

## Book Reviews

*Mega-Crises: Understanding the Prospects, Nature, Characteristics and the Effects of Cataclysmic Events*, 2012, edited by Ira Helsloot, Arjen Boin, Brian Jacobs, and Louise K. Comfort. Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas.

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A familiar refrain is that disasters, crises, and emergencies are getting bigger, more frequent, and worse—perhaps even more unpredictable and more sudden. Yet empirical evidence is rarely presented in a critical manner to demonstrate such contentions. A new volume dramatically titled *Mega-Crises: Understanding the Prospects, Nature, Characteristics and the Effects of Cataclysmic Events* adds to literature and the debates.

*Mega-Crises* is not quite a mega-volume, although it is substantive with 25 chapters across 370 pages organized in four parts. The editors and authors convened at a conference in The Hague in 2009 where they presented drafts of their chapters to each other and to Dutch government workers. Feedback from that meeting fed into the final versions. The chapters and the book therefore not only represent a contribution to academia, but are also relevant for and directed at policy makers, such as civil servants who might need to prepare for and deal with the catastrophes mentioned.

One of the volume's strengths is the diversity of the actual and potential disasters discussed. Part 1 comprises three chapters providing a theoretical overview of mega-crises. Parts 2 and 3 cover some of the usual suspects of disasters involving environmental and non-environmental hazards; for instance, Hurricane Katrina, 9/11, and the 26 December 2004 tsunamis. Less studied but equally important disasters receive equal footing, notably Hurricane Gustav, Kenya's post-election violence, and the Mumbai terrorist attacks, all in 2008. Alongside these, it is good to see health emergencies, notably H1N1, and the global financial crisis being analyzed.

Further creativity emerges in "Part IV: Identifying Mega-Threats and Vulnerabilities". Here, authors let their imaginations loose. Scenarios examined include electricity grids, food security, and the internet. Climate change is dealt with in its own chapter, and is mentioned elsewhere, ensuring that this hazard is addressed but without it dominating, as too frequently occurs in considering disasters. Other chapters are based on geography, namely one chapter on mega-cities and one chapter on fragile states.

The authors and editors represent both sexes, a variety of disciplines and interests, a diversity of backgrounds and home countries, and a range of ages and career stages. The inclusion of practitioners—from civil society, government, and the private sector—rounds out the perspectives provided. As well, many authors provide data

from first-hand accounts or operational experience, thereby giving the reader insights from theory, policy, and practice. A useful balance results amongst raw data (notably timelines and interview quotations), analysis, and guiding frameworks.

For me, the intrigue of this collection is the questions raised about mega-crises, not so much to criticise or even to critique, but instead to recognize this book as providing as starting point for exploring and discussing the topic. In particular, I remain unconvinced on four points, not due to deficiencies in the volume, but because the editors and authors have done their job: they have taught me about the topic and have provoked me into considering it further.

The first point is that I am not certain what is new in the forms of crises presented. Even Chapter 2's robust defence of newness, list of characteristics typifying "mega", and admission that "We do not have the answers" (p. 12) are each couched in numerous, forthright statements without backing evidence (which might nonetheless exist) or a full literature review. Many of the other authors avow that the mega-crisis they present is indeed somehow different from crises which have gone before. For the possibility of the internet collapsing, that might be fair. For the others, I would need more evidence and historical analysis (similar to that provided in the chapters on the London and Mumbai terrorist attacks) to convince me of newness.

Second, although linked to the first point, the definition of "mega" was not formal enough or compelling enough for me. The book asserts that mega-crises are upon us and "are not just 'more of the same'; they present a new class of adversity" (p. 5), yet evidence to back up that assertion is limited. For instance, La Red and others have shown by analyzing data sets that, in many locations, the smaller, more common disasters have a greater impact on humanity than the larger events garnering publicity.

These first two points neither preclude nor undermine the mega-crisis thesis. They do beg the question: Can or should the differing views be reconciled or is it all about context and definition? My questions never deny the scale, speed, danger, and connectivity of hazards and disasters. But all those parameters are continua which, at any level, reveal inherent, chronic, long-standing vulnerabilities and coping capacities throughout society. Exactly as with hazards and disasters in general!

My third point is that I can posit several calamitous possibilities which I would fully accept as mega-crises, albeit not new, but which are not covered in the book. Examples are a large meteorite or comet strike on Earth, a basaltic flood eruption, and an Ice Age. As the book asserts, we indeed have a long way to go in disaster management and disaster risk reduction. That does not immediately support the book's argument that we need something completely different. Perhaps so, but I need more details on exactly what. Chapter 3 provides criteria and examples—all of which are useful for all disasters and, in fact, most of which help to tackle root causes of vulnerability.

Finally, several authors (over)use words such as "unexpected" and "unknown". In 1983 in *Interpretations of Calamity*, Ken Hewitt critiqued "the 'un'-ness of the problem" of disasters (p. 10). He explained how this vocabulary separates us from the problem of vulnerability by constructing disaster as being outside the realm of usual life. Instead, the opposite is true: societal vulnerability which leads to disaster is

characteristic, not exceptional. Consequently, I am left unsatisfied by the apparent ‘un’-ness in *Mega-Crises* and the lack of engagement with the long-standing critiques of ‘un’-ness.

My four points are not about being right or wrong; they merely present different perspectives. My interest in this book is actually such queries. With the baseline from *Mega-Crises*, I now seek more depth, breadth, and critique.

Because these are the discussions which disaster research, policy, and practice needs. Kudos to the authors and editors of *Mega-Crises* for provoking debates that we ought to be having. The key is not to believe or disbelieve in the concept or practice of mega-crises, mega-events, or mega-disasters; this is not about a dichotomy for which each individual must choose a side. Instead, it is about exploring the ideas and rationales presented, to determine the levels of validity and applicability in different contexts and circumstances. *Mega-Crises* presents needed insights into the mega-problem of vulnerability to a wide swathe of hazards across space and time scales.