



Conversation on Disasters: Deconstructed on 13 October 2021

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3 **20 Years of Radical Disaster Interpretations: Reflections and Aspirations (RADIX @ 20!)**
4 **Conversation on Disasters: Deconstructed on 13 October 2021¹**

5
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22 **Structured Abstract**

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24 **Purpose:** This conversation presents the reflections from five prominent disaster scholars and
25 practitioners on the purpose of Radix - the Radical Disaster Interpretations network – as we celebrate
26 its 20th anniversary.

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28 **Design/methodology/approach:** This paper is based on the conversations that took place on
29 Disasters: Deconstructed Podcast livestream on the 13th October 2021.

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31 **Findings:** The conversation reflects on personal and professional journey in disaster studies over the
32 past 20 years, and on what needs changing in order to make disaster interpretations more radical.

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34 **Originality:** The conversation contributes to the ongoing discussions around explorations of radical
35 pathways for understanding and preventing disasters.

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37 **Keywords:** Disaster; Radix; interpretations of disasters; shock; reflections

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39 **Ksenia Chmutina** (the co-host; from herein Ksenia): I want to start today with a very short story from
40 Eduardo Galeano's *Mirrors*². It's called "Lost and Found":

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42 *"The twentieth century, which was born proclaiming peace and justice, died bathed in blood. It*
43 *passed on a world much more unjust than the one it inherited. The twenty-first century, which*
44 *also arrived heralding peace and justice, is following in its predecessor's footsteps. In my*
45 *childhood, I was convinced that everything that went astray on earth ended up on the moon.*
46 *But the astronauts found no sign of dangerous dreams, or broken promises, or hopes*
47 *betrayed. If not on the moon, where might they be? Perhaps they were never misplaced.*
48 *Perhaps they are in hiding here on earth. Waiting."*

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50 And as today's the International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction, I thought that Eduardo Galeano
51 summarizes our hopes and broken dreams and promises so well in this short piece. And this is what
52 we're going to talk about today - what could be better than marking the International Day Disaster
53 Risk Reduction than with the relaunch of Radix³ and the celebration of its 20 years? Many of us over
54 the years have been inspired by the discussions and debates on Radix listserv. And of course, many
55 of us have been using resources collected over the years on the website.

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57 Today we have some amazing guests for you - the people who I don't think need much of an
58 introduction! So we have Ben Wisner, Maureen Fordham, Bob Alexander (or Barefoot Bob as many of
59 us know him), Rohit Jigyasu, and Mayfourth Luneta, from whom you will hear shortly. We ask them to

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61 ¹ You can watch this conversation on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9eWw2y1rt1Y>

² Galleano, E. (2010). *Mirrors*. Nation Books.

³ <https://www.radixonline.org>

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3 reflect on their personal and professional journey in disaster studies since the launch of Radix 20
4 years ago.

5 **Jason von Meding** (*co-host; from herein Jason*): As many of you know, the Radix listserv has been a
6 touchstone for Ksenia and me and many of us, as disaster scholars over the past 20 years. And the
7 community of critical and engaged people is just really unique. And for me, it's definitely an honor to
8 publicly recognize this today and thank all of those who have contributed in the previous decades.
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10 I'd like to say a little bit about Radix for those of you who may be tuning in and hearing about the
11 group for the first time. Radix was established by Ben Wisner and Maureen Fordham, from whom we
12 will hear in a few minutes, in 2001, stimulated by witnessing yet more major disasters in the preceding
13 decade: they were inspired to act by those affected in Gujarat India and El Salvador in the first two
14 months of 2001. The original website and its companion mailing lists were created and curated by
15 Maureen [Fordham] (later joined by Alberto Delgado Perez) and were designed as collaborative and
16 open spaces to share comments and contents that could help to develop radical disaster scholarship
17 and practice. Radix is a radical group because it's concerned with both root causes of disaster and
18 structural actions to prevent disasters from the bottom up and the top down. Radix is non-sectarian,
19 but by no means a-political, and argues that disasters are fundamentally about power distribution,
20 preventing disasters, therefore requires political actions. Over the past two decades, Radix has
21 evolved into a dynamic collective of people from around the world, and it continues to inspire an
22 entirely new generation of disaster scholars to be more critical and explore radical pathways for
23 understanding and preventing disasters.

24 Today is such an exciting day because we're going to share the relaunched website with you, which is
25 online now. I'd like to hand over to our now quite well-established Disaster: Deconstructed co-host, JC
26 Gaillard to talk more about the relaunch of Radix.

27 **JC Gaillard** (*co-host, from herein JC*): Okay. Thanks, Jason. Super glad to be here tonight (for me!)
28 for this important occasion. And Radix had a similar formative influence on me back I think in 2002 or
29 2003 when I was in the Philippines, when I was teaching and researching at the University of the
30 Philippines. That's when I discovered Radix as a fantastic community and as a source of information,
31 inspiration, and motivation as well as a place to do research and challenge the status quo when it
32 comes to understanding and reducing the risk of disasters.

33 I'm glad to be here to launch a new Radix website. We've worked hard over the past few weeks to
34 revamp the Radix website without losing its ethos and the wealth of materials on the original website.
35 So it's still meant and designed for being a good to place - as Ben told me earlier today - good to
36 place for whoever is interested in studying disasters to share and to learn about the radical approach
37 to understanding disasters. Jason, I am not sure, if we could show the new website on screen.
38 Fantastic. Thank you so very much. It's been live since this morning, New Zealand time and it's still in
39 the making, it's not a finished product in any way, we want the website to be permanently updated,
40 and permanently changing in the spirit of this help for dialogue, and for learning, and for sharing about
41 disaster. So you will see a block tab on the top, right? Where we have already uploaded a few blocks
42 that we have classed as reference from different sources; and here are our partners, whether it's the
43 GRRIPP⁴ projects or the African Center for Disaster Studies⁵; and events being announced, including
44 this one heretoday. And for these two things - the blog and the events - we are reaching out to you all
45 for some articles. If you feel like you have something to share, whether it's a short piece, whether it's a
46 blog you've published somewhere else, whether it's an announcement for an event, for a publication,
47 for something happening in your neighborhood that's relevant to Radix, and that would help us in
48 terms of brainstorming, and learning, and sharing about disasters, please feel free to reach out to any
49 of us by email, send us some materials, and we will be super happy to upload these onto the website
50 as soon as we can. Now, this [References tab] is where all references are stacked and where you are
51 to find different archives including the original Radix archives, where all the materials that were on the
52 original website have been stored and everything's accessible for the different themes that feature on
53 the original websites, that's all still there. And we have a few other things that you can check out by
54 yourself.
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58 ⁴ For more information about the GRRIPP (Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and
59 Practice) project, go to: <https://www.gripp.net>

60 ⁵ For more information about the African Center for Disaster Studies, go to: <https://natural-sciences.nwu.ac.za/acds>

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3 The main thing I would like to introduce today and which is the second launch of the day after the
4 actual website is this Accord⁶. This Disaster Study Accord is a big thing for us. I guess, if you're a
5 regular of the Disaster: Deconstructed podcast and livestreams, you're surely aware of the Disaster
6 Studies Manifesto that we circulated two and a half years ago. We are super grateful we have more
7 than 500 people who have signed the Manifesto, and following this document, some of us came up
8 with a call for what we then called a 'code of conduct'.⁷ And my friend Lori Peek would remind me that
9 I need to mention the Nature paper⁸ where we issued that call a couple of years ag: we were calling
10 for researchers to come together and try to think of how we could improve our practice of research to
11 make it more fair, insightful, grounded, and just for all researchers with who we work within the field,
12 and practitioners as well. And this call received overwhelming support from all disciplines, from all
13 parts of the world. But at the same time, it got a bit misunderstood by some as a call for a rigid set of
14 principles or the list of prescriptive bullet points that we usually associate with the code of conduct.

15 So we've worked hard over the past few months to try to work on a document that we didn't give this
16 kind of prescriptive impression because that was antithetical to what we meant by a code of conduct
17 in the first place. And Ksenia came up with the word 'Accord', which is I think very appropriate for
18 what we have here. So what we have here and what we launch now is actually a series of questions -
19 and there are no answers to these questions. It's going to opportunity for all of us to ask ourselves
20 these questions before we actually even think about doing research anywhere, anytime. So there's
21 nothing prescriptive in there; it's just about asking ourselves: what do we want to do? Why do we want
22 to do it? Who is going to do what at the benefit of whom? And how we're going to do this research?
23 There's a sort of ontological and epistemological underpinning motivation there. It's all about how we
24 understand the world, how we try to get to know about the world, and for the benefit of whom. It's
25 building upon the Manifesto - and we've got a fantastic cohort of 100 signatories [of the Accord]
26 already, most of them being early career researchers who have joined some of us mid-career
27 researchers, and Maureen[Fordham] and Ben [Wisner] as our mentors to think about these questions.

28 **Ksenia:** Thanks, JC! Well, we have amazing guests today. And we have invited our guests to give us
29 a kind of short reflection about their personal and professional journey in disaster studies.

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31 The first guest I want to invite to join us today is Professor Maureen Fordham. Maureen is a professor
32 of gender and disaster resilience. She is the Centre Director of the IRDR [Institute for Risk and
33 Disaster Reduction] Center for Gender and Disaster at University College London. Maureen was a
34 founding member of the Gender and Disaster network in 1997. I'm sure you're all following the
35 network – and if you are not, please join. And of course, she is a co-founder with Ben Wisner of Radix
36 in 2001. Maureen has been researching hazards and disasters since 1998 with a focus on gender
37 and intersectionality, community, disaster risk production, resilience, capacities, and vulnerabilities,
38 focusing particularly on the inclusion of a range of social groups and especially women and children.
39 And currently, Maureen is focusing her research on issues of decoloniality and gender-responsive
40 infrastructure. And for me personally, it's been an absolute pleasure and a lot of excitement to work
41 with you, Maureen, on our GRRIPP projects, learning from you constantly. And thank you for joining
42 us.

43 **Maureen Fordham (from herein Maureen):** Thank you. And this is rather an honor to be the first
44 person to speak. The question was what does Radix mean to you? And my first sort of flippant
45 answer that came into mind was, it means six weeks of slog to get a website up and running from
46 scratch because actually, it wasn't Alberto who did the website, it was me (with due acknowledgement
47 of my son Robin who provided the tech support behind it). In those days you could set up a website
48 with nothing more than a simple text editor and HTML tags. And that's what we did. Because after
49 going through again a series of earthquakes at the time, in El Salvador on the 13th of January and 13th
50 of February, and in Gujarat India, on the 26th of January, Ben [Wisner] and I had been exchanging
51 emails and Ben asked me if I would like to write something with him about this, because, again, the
52 usual feelings of anger and almost despair at seeing the same things happening again and again. I
53 said I don't actually have time to write a paper, but what I could do was set up a website where we
54 could gather this kind of evidence and critical analysis exposing the root causes of the disasters. So I

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56 ⁶ The Disaster Studies Accord and Disaster Studies Manifesto are available at:

57 <https://www.radixonline.org/manifesto-accord>

58 ⁷ See Beaven et al. (2023) "Post-Disaster Research: Challenges and Opportunities" conversation published in
59 this Special Issue for a more discussion around the code of conduct.

60 ⁸ Gaillard, JC and Peek, L., 2019. Disaster-zone research needs a code of conduct. *Nature*. Available at:
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03534-z>

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3 suggested we could call it Radix, Latin for root. And then it took off and took over my life solidly for the
4 next six weeks! That was the beginning of it for me. And it just bloomed and blossomed.

5 You will hear Ben's thoughts about all of this later, Ben's energy, and the amount of work he could just
6 turn out 24/7 were extraordinary. So that was the beginning of Radix. And to me, in terms of the
7 meaning, it meant then, and it still means now, a platform for radical voices to move from the margins
8 to the center. So instead of being the lone radical voice amongst the dominance of technocratic neo-
9 liberalism, Radix was all about radical and grounded solutions and analyses and discourse. It was a
10 space to provide different answers to that question: What's wrong with this picture? So whenever I
11 saw disaster images or disaster discussions, I seem to be seeing a different picture from the dominant
12 one.

13 I saw a lot at that time about hazard science, but I rarely saw anything about power, about politics,
14 especially gender politics, about risk creation. I saw plenty of examples of marginalized social groups,
15 marginalized people, marginalized along race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other lines being
16 portrayed typically as a problem, as victims, as passive, as in need of education from technical
17 experts in order for them to act rationally and move from hazardous areas. What I wasn't seeing was
18 those same marginalized people being portrayed as active agents, as having power and control over
19 their lives, neither did I see or hear about their context and their history. If you speak directly with
20 those same marginalized social groups, they'll tell you about the history, their relationships to land, to
21 property, to relations of power. They'll tell you about the organizing they do in the face of, quite often,
22 official neglect. Neglect sounds too passive. It's more an active placing in harm's way.

23 So Radix became the site then for the exchange of these radical ideas, rejecting the status quo and
24 burying uncomfortable truths. It maintained its commitment to radical ideas through time, especially
25 after 9/11, since when the term 'radical' has been appropriated and when used, it was likely to attract
26 the attention of the secret services. I hope they enjoyed the discussions that were going on the Radix!

27 Going forward, I see a stronger movement - and now more generally - towards democratization of
28 voices, an increasing urgency for explicit more de-colonial and often feminist practices and
29 relationships between ourselves and the people in locations of risk with whom we engage in different
30 ways. JC has introduced the new Radix. We stopped updating the original Radix website in about
31 2017. But that was okay because the email discussion was where most exchanges were taking place.
32 So it just sat there in the background. Yes, it was an archive and a repository but there was never
33 enough time to keep actively managing that and now there is. Now we've got Radix brought back
34 Radix redux and Radix with a new future which I think is just fantastic. And I'm really happy that it's
35 moved on and that's my thoughts about Radix.

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37 **Jason:** Amazing. Thank you so much, Maureen, for kicking us off there with your reflections. And
38 again, it's just such a pleasure to have you with us this morning. I want to now introduce our second
39 guest for this event. We're so pleased to have you with us here today, Rohit. Rohit Jigyasu is a
40 conservation architect and risk management professional from India currently working at ICCROM as
41 a project manager on Urban Heritage, Climate Change, and Disaster Risk Management. Rohit served
42 as UNESCO chairholder professor at the Institute of Disaster Mitigation for Urban Cultural Heritage at
43 Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan. And he was instrumental there in developing and teaching an
44 international and international training course on disaster risk management of cultural heritage. He
45 was the elected president of ICOMOS India from 2014 to 2018 and president of their international
46 scientific committee on risk preparedness ICORP from 2010 to 2019. Rohit served as an elected
47 member of the executive committee of ICOMOS since 2011 and was its vice president from 2017 to
48 2020. And before joining this organization, he was working with several national and international
49 organizations such as UNESCO, The Getty Conservation Institute, and the World Bank in
50 consultancy, research and training on disaster risk management of cultural heritage. So thanks so
51 much for being with us, Rohit. I'm looking forward to hearing some of your Radix reflections.

52 **Rohit:** Thank you very much, Jason. It's an honor for me to be here, especially to relaunch and
53 celebrate 20 years of Raix. So I will give my own personal thoughts on how I got involved with Radix
54 in its initial years. And it all begins with Gujarat earthquake in January 2001, when I came in as part of
55 an interdisciplinary team that was created to assess post-earthquake challenges through field
56 investigations. In fact, I was originally not supposed to be there. I was a doctoral student in Norway at
57 the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, where I was doing my doctoral research and
58 very busy with my new kid, who was born actually on the day of the earthquake. And my supervisor
59 was actually supposed to join but for some reason, he could not, and asked me to go and join this
60 team of experts, who were going to do a field visit after the Gujarat earthquake and make a report on

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3 the situation. This is how I came there and met this extraordinary group of researchers and
4 practitioners from diverse fields. Being a heritage professional. I was not really so much in contact
5 with the world outside my own professional domain. And that's when I met Maureen and other
6 excellent professionals who became good friends and with some of them, I had the opportunity of
7 working in the future as well. I still remember that when I was there in the field, Maureen was
8 expecting a senior Norwegian professor there. However, to her surprise she found a young doctoral
9 student, who did not look so Norwegian. But what bound us together was that though there was this
10 huge international team of professionals, there were very few, who were really concerned about non-
11 technical issues. So there were all kinds of professionals and researchers and academics who were
12 talking about what technology to use and how best to use it for housing and infrastructure for
13 reconstruction. With all these top-notch experts, we found ourselves in minority, and therefore started
14 to talk to each other and complain about lack of consideration of social and cultural issues, and slowly
15 realized that a lot more needs to be done in this domain. And that's the time when Maureen was also
16 thinking about setting up Radix and then after her return, when she set up Radix, I was in touch with
17 her and all of a sudden I had access to this amazing platform to share what I have been researching
18 on and slowly discovered that there were not so many takers for the issues connected with society
19 and most specifically culture. Through this platform, I could share my ideas not just as an academic,
20 and a researcher, but as somebody deeply concerned about these issues. And that's when I
21 remember posting one of the papers that I had just written based on my research and titled it "From
22 natural to cultural disaster" and posted it on Radix during those initial days. And then suddenly I found
23 that there were quite a few other interesting papers that touched on similar issues and these proved
24 very useful for my Ph.D. work that was still in progress as I could start referring to them and further
25 enrich my research.

26 The platform also provided me with an opportunity to post my work during those initial days of the
27 internet. In those days, it was not so common for scholars and practitioners to refer to internet for
28 these kinds of articles and research work. I found that someone came across my paper on Radix and
29 wrote a rejoinder to my work. This person was actually one of the decision-makers who was
30 responsible for reconstruction after some of the previous earthquakes in India and was also going to
31 be responsible for managing reconstruction following Gujarat earthquake. So I suddenly found in
32 Radix a voice for myself and a channel for me to hear opinions of others on my work and have a
33 dialogue with them.

34 One of the most significant outcome was that this got me connected to disaster professionals who
35 were not from heritage sector. In fact, at that moment, probably, I was the only one who was speaking
36 about cultural heritage in the community of disaster risk management professionals. So it provided me
37 with an opportunity, where I was no longer a cultural heritage professional communicating and
38 working only with my own fraternity, but had the possibility for this exchange beyond my professional
39 domain. And that enabled me to make more efforts towards mainstreaming culture or cultural heritage
40 in the larger disaster risk management. At first, I worked with some of those people I had met through
41 Radix, virtually, and then met them in person as well. I also remember Teddy Boen who was also one
42 of the experts during post earthquake reconnaissance visit following Gujarat earthquake that I had
43 joined. He went through one of the papers that I had posted on Radix and invited me to write a paper
44 jointly with him comparing similarities and differences between post earthquake reconstruction in India
45 and Indonesia, since both of us were concerned about the lack of consideration for traditional building
46 knowledge in post earthquake reconstruction in both contexts. He expressed his frustration that
47 though he is engineer, others from his professional domain of civil engineering did not wish to talk
48 about the socio-cultural aspects that are connected to technology and only wanted to focused on
49 hardcore engineering solutions. So as a researcher, Radix provided me an opportunity to collaborate
50 with other researchers, and this provided me confidence that heritage field has an important role to
51 play in the disaster risk management sector. That led towards the beginning of the whole long journey
52 that I have been continuing since the birth of Radix, because of which I feel very much a part of this
53 larger fraternity with the common cause of reducing vulnerability and improving the quality of life for all
54 sections of the community. Thank you so much.

55 **JC:** Thank you so very much for sharing this experience. And it's interesting because this is how I got
56 to learn about your work and you. And I just checked my files and I downloaded a whole bunch of
57 your papers from the Radix website in 2004. And I remember reading those papers on the Gujarat
58 earthquake; that informed my work back then.

59 Our next panelist is Mayfourth Luneta who is the deputy director of the Center for Disaster
60 Preparedness [CDP] in the Philippines. I had the privilege to be part of the CDP family as well. So I

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3 know Mayfourth and I had the privilege to do some field work with you, Mayfourth, and I learned a lot
4 from your expertise, from your passion in the field. I'm grateful and I'm super happy to have you here
5 with us today. Mayfourth, for those who don't know her, trained as a community development
6 practitioner at the University of the Philippines and eventually started to work for the Center for
7 Disaster Preparedness, which is probably the leading local NGO in the Philippines when it comes to
8 DRR and one of the most influential worldwide for sure when it comes to the creativity and pioneering
9 – and in taking on the idea of Radix on the ground, in the practical space to inform how we actually
10 reduce disaster risk on the ground. Mayfourth, we're super happy to have you, and we're very much
11 looking forward to learning from you.

12 **Mayfourth:** Good morning. Good afternoon. And good evening, everyone. I'm so happy to be invited
13 here. And as JC was saying I am more of a community person. Our organization has a vision of
14 having a safe, disaster-resilient and developed communities. And so all of our mission and
15 interventions are focused on how the communities will be resilient. And Radix – well, I've learned
16 about it from receiving emails from colleagues, friends, and mentors since I think 2008, and even
17 earlier from Ben and also from Marla Petal at the course with the Prevention Web; and then I was
18 introduced to the blog and also the Radix discussions. And maybe, what would be useful in this
19 sharing is, as I look at the website now it's already very interesting, and it's also good to show this to
20 researchers and community people, CSO [Civil Society Organization], workers who need practical
21 research. As you've said, there's a lot of research that would talk a lot about semantics and other
22 things. It's okay, as long as it's good also for the community people, I think what I've seen on your
23 website that is interesting to know, is the different analyses of things, the perspective of the CSOs
24 most likely would side on, you would always have a side on these things like- who benefits from this
25 research, (just like in the Manifesto).

26 And it will always be interesting to know for whom it is. Because there's a lot of research going on and
27 usually it is driven by the donor who funded it. But now little by little, I have also seen a lot of
28 research, like the action research from the community. And then you ask what the community needs
29 to know and their needs to research - that would be more interesting. And in Radix, you have a lot of
30 different points of view that can really help in real risk reduction: the sharing of ideas and the sharing
31 of actual experiences can help the practitioners in doing their solutions and more can also help in
32 what to research on.

33 Now we're involved in one research, which is the ethics of closing a project. It's with a university in
34 Canada. You talk about when the donor finished a humanitarian project how you close the project just
35 after you give all the relief, then you go out of the community - or you also consider how your project
36 will really help the communities and how it will close properly and then make it into a transition of a
37 way forward something like that. That kind of research for me is very useful. And those things, it's all
38 also good to see in a blog - and people can relax and enjoy the research, not the usual traditional
39 research that you have.

40 So Radix is very radical, but at the same time very informative and it can really give you a lot of color
41 in understanding the things that you would want to learn. So just like what I've said in the ethical
42 consideration of closing a project. There's a lot of what the community would really want. What about
43 the project? And probably you will also see, do you really need the project. And sometimes,
44 amazingly we spend a lot of money on things that people do not really like. So, it's a good thing if we
45 base a lot of our intervention on a good research, and then you make the research come from the
46 community. So it's a very enlightening thing. If we always involve the people we want to serve or the
47 people who want to benefit from the research in the first part of it, like building the conceptual
48 framework and things like that. So I think, what is more for me as a reflection of things, is how can we
49 use it on our end as CSOs or NGOs in different countries. And also practitioners in DRR, as well as
50 the most vulnerable in the communities, how can they use the information that they see here, how
51 they can contribute and how can they use it? The interaction would be very phenomenal if they can
52 really have access to this, so that's why it's very good to see that you have also improved the website
53 and it becomes more interesting. Hopefully, people can have more access to it and also contribute to
54 it. That's it for now. Thank you very much.

55 **Ksenia:** Thank you so much, Mafourth, and it's great to have you here. Thank you for joining. And our
56 next guest - 'm so excited to introduce you! - is Bob Alexander, or as most of us know you, barefoot
57 bob, bfb. barefoot bob is an independent researcher, trainer, consultant, and recording artist who has
58 worked on participatory integrated studies of climate change and development, vulnerability reduction,
59 and resilience strengthening for over 25 years all around the world. bfb focuses on prospective risk-
60 managed community development, community-based risk management, and community-based

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3 adaptation, livelihood, food, nutrition, social service, access security, socioeconomic vulnerability,
4 identification, analysis, assessment, and reduction, and of course, effective risk communication and
5 community engagement approach. bfb is currently in Malawi, but pre-COVID, I think you lives and
6 worked pretty much in most of habitable regions of the world. And of course, I've got to meet you in
7 some of those regions, and we've got to work together, which was great. So over to you.

8 **bfb:** Let me start by saying thank you, and happy International Day of Disaster Reduction, whatever
9 part of that day you're in around the world! I was thinking back as each of you took your trips down
10 memory lane, and as Ben [Wisner] is about to take his as well after me. 20 years ago, I was also a
11 young graduate student and I was actually an economist. I was a disaster risk reduction economist
12 who was focusing almost exclusively on economic modeling for sustainable livelihoods in disaster-
13 prone areas. And I found it very difficult to have conversations with most people because when I
14 mentioned that I was studying the causes of disasters and the impacts and basically what could be
15 done to address them, people would stop me and say, "oh, yeah - you do disaster relief". And they
16 would put me into a box and expect me to stay in that box. So the email listservs that came in the
17 1990s were such a breath of fresh air, of being able to find people with whom I could communicate.
18 And then of course I found out about the papers and the books with Ben and others that helped me
19 say, 'Yes! There are other people who are focusing on these types of things!'

20 I'm thinking back now to what Maureen was just saying about what's wrong with this picture [disaster
21 as destruction]. I was thinking at that time that everything was wrong with this picture. Everything that
22 I was told it was about, wasn't what it was really about – it's about everything else that should be in
23 the picture that we should be talking about. So I came into Radix. At the time, I was working in post-
24 war Bosnia on a whole bunch of different things related to the confluence of conflict and natural
25 hazards and many different root causes of why people could not sustain development because of the
26 different disruptions of access that they were having. I was looking at this then, and when Radix came
27 out, I said, "Yes! This is the natural extension of these types of things!".

28 So even though I've been 'one poor correspondent' as an old song says - I've been a poor contributor
29 at times - I love to contribute in bunches and I've been very appreciative over the years of what's
30 been there. As things have continued, since we're supposed to talk about the journey, I remember a
31 time just before Radix got launched when I had gotten involved in a bunch of participatory projects.
32 And this shook my head back to my sustainable development perspective and the reason why I got
33 into this in the first place: I was trying to figure out how to help people assess and solve their own
34 problems rather than modeling for them from the outside. As I guess has been said about me, I'm
35 naturally what you could call radical I guess, because I'm not employed by any university and not
36 really employed by anyone at all. So I can be more free than others to be radical in some ways in
37 challenging the status quo in terms of publishing it but also in trying to think of how we can best reach
38 the local-level decision-makers. I was looking at that in a way similar to what Mayfourth was just
39 talking about in terms of the community-based approaches. And I realized at that point that
40 community-based disaster risk management, community-based adaptation, risk communication, and
41 community engagement seemed to be my path.

42 There were so many things that were lacking that could be done in those areas. Initially, it was going
43 in and trying to help people to help themselves, to understand how to do better assessments, and to
44 integrate across the different stakeholders, across time, etc. And then it moved more into the types of
45 communication. This is a lot of what I focus on now. But it's still trying to understand the integration of
46 how we make sure that the different people who are often neglected in the conventional ways of doing
47 things are not neglected and how we make sure that we're incorporating how things are changing
48 over time. So it's understanding assessment and decision-making through understanding the types of
49 things that are not normally considered and also looking at prospective risks because so much is
50 focused on the past conventionally, whereas we know that things are changing because of
51 development and because of creeping environmental problems including climate change. So how do
52 we incorporate these things that a lot of people are not necessarily incorporating?

53 My focus on community-based risk management has moved towards risk-managed community
54 development. And a lot of that is on good practices communication. One of the wonderful things is
55 that technology has allowed a lot of things to evolve. There are possibilities of using different types of
56 technologies to enable people to participate in the discussion and to participate in what's going on.
57 So, rather than top-down communication, there can be hybrid models of co-creative knowledge
58 approaches to figuring out what can be done including using songs, using videos, and using lots of
59 other things that people can actually produce and not just be given. So this has been fascinating for
60 me over the last few years, and, rather than being the passive occasional contributor, I'm dedicated

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3 now to the new Radix. I've already said that I will be helping in the early goings. So at the end of this
4 month, I will be hoping to encourage more people to get involved in contributing and discussing the
5 different ways that we can use these different types of communication approaches, tools, and
6 methods in order to get people involved in the conversation. So be on the lookout on Radix at the end
7 of this month and early next month. We will be looking at good practices communication and different
8 ways of doing it. And I hope people will submit a bunch of different songs, videos, poems, games, and
9 all kinds of different things that we can discuss so we can think about different ways to engage people
10 and how can we take this forward through Radix as we continue discussing this further.

11 **Jason:** Thank you so much. bfb, it's great to see you on the stream. Thanks for joining us. So our
12 final guest for the day is Ben Wisner. Ben is the second co-founder of Radix joining us today. We're
13 really glad to have you here. Ben has worked for 55 years on the use of village and neighborhood-
14 scale vernacular knowledge in resource and risk management. He also studies weather and how
15 national and international policy and practice acknowledge, respect, and learn from villages and
16 neighborhoods. His works include *Power and Need in Africa*, first published in 1988 at "At Risk:
17 Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters", editions of which he co-authored and
18 published in 1994 and 2004,⁹ and "The Routledge Handbook of Natural Hazards and Disaster
19 Reduction"¹⁰, which he co-edited and published in 2012, and "Vulnerability as Concept, Model, Metric,
20 and Tools"¹¹ publish in 2016. Ben as always, it's just a pleasure to see you again, and we're looking
21 forward to hearing your reflections on Radix.

22 **Ben Wisner [from herein Ben]:** All right. Thank you very much. To reflect on Radix, I really have to go
23 back to 1965 when I wrote my master's thesis on the justifiability of civil disobedience and informed
24 the Selective Service Administration in the US that I was a conscientious objector, and I wouldn't fight
25 in the Vietnam war. So that meant alternative service and I went off to Tanzania in 1966 and lived in a
26 cooperative village for two years. Now, I mentioned all that because what it underscores is my
27 concern for quite a while in my adult life with issues of violence and power. And in the particular case
28 of the Vietnam war, I'm talking about hard power and organized violence. It was in Tanzania that
29 sitting in Tanzanian village in 1967 I wrote something called "Reflections of Vietnam in Tanzanian
30 Village Life". It seemed to me, sitting in Tanzania at that time, reflecting on Vietnam, that there really
31 needed to be a total refusal, in Herbert Marcuse's sense, of the Great Refusal, a total rethinking of the
32 systems of exploitation and oppression that had brought this conflict to be. Everything I've seen since
33 has reinforced that perception I had at the time, although what's happened as I grew older and
34 eventually met Maureen [Fordham] and we created Radix, is that my understanding of power became
35 much more nuanced.

36 It wasn't simply hard power that needed to be contested. What one might call soft power that
37 influences what people take for granted, what people think of as common sense: in short, what they
38 believe. So one had to question the notion that disasters are natural. Not only that, but to question
39 other beliefs that people take for granted, such as the belief in development, belief in growth, belief in
40 progress, belief in the normality of safety. One needed to encourage people to stop and think about
41 those things and see them differently. And perhaps then organize with one another to act politically as
42 Maureen suggested. To change things one needed to shock people; so that was when a number of
43 us -- Phil O'Keefe (who sadly isn't with us any longer), Ken Westgate (who may be listening in from
44 Australia), and Alec Baird and I -- wrote a Bradford University Occasional Paper and went on to write
45 a paper in *Nature* and another one in *Disasters* declaring that no disaster is natural.¹² We were
46 attempting to shock. It was very extreme thing to say, and it caused people some dismay. Absolutely
47 no disaster is natural. I've recently been involved in a correspondence about near earth object
48 collisions. Collision with an asteroids, for instance, can't we consider that a *natural* disaster, I don't
49 want to get into the details, but I argued even that is not natural. We could talk about that for some
50 time. The point is that there are a number of beliefs that have to be contested.

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53 ⁹ Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T. and Davies, I. (2004). *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability,*
54 *and Disasters*. 2nd ed. Routledge.

55 ¹⁰ Wisner, B., Gaillard, JC and Kelman, I. (2012). *The Routledge Handbook of Natural Hazards and Disaster*
56 *Reduction*. Routledge.

57 ¹¹ Wisner, B. (2016). Vulnerability as Concept, Model, Metric, and Tools. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of
58 Natural Hazard Science.

59 ¹² O'Keefe, P., Westgate, K. and Wisner, B. (1976). Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters. *Nature* 260
60 (5552): 566–567.

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3 With the mainstreaming of the notion of vulnerability, we obtained the key to understanding disaster
4 and why no disaster is natural. Vulnerability has been mainstreamed into the United Nations system
5 and elsewhere. But with mainstreaming what's happened is the shock value has dissipated. And what
6 I find with the new attractive entertaining website, the new Radix, I have to say, I don't know where
7 the shock value is. And I'll leave that open for discussion. Don't we still need to shock people, wake
8 them up? Even before we can begin this participatory dialogue.

9 The other thing I'd like to say about both the old Radix and the new Radix, is that the radical solutions
10 weren't forthcoming. We had lots of radical interpretations of disaster. But as far as I'm concerned,
11 really are no radical solutions. Now in part, that's the function of the Great Refusal I mentioned earlier.
12 There have been many solutions proposed. Are they radical? We haven't decided what a radical
13 solution is and I've been discussing with JC [Gaillard] a bit about the new website and asking if is it
14 possible for a number of us to work together to come up with a system of assessing disaster risk
15 reduction interventions and ranking them by the extent to which they simultaneously deal with the
16 creation of new risks. I mean changing land use in order to reduce the impact of sea level rise is
17 undoubtedly a necessary thing, a good thing, perhaps, but does it simultaneously affect decision-
18 making and the allocation of people to places in the space economy and roles in territorial
19 management? Does it actually affect those systems in such a way that it won't be necessary to take
20 that kind of intervention again later? So I leave those two thoughts out there as perhaps challenges to
21 the new Radix going forward to find a way to reclaim the power to shock and also to develop some
22 way of assessing so-called solutions in a way that allows us to consider them truly radical solutions.
23 Thank you.

24 **Ksenia:** Thank you so much, Ben; as always, listening to you is amazing. And thank you for joining us
25 today. I love what you're saying about reclaiming the power to shock, because we are very often
26 scared of shocks. And we try and maybe tiptoe around the problem a little bit too much, but I think you
27 rightly pointed out that tip-toeing does not work. So thank you. And we will reflect on this, I think in
28 questions and answers, and we will invite all our guests back on the screen. We have a few questions
29 that we'd like to ask. We don't have that much time. We will perhaps go for about 10 minutes and just
30 ask a few questions, but of course, we would like to continue this discussion offline as well in the best
31 traditions of Radix, it will go on.

32 **JC:** I'd like to pick up Ben's final points and a sort of shock effect. It's a question for all of you: the
33 priorities and the key questions in the coming years, in the coming decades; it should be for all of us
34 researchers and practitioners as well. Because again, as Mayfourth said, it's not only about research
35 as it's about practitioners as well.

36 **Rohit:** If I may reflect a bit, JC. My major concern is that we are talking too big these days and have
37 got a lot of very nice words to play with. The question is whether we translate these on the ground, for
38 which a lot of bridging needs to be done. While we definitely need to talk big and reflect on the larger
39 issues at hand, we also need to think of way of finding local solutions, which unfortunately are not
40 being discussed and implemented. Whether climate change or unsustainable development models,
41 we need to go beyond merely spelling out the challenges and find innovative solutions that can be
42 implemented at policy, planning and project levels. Moreover, the discourse should not be limited to
43 English language speakers, and need to embrace the vocabulary of various languages.

44 **Maureen:** I had a thought after Ben was talking, about the importance of maintaining the shock value,
45 maintaining the radical. And I guess what we're always going to do is try to get more people to
46 recognize the legitimacy of the radical argument, the radical case. But then you get what seems to
47 happen is you then get locked into this process of appropriation. The power of radical ideas is
48 attractive to those who seek, and hold, power. So the radical that's appropriated suddenly starts to
49 mean something else. All the other terms, vulnerability, sustainability, and resilience, soon get merged
50 into the mainstream. When it gets into the mainstream, how can it remain radical? Okay. Just
51 throwing another problem out there.

52 **Ksenia:** Thanks Maureen. I want to pick up on that then with the next question, really. In recent years,
53 we've seen proliferation of descriptions, of kind of disaster studies, so 'radical', 'critical', 'innovative',
54 you name it, disaster studies has been at all! But I think that we are hopefully trying to achieve the
55 same thing. So how do we move into the future in that, we're not perhaps branding ourselves, but are
56 actually working in solidarity, because maybe it's something we don't really talk about enough in
57 disaster scholarship? And again, I'm just throwing it at all of you.

58 **Mayfourth:** I just remember it, when you talk about words and descriptive things, for example, the
59 nexus of talking about sustainable development, the nexus of sustainable development, disaster risk
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3 reduction, and the Paris agreement, all having the nexus of it making a grand solution for really
4 addressing the risks. But then again, as I've told you a while ago, my framework is more in the
5 community. When you talk with the community, talking about sustainable development, disaster risk
6 reduction, and things like that, they will just say: our problem is that we can no longer fish because of
7 the disasters, they have extreme weather events that affect their livelihood. And having more effect
8 when disaster comes to them, making them poorer and poorer. The thing is, sometimes all this
9 language and the things that you've researched when you go to the community and the people that
10 you want to really benefit from your research, it's actually lost in translation, as I've seen also in one of
11 those words. So it would be really very interesting to always have an involvement with them. And
12 that's why I'm also trying to also look into how we can engage these users on the platform that you
13 have.

14 **JC:** I agreed with Maureen's point about the proliferation of terms' objectives, new concepts. And to
15 me, this is antithetical somehow with the shock effect that Ben was talking about. And many of you
16 know my point about how we all claim to be critical, and it was definitely critical in the 1970s, but with
17 the proliferation of all these objectives and some concepts I don't think we are as critical as we claim
18 to be. And the very fact that we all claim and we've all come to agree that disasters are social
19 constructs, but at the same time, using all these concepts and terms and objectives that we take for
20 universal, doesn't make any sense to me. This is epistemological nonsense. We take things
21 universally and we apply them across very diverse cultures or around the world. But at the same time,
22 take these as a social construct. That doesn't make sense to me. So the more things we attached to
23 this core concept of disasters and all over the world in a blanket fashion doesn't make sense. There's
24 something wrong somewhere.

25 **Mayfourth:** I agree with you, JC. I'm sorry to interrupt. Is it okay? I agree with you that the thing is
26 maybe people in the areas that experience a lot of disasters would definitely understand the shocking
27 statements that Ben would say there's no such thing as natural disasters; if they were given the whole
28 story of it, then they would say yes, after then, it's something like if we do something like this in our
29 environment, it will go back to us as simple as that in their culture, in whatever culture there is.
30 Sometimes those shocking statements that we have, especially those who theorized a lot about
31 everything, if we go back to those people who do practical things, then they also can give you a lot of
32 shocking answers that are very practical and very usable.

33 **bfb:** From the beginning of this, I was trying to figure it out, I like Ben's question. Of course, I love
34 shocking, I love being shocked, but I was thinking of the question, who are we trying to shock? And it
35 seems there are different audiences and it seems that's coming out in our discussion as well. In terms
36 of the people who are coming to the website, they're already in the choir. I'm not sure who the new
37 members of the Radix website are, but I would believe that many of them are coming there for a
38 reason. It's because they're already part of the shock, the shockeies, or the shockers. So I'm not sure
39 much of what we're going to put there is going to shake them out of that. I think we might be looking
40 more to inspire, to think further along with where, and to go further within that. So we haven't failed if
41 we haven't shocked them, but we've done well to continue to inspire them in those phases. If we're
42 thinking along this thread of communities, then I liked what Mayfourth was saying and others in terms
43 of, well, finding out what is it that shocking. It's rather than us putting out something to them that we
44 don't need to use our terminology, but we can find out from them. What's shocking and what types of
45 things we need to actually do is the hybrid knowledge, the co-creation understanding like what it is.
46 That's different understandings, different perceptions that we can figure out together. I think it's
47 possible maybe we could use since this is about Radix, then we could use the site, we could use
48 Twitter, to try to engage with people and find out more about what is shocking. And so maybe in terms
49 of that preaching to the choir, maybe that isn't accurate, maybe we could actually be using that to find
50 out from everybody and engage in that conversation is what is it? Can we be doing maybe outside of
51 this site in real life, out there somewhere that can be shocking and actually inspiring at the same time.

52 **Ben:** Could I just clarify a little bit? There's a great deal of co-optation which has taken place over the
53 last 10 or 20 years. And so as JC and others have said, it's no longer controversial at all to assert that
54 marginal people tend to be allocated to marginal places in the space economy, or that no disaster is
55 natural. These are essential maxims, you might say a set of summary notions that represent the
56 conclusions of the work that I've done over 50-odd years. No longer shocking. I wrote recently that I
57 found that the UNDRR had done something on resilience I found really problematic, in this respect. If
58 you look at the notion of resilience and follow it through, it raises all sorts of questions about blaming
59 the victim about about about relieving the state of its responsibilities. And so I pushed back against
60 that in something that I wrote. I think those sorts of things ought to find a place on Radix. Every time

we find that language is being corrupted and being misused, we need to push back. In this way, we have a responsibility to respond and to put reflections of this kind on the website. That's not going to shock the particular people who are attracted to the Radix website. Probably the notion of inspiring people is a better idea than shocking them. But what I was reacting to in what UNISDR wrote is the wholesale appropriation of a lot of concepts such as resilience and their dilution, so that the human consequences, the pain, the suffering, and indeed the shock of disaster situations are no longer on the surface. That's what I was trying to get at.

Ksenia: Okay. Thank you so much, Ben. And I'm I guess all of us are hoping that perhaps Accord would somehow stimulate this reflections further, and help us to go back to these conversations and really reintegrate them. And I absolutely hate to bring this to a close but I am this person who will. Thank you so much for all your time. This has been a fascinating, wonderful discussion as always! And we're just so grateful for your time and for joining us today, and we always learn so much from you all. To finish this livestream, we couldn't not ask bfb to perhaps do a little song for us, so over to you bfb and thank you again, everyone, for joining us today.

bfb: What I did was, I just took the general ideas that we had discussed; and one of the main things were to make sure that local people, the focus is on locally driven agendas, what's the priorities of the people themselves, not the priorities of the outsiders, the external people. And similarly, one of the other things was about focusing on making sure that the local researchers are not taken advantage of that it isn't people from the outside who were using them and taking credit for their work. But ensuring that somehow these questions are leading towards thinking through how to do both of those things in addition to some other things. So I just took the 49 questions or whatever there were [in the Accord] and tried to lump them together as much as I could to make them fit into a song framework of two verses and a bridge.

ACCORD!: The Disaster Risk Reduction Studies Accord Song

A way forward [AN ACCORD!]

For disaster risk reduction studies

Starts by asking how the local people benefit

Who decides that there's a need for research, who does it, when, & who will benefit?

How is the disaster defined, for whom, & how could this research affect how they're hit?

How does what's proposed build on what's already done and what's being studied now?

Are local objectives, realities, views, & ways of knowing driving the design somehow? [This is...]

A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies

Moving toward [AN ACCORD!] – for research that's driven locally

To ensure [AN ACCORD!] – respect for local priorities

A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies

[Now ask: are - local researchers - & processes being strengthened?]

How are local research language, knowledge, and processes prioritized?

Who is involved in how data is decided upon, collected, and analyzed?

Who decides who's involved in what parts of the research & allocation of funds?

How do social structures get strengthened & ethics procedures decide what gets done?

[Now we have a way, we have...]

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4 A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies

5 Moving toward [AN ACCORD!] – to focus on better diversity

6 To ensure [AN ACCORD!] – that credit for work's given equitably

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8 A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies

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11 [finally, ask how local researchers & people benefit from findings]

12 Who should understand, who retains the rights,

13 & who gets acknowledged in research finding dissemination?

14 How do we share, with whom, in which language,

15 & who leads authorship of any subsequent written publications?

16 Who chooses which, who attends,

17 & who is up front for any media and conference presentations?

18 & who will follow up on policies, practices, partners, & people

19 that have been impacted in this research location?

20 [These questions should not be ignored – let's ask each one before – 'cause it's...]

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23 A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies

24 Moving toward [AN ACCORD!] – for research that's driven locally

25 To ensure [AN ACCORD!] – respect for local priorities

26 A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies

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28 A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies

29 Moving toward [AN ACCORD!] – to focus on better diversity

30 To ensure [AN ACCORD!] – that credit for work's given equitably

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33 A way forward [AN ACCORD!] – for disaster risk reduction studies – AN ACCORD!

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