GCSP Policy Brief Series
The GCSP policy brief series publishes papers in order to assess the policy challenges, dilemmas, and policy recommendations in **all aspects** of transnational security and globalization. The series was created and is edited by Dr. Nayef R.F. Al-Rodhan, Senior Scholar in Geostrategy and Director of the Program on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalization and Transnational Security.

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**Natural Disasters, Globalization, and the Implications for Global Security**

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Review and Critique
The impact of natural disasters, such as the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, the earthquake in Pakistan, and Hurricane Katrina in the United States (US), is relevant to both human and transnational security. Natural disasters affect individuals at the most fundamental level, injuring or killing them, leaving them homeless, displacing them, destroying their livelihoods, as well as disrupting health-care services, clean water supplies, and adequate housing facilities. Moreover, particular segments of the population may be disproportionately affected by natural disasters.¹ Women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and the poor may be particularly exposed to the effects of natural disasters.

As Emily Munro points out in her policy brief,² natural disasters can also make communities more vulnerable in the future by, for example, devastating or disrupting local ecosystems. In addition, at the state level, the damage to infrastructure, as well as the disruption to productive activity, can pose significant economic problems. Natural disasters take an enormous toll on development. They can even put at risk some countries’ very capacity for development. Sometimes, however, natural disasters are the result of regrettable development strategies. The development choices made by individuals, communities, and states can increase the risks related to natural disasters, as well as distribution thereof among the population of affected countries. Buildings that collapse during earthquakes and bridges that are washed away by floods were all, at some point, integral parts of development projects.

Disasters can also interact with and exacerbate other problems, such as furthering the spread of disease, worsening substate conflict, damaging the environment, and increasing migration. Many of these problems are not confined to individual states but are transnational in nature. An effective disaster-relief strategy is, thus, often transnational or multilateral. Cooperative disaster-relief efforts can, in some instances, even help to ease tense or relations or actual conflict situations. For example, Greek-Turkish relations improved slightly following the 1999 earthquakes.³ Cooperative disaster preparedness could even form part of conflict-prevention initiatives.

Both human and economic vulnerability to natural disasters can be reduced if effective disaster-management strategies are put in place. Such strategies require quick and coordinated responses from an array of actors. Globalization has implications for the impact of natural disasters and may encourage more coordinated responses to them. Since disaster response depends to a large degree on external funding from various countries, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and individuals, globalization may help to facilitate the mobilization of resources. Increased access to the media, for example, may sensitize a greater number of people nationally, as well as internationally, to the scale and impact of any given natural disaster and thereby encourage donations to relief efforts.
Dilemmas and Our Recommendations

Developing successful strategies that enable local and international actors to effectively respond to natural disasters is vital to increasing human, economic, and transnational security. We highlight eight dilemmas related to this issue and eight corresponding recommendations that may contribute to appropriate policy choices.

As mentioned, natural disasters affect the individual first, injuring and killing, as well as removing the necessary conditions for people to provide for their basic needs. In other words, natural disasters affect human security in the first instance. Yet, many policy makers are accustomed to thinking in terms of national security. Thus, states face the challenge of reconciling human and national security. In our view, human security should be given priority within the context of national security. It is only by prioritizing the individual that states will respond to natural disasters in a timely, well-organized, and impartial way.
Lack of preparedness for natural disasters is not just confined to developing countries. As Hurricane Katrina has demonstrated, developed countries also need to improve their capacities in this area. All policy makers, therefore, need to focus on developing capabilities for maximum preparedness for natural disasters, and they also need to avoid underestimating the effects of disasters, especially in poorer regions of the world. In order to be more prepared, states need to establish better early-warning systems. Ideally, this would involve transnational analysis of potential disasters, as well as better and more effective formulation of transnational scenarios and solutions. Existing early-warning systems should also be strengthened.

For large-scale natural disasters, multinational, coordinated responses are likely to be part of an effective disaster response. While it may seem self-evident that dealing with the fallout of natural disasters requires transnational relief efforts, some states may perceive outside intervention with suspicion. Therefore, it is crucial that transparent and coordinated multilateral relief avoid real or perceived ulterior, geopolitical motives for assistance. UN monitoring and logistical support may also serve to alleviate suspicions about external interventions.

States also face the problem of balancing the need for sophisticated civil defense systems to manage disasters with investing in a system that is aimed at managing infrequent events. We suggest that extensive training and preparedness should be maintained, because the expense of not doing so is likely to exceed the cost of prevention. Adequate preparedness will also require simulations to be carried out by states and international organizations to ensure that relief is delivered to the most vulnerable. Failure to do so may result in uneven disaster relief.

**Conclusion**

While we are accustomed to conceiving of natural disasters as environmental or humanitarian issues, they also constitute important security concerns. Specifically, they represent significant threats to human and economic security. While globalization can contribute to the severity of natural disasters by contributing to, for instance, global warming, it may also have some positive spin-offs for disaster-response efforts. It can facilitate the prediction of national disasters, raise immediate aid contributions and post-disaster funds through media coverage, and encourage cooperation between different actors.

**References**


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