Disasters as transformative opportunities

Indigenous Australian, Taiwanese & Zimbabwean communities recovering and rebuilding stronger

Panel presented at the Susan L Cutter Seminar Series 12th August 2020, ANU Disaster Risk Science Institute, Canberra, Australia

Centuries-long & growing existential crisis

- climate change, environmental destruction & loss of biodiversity
- extreme "natural" events, disasters & global pandemic
- mental & physical disease
- violence & wars
- food & water security challenges
Century long social disaster → Colonizing Indigenous peoples

vicious cycle of death, poverty, distress, physical & mental illness, intergenerational trauma & malignant grief
Fortunately...

‘In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity’
Albert Einstein
“In the point of the greatest instability lies the greatest potential”

(Lange, 2012, p. 203)

Context → space for potential can be difficult to see + cultural differences & sensitivities + suppressed

“In a crisis, be aware of the danger – but recognize the opportunity”

John F. Kennedy

What is this opportunity or potential?
Crisis → Windows of opportunity for transformation

... experiencing deep structural shifts of consciousness in thinking, feeling & acting → dramatically & permanently alters way of being & seeing self & world

These shifts typically involve:

- understanding ourselves, others & world  
- relating with other humans & the natural world  
- understanding how power relations play out  
- envisioning alternative approaches  
- sensing possibilities for social justice, peace & happiness

(O’Sullivan, Morrell & O’Connor, 2002)
Transformation opens spaces for:
... being open, critically examining, questioning, reflecting on their & other’s beliefs & actions, and engaging in dialogue to:

- redefine problems from different perspectives
- revise beliefs --> actions
- become more responsible agents of their lives & in their communities
- learn how to take & sustain effective social actions


How & why does transformation in crisis happen?
• to deal with the world → people constantly assign meaning to events/experiences & act/interact based on this meanings
• to construct this meaning people invent & share stories that organize events/experiences into a whole that connects events & actions over time
• stories used as long as they are relevant & useful

Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2014; Williams, 2008)
Narrative Theory (Abrams, 2016; Bruner, 2004; Crossley, 2000)
• unfamiliar events → challenge stories
  • if stories no longer make sense/lose usefulness → people experience a disorienting dilemma → break down
  • new stories can emerge
  • accepted when people can make sense & perceive the new story as relevant & useful

create spaces for people, communities and societies to create ways of being, knowing and doing that enable them better being healthy/well, fulfilling their needs and thriving

REALITY = EXPERIENCES

INTERPRETATIONS & STORIES

Self & others

World
Transformative Stories...

... of how Indigenous communities in Australia, Taiwan & Zimbabwe used, and are sustaining, the transformative potential of disasters

Reviving Indigenous Knowledges: Kanakanavu Women’s Field

Are disasters really transformative opportunities in remote/poor communities in Arnhem Land & Southern Africa?

Yolŋu women taking back power & leading

A/Prof Elaine Ėwurrpa Maypilama, CDU, College of Indigenous Futures, Arts & Society
Tahir Ali, CDU, College of Human & Social Sciences
Assist/Prof Petra Buergelt, UC, Faculty of Health
Prof Douglas Paton, CDU, College of Human & Social Sciences
In the old days before colonization...

Yolŋu had identity, which gave us Yolŋu power
Yolŋu women had power

Cyclones *burmulala*
Cyclones are natural part of life and us - “Cyclones are in our song line. We sing and dance cyclones.”

Cyclones used to be smaller – they didn’t
destroy and recycled life:

- they cleansed and purified everything
- they refreshed everything
- they gave new life

prevented future disasters
Colonising times before & during cyclone Lam & Nathan

Balanda [non-Indigenous people] undermined that power
Yolŋu men took some of the power of women

Balanda try to change Yolŋu & tell them what to do
Balanda gov't changing policies & programs without talking with Yolŋu → then bring that package to Yolŋu & tell them what to do
Yolŋu men do nothing – they don’t open package gov't gave them because they think “we got no power”

Same when cyclones happened:
• Yolŋu didn’t know what was happening
• didn’t understand why
• didn’t know what to do

Yolŋu frustrated & confused
Lots of damage

Damage on Elcho Island estimated to be A$ 80 million
Lam destroyed several houses along Elcho Island & left residents without water or electricity.
Two-thirds of the houses were affected
A week after the storm, 250 residents were still displaced
Yolŋu women reclaiming their original internal power

Cyclones wiped away old thinking → cleansing

New grass shots came up → representing how Yolŋu women got stronger

Yolŋu women wanted to lead but men did not let women to take power.

Yolŋu men said “You women can’t have that power. We have that power”

But women more aware that:
• cyclones now dangerous → destroying life → WHY?
• cyclones make Yolŋu weaker & vulnerable but still there is a power

Women took that power to stand up & do things the right way to show how we do it the good way

new life – fresh stories
new thinking & feeling
new thinking ahead for new pathways

Yolŋu women said
“We both have power. Let’s work together for our kids and make them resilient”
Yolŋu women reclaiming their original internal power

“We were not ready. What men have been doing has not worked. Only few male elders came out to tell community about cyclone and those men died. We need to take up that role and get ready. We need to get ready inside for next disaster for our kids and future by bringing back our power. We need to do something. We need to stand up and take power back. We have to start open up the package ourselves. Women and men need to walk together side-by-side.

Yolŋu women reclaiming their original internal power

Yolŋu still have power → still have strong identity – Balanda can’t change us!

Yolŋu women have power inside because of holy sacred birth
- baby inside women’s belly
- when baby starts forming a part will stay on in women’s belly
- that is where baby gets strength & grows into a human
- placenta comes out & goes into ground → land will feel blood of new born babies & tell them who they are
- that is internal power
- gives Yolŋu women power & strength
- women can use that to talk strongly on something
Yolŋu women leading truly working together two-way

More Yolŋu women giving birth on country

Yolŋu women more confident & interested in what is happening

Yolŋu women standing up to Balanda, questioning & speaking out

• What are you bringing?
• What is in the package?
• Why are you doing this?

Yolŋu women getting more knowledge → research

• what makes us strong & what makes us weak
• need to understand the Western system/law → real story
• what is making it hard for Yolŋu & Balanda to work together

Source: Patrick Josse - Nhaltjan limurr dhu djika mijułku gilja-gumunga dilmurrunguŋa wiŋjaŋur CARING FOR MUM ON COUNTRY

Yolŋu women saying to Yolŋu men

• you have the power but in the first place women have the power,
• can you get ready and follow us
• let’s do it together

Yolŋu women saying to Balanda

• let’s work truly together two-ways & communicate
• come with open hearts & minds
• listen carefully
• explain what is coming so we can be ready
Unfortunately, the power points for this part of the panel are not available at present due to the content being covered in a paper that is not yet published.

We sincerely apologize.
Are disasters really transformative opportunities in remote/poor communities in Arnhem land and southern Africa?

What is the nature of the transformation?

Central Arnhem land, Australia
“Living smart with hazards”
The reason we can transform Ngarijan, is we bin here for thousand years, we know country, we live with disasters. 

Gamarang Otto Campion

Eastern Highlands, Zimbabwe
“when the rhythm of the drumbeat changes, the dance must change too”
If you think you are too small to make a difference, you haven’t spent the night with a mosquito

African proverb
Lessons from Cyclone Idai, Zimbabwe
Scope: Eastern highlands in Zimbabwe
Duration: 2 years
Approach: Participant observations
Research team: 3 undergraduate students and 2 local informants

Lessons from a BNHCRC project
Scope: Ramingining, Arnhem Land, NT
Duration: 5 years
Approach: PAR by ARPNet
Research Team: Aboriginal

Are cyclones a sufficient catalyst for transformative change?
1. Severity of the cyclones
2. Frequency of the cyclones
The storm may be over, but the storm continues to rage against women and girls. So women ask which storm?

- Transactional sex, dispossession, child/forced marriage.
- Domestic violence, overcrowding, and women’s business in the face of patriarchy.

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What can you do when you are captured like in crocodile?

How much transformation is feasible WHEN government is the biggest hazard?

You gotta give the elephant room to dance on?
When is it **RIGHT** to talk about disasters as transformative opportunities?

What is the **responsibilities** of governments/agencies?

How do we make sure there is ‘no capture’ of transformative action by outside agencies and that conducive spaces are safe?

Does the **increased frequencies and severity** of disasters allow for transformative opportunities?

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- How do we make sure there is ‘no capture’ of transformative action by outside agencies and that conducive spaces are safe?
Eastern Highlands, Zimbabwe

Last year during cyclone Idai, he lost his son, Tatenda. Tatenda is one of the hundreds still missing up to this day, he met his fate at Coppa. Mukoma Likan narrated to me how he took the long journey to Mozambique in search of the remains of his missing son to no avail, he told me he moved village to village, chief to chief and was shown pictures of people who were buried there but did not find Tatenda. He had to find his way back to Zim, after immediate family started searching for him. It was a painful story to listen, he told me he would not rest until he finds his son or where he lies. But today, Mukoma Likan is gone and had an unfulfilled mission.

Paul Hariguti

Story of Mukoma Likan told by Lovex Kimbini

Central Arnhem Land, Australia

We started this BNHCRC project with 14 elders from west Arnhem and central Arnhem. 5 elders have passed on since the project started. They may be gone but they started something big. One of the remaining elders sat down in tears and said this. Don’t worry Ngapartjan, I will do it for old lady and them oldfellas, I am strong person now. I got space and I got my dillybag” O. B. Campion

Key take home stories...

... in the midst of crisis lies great transformative potential for recovery & rebuilding

Disasters → wipe away old stories → make space for fresh stories
reconnecting with country/land/nature & internal power
reviving of Indigenous knowledges & practices
recognizing power women & supporting them reclaiming their power
supporting community initiatives & genuine two-way working together

Govt suppress that transformative space
Govt needs to create conducive spaces for transformation to occur →
- need to shift their worldview &
- develop knowledges & capacities how to work together
Thank you