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Places of Vulnerability or Vulnerability of Places? Considerations on Reconstruction After a 'Natural' Disaster[1]

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Disasters have moved from the periphery to the centre of attention of anthropologists, especially those interested in urban settings. Urban areas are considered to be the most affected by the impact of a natural hazard. This article argues that disasters are not just natural phenomena but result from a natural hazard affecting people under a constructed condition of vulnerability. Reconstruction then, should avoid reproducing vulnerability. However, as the examples in this paper will show, there is no common understanding of what is a 'safe' place and what 'vulnerability' means to the different actors involved in the reconstruction process.
Key words: disaster, vulnerability, reconstruction, relocation, anthropology of disaster.

Introduction

Disasters are often the outcome of natural hazards that affect vulnerable groups and reveal the relationship between urban structure, vulnerabilities and risks. Hurricanes, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are environmental events that can become disasters when the community they affect is unable to cope with them. Thus, for a hazard to become a disaster it has to affect vulnerable people. As Terry Cannon puts it: 'hazards are natural, but in general disasters are not, and should not be seen as the inevitable outcome of a hazard's impact' (1994: 13). Therefore, a disaster is not just a 'natural' event; it is the result of the combination of a human population and potentially destructive agents, such as natural hazards. This combination, however, does not necessarily lead to a disaster, which becomes unavoidable in a context of vulnerability. Oliver-Smith and Hoffman define a disaster 'as a process leading to an event that involves a combination of a potentially destructive agent from the natural or technological sphere and a population in a socially produced condition of vulnerability' (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999: 4). In order to understand a disaster situation, it is therefore necessary to focus more on human vulnerability than on natural phenomena.

Past experiences have shown that urban settings are more vulnerable than rural settings. Thus, after a disaster urban reconstruction should be concerned with the reduction of vulnerability. While most donor guidelines emphasize this fact, other important considerations may be missing. As a result, discourses are not translated into practice. Moreover, political decisions and corruption often jeopardize reconstruction practices.

[1] I would like to thank Peter Heath for putting right the English.

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This article focuses on a specific aspect of urban reconstruction. Beyond the obviously technical feature of physical reconstruction, it looks at political, symbolic and cultural issues. Answers must be found to some key questions: where to build, what to build, how to build and for whom to build. The question of place is a crucial aspect of reconstruction that influences the cultural dimension more than the material one. The notion of reconstruction involves restructuring, reorganizing and reshaping. Reconstruction is not only about 'rebuilding', for it must take into account issues of vulnerability in order to reduce future risks. The following section will deal briefly with this notion.

Avoiding the Reconstruction of Vulnerability

Vulnerability is fundamental in the study of disaster: where there is no vulnerability, there is no disaster. Vulnerability also plays a key role in the reconstruction process, which should attempt to overcome the very vulnerability that has caused the disaster. If the reconstruction is not correctly done, the victims of a natural hazard can expect to experience the same situation again. In other words, if the reconstruction does not improve the social and material conditions of vulnerability, it will 'reconstruct vulnerability'.

Vulnerability as a key notion in understanding why a natural hazard triggers a disaster is a relatively recent development, particularly among social anthropologists and geographers who have addressed the social dimension of disasters (See Oliver-Smith 1996; Hewitt 1983; Blaikie *et al.* 1994; McEntire 2001; García Acosta 2002, 2005). It has been observed that hazards of similar severity can produce dramatically different outcomes in social and economic contexts as different as California and Nicaragua. This suggests that the degree of destruction is as much a function of the human context as the hazard itself (Varley 1994: 2). What kills people in an earthquake is not always the violent movement of the earth; often it is the destruction of buildings. Focusing more on human vulnerability than on natural phenomena as such suggests that, particularly in urban settings, disasters are more a feature of society than the result of an isolated natural hazard or of the physical environment.

It follows that, in order to reduce the effects of natural phenomena, we must understand what causes vulnerability. This is not an easy task because vulnerability is a very complex notion. The most common definition is that proposed by Blaikie *et al.*: 'By "vulnerability" we mean the characteristics of a person or group in terms of their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist, and recover from the impact of a natural hazard. It involves a combination of factors that determine the degree to which someone's life and livelihood is put

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at risk by a discrete and identifiable event in nature or in society' (1994: 9). This definition does not specify, however, that vulnerability is a dynamic process and not a static condition. Moreover, 'vulnerability' does not stand only for vulnerability to hazards; it also involves a series of resultant social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, physical and technological processes that take place before, during and after a disaster (McEntire 2001; Palliyaguru and Amaratunga 2011: 272). It is, therefore, essential to emphasize the overarching nature of vulnerability, which integrates physical or environmental vulnerability and social vulnerability. Physical vulnerability concerns the material aspect, building patterns and models of land occupation. Research that focuses on physical vulnerability attempts to identify the resistance of various materials and structures in different locations. Social vulnerability, in turn, is shaped by social, political and economic factors and is the result of social inequalities. More precisely, socio-economic factors generate the exposure of certain groups to damage and affect their ability to respond and recover from a disaster situation. Moreover, there is a cultural vulnerability linked to the influence of disasters on identity, fear, loss of reference points and feeling of belonging to a land and to a particular community. Vulnerability should therefore be seen to include not only physical risk but also the degree to which individuals are exposed to the risks raised by their social, economic and cultural condition (see Garcia Acosta 2002).

Where to Build after a Disaster? Contrasted Logics

After destruction, there is an important choice to make: stay and rebuild *in situ* or build in a new place. Despite the hazards, human groups usually avoid moving; they tend to refuse to abandon some places or, if they have left such places, they later return to them. At best, relocation is considered with suspicion; at worst, it is rejected altogether. Victims often wish reconstruction to be done in the original place or as close as possible to it, even if this involves risks. While reconstruction-promoters generally give priority to geographically stable and safe places in order to reduce physical vulnerability, research has shown that people want to stay in risky places despite the dangers and sad memories (Signorelli 1992; Oliver-Smith 1982; Revet 2007; Boscoboinik 2009, among others).

In the following section, I will try to explain this choice drawing on different case studies of resistance to relocation after a disaster and in the aftermath of relocation. For now, I will point out that, while the victims' wish to remain at the scene of the disaster generally seems 'irrational' and 'illogical' to relief actors, from a cultural point of view, such a choice

appears to be rational and logical, particularly if it is understood in terms of the opposition between nature and culture. The destructive phenomenon puts into question man's confidence in nature and in his ability to master it. A disaster can be viewed as a most serious crisis faced by man, as it sweeps away the cultural and organized space created by groups over long periods of time. What becomes important for survivors is that the area is reborn and, in particular, that the place does not become a kind of 'sanctuary of catastrophe': if physical death could not be avoided, cultural death will be!; by their presence, people show that 'culture' has won over 'nature' (Signorelli 1992). Salvation lies, then, not in flight but in continuity. Monuments that have resisted destruction have an essential role to play when, as elements of material culture, they continue to exist through the ages and uncertainties.

Several case studies show that plans to relocate a population that has suffered a disaster are met with strong resistance. Three examples will help to illustrate this point. The first one was observed during my fieldwork in Honduras, after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 (Boscoboinik 2009). The second example is the case study of a neighbourhood in Venezuela after the 1999 disaster studied by Sandrine Revet (2007). The last one is an analysis carried out by Anthony Oliver-Smith (1982) following the earthquake-avalanche of May 1970 in Peru.[2]

In the Department of Olancho, in the North of Honduras, relocation was problematic. The organizations responsible for reconstruction had proposed the construction of houses in the city of Catacamas for the peasant and indigenous communities affected by hurricane Mitch. Such proposed forced migration was not appreciated by the members of the community, despite the appeal the city may have had. Peasants had their sources of work, although scarce, in the fields. In addition, some belonged to cooperatives and to networks and other community and religious structures on which they felt they could rely. Indigenous communities owned the land on which they lived and did not want to leave it. They knew that if they left, their homes would be destroyed to prevent them from returning there to live.

In spite of important migrations from rural to urban settlements, these two communities saw transfer to the city as a loss and as a general weakening of their living

[2] Housing reconstruction after a disaster is discussed in the context of the long-term effects of the reconstruction. The reconstruction of villages and cities, whether *in situ* or relocated, usually takes several years. It is only in the long term that we can analyze and evaluate the results of the reconstruction projects.

conditions. Their predicament is a clear illustration of the *top-down* approach usually applied after disaster situations. Far too often relocation and prevention programmes are devised in this way, as they are usually run by highly centralized organizations with little participation by the people affected by the disaster. In this case, the organizations that proposed building houses in the city took it for granted that it was the best option to reduce vulnerability. They had not, however, assessed the situation on the ground and the consequences that such migration could have on the displaced population, nor did they seek the advice of the main interested parties. Their logic of 'breakdown' and 'secure land' made no allowance for other key considerations.

Promoters and victims usually follow two contrasting logics, which have been analysed by Sandrine Revet (2007). The victims' logic is that of continuity, of 'living with'; the promoters' logic is one of breakdown. In the logic of breakdown, there has to be a break with the pre-existing frameworks that have allowed or facilitated the disaster. Consequently, it is important to rebuild 'elsewhere' and 'otherwise'. Palliyaguru and Amaratunga also explain clearly these two logics: 'It is common for affected communities to demand a return to normalcy almost immediately, although experts often recognize that disaster is an opportunity to "build back better". There is a choice between whether reconstruction is just for restoration to the status quo or for enhancing development' (2011: 270-271). Restoration to the status quo involves the replacement of damaged or destroyed assets, often called 'replacement-reconstruction', whereas enhancing development involves adjusting the reconstruction efforts towards the future, often called 'development-reconstruction'. Nevertheless, the needs of the population frequently differ from the priorities of the authorities and of the agencies involved in the reconstruction process. Moreover, there is a temporality problem. While experts are planning what and how to build in ways that encourage development (a process that could take several years), the people who need reconstruction sometimes find other solutions, following the logic of 'living with'. Thus, by the time the planned reconstruction of the infrastructure officially starts, the population involved have already rebuilt, for after the destruction caused by the disaster, material reconstruction is a great concern. For the victims, material reconstruction implies a return to normality, understood as a return to routine: reopening schools and shops, restarting the usual community life, and so on. Their priority is to solve the housing problem in order to be able to organize themselves and make plans again. They long to feel that the disaster is over and that life can continue mostly as it was.

The 'continuity logic' is adopted by most residents in the affected areas. It implies an adaptation to changes dynamically in the sense of continuity. Specifically, people get together, rebuild their homes and repair the infrastructure (electricity, sewerage, and so on) as best as they can. *La Veguita*, a neighbourhood in the Venezuelan city of Macuto studied by Sandrine Revet (2007), is a good example of the logic of 'living with'. In 1999, torrential rains fell on the north coast of Venezuela causing rivers to break their banks with consequent mudslides. Vargas, a region between the mountains and the sea, was the most exposed. In total, 80% of the population was affected and material damage was very severe (Revet 2007: 13). Crucial questions needed to be answered concerning either the complete destruction or the reconstruction of the neighbourhood. As early as January 2000, the inhabitants of *La Veguita* returned to their homes to assess the extent of the damage. An informal association promptly came into being with the purpose of rehabilitating the neighbourhood. First, water and electricity were restored so that people could come back to live there. Each member of the informal association provided help in the form of skills and expertise, and families soon began to move back to the neighbourhood. The inhabitants had, therefore, created order out of the chaos left by the mudslides. While rebuilding their neighbourhood, they also built new relationships and created a social community. Together they defeated the moods of nature, in the process rebuilding part of their shared history (Revet 2007: 237-239). Their attitude clearly shows that physical reconstruction goes hand-in-hand with social reconstruction, an important aspect that is usually neglected in the top-down approach mentioned earlier (for more details, see Boscoboinik 2009). In addition to this, it is worth noting that the alliance and solidarity of the inhabitants could be seen as 'revenge' against the destructive episode.

However, things were not so simple. The situation before the disaster was problematic and reconstruction was meant to change the established patterns. So, the will of the residents was opposed to that of the donors, government institutions and NGOs. The latter aimed to transform, clean and make safe the physical infrastructure, and to educate the inhabitants to the perception of risk (Revet 2007: 242-243). The way to achieve this aim, it was thought, was to rebuild in a secure location elsewhere. Indeed, in some cases rebuilding in the place of the disaster exposes people to great danger and relocation helps to limit the physical vulnerability of the affected groups. In other cases, however, it increases the social and cultural vulnerability of the affected groups. As Revet points out, while for the institutions security is linked to geographical space, the inhabitants express a feeling of 'security' when talking about social links and community solidarity (Revet 2007: 219).

For the survivors, rebuilding the place that existed before the disaster is a re-appropriation of that place. *La Veguita*, like other places, bears the deep scars of the mudslides but also testifies to the continuation of life, despite the destruction. The conversion of scars into places of life marks the logic attitude of 'continuity', of 'living with', as opposed to the logic of 'breakdown' favoured by government institutions and NGOs.

During the process of destruction and reconstruction, the area has experienced a true transformation, which is material with significant new construction (buildings, a community centre and a dam) but is also social because the neighbourhood, as a place of identification and reference, strengthens its inhabitants' identity. (Revet 2007: 262-263).

Oliver-Smith (1982) discusses a case of successful resistance to a government-organized resettlement project following the Peruvian earthquake-avalanche disaster of May 1970. Almost all the urban areas in this traditional highland zone were reduced to piles of rubble. The city of Yungay was completely buried by an immense avalanche. Eventually, the authorities decided that the new capital of Yungay would be located in the Tingua camp some 15 kilometres to the south of its original location. The survivors, who were living in another camp called Yungay Norte, immediately and definitely rejected this decision.

The aid personnel tried to explain the need for such a step and assured that all services and institutions of the old Yungay would be fully reconstituted in the new capital in Tingua. They, however, argued in vain because the Tingua resettlement project represented further disruption and greater stress for the survivors of the tragedy, who gave practical reasons for their opposition to the move to Tingua and mostly psychological and cultural reasons for remaining in a place close to the buried city. From a sociocultural and psycho-cultural perspective, the community in Yungay Norte, the settlement closest to the site of the old city and the place where most survivors had chosen to live, carried old Yungay and the disaster at its cultural core. Oliver-Smith states, 'Continuity of tradition, a sense of the past, was a central theme in the emotional investment that the survivors had in the Yungay Norte location' (1982: 98). The place, the climate and the hills are all very much part of the Yungainos sociocultural identity. The will to remain near the familiar dead was also a strong motivation to stay near the old city, to keep an unbroken line of continuity with the past. Leaving the place would have meant betraying their dead. The scar left by the avalanche became an important ceremonial location for the renewal of the ties that the survivors maintained with their lost families; it became a national monument. Oliver-Smith concludes that 'the significance of the resettlement conflict lay in the fact that Yungaino leaders resisted

with all their might a project that threatened their socioeconomic structure as well as their much assaulted sense of cultural and personal identity' (1982: 99). The Yungainos felt that if the capital was relocated, the entire structure of rural-urban relationships would have to be redefined, and urban life radically restructured. The Tingua site for the new capital would have disrupted traditional social, economic and political patterns of interrelationships both in the capital and between the rural and urban sectors of society. When, during his research in Yungay, Oliver-Smith asked a peasant why he would not consider moving, he swept his arm over the scar left by the avalanche and exclaimed 'Here there is life!' (1982: 103).

Regardless of the preferences of the future inhabitants, however, key decisions are generally taken by governmental authorities or by those who support the costs of reconstruction. Such decisions tend to follow a rational logic that responds to specific interests. The next section illustrates two examples of relocation.

Two Cases of Relocation: Gibellina (Italy) and Luz (Portugal)

The earthquake on 14th and 15th January 1968 reduced the Sicilian village of Gibellina to ruins. From the ruins, the then mayor, Ludovico Corrao, decided to create some sort of outdoor museum. The artist Alberto Burri, who was in charge of this work in the late 1980s, covered most of the old town with white concrete and called it *Il Grande Cretto* (The Great Cretto). As Cantavella (2012) suggests in her description of this place, the result is both amazing and macabre: one walks the streets of old Gibellina among huge concrete cubes that hide the destroyed houses. Its position, its size and the contrast between the concrete and the green surroundings has a striking effect on the visitor. The life and memory of Gibellina remain fixed forever under white concrete. Today, Gibellina Vecchia is a tourist destination and a place of interest for architects and artists as a form of contemporary land art. Its location on top of a hill has hampered economic development but has allowed the villagers to keep alive their identity, tradition and culture. Unfortunately, these aspects were not considered at the time of reconstruction.

Gibellina Nuova (New Gibellina) is what comes after a disaster, a naïve and misguided attempt to reproduce a village by moving it to another place. The idea was to duplicate the Gibellina destroyed by the earthquake. The result, Gibellina Nuova, is an illusion, a utopia. This new village was built 18 kilometres away from Gibellina Vecchia (Old Gibellina). According to some Italian journalists (see, for example, the archive of the *Corriere della Sera*), the village was rebuilt in that location purely for political and economic reasons.

It was built on land owned by Ignazio and Nino Salvo, also known as the 'Salvo cousins', who were not entirely unfamiliar with the workings of Cosa Nostra (the Sicilian Mafia). Moreover, companies that also had connections with Cosa Nostra carried out the construction work. When, after years spent in temporary housing, the inhabitants of the destroyed Gibellina Vecchia saw the new city, they saw their hopes fade. Some decided to emigrate and never returned. Gibellina Nuova is a garden in the desert; it is the pride of Mayor Ludovico Corrao, who argued that an earthquake not only destroys but also gives an opportunity to create. He made of Gibellina Nuova a symbol of modernity, of architecture and of intellectuality. The Mayor had indeed asked the most important contemporary artists to offer their input in creating the new Gibellina. Works of art are found in every corner of Gibellina Nuova: the Church by Ludovico Quaroni, the square by Vittorio Gregotti and Giuseppe Samonà and the star-shaped sculpture by Pietro Consagra at the entrance of the city. The buildings, the theatre, sculptures, gardens and everything else in Gibellina Nuova is signed by a known artist. It is a 'city museum' with contemporary works of art that give this Sicilian village a strange and unusual atmosphere. The feeling of sadness and desolation experienced by most visitors (just look, for example, at the comments on www.tripadvisor.fr) is due to the that the new city being no more than an 'Open Museum' devoid of people. The monuments of the reconstruction seem to embody the absence or the neglect of the people's memories. The reconstruction did not respect Gibellina's past, its culture or its people. Apparently, during the construction process, it was forgotten that a village is made not only of houses: it has a history, it encapsulated a cultural community and has links with the environment. Thus, Gibellina represents the failure of a reconstruction that made no allowance for the fact that a village is formed by the soul of its people. As Cantavella says, the reconstruction shows a significant distance between the conception of a given place and the actual life that unfolds within it. She quotes a Gibellina inhabitant who clearly express this distance, '*Queste cose* che noi vediamo sono delle *cose* che vengono dal cielo non dalla vita della gente (...) Quindi la gente ha ricevuto tutte *queste cose* come *cose* assolutamente estranee alle proprie sensibilità, al proprio interesse, in un'epoca in cui la gente aveva tanti problemi, mmm, concreti (...) Non si é pensato minimamente ad avere degli incontri con gli abitanti, sulla

cultura, sulla mentalità, sulle abitudini... é come se tu avevi un pacchetto già pre-selezionato e lo hai installato in un posto'[3] (Cantavella 2012: 18).

Articles in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* tell the stories of people from Gibellina Vecchia living in Gibellina Nuova, who say that the new village is beautiful and modern but is empty, which does not make sense to them. For instance, there is no coffee bar for them to meet, play cards or chat (http://archiviostorico.corriere.it). Cantavella quotes: 'non c'è nessuna piazza che sia un luogo di vita collettiva'[4] (2012: 17).

The village of Luz, in Portugal, offers another illustrative example. As Luz was to be submerged following the building of the huge Alqueva dam, the village had to be moved to another location. Nova Luz, a copy of the original village, was built two kilometres away: the distribution and the names of the streets were maintained, the neighbours were the same, the houses were replicated and the surfaces were respected. Spatially, Nova Luz is a good imitation of the original village. The streets are, however, empty. Although the new houses are more comfortable than the old ones, the inhabitants have the feeling of having lost with the change. This stresses the point that, even when villages are completely 'transplanted', the soul is never there. Clara Saraiva (2003, 2007), who studied this case, states: 'a aldeia nova não é aldeia – não tem alma'[5] (Saraiva 2003: 129).

The case of Nova Luz is very similar to that of Gibellina Nuova, despite the fact that what caused relocation was not a 'natural' disaster but a man–made event; the decision, that is, to construct a dam. The slow and difficult appropriation of public spaces reflects an project of urbanization that ignored the way of living and the experiences of the people of Luz (Saraiva 2007: 96); it did not take into account the places where men or women usually met, the collective spaces of sociability. The new core of the village is a wide-open space, without intimacy; a place too big and unwelcoming that is made worse by the absence of trees and shadows – the single olive tree transplanted there, it is noted, cannot meet on its own the

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3 '*These things* that we see are *things* that come from the sky, not from the life of the people (...) So, people have received all *these things* as *things* entirely foreign to their sensibilities, to their interests, at a time when people had so many, mmm, real problems (...) There wasn't the slightest intention to meet with the people, to discuss their culture, their mentality, their customs ... it is as if you had a pre-selected package that you had installed in a place'. (Italics in the original).

[4] 'There is no piazza as a place for collective life'.

[5] 'The new village is not a village – it has no soul'.

function of establishing a friendly and inviting space (Saraiva 2007: 97). After rebuilding the village, the local identity has to be rebuilt. Giving a voice to the people of Luz, Amendoeira, Aguiar and Alfenim quote: 'Village life has been completely transformed, although people are the same. Relations between the people of the village have changed, they have nothing to do with what happened before. In our old village, the gardens were separate from houses, often in different streets, and this facilitated contact between people, especially women. Now the gardens are at the back of the houses, so people are not encouraged to go out' (2008: 6, personal translation from French).

The Meaning of 'Place'

Resistance to relocation and what can happen when relocation takes places can be best understood by considering the notion of 'place'. The opposition between reconstruction promoters (authorities and aid agencies) on one side and victims on the other is based on their different understanding of what *place* means, and consequently what vulnerability implies. For the promoters, a *place* is only a geographical location that can be dangerous. They focus exclusively on physical vulnerability. For the victims, a *place* is a symbolic and identity space where relationships are built, a space which is anchored in the past and gives meaning to the future. Their preferences show a concern for social and cultural vulnerability. To stay, despite the danger, follows a rational logic even though for the authorities, and in terms of common sense, such a decision may seem irrational. They desire a continuity of their past and of their identity. They feel more vulnerable if they lose their identity and their link to the land.

A city, a village or a neighbourhood are more than just a conglomeration of alleyways and houses. They are shaped by human relationships, by the people who inhabit them and by the attendant power struggles. They are, I stress, primarily a set of relationships, of people, of networks, of friendships and of conflicts. They are, then, *places,* in the anthropological sense of the term; that is, as Marc Augé (1992) would say, relational and historical spaces, concerned with identity. Accordingly, the specificity of a space makes it a reference point and a source of identification for citizens living in the area. Augé's concept of place is clearly charged with emotion and memory. If a place can be defined as relational, historical and

concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be thus defined will be a non-place[6]. The concept of a non-place, as opposed to a place, is devoid of emotion and memory[7].

Let me expand on this issue. Augé maintains that as super-modernity constructs places anew without incorporating their former identity, these places become non-places. He gives, as examples, supermarkets and highways that are devoid of local identity and might be constructed anywhere in the world. In this sense, the relocated villages described above are non-places. Gibellina Nuova is more like a museum than a village. Both Gibellina Nuova and Nova Luz have no link to a past or to a memory; their inhabitants have not appropriated them. Both villages have lost the 'spirit of place' that could be defined as 'all tangible and intangible elements that give meaning, value and emotion to the place' (Amendoeira, Aguiar and Alfenim 2008: 1). On the other hand, 'places' of relations, and history make identity possible; both, that is, the identity of the group and the identity of the individual. It follows that, as I have argued, resistance to relocation is usually an affirmation of the community identity. We have seen how recent research emphasizes the importance of place in the construction of individual and community identities, as well as in the politics of interpersonal, community and intercultural relations. Such attachment to place means that the loss or removal of a community from its 'ground' as a consequence of a disaster may be profoundly traumatic (Oliver-Smith 1996: 308).

Conclusion

The stated goal of reconstruction is always to avoid reproducing vulnerability. Unfortunately, this praiseworthy attempt is difficult to achieve. In practice, reconstruction and recovery interventions usually increase and reinforce not only existing inequalities but also vulnerability. Reconstruction sometimes constitutes a socio-cultural disaster after a natural disaster.

Many reconstruction projects focus on reducing the region's vulnerability to natural disasters; that is, to physical vulnerability. This means that reconstruction should be done in

[6] 'Si un lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu' (Augé 1992: 100).

[7] 'L'espace du non-lieu ne crée ni identité singulière, ni relation, mais solitude et similitude' (Augé 1992: 130).

'safe' geographical spaces. However, we have seen that vulnerability is not only physical but also social, cultural and economic, suggesting that vulnerability ought to be considered in its complex meaning when there is the need to rebuild.

A 'safe' space has different meanings for different actors. We have seen that the feeling of 'safety' for the population of Yungay was not only geographical, but drew on the structural pillars of their traditional social order. Their resistance to resettlement was a defence of their threatened identity. Moreover, such resistance enabled the survivors to begin re-establishing a positive image of themselves, as significant actors in their own lives and in society.

The traumatic experience of a disaster also involves a cultural crisis for the group, in that such an experience may challenge the very existence of a society. This is probably why survivors are mostly conservative. The resistance to relocation after a disaster reflects an essentially conservative tendency. The Yungainos and the inhabitants of *La Veguita* wanted to rebuild and return to things as they were, to normalcy. The inhabitants' resistance to relocation and their reconstruction *in situ* has allowed *La Veguita* to strengthen its existence as a *place* of community. The unity, solidarity, and tenacity shown during all the stages of the reconstruction formed the basis for a community strengthened by adversity (Revet 2007: 263). In all likelihood, relocation and resettlement would have ultimately destroyed their cultural identity. Therefore, while resistance constituted an affirmation of their identity and a defence against cultural collapse, relocation would have meant further change, further disruption, further risk and further vulnerability.

All cases of resistance reveal the victims' efforts to cope with their loss and grief, to reconstruct their lives and their community, to re-establish a social order similar to that which they have lost and to strengthen personal identities. To conclude, people prefer to recreate the social interactions and community-based models as they were before the destruction. People's attachment to the place and their sense of belonging strongly motivate reconstruction, which points to the fact that reconstruction stands for more than rebuilding the physical environment; instead, I reiterate, it encompasses all social, economic, political and physical aspects. In particular, rebuilding of trust and social networks is more difficult than rebuilding houses. As is clearly shown by the relocation examples of Gibellina and Luz, relocation and resettlement is thought to undermine efforts to rebuild the community and to re-establish and strengthen the cultural identity of the victims,

In short, the question of physical reconstruction must meet various criteria and provide answers to different problems. Solutions must be found in a process that includes the persons concerned. Nonetheless, foreign aid sometimes imposes criteria that are inappropriate to the social reality of the region concerned, not always taking into account the culture and local way of life. This shows the weaknesses of a technocratic governance that ignores identity, social cohesion and social vulnerability. Those who are responsible for resettlement programs should be sensitive to the cultural and ethnic roots of the people who are to be relocated. It is not often recognized that local people know the place better than the specialists, that they have proposals to make and that their needs can differ from those imposed from outside. The fundamental issue is that it is usually not just a problem of ignoring the local culture or of neglecting the victims in matters that are important to them. In most cases, political and economic decisions guide the reconstruction process; that is, what to rebuild, for whom to build and where to build. As I have tried to show, the crucial problem lies in the different meaning given to 'place' and to 'vulnerability'.

In short, these considerations suggest that if a disaster brings about more than physical destruction, reconstruction is about more than just rebuilding what was physically destroyed. Other issues, far beyond the realm of material survival and security should be taken into account. The spirit and the soul of a place cannot be relocated. What made the space a 'place' has disappeared and new 'places' have to be built, which will be the task of the new generations.

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