

When the Waters Came:

A study of Differences of Wealth in a Post Disaster Community

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Introduction

What would you do if one morning you woke up to everything you owned gone? If in a moment, you had to choose only a couple of items to take with you, what would you choose? What if you had to choose in a matter of minutes what you would save in your house? Would you gather your family, pets or maybe the first thing you would grab would be your TV? Would all your most important items fit in one measly plastic bag? How would you chose what is most important to you? These are the types of questions that the people of Peru had to answer as water flooded their homes. Destroying everything in sight and taking everything it could with it. For many people this would be a hard thing to imagine, but for many families in Peru, during this last year this nightmare became a reality.

In March of 2017, Peru experienced an El Niño, which is a sudden and abnormal warming of surface sea temperature in the Pacific which unleashed the deadliest downpours in decades, with landslides and raging rivers swallowing everything in its path, including clogging highways and destroying homes and crops (Taylor, 2017). The floods left towns engulfed in mud and water and muddy swamps where farmlands once were. More than a 100 people were killed and tens of thousands were left homeless. Making matters worse, over 800 villages were destroyed, 260 bridges collapsed and nearly 30,000 km of roads became unusable, cutting off hundreds of villages and towns from water (Collyns, 2017).

After a natural disaster, we tend to lump everyone together and assume they have all lost everything and everyone is equal, but is this true? When the disaster comes does everyone really become equal? I had the opportunity to conduct ethnographic research in one such flood-affected community in northern Peru. I set out to understand wealth disparities and wealth inequities in this community after this disaster and to get answers to these questions. As I continued to study this group of people, I began to see that some did have more than others. Some were living in what was left of their houses with four solid walls while others were having to live out of tents because their houses were washed away in the flood. As I continued to study this community I also noticed that in terms of items, many people also had a lot more of things than others, but were they really considered wealthier or above the others? To answer that question, I was going to have to figure out a way to understand what was considered wealth in this community.

In order to understand the definition of wealth in this community, I first had to understand what would make a family wealthier. I came to realize that a family or person living in an area with four solid walls would put them ahead of others. This did not mean they were living comfortably, just that they have a little more than others around them. The following experience illustrates the condition of the community after the disaster on my first visit there:

As we pulled in this so-called neighborhood I took note of the hundreds of piles of trash and rubble that used to be homes with families. I tried to imagine what this place used to look like before the floods came, but it was hard for me to convert the lone standing doors into houses or change piles of bricks into a place someone would want to live. I could not take my eyes off the trash and the destroyed homes that were left behind. I stepped off the bus that day in awe of the destruction as I had never imagined the floods could have caused such devastation.

As I climbed off the bus, I was immediately greeted by a strong smell of a campfire. I could see the smoke drifting in the wind, swirling in the air and floating to the bright blue cloudless sky. The fire reminded me of home and of my family. I found this strange as I looked at the fields of sand and rubble that surrounded me because it was nowhere close to the green fields and mountains I had come to call home. After only a few minutes I could feel beads of sweat on my skin as it was heated by the intense sun. As I walk towards toward the group of people waiting to greet up, I could feel the soft shift of sand beneath my feet as it starts to trickle into my shoes. On that first day, we were greeted so warmly with people coming out to greet us for the first time and bringing up bundles of bright, beautiful flowers. I remember how awkward I felt that first day as these strangers hugged and kissed me because I was not used to it. I remember staring at the one standing building and the make shift porch area they had constructed to have communal meals by throwing a tarp over wooden poles. As I looked at the water lines a third of the way up the wall, I began to question how much was left of their old lives.

After talking with them for a little bit, they wanted to show me around. They took me out onto what use to be the main road and we started to walk up the road away from the community center. As I stumble down this sandy and rocky road, I stared around me in amazement as they began to describe what the rubble use to be. I could see for miles around me. They explained that these empty fields of nothing use to be homes. As I stared out into the destruction all I could think about was how many lives would have been changed in such a short amount of time. As one woman looked out across what use to be her home she quietly said, “When the waters came, they just took everything”



Pictures of destruction left behind by the floods of 2017 in North Peru

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have studied topics close to this, but I was only able to find a couple studying wealth disparities after a disaster such as Stephen W. Dudasik's *Victimization in Natural Disaster*. This study, conducted by Dudasik, looked at the unequal distribution of wealth. He went on to talk about how people tend to think natural disasters make everyone equal. He states "As in other natural disasters not all survivors were injured, nor did everyone lose family and friends. Unequal distribution of wealth, moreover, meant that some victims could better cope with some aspects of the emergency, while the greater number lost most of their

personal possessions and faced a difficult struggle for survival and recovery. Despite such differences in kind and degree of victimization, several authors maintain that natural disasters tend to level the social order and to eliminate hierarchical distinctions because the dangers “indiscriminately affect persons of all groups and statues”. This is exactly what I set out to study. I wanted to know if this natural disaster had “leveled the social order” or if there still was a difference in the wealth disparities in this community in northern Peru. Another scholar I could find that studied the topic of wealth differences would be, Daniel J. Murphy in his study *Booms and Busts: Assets Dynamics, Disaster, and the Politics of Wealth in Rural Mongolia*. In his study, he looks at wealth in a poverty setting by using “contemporary and historical livestock data collected from rural pastoralists in Mongolia...:”. I decided to define wealth in the community I was studied by the assets they possessed.

Methods

I began my research by walking around the community and making small-scale maps of some of the members houses and properties. I made sure to map how many items they had, what those items were, what type of structure they were living in, and where everything was located. My first map I did was of a man named Joseph. The flood had completely destroyed his house and he was living in two tents, one small and one larger. He also had an area where he kept ducks and pigs. As I walked around his property I noticed he was nervous to show us around and was uncomfortable with us taking pictures. As I began to take note of his belongings I realized I did not have to do much counting or mapping because there was not a lot there. They had a couple of beds, some clothing, a couple pieces of worn furniture, and animals.

The next property I went to was an older woman named Emily. She was living in a small tent with her husband and her son. She was a bright and happy woman. She proudly displayed

her few items and was very excited to show us where she lived. She loved having her picture taken and was excited to share with me anything she could. I quickly noticed her living conditions were not the best. She did not have any electricity and was living in cramped quarters with only a mattress and a couple bags of clothing. One of the items I found interesting was she had a tube television that had items stacked on top of it. She had no means to watch the television but she had decided to hold on to it. She had made a space she used as a kitchen with a wood burning stove. Next to the kitchen was an area for her ducks and a garden of plants that she had gone out and collected after the flood.

I then got invited into the home of another family, it was a husband named Felix and his wife, Dawn along with their nephew, Alex. The first thing I noticed was how most of the walls had made it through the floods and that they had two empty rooms that were still filled with rubble and dirt from the flood. As I continued to walk around I saw that most of rooms had lights and electricity in them and that both rooms being used had televisions in them. When asked about his room, Alex, a fifteen-year-old said “My room is similar to what it looked like before the flood. When I heard, the flood was coming I quickly grabbed my TV and ran it up to the roof” The rooms also had a mattress with a bed frame in them, along with clothing. As we got to the last room, I saw that they had a room with thirteen little chicks in it. They explained that the room used to belong to their nieces but they moved after the flood to continue school.

The next house I visited was Liz, she is another lady that lives close to the end of the group. Her house was also made of adobe with a thin layer of concrete, so most of her walls made it through the flood, but she did have huge gaping holes where doors used to be. She later explained that the pressure from the water trying to get into the house caused the doors to collapse bringing parts of the walls with them. Right away I notice that there was a light in

almost all of the rooms in the house with electricity running through the house. She had multiple tables and chairs. She explained that before the floods she owned and operated a restaurant. She also had two refrigerators and two gas stoves but one of each of them was standing in a pile of rubble and was not plugged in or being used. I noticed that she had two bed frames, one in what used to be her bedroom but because of the damage she had to move to another room, and she used to sleep on. Liz left the frame in the old room where it sat with no use. As we came to the end of what was left of her house, I saw a room that was almost collapsed and ask what it had been used for. She explained to me that the room use to house multiple animals that she would cook, such as chickens, ducks and guinea pigs, but when the floods came the room collapsed washing away the animals killing them all.

Nancy, Liz's daughter, was the last house I got the chance to tour. The structure and walls of her house were also saved but her doors and the area around her doors were missing. She was living in one room which she had divided into a kitchen areas and a bedroom. Nancy lived there with her husband. She had a light hanging from the ceiling and a tent set up in half of the room. I also noticed a bike that was leaning up against one of the walls. In the middle of one side of the room was a large table. On the same side of the room were shelves set up against a wall and they contained kitchen utensils and other items thrown about. As you walk to the final "room" that she has, I can see that only one and half walls made it through the pressure of the floods, but she has made use of the room by lining the walls and floor with plants. After I finished mapping all the houses, I began defining and assessing wealth between the members of the community.

Below are the methods that I used, and the data that I collected, to define and assess wealth in this community.

Step 1: Mapping and creating a list of items

After I had made maps of the houses I planned to study, I made a list of twenty-two items I had seen in each of the houses. I then decided what items to put on the flashcards. I chose to use flashcards to provide the participants with tangible objects to organize into a list. I first wrote the words in English on one side of the card for my benefit. Afterwards, I translated the words into Spanish and wrote them on the other side of the card. Lastly, I took the time to draw a picture of the object. I did this so that if someone could not read they would still be able to do the exercise on their own. I chose this method in order to boost confidence and make it easier to perform the exercise as well as it better conveyed my intentions.

Step 2: Ranking

My next step was to put my flashcards into action. I began with Nancy and Liz who did the ranking exercise together. I began by explain what the exercise was and how to do it. Such as telling them I was trying to assess what was most important to least important to them. I than showed them the cards by laying them out onto a table. Next, I asked them to pick the most important thing to them. As we continued with the exercise, I would ask them what would come next and if it was more important than the last card or less important. It was important to me to let them decide the ranking without my influence of option. With Nancy and Liz, the experience had a fun atmosphere, but I could tell that some objects were hard for them to think about because they did not have access to them. With most of the items they would make comments on why they rank it the way they did. Such as when they ranked 'cell phone' they said it needed to be number two because it was "very important for social interaction and communication to the outside world because without it they would be all alone". The exercise was fun for them and I could tell they enjoyed it by how they would make joke, such as when they ranked electricity as

number six they stated, “the light keeps the ghost away”. At the very end of the exercise, I would ask them to relook at the cards and see if they were all in the correct order. Giving them a chance to change any of their answers.

Table 1: Shows the final ranking that each community member gave to each item. Each card and item is represented and the numbers that correlate are what number each person rank the object. See table 2 on page 11 for assessment of average ranking.

Names	EC	W	ST	Gas	KU	BL	CL	LBS	Matt	BF	Pets	Chicks	Ducks	G/P	Bath	Tow	Cell	Tv	SHV	Pigs	Fridge	Bike
Nancy/Liz	6	1	4	5	7	8	3	16	9	10	21	14	15	12	11	19	2	22	18	13	17	20
Emily	15	14	5	6	18	19	9	7	2	3	17	4	13	8	1	20	16	10	21	11	12	22
Alex	13	6	9	8	10	5	4	15	3	2	1	21	20	22	12	7	16	14	18	19	11	17
Dawn/Feliz	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22

Table 2: This table to the Key to table 1. It shows the different items that villagers ranked exercise.

Key	Clothing - CL	Bathroom - Bath
Electricity - EC	Light Bulbs - LBS	Towels- Tow
Water - W	Mattress - Matt	Cell Phones - Cell
Stove - ST	Bed Frame - BF	Television - TV
Kitchen Utensils - KU	Chickens - Chicks	Shelves - SHV
Blankets - BL	Garden/Plants - G/P	Bicycle - Bike



Flashcards exercise done by Anthony, a fifteen-year-old living in the community. He organized the cards by what he thought was most important to what was least important

Step 3: Performing informal interviews

For my interviews, I decided to conduct them informally with only a couple ideas of questions I wanted answers to and really try to focus on where they conservation lead with the difference people. A couple of the questions I decided to ask where: “do you feel like everyone is equal in the community”, “Were donation equally divided out.”, and “Are items shared in the community or are items personal?” From these interviews, I got very interesting contradictions. From one young mother, I got the impression that everyone in the community was equal and that when the floods washed away everything it made everyone equal. From another point of view, from one of the older ladies, she thought that there were still many inequalities and that some people still have more than others. She stated that “the ones who had little before the floods, now just have nothing. While the people had stuff before not just have less”.

Table 2: This table is used to show the different items that were ranked and the average of where that item was ranked. It also shows how many of that certain object everyone has and then their total of the amount of “wealth”.

	Tangible Assets	Average #	Joseph		Emily		Nancy		Liz		Dawn, Feliz & Alex	
1	Stove	17.75	1	17.75	1	17.75	1	17.75	2	35.5	0	0
2	Water	17.25							1	17.25	1	17.25
2	Clothing	17.25	1	17.25	1	17.25	1	17.25	1	17.25	1	17.25
2	Mattress	17.25	2	34.5	1	17.25			1	17.25	2	34.5
2	Gas	17.25	1	17.25	0	0	1	17.25	1	17.25	0	0
3	Bed Frame	16.75	1	16.75	0	0	0	0	2	33.5	2	33.5
4	Electricity	14.25	1	14.25	0	0	1	14.25	1	14.25	1	14.25
5	Blankets	13.5	2	27	1	13.5	1	13.5	1	13.5	2	27
6	Bathroom	13.25	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	1	13.25
7	Kitchen Utensils	13	1	13	1	13	1	13	1	13		
8	Light Bulbs	11.5	1	11.5	0	0	2	23	2	23	5	57.5
9	Pets	10.5	1	10.5	1	10.5	0	0	1	10.5	1	10.5
10	Chickens	10.25	0		0	0	0	0	0	0	13	133.25
10	Cellphones	10.25			0	0	1	10.25	1	10.5	3	31.5
11	Garden/Plants	9	0		1	9	1	9	0	0	1	9
12	Ducks	7.75	10	77.5	8	62	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	Pigs	7.75	3	23.25	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	Fridge	7.75	0		0	0	0	0	2	15.5	0	0
13	Towels	7.5	2	15	2	15	1	7.5	1	7.5	3	22.5
14	Television	7	0		1	7	0	0	0	0	2	14
15	Shelves	4	0		0	0	1	4	2	8	2	8
16	Bicycle	2.75	1	2.75	0	0	1	2.75	0	0	0	0
	Totals			298.25		182.25		149.5		253.75		443.25

From the data could collect, I am able to see that in term of tangible assets and what is important in this community, there is a huge difference between these members of this community. The highest ranked family is almost to five hundred points on the scale of what items they own and have access to. While, the lowest rank family is only close to a hundred and fifty points. This show how one family could save a lot of their assets after the natural disaster happened, while many were not able to hold onto anything. This data shows that in this community they were not brought to equal level. When looking at the items that everyone owned after the flood, I could see a large difference in the number associated with the families. I also noticed some contention with a couple members of the group when asking about certain items. When talking about electricity and the cost each member of the community was having to pay for their usage, I was told some families were paying a very large amount of money verse some member who were paying very little. When one member was talking about the unfair cost they were paying comparatively another member said “You pay a lot more because you have multiple light and a refrigerator and I only have one light” When asking the members of the community about the differences in tangible assets I receive very contradicting answers one member said they thought that everyone in the community was equal and they shared everything with each other, She stated “Things were unequal before but after the floods we became equal”. But when I asked another member she said “Things were unequal before and things are unequal now, the people that had a lot before now have less and the people that had a little before now have nothing” By looking at table 2, I was able to see a difference in the tangible assets, I was able to see that the bottom two families were close in number and the middle two were close in numbers with the top family’s rank being a lot larger.

Using this ranking exercise, I was also able to see what is most important to the members of this community. Such as when I was doing the exercise with Nancy and Liz, they explained to me that water was the most important asset because “without water you cannot live”. As seen on table 2, I could rank the items in terms of most important to least important in terms of what the community thought. It shows that the items that most people choose to put on the top of the list were assets that made their lives more comfortable such as, a stove, water, clothing, and a mattress. These items were the first couple of tangible assets on the list.

This study can help on larger scale by creating an awareness of wealth differences in a community that is trying to rebuild. When giving aid to people that are in survival mode it is important not to add to the inequalities and one way to start combating this issue is to create awareness. This could also be a start of coming up with a way to divide and pass out resources that are given as aid. Knowing about and paying attention to these inequalities could lessen tensions and disagreements in a community that is trying to rebuild from a disaster.

Resources:

Collins, Dan. "How Can Peru Prepare to Withstand More Devastating Floods and Landslides?" *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 13 Apr. 2017. Web. 29 June 2017.

Dudasik, S. W. (1980), VICTIMIZATION IN NATURAL DISASTER. *Disasters*, 4: 329-338.

Murphy, D. J. (2014), Blooms and Busts: Asset Dynamics, Disaster, and the Politics of Wealth in Rural Mongolia. *Economic Anthropology*, 1: 104-123

Taylor, Alan. "Peru Suffers Worst Flooding in Decades." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 20 Mar. 2017. Web. 29 June 2017.

