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## From Vulnerability to Hyperreality: How Power Relations Shape Flood Disaster Experiences in Urban Sri Lanka

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### Abstract

As a developing nation in the Third World, Sri Lanka faces numerous crises, among which environmental challenges occupy a prominent position. Natural disasters, which fall within these environmental crises, have become direct obstacles to achieving sustainable development. Among such disasters, floods can be identified as the second most significant hazard after drought, which is one of the major natural disasters affecting Sri Lanka. Flood disasters may arise not only from natural environmental processes but also as consequences of human activities. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to the power structures that emerge within disaster contexts, their functioning, and the interventions influenced by these structures. Accordingly, the central research problem of this study is: "How do power relations shape the production of the flood disaster context and influence its operational dynamics?" The primary objective, therefore, is to analyze how power relations contribute to the creation of flood-prone conditions and how such relations serve to either mitigate or exacerbate disaster impacts. A Grama Niladhari Division subject to frequent flooding within the Kolonnawa Divisional Secretariat in the Colombo District was selected as the research site. Under purposive sampling, data were collected from a sample of forty respondents using a mixed-methods approach that combined questionnaire surveys and interviews. As observed in previous disaster situations, political power configurations undergo significant transformation during disaster events, and the media often emerges as a dominant power apparatus. From a post-structuralist perspective, disaster contexts also provide evidence for the notion that knowledge functions as a medium through which power is produced, while power, in turn, becomes a mechanism through which knowledge is regulated. Furthermore, both external power structures operating during and after disaster events, and internal power structures emerging within disaster-affected communities, contribute in diverse ways both positively and negatively to disaster management processes. Conversely, the relief phase of disasters often becomes a context in which political actors reconstruct their symbols and public images, sometimes generating fabricated realities; thus, disaster situations frequently become politicized arenas. Overall, this analysis demonstrates that disasters may be produced through political processes, just as political processes may emerge and evolve within disaster contexts.

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### Introduction

The ancient Greeks described the environment using the term *oikos*, referring to the surroundings in which one lives and highlighting the inherent interconnectedness between humans and their living conditions.

This concept encompasses all living beings, the relationships among them, and the processes that contribute to their existence (Dhanapala & Ariyasena, 2004) <sup>[9]</sup>. Historically, environmental issues remained primarily within the domain of environmental scientists. However, the recurring question of whether environmental problems can be addressed solely through the natural sciences has drawn increasing attention. Consequently, scholars began to argue that environmental issues should also be examined as social problems, a view that initially generated considerable debate among social scientists. Over the past two decades, however, social scientists have increasingly focused on environmental concerns, and the significance of their role in identifying environmental problems and proposing sustainable solutions has gradually gained recognition within the environmental field.

Accordingly, when an environmental issue becomes a topic of public discussion and society begins to engage in efforts to minimize or regulate its impacts, such issues can be studied as social problems, demonstrating the continuing influence of social factors on most environmental phenomena. Social constructions of environmental problems are also shaped by media narratives and socially created realities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) <sup>[12]</sup>.

Among the numerous environmental problems, disasters also referred to as hazardous events are particularly significant as social issues. According to Quarantelli (1969), a disaster is an unexpected situation that exceeds the coping capacity of a society, causing severe impacts on individuals, communities, and the environment, resulting in social, material, and ecological losses (Shaw *et al.*, 2015). Disasters challenge social structures, environmental systems, and technological capacities (Wisner, 1996). They are commonly categorized into natural disasters and human-induced disasters.

Floods, or water-related hazards, fall within the category of hydrometeorological disasters. Geographically, a flood may be defined as the result of excessive or insufficient water conditions, particularly when precipitation exceeding 200 mm in a 24-hour period triggers hazardous conditions (Ratnayake, 2007). Globally, floods constitute one of the most frequently occurring natural hazards; approximately 30% of all reported natural disasters between 1900 and 2006 were flood events. Floods also represent a significant natural hazard in Sri Lanka, second only to drought, and affect large areas of the country (Jayasinha, 2014) <sup>[16]</sup>.

Although contemporary scholarship has examined both natural and human-induced causes of flooding, the present study focuses specifically on the power relations and environmental politics associated with flood events. Power relations influence not only the conditions that give rise to floods but also shape the livelihood strategies and behaviors of urban populations. Therefore, this study examines how such relations can either exacerbate or mitigate flood-related issues.

The central research problem of this study is: "How do existing political power structures and associated power relations contribute to the emergence or reduction of flood-related issues in the selected area?" Accordingly, the primary objective is to identify the nature of power relations that operate within flood-prone contexts and to examine their interventions. The study's sub-objectives include:

1. Examining how disasters become politicized.
2. Analyzing the nature of flood disaster situations in relation to political power.

3. Identifying the power structures that emerge within the flood context

### Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design within an exploratory research framework. A Grama Niladhari Division located in the Kolonnawa Divisional Secretariat of the Colombo District was selected as the study area. The selected division, GN 389, consisted of a total of 389 households, all of which were affected by the 2016 flood event. Accordingly, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted, and a sample of 40 households was selected to ensure adequate representation of affected residents (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015) <sup>[26]</sup>. A questionnaire consisting of coded items and open-ended questions was administered to all 40 respondents with the objective of gathering baseline socio-economic information and generating a general understanding of the impacts of the flood event. From these respondents, ten individuals were subsequently selected purposively for semi-structured interviews to obtain more in-depth qualitative insights (Bryman, 2016) <sup>[6]</sup>. In addition, five key informants were interviewed through in-depth interviews, enabling the collection of context-specific and experience-based data relevant to flood dynamics and local power relations. Simple observation was also used as a supplementary method to strengthen contextual interpretation of the study area (Creswell & Poth, 2018) <sup>[7]</sup>. Quantitative data were analysed using the SPSS statistical software package, while qualitative data were examined through thematic content analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, meanings, and power relations embedded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) <sup>[4]</sup>.

### Literature Review

#### Political Ecology and the Politicization of Disasters

Political ecology examines how the environment becomes deeply entangled with political processes, illustrating the ways in which environmental issues are shaped by unequal power relations. As Bryant and Bailey (1997) <sup>[5]</sup> argue, political ecology analyses the political dynamics embedded within environmentally mediated power structures as well as the political dimensions of the biophysical world. Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels did not explicitly articulate an environmental theory, their critique of capitalism has significantly influenced contemporary environmental thought (Foster, 2000) <sup>[11]</sup>. From a Marxian perspective, capitalism renders nature a commodity that can be exchanged and consumed within the market, thereby positioning natural resources as a form of capital and private profit (Mahish, 2012) <sup>[23]</sup>. In a related argument, Gare (1992, as cited in Mahish, 2010) <sup>[23]</sup> contends that capitalism disrupts the relationship between humans and nature by prioritizing profit accumulation and intensified production, often at the expense of ecological stability. Similarly, Stott and Sullivan (2000) <sup>[29]</sup> emphasize that environmental problems become politically uneven due to these entrenched power relations, suggesting that political structures themselves play a central role in producing environmental crises. Michel Foucault did not directly discuss environmental issues; however, his theoretical contributions offer a valuable lens for understanding the political construction of environmental problems. In particular, his concepts of biopolitics and the power-knowledge nexus provide a framework for examining how environmental crises are constructed, mobilized, and

governed within contemporary societies (Mahish, 2012; Darier, 1999) <sup>[23, 8]</sup>. Through this lens, environmental discourses become embedded within wider political rationalities, shaping both the production and management of environmental crises.

### Political Ecology in the Third World

The emergence of political ecology within the Global South provides critical insights into the relationship between environment and politics in developing countries. This approach highlights how political economy, cultural contexts, and local social structures shape interactions between communities and their natural environments (Mahish, 2012) <sup>[23]</sup>. According to Bryant and Bailey (1997) <sup>[5]</sup>, the political ecology of the Third World reveals how culture, nature, and political power relations intersect to influence environmental management and degradation in developing regions. Environmental practices in developing countries involve multiple stakeholders, including state entities, non-governmental organizations, and local communities. Despite the presence of various actors, the state remains the most dominant force in environmental resource management and decision-making. Consequently, Bryant and Bailey (1997) <sup>[5]</sup> contend that Third World states bear substantial responsibility for environmental degradation, given their central role in determining access to and control over natural resources. Countries across the globe can be broadly categorized into capitalist, socialist, and developing nations based on political systems. Within this context, political ecology in the developing world critically examines how economic and social inequalities often politically produced shape environmental outcomes. Importantly, debates within Third World political ecology emphasize that natural resources should be considered communal assets, belonging to local communities rather than external political or economic elites.

### Findings and Discussion

**Socio-Spatial Dimensions of Power and Flood Vulnerability**  
In addition to the previously discussed political and institutional dynamics, further analysis of the study data reveals that socio-spatial factors significantly shape how power relations influence flood vulnerability in the selected community. Spatial inequalities particularly related to settlement patterns, land elevation, and proximity to water channels interacted strongly with existing political hierarchies to produce uneven disaster impacts. Survey data indicated that households located in low-lying zones experienced higher levels of inundation, with 67.5% of respondents reporting water levels exceeding four feet inside their homes. However, qualitative insights reveal that these spatial vulnerabilities were not solely the result of natural topography. Community members consistently highlighted that land-use decisions, influenced by political patronage, contributed to the increased severity of flooding. For instance, several participants noted that large-scale unauthorized landfilling and commercial construction near the canal had redirected water flow toward densely populated residential areas:

*“Earlier the water used to flow freely to the marshland, but after the factories filled that area, the water simply turned toward our houses.”* (Semi-structured Interview Data, 2017)  
These observations reflect Bryant and Bailey’s (1997) <sup>[5]</sup> assertion that environmental degradation in developing

nations often emerges through political decisions regarding land allocation and resource control. The data suggest that political actors selectively permitted the filling of wetlands and reservation areas to meet the interests of economically influential groups, thereby exacerbating community-level vulnerability. A cross-tabulation of respondents’ socio-economic status with reported flood impacts provides further clarity. Households with monthly incomes below Rs. 30,000 reported significantly higher losses of household assets, while those with higher incomes occupied relatively elevated or structurally stronger housing units. This pattern implies that vulnerability is not only environmentally produced but also reinforced by class-based disparities, aligning with Wisner *et al.*’s (2004) “pressure and release” model, which links social oppression to disaster risk. Similarly, thematic analysis of interview data illustrates how social capital influenced access to relief. Respondents who reported having strong ties to local political figures or community leaders received emergency assistance earlier and more consistently. Conversely, marginalized groups including daily wage laborers, single mothers, and renters reported delays or absence of support. These findings reinforce the argument that disaster relief distribution often reflects pre-existing power hierarchies rather than objective assessments of need (Stott & Sullivan, 2000) <sup>[29]</sup>.

Furthermore, variations were visible in post-disaster recovery as well. Approximately 55% of participants stated that reconstruction programs prioritized households with formal land titles, whereas residents in unauthorized settlements encountered bureaucratic and political barriers when attempting to access state support. This stratification indicates that political and administrative systems embed vulnerability into the recovery process itself, reproducing long-term disaster risk.

Finally, observational data highlight the emergence of informal community coordination mechanisms during the flood, which, although effective in the immediate response, were later overshadowed by political actors during media coverage. This disparity illustrates how community-based resilience is often symbolically appropriated in post-disaster narratives to enhance political legitimacy, echoing Baudrillard’s (1989) <sup>[1]</sup> concept of hyperreality in disaster representation. Overall, this additional analysis demonstrates that flood vulnerability in the study area is not merely a natural phenomenon but a socio-spatially produced condition shaped by political patronage, economic inequalities, and contested land-use decisions. These dynamics collectively highlight the need to understand disasters through a multidimensional political ecology lens that accounts for power, space, and social structure.

### Politicization of Disasters and Patron–Client Communities

The findings of this study reveal that political dynamics play a crucial role in shaping environmental conditions and disaster vulnerability in the study area. In the context of recurrent floods, it becomes evident that environmental politics significantly influence how communities experience and respond to disaster situations. Although the weak environmental literacy of local residents can contribute to environmentally harmful practices, the data clearly demonstrate that they are not the sole actors responsible for environmental degradation. Political actors also play a

substantial role in intensifying flood-related risks.

### One participant stated

*“Even though people build houses on unauthorized land, no one takes legal action. Ordinary people build only small houses, but when businessmen reclaim large lands, they receive political support to do so. No one opposes these illegal constructions. During election periods, ministers even provide utilities such as electricity and water to these unauthorized houses...”* (In-depth Interview Data, 2017).

This qualitative insight reflects several key issues linked to Gunnar Myrdal's (1968) concept of the “soft state.” According to Myrdal, although many developing nations have environmental regulations in place, these laws are often not implemented effectively, resulting in continuous environmental degradation (Myrdal, as cited in Mahish, 2012) <sup>[23]</sup>. The interview data demonstrate that similar conditions exist in the study area, where residents violate environmental regulations to fulfil their needs while the state fails to enforce legal standards. In line with Third World political ecology perspectives, the findings also reaffirm that the state bears significant responsibility for permitting construction in environmentally sensitive zones. Industries and housing developments in hazardous areas require state approval, and the absence of regulatory enforcement reveals the state's implicit support for environmentally harmful activities (Bryant & Bailey, 1997) <sup>[5]</sup>. Driven by profit accumulation and economic expansion, state authorities often overlook ecological considerations, occasionally revising legal frameworks to accommodate private companies and international organizations.

Within such politically driven environments, both environmental resources and disaster conditions become deeply politicized. Midlarsky's (1998) argument that environmental degradation increases under democratic governance is also reflected in the study context. He asserts that political leaders in democracies must satisfy citizens while simultaneously responding to the demands of influential interest groups, leading to frequent violations of environmental law. The data show that political representatives in the study area grant concessions to industrial actors, enabling unauthorized and harmful construction, which further exacerbates flood vulnerability. The geographic location of the study area an urban zone where land yields high economic returns has intensified its commercialization. This situation has made the environment vulnerable to market pressures, turning land into a commodity and exposing ecological systems to exploitation. As the findings indicate, political patronage accelerates this process, allowing destructive practices to continue unchallenged.

The study also highlights the significant influence of patron–client political relations within Sri Lanka. As argued by Mhees *et al.* (2009), patron–client networks rooted in electoral politics contribute substantially to environmental degradation. Political leaders depend on the support of their constituencies, and losing this support threatens their political survival. Consequently, politicians refrain from opposing environmentally harmful practices committed by their voters and sometimes actively facilitate them by providing infrastructure to illegally constructed houses in flood-prone areas. This dynamic suggests that political patronage has indirectly intensified the flood crisis. A further insight relates to land ownership and legal entitlements. Many residents in

the study area lack formal land titles but depend on political intermediaries to secure alternative forms of legitimacy. This system creates a parallel power structure grounded in money and political influence. As a result, state officials become part of the patron–client network, and the community becomes dependent on these actors for survival in disaster-prone settings. This normalization of political dependency encourages residents to continue living in environmentally hazardous locations, thereby worsening disaster risks.

Media influence also emerged as a significant factor in the politicization of disasters. As McKinzie (2017) argues, media institutions have the power to frame events as disasters or minimize them, thereby shaping political accountability. In the study area, political representatives frequently used media coverage during disaster events to depict themselves as benevolent supporters of the affected population. Through such symbolic actions, they aimed to reinforce patron–client relationships and secure future electoral advantage. Survey data further confirmed these political influences, illustrating how disaster contexts were strategically used to strengthen political bonds rather than to enforce sustainable environmental governance.

**Table 1:** Nature of Assistance Received from Politicians During the 2016 Flood Event

| Category                    | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Received Assistance on Time | 3         | 7.5%       |
| Received Delayed Assistance | 20        | 50%        |
| Received No Assistance      | 17        | 42.5%      |
| Total                       | 40        | 100%       |

According to the above data, the majority of respondents indicated that they received delayed assistance related to political influence, while a comparatively high percentage (42.5%) reported having received no such assistance. However, interviews revealed that despite either not receiving assistance or receiving it belatedly, long-standing political affiliations among community members have prevented a significant decline in their political loyalty. Notably, individuals had not altered their political orientations based on the difficulties they experienced. Instead, generalized perceptions regarding whether they received assistance, whether delayed or otherwise, continued to shape their views.

As Jean Baudrillard explains in his theory of simulacra and simulation, there is no absolute “truth” within society; nothing constitutes an independent reality. What individuals perceive as “reality” is instead an artificially produced representation. According to Baudrillard (1989) <sup>[1]</sup>, meaning is created through the connection of one sign to another, not through reference to an objective reality. Simulacra therefore, refer to images or reproductions that appear more real than the actual reality they distort or replace. Baudrillard (1989) <sup>[1]</sup> identifies four forms through which simulacra may arise:

1. The image reflects a basic reality.
2. The image masks or distorts a basic reality.
3. The image masks the absence of a basic reality.
4. The image bears no relation to any reality whatsoever.

In the first form, there is little distinction between reality and representation. In the second, the representation begins to dominate reality, presenting a mixture of both. The third form involves the disappearance of reality and the emergence of purely fabricated images. The final form produces a

contradictory or alternative “reality” entirely detached from the actual world this is described as hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1989) <sup>[1]</sup>.

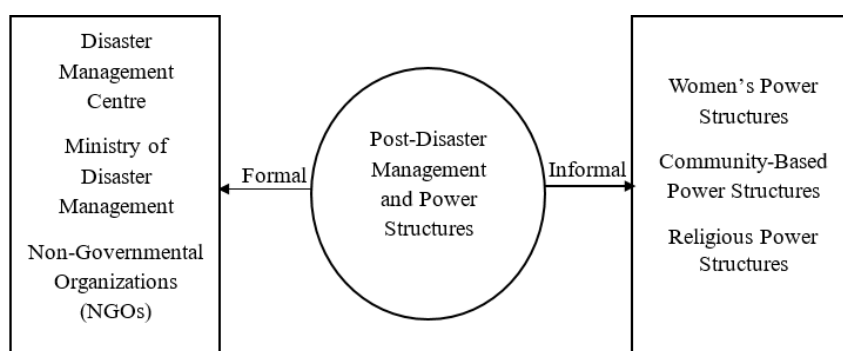
The third form of simulacra is particularly applicable to interpreting the research data. When reality becomes obscured, individuals attempt to understand the world through fabricated representations. In such instances, people accept constructed images as truth. Accordingly, political actors who provide assistance primarily for the purpose of enhancing their public image are perceived by the public as engaging in genuinely benevolent acts. Thus, public opinion becomes shaped not by lived reality but by political imagery. This indicates that disaster situations become deeply politicized within this context.

Furthermore, it was observed that certain political groups attempted to mobilize disaster-affected individuals who had not received full state compensation, particularly in recent times. The eagerness to utilize disasters as a medium for political promotion both during the crisis and in its aftermath illustrates how environmental contexts become embedded in political practices. Hence, it is evident that disasters in the contemporary Sri Lankan context have become fully

politicized events.

### Post-Disaster Management and Power Structures

Regardless of the intensity or inevitability of natural hazards, their transformation into disasters depends on factors such as the degree of preparedness, adaptive capacity, and the resilience of affected populations (Jayasinha, 2014) <sup>[16]</sup>. Accordingly, populations tend to experience extreme hardship when these protective factors are absent. Disaster management refers to “necessary or appropriate measures to prevent, reduce, or counteract the impacts of an imminent hazard, or to minimize adverse effects on people, property, or the state following the occurrence of a disaster” (Disaster Management Act No. 23 of 2015). Post-disaster management thus consists of actions taken after the occurrence of a hazard to mitigate its negative consequences. It represents the most responsibility-intensive stage of disaster management (Kamalaratne & Amarasekara, 2013) <sup>[17]</sup>. During both disaster response and post-disaster recovery, multiple forms of power structures may emerge. These are commonly categorized as formal and informal power structures.



**Fig 1:** Power Structures Associated with Post-Disaster Management

Source: Created by the research

### Formal Power Structures

In Sri Lanka, the longest and most resource-intensive phase of disaster management is the post-disaster stage, which requires a clearly defined institutional structure. This structure includes the government, civil society, the military, various international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, and communication centers (Kamalaratne & Amarasekara, 2013) <sup>[17]</sup>. Effective coordination among these actors is essential. Currently, the primary institutional authority for post-disaster management lies with the Disaster Management Centre (DMC) and the Ministry of Disaster Management. Their power stems not merely from administrative authority but from specialized technical expertise such as knowledge required for early warnings and crisis communication. The authority to define what constitutes a “disaster” gives these institutions significant power in shaping public disaster narratives.

Foucault (1980) <sup>[12]</sup> argues that wherever power operates, resistance also emerges (Bhimrao & Jadav, 2016) <sup>[3]</sup>. This was evident in the field when some respondents reported ignoring early warnings issued by the DMC, indicating a reluctance to accept official authority. In contrast, the media due to its public reach exerts strong discursive power by constructing societal perceptions of disaster severity through its reporting. Thus, while the DMC possesses the knowledge to frame disaster conditions, the media possesses the

communicative power to disseminate and amplify those framings. NGOs also form part of the formal power structure. Since their emergence in Sri Lanka after 1955 (Wanigaratne, 1997) <sup>[32]</sup>, NGOs have operated across sectors such as religion, human rights, development, women’s and children’s issues, environmental concerns, cultural activities, and disability services. With the increasing frequency of disasters in the 19th and 20th centuries, NGOs became essential actors because the state alone could not meet growing humanitarian demands. Interview excerpts show that NGOs were often able to reach affected communities faster than the government, especially in geographically difficult areas. However, their strong financial capacity and the tendency to distribute material aid extensively resulted in competition with state actors, hindering long-term development-oriented interventions. Furthermore, the dependence of affected communities on NGO support contributed to a culture of aid dependency and the commercialization of disaster relief.

### Informal Power Structures

At the global and regional levels particularly within United Nations disaster management frameworks gender has emerged as an important analytical focus. This does not reflect a gender-biased approach, but an acknowledgment that women often perform critical roles during disaster management (UNICEF, 2018). Research suggests that women possess strong adaptive capacity during crises;

therefore, attention must be given to the structural relationship between women and the environment. Research data reflect similar observations. During flood events, women often took leadership roles engaging in relief distribution, assisting vulnerable individuals, and restoring order within temporary shelters. These actions contrast with social norms that assign disaster response responsibilities primarily to men. The findings show that disaster contexts provide opportunities for women to transcend traditional caregiving roles and demonstrate leadership capabilities. Women's pre-existing social responsibilities, such as caregiving and community coordination, position them effectively to rebuild disrupted social networks. As such, women's contributions are essential for social reconstruction during post-disaster recovery.

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