

Call for papers

Frontlines of protection: Thinking and defining protection against disasters in times of environmental disruptions

Workshop

Leiden University 21-22 March 2024

What does it mean to protect against disaster in the context of climate change and other cascading environmental crises?

Climate change and other associated crises are increasing the scope, frequency, and intensity of disasters, raising the question of how to protect lives, infrastructure, and the environment. The last IPCC report warned of an ‘unavoidable increase in multiple climate hazards’ and ‘multiple risks to ecosystems and humans’ regardless of efforts to contain global warming (IPCC 2022). Losses caused by environmental disasters cannot be avoided in the short term. Climate change adaptation raises new questions regarding how to maintain or improve levels of protection in the face of increasing environmental threats. Although the question of protection against disasters has long been discussed in the case of humanitarian assistance (Redfield, 2012), current debates on climate change and other intensifying crises call for re-thinking what kind of protection is desirable in times of disasters and how to produce it.

Protection can be defined in legal, economic, social, or technical terms, with various implications. How do these definitions interact with one another during disasters? What keeps people, properties, and the environment safe, and how: laws, policies, infrastructures, human interventions, technical systems, insurances? What are the implications of different modalities for states, international organisations, or private actors? And what does ‘safe’ even mean? Keeping safe involves a variety of expectations, interventions, and expertise, which all have different definitions, standards, concepts, and views regarding protection (Littlejohn 2020). Can different understandings of protection clash with one another? How do communities define protection and interact with the infrastructures of protection?

These questions call for an interdisciplinary debate to unpack the notion of protection. Recent work in disaster studies have already pointed out how disaster management is not only about providing safety but is also a protective intervention contributing to state formation. (Landis Dauber, 2012; Collier and Lakoff, 2021; Bandopadhyay, 2022; Cabane, 2023). Related notions of vulnerability or resilience have also raised debates about what kind of interventions best mitigate the impact of disasters, but they often fall short when it comes to drawing implications in terms of power and governance. There are also emerging discussions about how climate change calls for rethinking disaster insurance models (Jarzabkowski et al. 2023; Elliot 2021) or welfare state interventions on social risks related to environmental risks (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). Other debates point to shifting responsibilities in terms of protection against disasters that are being caused by climate change (and therefore CO2 emitters, whether they be states or oil companies).

This highlights the need for cross-disciplinary discussion around the notion of protection to better understand its implications when navigating the disruptive times and politics of climate change. Bringing together different disciplines such as law, economics, engineering, physical and human geography, anthropology, and political science is essential to unpack the multi-faceted notion of protection. The notion of protection is being discussed within each of those fields, but bridging across disciplines is more challenging, as is mainstreaming the idea that protection matters as an analytical concept to analyse and act on disasters.

We invite interested scholars from the above and other cognate disciplines to apply to participate in a workshop at Leiden University on 21-22 March 2024 on protection against disaster in times of environmental disruptions.

The workshop will seek to address the following questions:

1. Genealogies of protection

What does protection mean in different disciplines? How is it conceptualised? Here, we consider theoretical contributions, discussing the foundations of protection in different disciplines and critical genealogies of protection. Are there different levels or forms of protection? Different types of expertise and knowledge shape what protection involves in practice. This sub-theme would seek to interrogate practices of crisis management, but also building codes, regulation, NGOs and IGOs interventions, flood standards, etc. Also, how are protective thinking and policies changing, or not, in view of disrupted ecologies and climate change?

2. Objects and non-objects of protection

Who and what is deemed as in need of protection. In other words: Whose interests are being looked after? Protection through critical infrastructure (dams, dykes, etc.) has long been critical for many, and as climate change advances, the need for such protection is growing. But there are often social and political choices about what suffering and protection involves based on social stratifications and representations (Hagen and Elliott 2021): who gets to benefit from infrastructure, legal, or state protection depends on social classes, races, ethnic groups, and more generally power relations in a society (Wisner et al. 2004). This panel would seek to discuss topologies of protection: what are the places, people, objects and things that get to be protected, and how does protection vary for these categories?

A related issue here is protection beyond people and properties. Policies, institutions, and actors typically focus on protecting human lives, buildings, and the institutions and values they embody. Yet, disasters also affect ecologies, animals, rivers, mountains, etc. Can the notion of protection be extended to different categories? For example, can we think about the protection of mental health, animals, or the 'environment' itself in times of disruption. What role do legal attempts to give rights to nature play in defining and operationalising protected interests, for instance?

3. Operationalising, translating and implementing protection

Who does the protecting? Which actors are engaged in providing protection, and how do their practices shape the actual protection provided?

This panel examines the institutions, instruments and technologies of protection, as well as the organisations, professions, experts, and other actors. Here, one could think of discussing the role of

first respondents (such as fire-fighters, crisis managers, ambulance services, humanitarian organisations, and workers, etc.) in making decisions about saving lives and properties. How are their interventions shaped by organisational understanding of protection or professional culture, for example? Other aspects to discuss would be engineering standards (how do we define values and numbers of lives to be saved? How can we calculate the degree of protection of a building, a road, or a dam?), regulatory and legal standards (are there any rights to protection and, if so, what kind of duties do these rights give rise to and for which actors?), or economic aspects – one critical issue here is the question of disaster insurance, and how climate change is challenging it.

4. Protecting beyond the emergency.

Slow onset disasters, creeping crises, polycrises and climate change raise the question of what protection means in those crisis contexts beyond immediate urgencies and as the nature of disaster is changing. How does that change protection calculations, expectations, and rights? More specifically, what does climate change adaptation imply for thinking and implementing protection on the ground, notably in legal terms? Protection in this context also requires active mitigation, i.e. taking measures to tackle the causes of disasters (with climate-related disasters being largely human-induced).

Practicalities

Date: Thursday 21 (afternoon) / Friday 22 March

Modalities: The workshop will be hybrid, with the main event taking place at Leiden University in the Netherlands, with the possibility to join online.

We have limited funding to cover expenses depending on the number of applicants.

Submit an abstract to protection.workshop@fgga.leidenuniv.nl before Monday 4 December 2023. We aim to respond before the end of December 2023.

When submitting your application, please indicate whether:

- you are interested in attending in person or online,
- whether you already have funding, and what your planned costs are.

Organising committee at Leiden University:

Lydie Cabane (ISGA)

Daniella Dam-de Jong (Law)

Valerie de Koeijer (ISGA)

Andrew Littlejohn (Anthropology)