A Vulnerable World?
“Honor a quien honor merece”

Regions and Cohesion has grown from invaluable human and intellectual roots. One source of inspiration, Dr. Virginia García-Acosta, comes from CIESAS-Mexico (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social). Dr. García-Acosta is an internationally recognized scholar who has achieved much through her professional career and touched many through her wisdom and humanity. In recognition of her achievements, she was honored with the title Chevalier dans l’ordre des palmes académiques by France in a ceremony on 16 November 2010 at the Residencia de Francia in Mexico City. The editors of Regions and Cohesion, on behalf of the RISC Consortium, are pleased to recognize this honor by translating into French and publishing in this issue of the journal one of Dr. García-Acosta’s most important articles, entitled: “Le risque comme construction sociale et la construction sociale des risques” (originally published in Mexico as “El riesgo como construcción social y la construcción social de riesgos” in Desacatos No. 19 (2005): p. 11–24).

Dr. García-Acosta has a BA and MA in social anthropology and a PhD in history. She is the author of nearly 100 articles and 20 books on food history and the social construction of risk and disasters from a historical-anthropological perspective. Her research interests focus on earthquakes and agricultural disasters (floods, droughts, hailstorms, and so on) in Mexican history. She has a significant background as principal researcher and coordinator of international projects sponsored by different research organizations such as the Inter-American Institute for Global Change Research; Mexican research and science initiatives CONACYT and FONCYT (with the European Union); the United Nations-Mexico City office, and La Red (Network for Social Studies in Disaster Prevention in Latin America), among others.

Since May 2004, Dr. García-Acosta has been the general director of CIESAS, and she will occupy that position until 2014. She also is an active member of many professional associations and international social research groups. We would like to underline Dr. García-Acosta’s role as a member of the RISC Consortium’s scientific committee, which acts as the consortium’s steering organism, and we thank her for her significant con-
tributions as a founding member of this body. At RISC, we have benefitted significantly in our almost four years of existence from Dr. García-Acosta’s invaluable experience, knowledge, and humanity. Today, Regions and Cohesion and the RISC Consortium congratulate Dr. Virginia García-Acosta for the honor bestowed upon her by France, and we thank her for her friendship and guidance.

Dr. García-Acosta’s article “Le risque comme construction sociale et la construction sociale des risques” (Risk as social construction and the social construction of risks) is timely in terms of world events (e.g., the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear emergencies in Japan; earthquake in New Zealand; massive flooding in Colombia, etc.) and it provides an interesting framework for this issue of the journal. Specifically, this article takes us through contemporary debates on vulnerability. This focus has been necessary to understand that so-called disasters are not the product of unique and remote elements by themselves, but social processes that unchain themselves as the result of an extreme event of socionatural, natural, or anthropic origin which occurs when there are favorable conditions of vulnerability in a population and in its productive structure and infrastructure. (Lavell, 2004)²

According to García-Acosta (1997), vulnerability is a variable closely related to existing internal contradictions, the hierarchical organization in any society, and the social complexity that underlies and persists in each extreme situation. Conditions of vulnerability comprise diverse factors and they can vary considerably according to living conditions and economic activities in any society. The cultural, political, and socioeconomic conditions in society have a great impact on the opportunities to face risk. To express the degrees of vulnerability of a population, one must consider the direct relationship between vulnerable groups and their level of development. For example, low wage levels, deficient health policies, lack of cross-border integration strategies, weak national economies, a lack of social organization, and the presence of passive anti-migrant ideologies are all themes addressed in this issue which are related to vulnerability.

The article by Barry, Boidin, and Tizio examines development aid for public health. The authors contend that most aid does not account for equity or sustainability, two concepts that are fundamental to our understanding of vulnerability and its political/social construction. This is followed by an article by Marcela Ceballos on Ecuador’s policies toward forced migration from Colombia and their impact on border communities. Obviously, displaced persons live in vulnerable conditions due to the involuntary nature of their displacement and the lack of legal/social protection they generally receive in host communities. Finally, Enrique Pérez Campuzano empirically examines urban planning in peripheral areas (fo-
cusing on Mexico City), presenting the case study of a rural community with unrestricted attachment to land; prevailing traditional ideologies regarding the relationship between people, their environment, and control over the environment; and a program of financing for the environmental conservation of peripheral lands characterized by limited interaction between government, planning, and beneficiaries, and economic uncertainty that undermines structural consolidation.

A social analysis of vulnerability intrinsically involves the analysis of sociopolitical practices. Risk, like vulnerability, is related to social routines, and it includes a time dimension that is fundamental for understanding the notion of crisis (or disasters) as a consequence of social processes.

This aspect of “risk/vulnerability” is evident in the articles presented in the leadership forum. First, Regions & Cohesion is proud to publish the keynote address of the 2010 RISC Consortium Conference on “Development, Poverty, and Global Crises: Reinforcing Governance,” delivered by Mr. Soumaïla Cissé, president of the Commission of the Union économique et monétaire ouest africaine (West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA)). His speech was entitled “Le Rôle de l’intégration régionale dans le développement en Afrique de l’ouest: avancées et défis” (The role of regional integration in West African development: Progress and Challenges). The article specifically discusses responses to various types of development challenges and UEMOA’s activities in the fields of energy, environment, and education, among others. One aspect of the contribution is its focus on crises, development, and the relationships between West Africa and external actors participating in regional development, such as the EU and its member states and the World Bank. President Cissé addresses recent crises related to food, energy, environment (water and climate change), and, of course, finance, and how these events have affected West African states. The RISC Consortium thanks President Cissé for his keynote address, which puts forth regional responses to ongoing development challenges. The consortium is honored to have had the opportunity to welcome such a recognized statesman at the 2010 conference, along with UEMOA’s head of scientific and economic analysis, Mr. Kako Nubukpo, who participated in the entire RISC Conference.

The second article in the Leadership Forum also examines the tension between crises and development in the context of vulnerability in Africa. Mr. Christian Manahl, deputy special representative of the United Nations Secretary General for Somalia and former director of the political affairs division of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO) discusses the responsibility to protect civilians in Congo. Mr. Manahl’s analysis is timely and interesting because it clearly illustrates the tension between the
United Nations’ responsibility to protect civilians in the short-term and its long-term mission to support and reinforce state structures in Congo. Mr. Manahl shows that these parallel missions are sometimes difficult to achieve simultaneously, and his contribution describes how the United Nations is attempting to balance these two objectives in very difficult circumstances.

One objective of Regions & Cohesion and the RISC Consortium is to foster international cooperation in the field of social affairs. In our short history, we are grateful to those individuals, such as Virginia García-Acosta, President Soumaïla Cissé, and the other authors who have published with us, for their contributions toward the achievement of this goal. Vulnerability is a priority which has yet to be significantly addressed in regional integration processes. We are pleased to present a series of worthwhile articles tied to this theme.

The Editors

NOTES

1. Authors such as Hewitt (1983) and Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner (1995), were pioneers, indicating that the existence of transformations and social complexities generate prior conditions to any disastrous impact. This analytic current, today known as “social vulnerability approach,” was in contrast to the functionalist structural vision, including social, economic, and historical perspectives on the study of disasters.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


