

# DRR pioneer interview with Thea Hilhorst

DRR pioneer  
interview

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The transcript takes you on a journey of the book mapping vulnerability and the developments thereafter.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The transcript and video was developed in the context of a United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) project on the History of DRR.

**Findings** – This interview highlights how DRR is central to conflict settings as well.

**Originality/value** – The interview provides reflections on DRR in conflict settings.

**Keywords** Resilience, Conflict, Disaster risk reduction, Vulnerability

**Paper type** Transcript

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## Bruno Haghebaert

Thank you for joining this disaster risk reduction (DRR) pioneers interview. I'd like to know how you initially got engaged in DRR work?

## Thea Hilhorst

I do not actually work in DRR, but my engagement as a scholar stems from the year 2000.

## Bruno Haghebaert

What were your major achievements in those early days, what were your major insights? I remember you organized a workshop (in Wageningen) on vulnerability, with some of the pioneers at that time. So, there was already a strong interest in the social dimension of disaster at that time. Could you explain how your insights then were?

## The Wageningen vulnerability workshop and the “mapping vulnerability” publication

*Thea Hilhorst*

Yes, definitely. So, at the very start, when we started working on disasters, of course, the introduction of the idea of the vulnerability paradigm was around 10 years old. And in the 1990s, people also started to talk about resilience. So, was resilience the flip side of vulnerability? Or was it something else? But we still felt at the time vulnerability was a key concept to understand disasters, and its root causes. Therefore, we did have this wonderful

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“As this manuscript is a transcript of a historical interview, the peer review has not been anonymous”.



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workshop in Wageningen that culminated in a book about “Mapping Vulnerability” with Greg Bankoff and Georg Frerks. At that time, DRR was positioned in the corner of radical disaster studies and very much in line with more development-oriented community-based work that I was engaged in. However, in the following years I saw that risk reduction sort of lost its cutting edge and became more of a technocratic endeavor to respond to risks that could result in disasters. What seemed to have disappeared was why would people be exposed to disasters? Or what is the deeper reason why those risks have emanated? Why are those risks there?

*Disaster risk “creation”*

So, what I find quite interesting, it is not new, but it is catchy, this idea that you say, we have DRR, but at the same time, there’s also something as disaster risk creation. It is the idea that you almost reinvigorate the idea of the politics of DRR, and that disasters are socially constructed and created and politically created most of the time. Therefore, we try to reinvigorate the concept by now using the term disaster risk creation. And by showing and seeing that very often the efforts to reduce disaster risk are outweighed by an increase through disaster risk creation. Therefore, I find that a very interesting way forward. I think Ilan Kelman coined the term disaster risk creation [1].

*Bruno Haghebaert*

Teaching in Wageningen also meant that you must work in a more transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary way. At least what I remember from Wageningen was that there was an attempt to bring different scientific disciplines together and look for synergies. Was this also the case in your work with disaster studies? Or did you mainly focus on social science issues?

**Including conflict in disaster risk reduction**

*Thea Hillhorst*

What I thought was very special about what we did in Wageningen was that from the very start we talked about disasters triggered by natural hazards as well as conflict. We were rather early in trying to see the nexus between conflict and disaster and were looking at both. Therefore, we also looked at peacebuilding. We also looked at humanitarian interventions. Therefore, we had a rather comprehensive way of looking at disaster unlike many of the institutes I have come across that are either specializing in disasters or in conflict, but do not combine it in humanitarianism and/or development. And we somehow mixed all that in Wageningen. And I always thought this approach was very fruitful.

*Bruno Haghebaert*

This was probably one of the key lessons or insights you gained during those early days, which is still relevant today. It may even be more relevant today as many natural hazards are occurring in countries, which are also very fragile and prone to conflict. I think you were indeed a pioneer in this field, and the topic just became more relevant over the decades. No?

*Thea Hillhorst*

Yeah, it is been very surprising to us maybe because in Wageningen from the start, we saw the connections, and we defined ourselves as disaster scholars looking at those different types of disasters and how they interacted. And hence, I have found it very shocking, to see in the Hyogo Framework and then in the Sendai Framework no reference at all to conflict and also, during the preparatory meetings for the Frameworks. I remember I was sitting in an

ALNAP meeting in New York, I think, and it was a big room, and we were going to talk about disasters triggered by natural hazards. And then I mentioned “*let’s also talk about conflict, because more than 30% of those disasters happen in conflict areas*”. And then the chair just hushed me and said: “*Yeah, we all know that. But here we will focus on the on the disasters triggered by natural hazards*”. I could understand the request, but it meant that we decided to not include 1/3 of the disasters in our conversation, because it is no exception to see a disaster in a conflict area. So, if you look at the dead toll, the conflict and fragility affected areas they have like 60%, I think, of everybody who dies in disaster. Based on that initial work in Wageningen, I was then able to organize a five-year academic research program with four Ph.D. candidates, quite a substantive team for four years to look at instances where conflict meets disaster and where disaster meets conflict.

*Bruno Haghebaert*

Would the reason that there is a lack of interest in bringing together these different fields also relate to some of the mandates the different UN agencies have, and the fact that they do not want to overstep their own mandates? I can imagine that for the UNDRR, as it is called now, it would be hard to fully embrace conflict as a topic, although there is definitely progress in this regard. I do remember at the latest UNDRR Global Platform that there was a combined session on this, but my experience has always been that if you deal with UN agencies, they are kind of strictly defending their own realms and are less open to this kind of cross-sectoral thinking than the academics would be.

*Thea Hilhorst*

I am not sure if it is mandate, perhaps a lack of real intention to work bottom up, because if you look at communities, we did research once for the “Partners for Resilience”, which was also not looking at conflicts at the time. And when we were talking to people, in all the implementing countries of Partners for Resilience (PFR), and really talk to people from communities, they all raised this issue, like we have so many conflicts, why is PFR not looking at the conflict side of things. And it is intimately connected. And I’m not even talking about big conflict between countries, for example, such as the conflict in Yemen. But the local conflicts that are happening around resource extraction are everywhere, everywhere there is social tension around resource extraction. And DRR works on resources, it is about planting trees, but where do you plant a tree? Who plants the trees, who will earn from it? And those are questions that may rip every single community apart. If you feel that mining companies are threatening the environment, and hence trigger renewed risks for disasters, they do disaster risk creation, you are heading into a conflict at a local level. Therefore, to my mind, this is about the issues that you encounter when you implement DRR. Now, other issues that have come across are of course the fact that we have now much more attention to climate as the effects of climate change further increase disaster risk. Another important issue I think that was not very obvious in DRR efforts at the beginning is migration. Very little attention was paid to migration and hence to urbanity: the connection between urban issues and DRR was very slow to develop.

**“Climate change in itself is not a disaster”**

*Bruno Haghebaert*

Nowadays, as you mentioned, DRR work is very much, I am not saying dominated, but at least strongly influenced by the whole climate thinking and the link with climate adaptation, do you see this as an added value for DRR? Or do you see also some challenges in bringing these two topics together in almost an equation?

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*Thea Hilhorst*

I think it is very important to take climate into account. What I also see is a tendency to turn climate and climate change into a hazard, as in the old generations of disasters' study that the hazard is the disaster and of course, it is not. Climate change in and of itself is not a disaster. And that's why it is so important not to forget what I call the iron law of disaster studies that disasters are the outcome of the encounter of risks of hazards, vulnerability, mitigated by capacities. And it is the same in climate change. Climate change in and of itself is not a disaster. It is a hazard that becomes a disaster in the encounter with vulnerabilities. And if it is not properly mitigated by policy measures, then we get a disaster and we always forget that. And then people can say, oh, it is climate change, it is happening out there. No, they have a role, it becomes a disaster because of the policies they have; therefore, it is very important to bring in climate change, but do it within the framework of critical or not even critical but basic disaster studies.

*Bruno Haghebaert*

So, to some extent, by focusing too strongly on climate as a hazard you return to a more technocratic and hazard centric approach. And you tend to oversee the underlying factors and the root causes of people's vulnerability . . .

*Thea Hilhorst*

Of course, that is the whole issue and therefore, climate change is the hazard. It does not explain in itself, the vulnerabilities. And it also is no excuse for a lack of action on the ground and lack of policies on the ground. Therefore that is why climate change is super important. But it must still be analyzed and seen in that framework that we developed for disasters where we say, wait a minute, the hazard is not a disaster. Disaster risk comes about when the hazard meets vulnerabilities and is not mitigated by measures or policies. That's when you get a disaster. So, if we take it within that frame, I think the climate change discussion is very enriching. Where there is a problem, of course, is that people may start to believe too strongly that disasters are the outcome of climate change, forgetting other ways in which vulnerabilities have grown, for example, through social inequality, environmental mismanagement or migration patterns.

### **“Resilience” should not lead to abandoning vulnerable communities**

*Bruno Haghebaert*

And then there's of course, it is been debated so many times, the whole concept of resilience, being a term that can undermine the vulnerability thinking, but can also stress the capacities that people have and thus have a more positive outlook on things. But is this something you embrace in your academic work, also in a conflict context where people may not necessarily be very resilient because the conflicts have a very strong impact on people's lives and on society as a whole?

*Thea Hilhorst*

I think resilience is an extremely important topic and concept, also in conflict. Because if humanitarian action or other measures do not build on what people already do and can do to mitigate the effects of climate of conflict, they undermine people's efforts. Therefore, the arguments to build on people's capacities are extremely strong. Now where things go funny is that resilience has been embraced as a mainstreaming argument and brought into large meta-global policies from the World Bank and others, where resilience seems to be used and instrumentalized. Not to build on people's capacities but to bank on people's

capacities and sort of stand by the side and say, well, aren't those people wonderfully resilient? And that will lead if you are not careful, to politics of abandonment, rather than resilience. For example, the work of Susanne Jaspers on Sudan is very relevant. She shows how agencies started to talk resilience and claim people's resilience, using it as an excuse to lower the rations for food aid. But there was no evidence of this resilience, there was no evidence that people could manage. It was just sort of, you know, talk going around the discourse. Wow, people are so resilient, wow; people are greatly resilient, let's lower the food ration. But if people do not have other means to get their food that is not building on their capacity. That's abandoning!

### **Influencers**

*Bruno Haghebaert*

This is very insightful. I'll conclude the interview with a question about who your main influencers were? Who were the people that you built your thinking on, when you were still a young academic and who have influenced your work up to today? It could also be publications that have really been an inspiring source for your thinking. There are maybe many.

*Thea Hilhorst*

Yeah, many, many. But of course, the first who come to mind would be the people who did "At Risk". But also, Ken Hewitt, and definitely also Anthony Oliver Smith, Maureen Fordham and Elaine Enarson, I rather quickly caught on to the idea that disaster, like everything else, is much gendered. And we must understand the gender dimensions and aspects of disaster.

And then our group – as a kind of serendipity – came about and we had the resources to have a workshop where we could invite all those inspiring people and apparently, it was the right time to talk about vulnerability. So, all the folks we invited came to the workshop. Therefore, it was not only a very rich gathering of people, but it was also for me, as a young academic, that I suddenly found myself in the company of those people that were my influencers. It was for me personally, as well, a very special, very special occasion.

What is very nice is that we are having a sequel. Greg Bankoff and I are now working on a next book about vulnerability and the politics of disaster risk creation. We have a contract with Routledge. And we bring together quite a few of the old folks. Ken Hewitt is there, Ian Burton is there, Ben Wisner, Terry Cannon, so it is really lovely. And some of them are now in their 80s. And it is like they are writing the testament of everything they have seen in their working lives in their papers and their chapter. So, I think it is going to be a very prominent and nice book ([Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2022](#)).

*Bruno Haghebaert*

Yeah, we're looking forward to reading it. And Ben already mentioned it to me, and I think it's very interesting to see the term risk reduction now being broadened into risk creation, which I think many scholars also like Alan Lavell and others have proposed. Yeah, this may be the real issue that needs to be tackled, also, academically and hopefully over time, in practice and in policy as well. Thank you so much for your contribution to the field. And thank you so much for the interview. And I wish you all the very best!

*Thea Hilhorst*

Thanks for this initiative!

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**Reference**

Bankoff, G. and Hilhorst, D. (2022), *Why Vulnerability Still Matters. The Politics of Disaster Risk Creation*, Routledge, London.

**Note**

1. The text is based on the recorded interview but occasionally minor additions have been added or certain statements rephrased for greater clarity. The transcript and video was developed in the context of a UNDRR project on the History of DRR. The views expressed therein are not necessarily those of the UNDRR or its sponsors. For more information on the UNDRR work on DRR History, visit the “[A Walk through DRR History](#)” PreventionWeb page.

**About the author**

[Dorothea Hilhorst](#) is Professor of humanitarian studies at the International Institute for Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University in The Hague. Her focus is on aid-society relations: studying how aid is embedded in the context, impacts on governments and society, and is shaped by the manifold actions of actors in and around programmes for protection, service delivery and capacity development. She has a special interest in the intersections of humanitarianism with development, peacebuilding and gender-relations. Her research programmes have taken place in settings affected by disaster, conflict and fragility, including Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Rwanda, South Sudan and Sri Lanka. One of her recent research programme concerns cases where “[conflict meets disaster](#)” that studies disaster governance in high-conflict, low-conflict and post-conflict societies. In 2022, she was awarded the Spinoza Price, the highest scientific distinction in the Netherlands. Dorothea Hilhorst can be contacted at: [hilhorst@iss.nl](mailto:hilhorst@iss.nl)

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