

**Approaches to reduce the disaster vulnerability of forcibly  
displaced people: Humanitarian practitioners and the Rohingya**

**Thomas Johnson**

*Bachelor of Construction Management (Hons) (Newcastle)*  
*Master of Disaster Preparedness and Reconstruction (Newcastle)*



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School of Architecture and Built Environment  
College of Engineering, Science and Environment  
University of Newcastle, Australia

# Note to readers

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# Statement of Originality

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**Thomas Johnson**

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# Dedication

This work is dedicated to the countless individuals and families who have needlessly suffered as a result of disasters and forced displacement. I acknowledge the immense hardship and trauma they have endured, and the ongoing struggles faced in dispossession and displacement. May we commit to challenging the systems that perpetuate the marginalisation and persecution of these people. This study is also dedicated to the aid workers, volunteers, and organisations working tirelessly in response to the numerous displacement crises around the globe.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the Pambalong Clan of the Awabakal People, the traditional custodians of the land on which The University of Newcastle is located. I pay my respects to their Elders, past, present, and future, for their ongoing stewardship of this land and for the knowledge and resilience that indigenous people have shown throughout history. I also recognise the importance of understanding the perspectives and experiences of indigenous peoples in addressing issues related to disaster vulnerability and forced displacement. In particular, a respect for *country*, distinctly lacking in decision-making processes regarding development and disaster risk, to shift from an extractive relationship with the earth towards a custodial one. Tyson Yunkaporta (2019, p. 3) conveys the importance of this in one simple phrase *“If you don’t move with the land, the land will move you”*.

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the professional team at the School of Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Newcastle. This thesis would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my supervisors Assoc. Prof. Thayaparan Gajendran, Assoc. Prof. Jason von Meding, and Dr. Helen Giggins. Their expert knowledge, patience and encouragement throughout the research process has been invaluable. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to them for their unwavering support and for providing me with the opportunity to work on such an important and meaningful topic. Their dedication to my academic and personal growth has been a constant source of motivation. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my wife, Lily Cooper-Johnson. Without you, I would not have been able to continue this journey. Thank you for believing in me and being my inspiration.

# Abstract

Displaced people living in temporary shelter are often more vulnerable to disasters than those with secure tenure. Displaced people, whether internally displaced within their country or refugees across international borders, are generally unable to address the emergent vulnerabilities due to a lack of access to resources, support networks and fundamental rights. In many instances, humanitarian organisations lack the knowledge or capacity to best reduce disaster vulnerability in displaced settlements.

Research on the vulnerability of displaced populations, their unique challenges in the disaster context, and how humanitarian organisations can assist in this context is limited. Moreover, the limited understanding of how displacement exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities (e.g., poverty and lack of access to healthcare) and affects the ability to prepare for and recover from disasters, poses significant challenges to practitioners in this field.

In this context, a knowledge gap exists in the discourse of disaster risk reduction concerning understanding of the disaster vulnerability of displaced people, their specific needs, and potential interventions. Furthermore, the knowledge gap extends to the long-term impacts of displacement on disaster risk and how displacement may impact access to housing, employment, and other resources needed for recovery. Addressing this knowledge gap can inform displaced populations' disaster preparedness and response strategies. Therefore, this research aims to explore the effects of humanitarian operations on the drivers of disaster vulnerability for forcibly displaced populations.

The conceptual framework for this study was developed using the Pressure and Release model and the literature on forced displacement, humanitarian response operations, and

disaster vulnerability. Using abductive reasoning, the study develops propositions from the literature and further explores the propositions through a single phenomenological case study, utilising semi-structured interviews with thirty-two humanitarian practitioners. The data collected from these interviews were provisionally and structurally coded through Lumivero's NVivo software and explored through thematic analysis.

The research findings identify five key aspects. First, the disconnect between 'what is known about reducing disaster vulnerability' and 'what is implemented in practice by the humanitarian sector' contributes to significant levels of vulnerability in displaced populations. Second, among displaced populations, improving access to resources is not adequately utilised as a means to reduce vulnerability. Third, these shortcomings are negatively impacted by external influences from governments and donors that limit the ability of organisations to reduce vulnerability effectively. Fourth, intra-organisation coordination issues affect the outcomes of humanitarian programmes. The limitations of the cluster approach, lack of institutional knowledge, and difficulties in monitoring and evaluation impede the ability of organisations to reduce vulnerability effectively. Fifth, the humanitarian sector negatively affects outcomes by not adequately addressing social cohesion and aid equity. The lack of localisation of the NGO labour force, the increased strain on local resources, and unequal aid delivery lead to increased tensions between displaced populations and the host community which negatively impacts the drivers of vulnerability.

Overall, this thesis contributes to an understanding of how humanitarian operations can impact the disaster vulnerability of displaced populations and provides recommendations for improving the effectiveness of these operations in the future. This culminates in two key contributions. Firstly, a conceptual model based on the Pressure and Release model is

produced specifically for the context of forced displacement crises. Secondly, the *vulnerability headway model* is proposed for focusing activities designed to reduce the disaster vulnerability of forcibly displaced people.

**Keywords:** Disaster vulnerability, forced displacement, Rohingya refugee crisis, humanitarian response, progression of vulnerability



# List of Abbreviations

**ASEAN** – Association of Southeast Asian Nations

**ATR** – Access to Resources Model

**BOK** – Body of Knowledge

**CwC** – Communicating with Communities

**DRM** – Disaster Risk Management

**DRR** – Disaster Risk Reduction

**IASC** – Inter-Agency Standing Committee

**IDPs** – Internally Displaced Persons

**IOM** – International Organisation for Migration

**INGO** – International Non-Government Organisation

**ISCG** – Inter-Sector Coordination Group

**MEAL** – Monitoring Evaluation and Learning

**MOVE** – Methods for the Improvement of Vulnerability in Europe Framework

**NGO** – Non-Government Organisation

**PAR** – Pressure and Release Model

**PMLD** – Post-Migration Living Difficulties

**SDG** – United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

**Sendai Framework** - The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030

**TDK** – Tie Down Kits

**TOC** – Theory of Change

**UNDRO** – Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator

**UNHCR** – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

**UNICEF** – United Nations International Children’s Fund

**UNOCHA** – United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

**WASH** – Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

**WHO** – World Health Organisation

**WFP** – World Food Programme

# Definition of Key Terms

<b>Capacity –</b>	<i>The combination of all the strengths, attributes and resources available within an organisation, community or society to manage and reduce disaster risks and strengthen resilience (UNDRR, 2023).</i>
<b>Disaster Risk –</b>	<i>The potential loss of life, injury, or destroyed or damaged assets which could occur to a system, society or a community in a specific period of time, determined probabilistically as a function of hazard, exposure, vulnerability and capacity (UNDRR, 2023).</i>
<b>Disaster –</b>	<i>A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts (UNDRR, 2023).</i>
<b>Hazard –</b>	<i>A process, phenomenon or human activity that may cause loss of life, injury or other health impacts, property damage, social and economic disruption or environmental degradation (UNDRR, 2023).</i>
<b>Internally Displaced Persons –</b>	<i>An IDP is “a person who has been forced to flee his or her home for the same reason as a refugee, but remains in his or her own country and has not crossed an international border” (Kennedy, 2008).</i>
<b>Resilience –</b>	<i>The ability of a system, community or society exposed to hazards to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, including</i>

*through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management (UNDRR, 2023).*

**Refugee –**

*A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries (UNHCR, 2021c). The Rohingya refugees are not officially registered as refugees; however, they are referred to as refugees throughout this study as they meet the UNHCR definition and are often referred as refugees in the literature. In some literature they are referred to as FDMN (forcibly displaced Myanmar national).*

**Root causes –**

*Root causes refer to the underlying factors that contribute to the vulnerabilities and risks faced by communities. These root causes are the primary drivers of the progression of vulnerability and ultimately lead to disasters.*

**Dynamic pressures –**

*Processes which translate the effect of root causes both temporally and spatially into unsafe conditions as well as the institutional constraints triggered by the interaction between structures and processes (Wisner et al., 1994).*

<b>Vulnerability –</b>	<i>The characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural hazard (Wisner et al., 1994).</i>
<b>Preparedness –</b>	<i>The knowledge and capacities developed by governments, response and recovery organisations, communities and individuals to effectively anticipate, respond to and recover from the impacts of likely, imminent or current disasters (UNDRR, 2023).</i>
<b>Mitigation –</b>	<i>The lessening or minimising of the adverse impacts of a hazardous event (UNDRR, 2023).</i>
<b>Exposure –</b>	<i>The situation of people, infrastructure, housing, production capacities and other tangible human assets located in hazard-prone areas (UNDRR, 2023).</i>

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