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Covid-19 and the Peculiar Nature of Gradual Onset Disasters

[Abstract]

Basic texts sometimes classify natural disasters according to their onset as “rapid” or “gradual.” While both disrupt normal routines, cause damage and casualties and require collective solutions, rapid onset disasters (e.g. earthquakes, tornados, wildland fires, hurricanes etc.) are more familiar due to their sudden occurrence, the need for immediate lifesaving response and high visibility in the news media. Gradual onset disasters which include droughts, famines and epidemics emerge slowly, or at least occur over weeks, months and even years. Prof. Katsuya Yamori has written that the Covid-19 pandemic differs in significant ways from our traditional paradigm of natural disaster, that it “nullifies” three aspects of this paradigm: the zoning or spatial dimension, the phasing of disasters into warning, response and recovery, and the status aspect in which experts speak authoritatively to inform non-experts. While I would agree that the Covid-19 pandemic has stretched our standard paradigm, I would not go so far as to say that it has nullified it. There are key elements of the paradigm that remain relevant including a normalization bias, immediate post-impact altruism and the differential vulnerability of the elderly and poor. Covid-19 has forced a re-thinking of our natural hazard paradigm which takes rapidly occurring disasters for granted.



[Keywords]

rapid vs. gradual onset disasters, Covid-19, paradigms