should be framed from locally appropriate, culturally grounded perspectives and methodologies which must be similarly developed and critiqued. It is still largely assumed that Enlightenment-based ideas about science are fundamental and rational, thus assuming superiority and a mission to ‘bring progress’. The ‘progress’ however is ill-fitting and ignores local social and institutional practices. This epistemological shift should feature in our routine research chores such as the peer review of proposals and publications.

Change WHAT and WHO we research:

3.3 Encourage and promote local researchers to lead the development and design of research proposals based on local priorities, theorising local issues and making best use of local capacities—always with critiques.

3.4 Do not always prioritise research adopting Enlightenment-based research approaches and do consider local and indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. The epistemologies and ideologies that underpin disaster studies research are important because they frame the questions that are asked, determine the sets of methods that are employed, and shape the analysis.

Change WHO does the research:

3.5 Foster the leadership of local institutions (regardless of the ranks in the international leagues), including local funding agencies, and encourage local researchers to lead

research endeavours, from designing proposals to collecting and analysing data as well as authoring publications. This will help to minimise the frequent 'discovery' of what is new for the external scholar but is common knowledge of those to those who live in the context.

3.6 Employ methods that enable and encourage local people to lead and critique enquiry and local scientific endeavours that provide maximum benefit to local researchers and the people who are the subjects of research.

4. Join us and commit to:

4.1 Develop a research agenda that reflects local realities, priorities, and critiques while recognising that local groups often differ in their views and interests.

4.2 Respect and build upon what local researchers have achieved already, rather than only "external" scholarship.

4.3 Lobby for change in research agendas through our publications, peer-reviewing, networks and professional time servicing our field.

4.4 Promote and lobby for more local funding opportunities to support our research so that external funding only top these up when needed.

4.5 Fit into, and pursue local research agendas and work within local/indigenous epistemologies where appropriate.

4.6 Ensure that research is done with the benefit of those being researched as a central aim.

4.7 Actively pursue network building with institutions and individuals everywhere (and those often the subject of our research).

4.8 Seek and involve these researchers in projects in our own homes, as co-principal investigators, encouraging their critiques of and advice regarding work and approaches in our homes.

4.9 Commit to support and publish in journals everywhere. Open access also matters - make sure that scholars around the world can use your work while being careful not to perpetuate inequities through only using pay-to-publish-open-access journals.

4.10 Create opportunities for non-English publications in disaster studies.

4.11 Encourage and promote locally-led publications and presentations, academic and non-academic.

We hope that you will join us! Disaster studies needs to become more inclusive and collaborative. If we are successful, disaster studies might contribute more fully to disaster risk reduction. We can't afford to wait.

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