

# ANTHROPOLOGY AND DISASTERS

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## Introduction

The diverse social principles that govern behavior exert influence on judgments regarding which dangers are to be most feared, which risks are deemed acceptable, and who should be permitted to undertake them. The perception of risk, contingent upon cultural context, enables various aspects of social life to elicit distinct responses to danger. Depending on cultural biases or values, certain cultures may ascribe great significance to particular hazards and risks while disregarding others (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1982). Cultural perceptions and interpretations heavily influence the processes of exposure, identification, and adaptation to risks and hazards. There is always a need for an ethic of dialogue and participation based on a detailed understanding of how various local figures and communities cope with disasters. Anthropology can make a special contribution to the understanding of reconstruction processes. Moreover, this contribution includes more dimensions than economic recovery and the reconstruction of physical living spaces (Schlehe, 2010, p.113).

Anthropologists examine the evolution of culture within specific societies, investigating the formation of individuals' worldviews and the mechanisms through which these formations are manifested. The circumstances in which individuals encounter profound existential inquiries often arise in extraordinary situations characterized by loss and transformation. When confronted with exceptional circumstances such as disasters, individuals endeavor to derive a more profound understanding of both their own existential condition and their divine presence (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 308). Numerous studies in the field of disaster anthropology have demonstrated that disasters and similar catastrophic events significantly influence and alter human behaviour and interpersonal relationships. Across various cultures, disasters reveal the underlying values, behavioural patterns, and relational dynamics within societies. Comprehending how individuals within a culture conceptualize, behave, and interpret events, as well as the factors that induce change and the impact of disasters on populations, is crucial for effective disaster response and policy formulation. An understanding of individuals'

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perspectives on events and phenomena, their socio-cultural and economic contexts, and behavioural modifications plays a pivotal role in elucidating pre- and post-disaster processes. Consequently, disaster science and disaster management should be significant in anthropological analyses of the cultural characteristics and behavioural patterns of societies and individuals. In the aftermath of numerous disasters, questions emerge that necessitate answers; however, the responses to many of these inquiries reside in the social and cultural depths of societies rather than in the technical sciences. Consequently, disasters are not solely a series of geographical and geophysical events but also a phenomenon determined by individual-society and human-environment interactions. Furthermore, disasters are intrinsically linked to cultural responses. Thus, a reciprocal relationship exists between disasters and sociocultural anthropology. How do social, cultural, and economic structures and alterations in these domains engender changes in individuals' disaster perspectives? How do cultural phenomena, such as gender, religion, and education, influence individuals' perceptions of a disaster event? The investigation of these and analogous inquiries necessitates an anthropological approach to disasters. This research examines the influence of societal social and cultural structures and processes on disasters. In this context, social and cultural anthropology provides valuable insights.

Since the commencement of the twentieth century, the study of disasters, particularly those of natural origin, has garnered attention from various disciplines and social scientists. However, anthropology's engagement with this field began in the first half of the twentieth century. The anthropologist Fernando Ortiz conducted an analysis of the symbolism and mythology associated with this natural phenomenon in his monograph "El Huracán," published in 1947 (García-Acosta, 2018, p. 1). Anthropological studies of disasters commenced in the 1950s. Initially, such studies predominantly focused on the responses of "traditional" societies to specific events. During the 1940s and 1950s, anthropology made limited contributions to the study of disasters as a process. Subsequently, the conceptualization of disasters as a factor of social change emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout this period, disasters came to be recognised as a significant catalyst for social change. In the early 1980s, disaster studies in anthropology underwent a significant theoretical shift towards examining the political-economic perspectives of disasters. Furthermore, disaster anthropologists of this period, critical of disaster research conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, advocated for a comprehensive theoretical examination of how societies evolved with the rise of capitalism and/or modern state structures (Mullick and Das, 2014:388, p. 389). Oliver-Smith (1996) asserted in this context: "Disasters can also be important factors in social and cultural change. No matter how different disasters may be in terms of damaging or destroying a society's ability to meet the needs of its members, new arrangements or adjustments may need to be formulated in order

for the society to survive” (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 312). In this regard, numerous anthropological studies have emphasised that the most significant impact of disasters is long-term social change (Mullick & Das, 2014, p. 389).

### **1. Disaster**

There are numerous categories of disasters. These encompass natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanic eruptions, and droughts, which occur unexpectedly and frequently have adverse effects on underdeveloped or developing countries. Additionally, social disasters may include industrial and transportation accidents, wars, terrorism, and migration waves. Furthermore, a third classification of mixed disasters exists, involving both natural and anthropogenic causes, such as various epidemics, insect infestations and plagues. A common characteristic of all such disasters is the abrupt loss of normality that immediately follows their occurrence. The sense of normality that previously prevailed in society suddenly dissipates, resulting in a significant number of fatalities, serious injuries, or widespread homelessness (Kalokairinou, 2018, p. 218). When a disaster disrupts this state of normality, which corresponds to a state of stability and continuity, and individuals are suddenly disconnected from their usual practices and lifestyles, they experience a tension akin to what is sometimes referred to as “culture shock” (Bates, 2009, p.49). Consequently, a disaster cannot be considered independently of the social and cultural factors of society.

Given that natural and social disasters have occurred continuously throughout human history, they are intrinsically linked to the entirety of human historical development (Gluchman, 2016, p. 3). Ideas about disasters have gone through various stages, characterized as ‘supernatural,’ ‘natural events’ and ‘human actions.’ The pertinent inquiry does not regard the definition of a disaster but rather concerns the vulnerability and resilience of individuals and societies to environmental threats and exceptionally sudden and severe natural events. Therefore, disasters have profound implications rooted in the social structures of societies and social changes (Reddy, 2011, p. 84). Consequently, disasters are not independent of social and cultural factors, such as class, ethnicity, gender, and other inequalities or forms of discrimination among individuals in society. Furthermore, the lack of access to social and economic opportunities for certain segments of the population exacerbates the severity of disasters. In such a society where inequality and discrimination are prevalent, specific individuals or groups (women, girls, and the economically disadvantaged) are disproportionately affected by disasters.

The massive earthquake in Guatemala in 1976 is an example of how a natural event can have different effects on people in a society characterised by inequality.

The unexpected physical shaking of the Earth's crust was, in fact, a natural event. However, poor slum dwellers in Guatemala and many Mayan Indians living in rural areas had the highest mortality rates. Middle-class people's homes were better sheltered, in a safer location, and were less affected. The lack of access to certain social and economic opportunities for poor people in Guatemala has, in many ways, put them in a vicious circle that makes them more vulnerable to the next disaster. The fact that poor people live on steeper slopes and in more flimsy and unprotected houses than rich people makes them more vulnerable to earthquakes. The earthquake revealed a 'social reality' that embodied the historical reality of the disadvantaged position of some people in society. The earthquake, which emerged as a natural disaster, has even been called a 'class-quake' (Blake, et al., 1994, p. 9).

Disasters illuminate inequities in power distribution and socio-economic disparities within communities. The perspectives, beliefs, and practices prevalent in communities can exacerbate the destructive potential of geophysical events. Consequently, the impacts of disasters are not uniformly experienced across populations due to socially constructed differences in gender, race, class, and ethnicity (Faas & Barrios, 2015, p. 290). Disasters are therefore a social phenomenon and the structure of societies becomes even more pronounced in times of crises. This means that social, cultural and religious norms and values are inherent in disasters and shape the needs and risks of affected individuals or communities (Ahmad, 2018, p. 108). From this perspective, the inability of some individuals or groups in a society to enjoy certain social, cultural and economic rights and freedoms makes them more vulnerable to disasters. While a natural event is limited to danger or threat to other individuals in society, the same natural event becomes a disaster for vulnerable individuals.

## **2. Anthropology and Disasters**

Everything concerning human beings has the potential to be included in the field of anthropology studies. In other words, anthropology can be defined as the study of human nature, society and human history. Anthropology seeks to understand how people have lived from the past to the present and how they react to events or specific situations that occur around them. Anthropology endeavors to obtain knowledge about human beings using holistic, comparative and field studies (Lavenda & Schultz, 2017, pp. 24-25). Anthropology is the study of all aspects of human societies throughout history, from the diseases they have encountered to their dietary habits, from their settlement preferences to the way they raise children and question their existence in the world (Bates, 2009, p. 7). Anthropology addresses a wide range of topics, including how cultures shape human actions, the effects of culture on individuals' personality and gender structures, forms of social or societal organization, individuals' adaptation processes, class structures of societies, identity, sexuality, gender, kinship relations, and the origins

of religious beliefs. Numerous anthropological and ethnographic research topics are directly or indirectly associated with disasters encompassing social, cultural, diverse, and economic dimensions. Anthropological and ethnographic studies have demonstrated that in certain cultures, individuals interpret disasters within the framework of specific religious perspectives or moral beliefs.

For instance, in some societies, the transgression of established moral norms is perceived as the cause of a disaster, which subsequently influences the marriage structure of that society. This phenomenon can be observed in the analysis of the concept of exogamy (marriage outside the group) among the Trobriand Islanders by the Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (Haviland et al., 2008, p. 122):

An examination of exogamy practices among the Trobriand Islanders reveals that the indigenous population harbours concerns regarding potential calamities or maladies that may befall them should the rules of exogamy be contravened. Furthermore, it is believed that clan incest (proscribed sexual relations among relatives) could potentially result in fatality.

Some sacred religious texts interpret both natural and social disasters as punishments from God for human sins, viewing them as a result of the corrupt nature of the world at that time (Gluchman, 2016, p. 3). Cultural beliefs that disasters occur because of various human sins have led some societies to prohibit incestuous relationships.

Many ethnographic studies have sought to explain the origins and transformations of societies' religious beliefs and systems. These studies have also shown a great interest in how changes affect religious beliefs and practices. When a society faces profound changes, which may be due to a natural disaster, it often seeks new interpretations to help cope with these changes." In some cases, these individuals or societies, during the process of religious conversion, often adopt an entirely new worldview that is typically a religious system" (Lavenda & Schultz, 2017, p. 109). For instance, catastrophic events can alter individuals' perspectives on mortality, which they may previously have disregarded and considered as a phenomenon that solely affects others, as well as the consequent understanding of bereavement. Indeed, "death" and "mourning" are significant foci of cultural anthropological research on disasters.

In addition to the individual losses experienced by individuals, severe disasters frequently result in significant losses across communities, leading to collective mourning for lost settlements, social relationships, and culturally significant sites and structures. When these elements are destroyed, they may necessitate mourning processes analogous to those associated with the loss of a loved one. Survivors may attribute great significance not only to the preservation of cultural

traditions but also to the imperative of bearing witness to the pain and tragedy experienced (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 309). It is imperative for individuals to adapt to changing environmental, social, and economic conditions in order to survive and sustain their lives in the aftermath of disasters. From an anthropological perspective, given that disasters possess the potential to precipitate cultural change and transformation, a critical inquiry arises regarding whether individuals will align themselves with the values and requirements inherent in this cultural shift.

The anthropological perspective conceptualises disasters as socio-natural processes that encompass the combination of a destructive factor, whether of natural and/or technological origin, and a population in a socially constructed state of vulnerability, which is socially and economically produced. Numerous studies have demonstrated that disasters are historically constructed processes. Furthermore, it has been established that the occurrence of natural disasters has not increased over time; rather, the vulnerability of social groups and the risks they face have escalated. From historical to contemporary contexts, anthropological and ethnographic research has elucidated that risks and disasters are multidimensional processes resulting from the interaction between natural or technological hazards and the social and economic vulnerability conditions of a population (García-Acosta, 2018, pp. 1-5).

Throughout history, humanity has endeavoured to comprehend natural phenomena, ascribing diverse interpretations to them within various cultures. From primitive tribal societies to the modern era, the causes and effects of current events have been elucidated through mythological traditions in some cultures, religious beliefs in others, and, more recently, through scientific inquiry with the advancement of technology (Vittori et al., 2007, p. 54). In contemporary times, particularly in Western societies, natural disasters are no longer predominantly interpreted as justifiable responses from supernatural forces—specifically, a deity—to human transgressions (Dranseika, 2016, p. 53). The notion that disasters or catastrophes are primarily attributable to nature or divine intervention has been largely abandoned in the present day.

Throughout human history, numerous communities have been affected by disasters. However, their responses to these events have varied. The factors contributing to these social differences in responses can be attributed to the culture, moral and religious values, and norms that govern individuals' behaviours. The understanding of risk, danger, and vulnerability, as well as the responses during post-disaster recovery processes of individuals and communities, can be elucidated through ethnographic research. Conversely, certain archaeological and historical studies indicate that cultures undergo transformation following disasters. Disasters expose the nature of society's social structure by impacting kinship and other relationships within the community. While disasters may temporarily foster

cooperation or solidarity among social subgroups, they can also engender conflicts during the subsequent recovery period (Reddy, 2011, p. 90).

### **3. The Place of Anthropology in Understanding Disasters**

Disasters are frequently conceptualised as ordinary natural phenomena, and social dynamics are often overlooked. Anthropologists possess the capacity to elucidate the perceptual and interactional processes that influence how societies and individuals respond to disaster events. Furthermore, anthropologists can evaluate the vulnerability of communities and identify their resilience in the aftermath of a disaster. Anthropological perspectives can elucidate the perceptual and interactional processes that influence how communities respond to adverse events and phenomena (Reddy, 2011, p. 90). For instance, it is pertinent to examine why certain cultures experience a natural event as a major catastrophe, while others are less severely affected. Anthropological studies and perspectives can be employed to address such inquiries. In this context, one can readily identify, for example, the role of social and gender inequalities, which vary across cultures, in exacerbating the devastating effects of disasters. Anthropological research can illuminate how societies' patriarchal or matriarchal family structures differentially impact women and men before and after natural disasters. Furthermore, anthropological studies can contribute to understanding how specific religious and cultural beliefs within societies may impede the post-disaster recovery process, particularly for women.

Indeed, the gender-based division of labour in cultures, gender stereotypes, and cultural beliefs inherited from the past are significant factors in determining how men and women are affected by a disaster. Although a disaster in a society affects everyone, both men and women, they cannot benefit equally from response and recovery processes due to the unequal dynamics of the society (Izquierdo, 2015, p. 30). Whether communities are resilient to disasters requires knowledge about their social organisation, cultural behaviours and coping strategies. Anthropological research can provide basic information to understand the vulnerability of communities to disasters and prepare communities for disasters. Understanding the pre- and post-disaster responses of communities or identifying their vulnerabilities can facilitate the development of appropriate disaster policies by both governments and humanitarian organisations. Applied anthropology can contribute to the reconstruction of individuals' lives during post-disaster processes. Anthropologists can participate in recovery and development activities by identifying culturally supported, socially and ecologically appropriate response strategies (Reddy, 2011, pp. 90-91). Consequently, anthropological research demonstrates that local culture should be taken into consideration in the formulation and implementation of policies and practices related to disasters.

For example, an effective long-term assessment of both the needs of victims

and the assistance provided to them requires a sensitive assessment of the social and cultural backgrounds of disasters. An overview of famine as a type of disaster and the social and cultural antecedents that lead to it is required. This perspective can help accurately identify and meet the needs of a specific population segment. On the other hand, comparative disaster studies, including historical and anthropological data, allow testing the accuracy or inaccuracy of generalisations or even hypotheses. The causes and consequences of a specific disaster can be assessed retrospectively, for example, the conditions that led to famine can be analyzed (D'Souza, 1979, pp. 1-2).

The anthropological-historical approach demonstrates that numerous societies worldwide have developed behaviours and practices that can be characterised as culturally constructed adaptation strategies to address hazards that are a known component of the environment to which they have adapted. Illustrative examples include the strategies employed by nomadic pastoralists to adapt to droughts in Africa and those utilised by communities in hurricane-prone areas in the Caribbean. The anthropological study of such adaptations provides tools and methodologies for their implementation. Anthropological research enables scholars to reassess hazardous situations, thereby potentially mitigating the consequences and impacts of specific natural hazards (Garcia-Acosta, 2018, p. 3). Understanding how individuals have responded to past disasters is crucial for preventing numerous individual or societal conflicts in the future. Consequently, anthropologists have endeavoured to ascertain how changes in the economic structures of societies lead to localised responses or social transformation in individuals and communities. In this context, determining the nature of transformations experienced in the individual and social spheres during periods of drought or famine, for instance, is also of significant interest to anthropology.

Indeed, gradual and long-term environmental phenomena, such as droughts or desertification, have minimal immediate impact on individuals. When confronted with such issues, populations can adapt their production strategies over time. Disasters that are relatively limited in the short term and can be mitigated with minor interventions are likely, in the long term, to impede economic growth, exacerbate income inequality, and diminish state capacity. All these aspects of such gradual and long-term events can heighten the propensity for violence and, consequently, intensify perceptions of conflict. In summary, gradual, long-term environmental disasters are likely to exacerbate personal grievances and social unrest, as individuals' life satisfaction is contingent not only upon perceived disparities between their current and desired circumstances but also upon the observation of progress in their present or future conditions. Furthermore, experiences of environmental disasters such as drought may have enduring effects on individuals' cognitive, moral, and personality development, as well as

on interpersonal relationships and coping mechanisms (Koubi, 2018, pp. 912-913). While numerous studies have demonstrated that climate change and one of its consequences, resource scarcity, promote behaviours that escalate social violence or conflict, societal responses are not uniformly consistent. For instance, anthropological research<sup>1</sup> on cattle rustling in Africa reveals that mortality rates are higher in years of abundant rainfall compared to drought years or seasons with reduced vegetation (Theisen et al., 2013, p. 616). Consequently, rather than invariably precipitating conflict, resource scarcity may also foster cooperation over limited resources (Adano et al., 2012, p. 66).

Nevertheless, catastrophic events that engender economic hardships for individuals and societies can also precipitate alterations in individuals' perceptions of their moral values. Oliver-Smith (1996) posits that during periods of material scarcity, there may be a deterioration in the moral framework that ensures the equitable distribution of food and resources. It has been observed that the inequitable structures in certain traditional societies expose specific groups to deprivation or mortality following a disaster. For instance, in India, pre-existing patterns of social and religious inequality that result in severe disparities in access to resources may be morally justified during times of crisis (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 311). In certain societies, behavioural patterns legitimised based on morally and culturally accepted norms in the aftermath of disasters may disproportionately affect specific individuals. World Vision (NGO), in its study on child marriages in fragile states, highlights that "factors such as fear of rape and sexual violence, unwanted premarital pregnancies, family shame and dishonour, homelessness, and hunger are seen by parents and children as legitimate reasons for early marriage." In countries such as Bangladesh and Somalia, which experience high levels of food insecurity and/or drought, girls and women are excluded from the household, whereas boys are considered more valuable assets to the family. Similarly, in Uganda, food crises linked to climate change have compelled young girls into "famine marriages" in exchange for dowries or bride prices. The incidence of early marriages increases following natural disasters due to heightened concerns regarding violence. For example, a rise in child marriages was observed subsequent to the 2004 Asian tsunami. Female children who were orphaned were compelled by extended family members or the community to enter into matrimony with young men against their volition. Consequently, the apprehension and insecurity concerning the physical well-being of girls in the aftermath of disasters prompted families to legitimise patterns of behaviour favouring early marriage (Lemmon, 2014, pp. 5-6).

Another issue that falls within the scope of anthropological studies and is also relevant to disasters is the determination of the structure and change of family organisations in societies and the factors influencing the cooperation

or interaction of small communities with other groups. Certain societies, or numerous small communities in the past, encounter challenges beyond the capacity of family members to address. Consequently, members of an independent local group often perceive the necessity to interact with neighbouring groups and seek support and protection. Notably, the phenomenon of self-defence against natural or anthropogenic disasters can be significant for intergroup interaction and cooperation (Haviland et al., 2008, p. 501). Furthermore, an anthropological perspective may prompt a re-evaluation of the information presented regarding the resilience and vulnerability of various social structures to disasters. While non-anthropological disaster studies frequently depict traditional societies as vulnerable, incapable of problem-solving, and possessing a fatalistic outlook, certain anthropological studies have demonstrated their resilience to disasters and capacity for adaptation. In traditional contexts, local adaptations are likely to facilitate reasonably effective responses to hazards. However, it is essential to consider the scale of change potentially induced by disasters. Additionally, social and economic changes or transformations resulting from industrialization render traditional societies vulnerable to disasters (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 312).

Another closely related issue between disasters and anthropology is the belief systems of societies regarding illness and health. “Some applied anthropologists can use a human community’s ideas and beliefs about illness and health to translate them into a useful set of public health services that can be accepted by members of that group” (Lavenda & Schultz, 2017, p. 32). Medical anthropology, which is particularly concerned with the relationship between health and culture, provides insights into how the cultural norms and belief systems of societies influence their capacity to address epidemics. It is evident that the beliefs and cultural patterns of societies regarding disease and health significantly influence the propagation or decline of epidemics that have emerged in numerous societies from historical times to the present. The manner in which societies perceive and interpret disease and health, their nutritional behaviors, and treatment preferences are crucial factors in the prevention, treatment, and recovery processes of major calamities such as epidemics. At the cultural level, identifying individuals’ beliefs and behavioural patterns concerning specific treatment methods and their efficacy provides valuable insights for combating epidemics.

Anthropologists believe that what is considered healthy and what constitutes a threat to health is largely shaped by people’s cultural, social, and political experiences and expectations. Medical anthropologists are often concerned with systems of beliefs and practices related to human health that develop outside the influence of biomedicine. Anthropological research highlights the diversity in what people from different cultures say about why they become sick and how they can recover. Anthropological and ethnographic studies emphasize the

importance of traditional healing methods in some local communities and the strong belief that illnesses are sent as punishment by ancestors when people violate the rules they are expected to follow (Lavenda & Schultz, 2017, pp. 284-286). Consequently, comprehending and addressing the AIDS epidemic within a community necessitates not only biological knowledge but also an understanding of the social and cultural perspectives held by communities.

An ethnographic study by anthropologist Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala found that “while some communities on the African continent are struggling with the problem of AIDS, millions of people living in extreme poverty or far from modern health care are proving the importance of traditional healers in the fight against AIDS.” Anthropological fieldwork is crucial for understanding the prevalence of an epidemic in society and identifying effective methods to combat it. Therefore, from the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, an anthropological understanding of how people perceived the disease and how they tried to cope with it was crucial for developing an intervention. This study found that traditional Zulu healers most frequently consulted people for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases. These diseases, as well as HIV/AIDS, are thought to be caused by breaking taboos about birth, pregnancy, marriage, and death. They were even equated with pollution and immorality and, like other serious illnesses, were thought to be rooted in magic. Anthropological fieldwork has shown that traditional healers are highly valued in communities across Africa. Moreover, traditional healers outnumber modern medical professionals. Therefore, the anthropological study showed that to combat disease on this continent; it would make more sense to first collaborate with traditional healers and then train them in medical practices (Lavenda & Schultz, 2017, pp.72-73).

The effects of disasters on political factors are also the subject of anthropological studies. It is essential to examine how disasters shape, weaken, or destroy both political organizations and relationships. Disasters are times when power relations at the social and political level can be clearly perceived, political consciousness is transformed, individual actions are shaped, and institutional functioning is either strengthened or ceases to exist (Oliver-Smith, 1996, p. 309). Therefore, “Do the relationships established or intensified between society and government as a result of disasters initiate social changes at the local level? Does the government manipulate disasters to accelerate local reforms that were previously planned or failed to initiate? Can communities use disasters to push for administrative reforms?” (Torry, 1979, p. 523).

Disasters can provide a legitimate basis for governments’ political tendencies or policies and can be used to transform citizens’ political behavior and thinking within a society. For governments persistently limiting or abolishing certain fundamental rights and freedoms, the occurrence of natural disasters can present a

unique opportunity to suppress these rights and freedoms. Additionally, they may garner support from their voter base or a significant portion of the population. The psychological and economic hardships experienced during times of crisis can lead people to overlook the actions and policies of political authorities that violate fundamental rights and freedom.

Thus, disasters can have a direct negative impact on fundamental human rights. Moreover, the threat of conflict following a disaster may lead governments to protect themselves by restricting civil and political rights. These effects may be more pronounced in dictatorships than in democracies. However, the impact of natural disasters on human rights does not necessarily need to be explicitly negative. Brückner and Ciccone (2011) show that adverse economic shocks can trigger political liberalisation (Gutmann & Voigt, 2017, p. 5).

### **Conclusion**

As hazards and disasters are products of human and cultural interaction, the perception of risk and behaviour must be analysed at both individual and societal levels. Numerous anthropological and ethnographic studies can provide insights into how societies have responded to natural disasters or catastrophes in the past and how they might respond in the future. The utilisation of anthropological research and findings in the effective management of processes or policies before and after disasters is appropriate. Disaster risk prevention, damage mitigation, planning, humanitarian aid, and recovery efforts are not independent of cultural, social, and political processes or changes within society. There exists a reciprocal relationship among societal dynamics, changes, and disasters. Anthropology demonstrates the social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that have precipitated many disasters experienced by past communities.

The anthropological perspective demonstrates that disasters are not merely ordinary natural events but are deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and political patterns of behaviour within society. Anthropology emphasises the importance of considering local social and cultural patterns in the effective implementation of policies and practices for disaster management. Anthropological or ethnographic studies provide an opportunity to elucidate how and why social, cultural, political, and economic practices or religious beliefs in society undergo transformation in the aftermath of disasters.

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