

Thomas Riis und Mareike Hansen (eds)

Poverty: its Degrees, its Causes and its Relief –
a Multidisciplinary Approach to an Urgent Problem



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Seismic Disasters and Poverty: Some Data and Reflections on Past and Current Trends

— Emanuela Guidoboni & James Jackson —

Abstract

Strong earthquakes and tsunamis, like other natural disasters (storms, hurricanes, floods) are destructive events that strongly affect the standard of living of the populations they hit. Their impact on human societies varies according to the frequency with which they occur, the quality of the buildings, the demographic density and the economy of the areas involved.

In areas with a precarious economic equilibrium, natural disasters have increased the speed of impoverishment in the short and medium term. The economic and social impact of seismic disasters over the medium and long term can be assessed by analysing the quality of reconstruction work and the time taken to carry it out. Historical and recent records show that when reconstruction is slow and funds are largely or totally lacking, there is a negative effect even on later generations, increasing the vulnerability of the buildings and therefore increasing the hazard from other later destructive events. At times when reconstruction work is being carried out, now as in the past, local economic crises, emigration, famine, plague may also occur, leading to further losses.

In so far as the increasing disparity in living standards across the world is affected by seismic disasters, the scenarios we find today tend to be new, since earthquakes and tsunamis of the same size can have effects of widely varying severity depending on the context. The poorest and most densely populated areas in the world (Near East, Asia, and along the coast of South America), are those most likely to suffer major disasters in the near future. This general trend does not exclude the possibility of economically strong regions being struck by natural disasters resulting in high death tolls and serious economic damage (see the case of New Orleans, in 2004). The technological systems on which urban life depends are in fact very vulnerable. But the difference lies in the resources available for recovery and the time required to effect it. We can therefore be sure, not only that very poor and highly populated areas will suffer the worst natural disasters, but also that the destructive effects of these disasters will tend to worsen pre-existing poverty levels.

The authors present some cases that highlight this historical and current trend in Iran, Pakistan and Italy. For Italy, they present a historical case study of Calabria over the last three centuries. A sequence of destructive earthquakes has played a crucial role in the economy and the culture of that region, which is today one of the poorest in Italy. Historical research has shown that this kind of poverty results from the loss, not only of houses and other buildings needed for production purposes, but also of knowledge, skills and trade exchanges.

Introduction: Earthquakes and Seismic Disasters

Earthquakes are natural frequent phenomena in the life of the Earth. They can be disastrous, triggering off economic and social crises, or over a period of time harm the areas that are affected by them frequently. However, the relationship between earthquakes and disasters is not always clear, as multiple and pre-existing economic, social and cultural factors can interact with the natural phenomenon itself to determine whether the earthquake becomes a ‘disaster’ or not. Here we try to shed light on some aspects of these inter-relationships where they affect relatively poor areas of the globe. We discuss two standpoints: I) the natural one, that is, the earthquake phenomenon itself and its distribution around the world; and II) the human one, observing some of the social and economic dynamics initiated by earthquakes, when the areas hit are already sociologically or economically fragile, sometimes as a result of demographic changes involving population growth or decline. In our opinion, the cases we present are of interest from historical, anthropological and economic perspectives, and may also be useful towards understanding ongoing trends.

On a macro-level we consider the entire country of Iran, an ancient country and society that long ago developed particular ways of living with the threat posed by earthquakes, remnants of which are preserved in some of its rural communities and the locations of its larger towns and cities. On a much smaller scale, we consider the case of a southern Italian region, Calabria, today one of the least developed areas of an economically developed country. This region of the Mediterranean region experiences strong and relatively frequent earthquakes, which represent an important local environmental characteristic, and one that has influenced many aspects of its history and