



Compound Risks and Sustainable Security

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In the Anthropocene, it is vital for those in power to understand the interplay between drivers of insecurity and act accordingly. But no state is currently equipped to do this.

“ When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions. ”

Claudius to Gertrude, *Hamlet* (4.5.53 – 54)

The quote occurred to me while looking at my laptop screen on the 18th May, where www.windy.com was depicting the Category 5 super cyclone “Amphan” heading towards the largest refugee camps in the world, home to a million people forced to flee the horrors of ethnic cleansing, and where the first Covid-19 cases had been registered four days previously. At that point it was impossible to predict exactly where Amphan would make landfall, except that it would be a coastal region bordering the Bay of Bengal, including the Rohingya Camps in Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh. On social media, old friends now working in Rohingya response were posting photos of preparations for another layer of disaster, layered on top of a pandemic, on top of a vulnerable population of refugees from genocide in Myanmar. The interaction of these different kinds of drivers of risk is exactly what ORG’s recently released Sustainable Security Index is designed to highlight.

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We hear a lot about the “new normal” these days and one of the key features will be the realisation of “compound risks”, “interconnected” risks, and “risk cascades”. [Pescaroli and Alexander](#) published a paper in 2018 trying to disentangle these various terms, each one often emerging from different literatures (though mainly from the physical sciences) and with considerable overlap and confusion in usage. This is particularly the case when applying terms deriving from the physical sciences to complex social systems and how they relate to the natural environment. The situation from where I was sitting on 18 May, for example, seemed to meet the criteria for both compound risk (“successive or concurrent extreme events”) and “interconnected risk” (arising from “interactions between human, environment and technological systems”). The bottom line is that, in the age of the Anthropocene, catastrophes will no longer occur in isolation; our sorrows will continue to come in battalions.

Mapping “Cross-Risk Interactions”

One of the most important tasks for public policy in the Anthropocene is to understand the interplay between these different types of risks (“cross risk interactions”) as well as how action in one policy domain will achieve concurrent benefits in another. In principle this will allow a holistic approach to risk management and mitigation. Despite many honest efforts and good intentions, governance at national and international level remains ill-equipped to think and act in these terms. Our largest problems span the portfolios of several siloed departments and ministers. “Interdepartmental cross-working” and a “genuinely joined-up” approach remain largely slogans.

A major hazard here is the inevitable future mission, in the wake of Covid-19, to “stop future pandemics”. How good the answers are will be irrelevant because this is the wrong question. We encounter similar problems with well-intentioned

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warnings about “climate change” being “an even bigger” risk. As outlined in a paper [written](#) for the Center for Sustainable Development, zoonotic spill over and a warming climate share common underlying causes, most importantly industrial agriculture and deforestation. A warming climate is, *in addition and in itself* a driver of zoonotic disease risk, primarily through increasing temperatures in currently temperate regions expanding the range of the *Aedes* mosquito, the primary vector for viruses like zika and chikungunya. Industrial agriculture is in itself a cause of deforestation. Climate change increases the risk of still further deforestation through wildfires of increasing severity and regularity. These then further accelerate climate change, a feedback loop captured by the grim statistic that the unprecedented Australian bushfires in January released an amount of carbon into the atmosphere equivalent to [twice](#) the country’s annual emissions.

Improving Analysis and Communication of Risk and Reward

These interactions and relationships need to be addressed in parallel, not in series. The positive aspect to this is that action in one area will lead to “co-benefits” in another. It remains unclear as to what anyone’s approach to fiscal policy will be after Covid, although globally Government outlays during the crisis give some cause for optimism. However, the compartmentalisation of Government is to some extent replicated in civil society. Linking benefits in greenhouse gas reduction with reduced mortality from air pollution, for example, is still not sufficiently stressed. This requirement for more concrete policy work to demonstrate every benefit that zero emissions will provide, including both a reduction in future pandemic risk and bolstered population resilience to such pandemics when they do occur, is urgent. This needs to include a granular analysis of the combined return on investment of such

benefits to assuage to concerns of a future UK Chancellor who balks at a £1 trillion price tag for zero emissions.

While in the end the Rohingya camps were spared the full brunt of the storm, which made landfall in the Indian Sunderbans, the impact on Bangladesh, and the Indian states of West Bengal and Odisha remains horrific. It is likely that only speculative estimates of the combined toll resulting from the interaction between the pandemic and Cyclone Amphan will ever be possible. Concurrently locust swarms resulting from “unusual weather and climate conditions” are poised to wreak havoc on agriculture across a vast area stretching from East Africa to India at a time where, as discussed by Professor Paul Rogers in April, a global food crisis is already well underway. This is against a background of an unprecedented shortfall in the ability of the Global North to effect humanitarian response, this partly a result of a “risk cascade”: the Covid public health emergency triggering economic collapse. Human and environmental systems are tightly coupled; failure in one may rapidly trigger “cascading failures” in others.

It is here that the Sustainable Security concept comes into its own, and the release of the first Sustainable Security Index is particularly timely. Taking an approach that explicitly links different drivers of Global Security risk, including conflict, good governance and equality, and environmental and climate policies is vital. This needs to be taken forward in further work by ORG and other concerned organisations and individuals in science and policy examining how these drivers interact, and the potential beneficial impact of action in one area in reducing risks emerging from another. This as an important corrective to public policy that suffers at once from both fragmentation and tunnel vision. If sorrows must come in battalions then remedies cannot come single spies.

Image credit: PXFuel.

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