ON RESILIENCE AND NATURAL DISASTERS

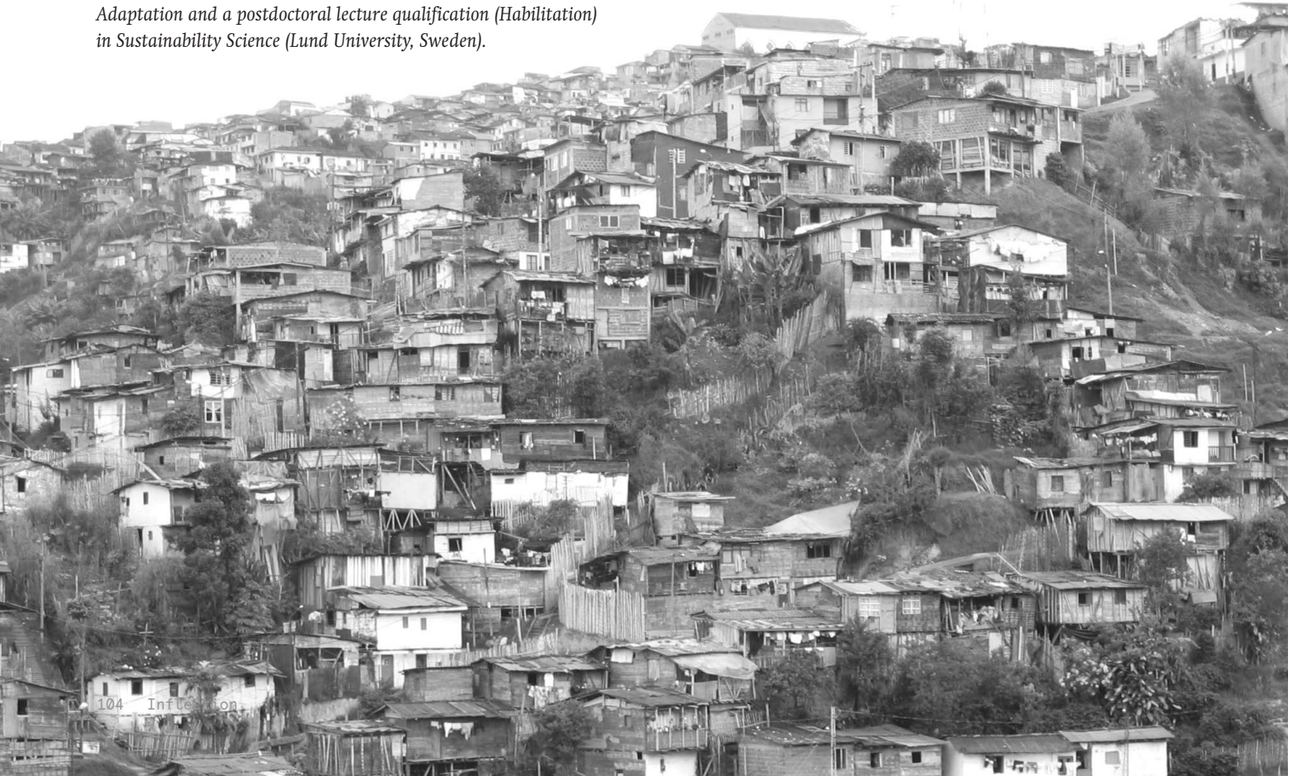
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE WAMSLER

Christine Wamsler is Professor of Sustainability Science at the Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies, Sweden, former Co-director of the Lund University Centre for Societal Resilience, Research Fellow at the Centre of Natural Disaster Science, and Honorary Research Fellow of the Global Urbanism Research Group at the Global Development Institute of the University of Manchester.

Christine trained as an architect and urban planner, with specialisation in International Urban Development Planning (University of Stuttgart, Germany & Ecole d'Architecture de Paris-Belleville, France). She holds a Master in International Humanitarian Assistance (University of Bochum, Germany), a Ph.D on Urban Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation and a postdoctoral lecture qualification (Habilitation) in Sustainability Science (Lund University, Sweden).

To date, Christine has published more than 100 academic papers, popular scientific articles, guidelines, book chapters and books on sustainable urban development and resilience, including her internationally-recognized book titled Cities, Disaster Risk and Adaptation*, published by Routledge.*

In October 2017, on her visit to Melbourne for the presentation of the Melbourne School of Design Dean's Lecture, Christine spoke with *Inflection* and shared insight into her research in the field of disaster risk management.



Your framework for integrating disaster and climate risk reduction in urban governance and planning has been used worldwide in different contexts, in research, in teaching and in practice. How did you begin developing it?

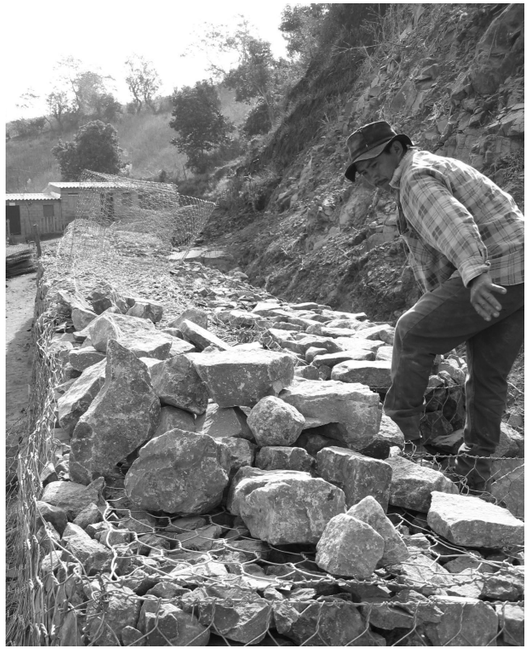
It began in the early 2000s and has evolved since. In 2001, I had the opportunity to work for a Central American pilot project in disaster risk reduction, which was coordinated by the German International Development Cooperation Agency (GIZ). At the end of the 1990s there were a lot of natural disasters (for example, Hurricane Mitch in 1998) and many international development cooperation agencies began creating new projects in what they first called 'disaster management' and later on 'disaster risk reduction'.

I worked for one of these agencies, the GIZ, and was specifically asked to look into the links between the occurrence of natural hazards, urban planning and architecture. This work went on for about four months. During this time, I identified many unanswered questions that had not been addressed by either research or practice, so I applied for a Ph.D to look into these questions and received funding from the Swedish International Development Corporation Agency (SIDA). This marked the starting point for developing the framework (for integrating disaster and climate risk reduction in urban governance and planning). If you go back to my Ph.D, you'll find all the key elements there, and they have been continuously refined over the following years.

Can you tell us a little about a key finding that you uncovered during your initial studies on integrating disaster and climate risk reduction into urban planning?

During my Ph.D, I worked predominantly with non-governmental social housing organisations in Latin America that were focused on improving the living conditions of the urban poor. I spent a lot of time with people living in risky, marginalised areas. I analysed their personal experiences, and the existing assistance from, and cooperation with, different types of governmental and non-governmental organisations in order to see what worked and what didn't. One finding was that the personal and institutional efforts to reduce risk provided little support for each other. Another important finding was that there was very little preparedness for recovery. People and organisations were mainly working on reducing hazard exposure and vulnerabilities, and improving response preparedness. But very little recovery preparedness work was being done. As a result, people often get stuck in a vicious circle because they can't recover quickly enough before the next hazard hits them.

Opposite: Houses on Slopes. Manizales, Colombia. All images by author.



How do you see the relationship between your academic and consultancy work on this topic?

My academic and consultancy work have always been linked. It's important to stay grounded and create strong feedback loops between research and implementation. This feedback is crucial at all levels—from the definition of problems, to the development and implementation of outcomes—in order to create relevant knowledge and support change. I also believe that research should focus more on understanding and the co-creation of knowledge, rather than just criticism, as is currently often the case.

How do you see your role as an academic in engaging with community groups, organisations and NGOs?

Academics can act as facilitators and mediators, but every context and study is different and requires a different engagement with stakeholders. If I'm asked to act as a mediator, I'm very careful not to interfere, unless the research requires it.

How do you make your framework accessible at all levels, and available to as many people as possible?

There are different versions of my framework, and they are designed to address the needs of different stakeholders and contexts. I adapt the terminology and approach I use to present the framework, and highlight different aspects, depending on the stakeholder, user or reader group. The principles remain the same, but specific details may require reconsideration or adaptation.

For example, this year, together with a colleague, I prepared a new version of the framework focused on ecosystems, or nature-based adaptation, which highlights related aspects that are especially relevant for municipal staff. In contrast, when I work with academics, I explicitly draw upon and highlight aspects of so-called educational mainstreaming. I have also produced shorter versions for government policymakers in order to provide them with more targeted support.

How do you measure whether what is being implemented is successful? What defines the successful implementation of the framework?

It is very difficult to say. For instance, the implementation of suitable local measures could be seen as a success. However, if they are only implemented in the context of a single project, and there is no change in the wider system, it's less of a success. There are lots of pilot projects, and visitors come from all over the world to see them, but many aren't replicated or integrated into the urban planning and governance system. The level of success thus always depends on the scale or scope. From a local perspective, some measures might appear to be very successful, but if you were to examine the community or the city level, the level of relative success might look very different. One community may have been helped by a particular project, but if you look up at the next scale, you might find that what was implemented was actually negative for the wider society.

The challenge is to be successful across all levels. The level of 'success' or 'sustainability' depends on the scope of the analysis. A country, taken as a whole, might look very sustainable, but if you analyse how it relates to other countries, this statement may no longer hold true. Therefore, in the future, I would like to look more into feedback between actions at individual, household, community, city, country and regional levels to reduce climate and disaster risk in a sustainable way. How does one person's action here, for instance, increase the hazard exposure of another person in another country?

Opposite, above: Slope protection. San Salvador.

Opposite, below: Old car tyres retention wall. El Salvador.

Do you think that risk reduction and climate adaptation must be fully integrated into all new government policy?

Yes. We should create systems where risk reduction and climate adaptation are considered by default. These issues need to be systematically built into all kinds of planning policies and tools, building regulations etc. If integration is successful, risk reduction and adaptation become like washing your hands before you leave the bathroom: you don't think about why you do it, you do it because you do it, because this is how you were educated or told. You don't have to know exactly what type of bacteria you have on your hands, what the cleaning processes are, or the types of illnesses you could develop, you just do it.

When I was studying architecture and urban planning at university, the issues of risk reduction and climate adaptation were never mentioned. They were not seen as part of the job of architects and planners. Integrating risk reduction and adaptation in the curriculum is also an important step to achieve sustainable change.

You touched on, in your Dean's lecture at the MSD, the ethics of the different contexts you work in. What are some of the ethical implications to be aware of when implementing your framework?

There is no doubt that culture matters, and that it is absolutely crucial to understand and adapt to local contexts. The 2014 *World Disaster Report* looked, for instance, at different aspects of how culture affects disaster risk reduction, and how disasters and risk influence culture.

This is actually also one of the reasons why I've started to work more within my own cultural context—Germany and Sweden. There are a lot of good reasons to work on your own doorstep; you can understand and address things in a different way. I am more and more convinced that we should avoid any kind of external interference. If you work in your own context there is much less risk of doing harm.

What are the dangers and risks of implementing a framework in a foreign country that has a culture that is very different to one's own?

Different cultures have different perspectives on risk in general and on the risk reduction approaches that need to be acknowledged and addressed. A thorough understanding of the local culture, risk context and institutional setting is very important.

The *Greening Laneways* project. Melbourne.

What's your definition of the 'urban poor'? Why is it relevant to disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation?

Urban poverty was originally only linked to people's level of income, but this understanding has changed. We no longer think about poverty solely in terms of monetary wealth. It's also about access to amenities, to healthcare, to education, to a livelihood. Poverty is an important risk factor in all kinds of contexts. We tend to associate poverty with low-income countries, while forgetting that poverty and poverty-related risks are also found in more developed nations. Nowadays, more than 50% of people live in cities, which also contributes to the increase in urban poverty. At the same time, urban disaster and climate risk have grown exponentially. Poverty takes different forms in different contexts, but the patterns are extremely similar. To adequately address climate and disaster risk, it's crucial to identify and address the poorest and most vulnerable population groups.

Your article in *The Conversation* about mindfulness is particularly relevant for those of us living in a society where most have a certain level of privilege and agency.[1] How can mindfulness help us in adapting our own behaviour to reduce our impact on the environment? Can internal feedback be helpful?

Research into the issue of individual inner dimensions (or transformation) to achieve sustainable change, including sustainable risk reduction and climate adaptation, is very new. I've recently published three articles that present some initial findings, and call for more research on related questions. Individual mindfulness can minimise automatic or impulsive reactions, and increase cognitive flexibility, which in turn can lead people to consider the consequences of unquestioned structures and power relations. It also influences compassion towards other people and the environment, which can translate into more pro-social and pro-environmental behaviour. A recent survey, which I conducted with a colleague, also found that individual mindfulness coincides with increased motivation to take or support risk reduction and climate adaptation actions. It has the potential to facilitate adaptation at all scales. I have recently set up a Contemplative Sustainable Futures Program, which includes research and teaching activities, to continue working on related questions.[2]

01 Christine Wamsler, "How Mindfulness Can Help the Shift Towards a More Sustainable Society," *The Conversation*, June 29, 2017, https://theconversation.com/how-mindfulness-can-help-the-shift-towards-a-more-sustainable-society-79127.

02 For more information on Christine's research project at the Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies, see: https://www.lucsus.lu.se/research/urban-governance/contemplative-sustainable-futures