Social Construction of Disaster Risk and Preparedness: Institutional Narratives from Sindh

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Abstract

Traditionally, disaster risk reduction (DRR) and preparedness planning in Pakistan has been viewed through technocratic and hazard-oriented structures giving precedence to planning tools, response systems and infrastructural remedies. Although these methods are necessary, they do not pay much attention to the social and institutional mechanisms according to which the disaster risk and preparedness are perceived and regulated. This paper considers disaster risk and preparedness as socially constructed phenomena through the lenses of the institutional discourses that have been generated by the disaster management authorities in Sindh and one of the most disaster-prone provinces in Pakistan.

The study is based on a qualitative, interpretivist research design and uses semi-structured interviews with disaster management officials, the analysis of disaster management plans, standard operating procedures, and policy documents, and a limited number of focus group discussions to provide the contexts of triangulation. Thematic and narrative analysis were also applied as the means of analysing the data in order to determine the prevailing patterns of meaning-making in institutional discourse. The results indicate that there are four interconnected institutional discourses that influence preparedness to disasters in Sindh. To start with, the catastrophes are depicted as extraordinary and externally imposed natural processes, which supports the sense of inescapability. Second, preparedness is mostly created in the form of documentation and procedural adherence which leads to symbolic rather than functional preparedness. Third, communities are placed mainly as passive beneficiaries, restricting the acknowledgment of the local knowledge and adaptive capacities. Lastly, the blame on the disaster risk is often transferred to climate change, geography, or population behaviour, which further depoliticises the governance of disaster and contributes to accountability spreading. Connecting the results to the social constructionist theory and the literature on disaster governance, the research shows that the failures in preparedness cannot be explained only by the factors that could be defined as technical or capacity-related but need to be considered as the results of the institutional discourse and power dynamics. The research has the potential to add to disaster literature by expanding the social constructionist approach to investigating the sub-national governance of DRR in a Global South setting, and it provides policy-implicated implications in terms of the shift towards less symbolic preparedness and more reflexive, inclusive, and functional approaches to disaster risk reduction.

Introduction

Hazard and climate-prone province of Sindh.

Climate change, the declining environment, and other irresponsible development activities have led to the frequency, intensity, and complexity of natural disasters worldwide (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2015). Pakistan belongs to the list of the most vulnerable countries in terms of facing the dangers of climate change such as flood, drought, cyclones, earthquakes, and heat waves (World Bank, 2022). The province of Sindh in Pakistan is one among the worst instances of multi-hazard vulnerability. Sindh, as a part of the lower Indus basin, is very vulnerable to floods of rivers, the abundant monsoon rain, coastline cyclones, extended droughts in dry areas, and heatwave increasing temperatures (Ahmed et al., 2015; Mani et al., 2018). Regular disasters, the most notable of which have been the floods of 2010 and 2022, have resulted in massive human, economic, and infrastructural damage, with a skewed impact on poor and marginalized communities (World Bank, 2022). Such periodic shocks point to the fact that urgent and efficient disaster risk reduction (DRR), as well as preparedness planning, must extend beyond emergency response and look at the root causes of vulnerability.

Domination of Hazard-Centric and Technocratic Disaster Parigms.

Pakistan has come up with a formal structure of disaster governance with the aim of addressing the growing risks of disasters with the key focus being on technocratic frameworks and hazard-oriented framework. The institutionalization of disaster management came with the formation of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), provincial Disaster Management Authorities (PDMAs) and district Disaster Management Authorities (DDMAs) which occurred after the 2005 earthquake (National Disaster Management Authority [NDMA], 2010). Risk assessment, early warning system, contingency plans, standard operating procedures and infrastructural interventions have since been highlighted in preparedness planning. Although such measures are critical, disaster governance in Sindh still relies on the technical solution and procedural compliance without considering social, cultural, and political aspects of risk (Jabeen et al., 2020). Preparedness is measured mostly by the presence of plans and files as opposed to whether it is practically applicable or socially integrated. These hazard based frameworks are more likely to consider disasters as external shocks, and ignore the role of governance failures, inequality and marginalization in disaster effects.

Disaster Risk and Preparedness as a Social, Institutional Construction.

Modern disaster studies are gradually gaining ground in arguing that disaster risk and preparedness are not value-neutral and objective phenomena. Rather, they are socially and institutionally constructed by discursive means, language of policies and organizational practices (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith, 2002; Tierney, 2014). Disaster risk is not only a creation of natural hazardous conditions but a social creation of vulnerability determined by poverty, power relations and unequal development (Wisner et al., 2004). The institutes are at the center of building meaning of this risk, preparedness and vulnerability. By means of official discourses, disaster management

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authorities establish the definition of risk, validated knowledge, and prioritized interventions. These stories shape the conceptualization, implementation and assessment of preparedness and tend to place a higher value on technocratic knowledge at the expense of community knowledge and experience.

Preparedness Priorities, Accountability and Institutional Narratives.

Dominating institutional discourses in Sindh direct the disasters as mainly being the result of climate change, geography or the extreme weather. Societies are not often depicted as active participants who can help in preparedness and resilience, but rather as inactive, passive receivers of assistance. The preparedness priorities got as a result of such framings are biased towards response and relief, rather than prevention, participation, and long-term resilience building (Awan et al., 2019).

In addition, institutional narratives affect the accountability frameworks in disaster governance. By externalizing or naturalizing disaster risk, the responsibility is frequently decentralized and it does not lie within institutional decision-making, planning failures, or governance constraints. This may lead to symbolic preparedness, in which adherence to formal standards replaces meaningful preparedness, and in which previous disaster experience is not learned.

Research Problem, Objectives and Guiding Question.

Although Sindh is one of the most vulnerable provinces of the country to disaster, empirical studies have so far concentrated on effects of the hazard and emergency response and damage of infrastructures. The discursive construction of disaster risk and preparedness is a little studied topic in scholarly literature, especially on provincial and district levels where preparedness planning operationalizes it (Rasheed et al., 2021). The main research question that will be involved in the current research is the following: the institutional narrative is found to influence preparedness priorities, community roles, and accountability mechanisms in disaster governance; however, these narratives have not been well analyzed in current DRR research.

Accordingly, the study aims to:

1. Identify dominant institutional narratives surrounding disaster risk and preparedness in Sindh;

2. Analyse how these narratives influence preparedness planning and community engagement; and

3. Examine the implications of these narratives for accountability and resilience building.

The guiding research question is: How do institutional narratives shape the social construction of disaster risk and preparedness in Sindh, and what are their implications for inclusive and effective disaster governance?

Contribution to Disaster Studies and DRR Governance Literature

This paper makes an impact, as it will provide work in the disaster studies by shifting the focus away hazard-focused discussions on disaster management and predicts the relevance of discourse, power, and institutional meaning-making in DRR. It provides sub-national empirical data of Sindh, which is a highly vulnerable, under-researched environment, thus enriching DRR governance literature in the Global South.

The research also provides practical implications to the policymakers and disaster management authorities, in that it emphasizes a need to re-conceptualize preparedness as reflexive, participatory and socially-based process. The role played by institutional narratives to govern disaster is important in strengthening accountability, increase community participation, and resilient societies in multi-hazard situations like the Sindh.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The research is based on a social constructionist approach that does not consider disaster risk and preparedness as objective or technical facts but as socially produced as it involves institutional definitions, hegemonic narratives, and power dynamics. This framework combines the social construction of disaster risk, institutional narrative analysis, and the governance theory to describe the way in which the priorities regarding disaster preparedness, community roles, and accountability mechanisms are established in formal disaster management institutions in Sindh.

Social Construction of Disaster Risk

Traditional approaches to disaster management have traditionally theorized disasters in terms of natural, external events, mostly caused by physical hazards, e.g., floods, earthquakes, or cyclones. Nevertheless, the modern study of disasters tends to call this assumption into question since it is becoming clear that disasters are a product of interpretation, framing, and meaning-making processes entrenched in social and institutional contexts (Hoffman & Oliver-Smith, 2002; Tierney, 2014). Within the social constructionist perspective, the subject of disaster risk does not simply arise due to the environmental hazards but rather due to the manner in which societies define, prioritize and react to the hazards.

According to the theory of social construction, realities are not pre-made and unrelated to the interpretation of human beings; in fact, they arise through the processes of mutuality of meaning, language, and sociality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). When applied in the context of disaster studies, the viewpoint of risk as a socially mediated condition indicates that risk is not an intrinsic aspect of hazards but rather a culturally structured, politically oriented and institutionally practiced phenomenon. The constructs of a risk, vulnerable populations, and appropriate interventions are shaped by dominant narratives and not by a scientific judgment on its own (Bankoff, 2001).

A major role of this is played by discourse. Disaster discourse in policy texts, preparedness guidelines, and other official materials constructs disasters in specific manners, frequently imposing a technocratic discourse and deemphasizing structural and social factors of vulnerability.

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To illustrate, the framing of floods is mainly achieved by treating them as anomaly of climate because it can hush down the contributions of the failure of governance, unplanned urbanization, or poor maintenance of infrastructure (Wisner et al., 2004). Reporting, evaluation, and professional consultation, therefore, turn into institutional knowledge, which is a potent tool in the process of forming the perception of disaster risk perception and management.

The disruption of the status quo Probability of the disaster object is manifested in the context of the Sindh, in the form of narratives, where geography, climate change, and extreme weather patterns are prioritized as the determinants of disaster. These framings can make normal the frequent occurrences of losses and make it difficult to critically think about possible mitigable causes, thus contributing to an embodiment of a reactive over a preventive attitude to disaster preparedness..

Institutional Narratives and Power

Institutional narratives can be defined as those powerful storylines created and propagated by actors in the bureaucracy that define problems, justify interventions and legitimize power. These narratives define the conceptualization of risk, preparedness and vulnerability in formal institutions like the disaster management authorities, line departments and planning bodies in the context of disaster governance. Bureaucratic actors are those who have the power to frame the official knowledge and establishing policy agendas and assigning resources which makes them central to disaster meaning-making processes (Tierney et al., 2001). Institutional narratives are directly associated with power, particularly politically and sociologically. The concept of the knowledge-power nexus as proposed by Foucault (1980) indicates that the power of institutions can be exercised not only by means of the use of force or control but by producing authoritative knowledge. Technical assessments, hazard maps, and preparedness plans tend to transform into the objective truth in disaster management despite their being influenced by institutional interests, funding opportunities, and politics.

Bureaucratic actors will define risk, preparedness, and vulnerability by choosing what hazards will be attended to, what readiness is permissible to be as well as what it is not, and also by grouping people based on the criteria that are administratively convenient. Such definitions determine who knowledge should be attributed to and whose experience should be marginalized. Communities are commonly described as preventing, vulnerable beneficiaries with little capacity, and the institutional actors put themselves as experts and problem-solvers (Jabeen et al., 2020). This imbalance strengthens the top-down modes of governance and avoids the possibilities of participative preparedness planning.

Institutional narratives in Sindh tend to understand preparedness as a technical and procedural practice, the degree of which is judged by the presence of plans, standard operating procedures and coordination structures. Although these tools are necessary, their prevalence may mask more profound issues of functionality, inclusiveness, and learning. Further, institutional discourses can evade blame onto policy inefficiencies, lax adherence to regulations, or insufficient investment in

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risk mitigation by blaming natural forces as the main reason behind such disasters (Awan et al., 2019).

Implications for Disaster Preparedness

There are great implications of institutional domination of the narratives on disaster preparedness practice. The first effect is the development of symbolic preparedness where preparedness is evidenced by documentation, reporting and compliance in a formal way as opposed to operational preparedness or community involvement. Symbolic preparedness shapes an illusion of preparedness and conceals gaps in capacity, coordination, and local ownership (Tierney, 2014).

Narrative dominance also influences preparedness priorities whereby response and relief are favored as opposed to prevention and mitigation. The preparedness plans can be based on the emergency supplies, evacuation processes, and inter-agency coordination without highlighting the long-term risk mitigation strategies like land-use planning, community training, and social protection. The balance is especially pernicious in multi-hazard situations such as in Sindh as frequent disasters necessitate long-term investment in resilience as opposed to short-term actions.

The other important implication is the marginalization of the community knowledge. The local communities have contextual knowledge, historical recollection and adaptive practices that may be essential in successful preparedness. Nevertheless, when communities are conceived as passive victims through institutional discourses their knowledge is not taken into consideration in formal planning processes. The result of this exclusion is a vulnerability of the preparedness, as well as a degradation of the trust between the institutions and communities (Wisner et al., 2004).

In addition, narrative framing influences accountability systems. Failures in preparedness are more readily accepted or ignored in a situation where any disaster is depicted as a natural or inevitable occurrence. This restricts learning in institutions and limits reform opportunities. A social constructionist approach signifies the importance of analyzing critically the role of narratives in creating not only perceptions of risk but also some sense of responsibility in managing risks.

Analytical Relevance to This Study

This framework allows a view of the conceptualization and practice of disaster preparedness in Sindh by uniting social construction of risk, institutional narrative analysis, and power theory. It allows examining disaster governance in a non-technical way, but in terms of meaning-making processes that affect policy decisions, participation at community level, and responsibility. The qualitative analysis of institutional narratives presented in this framework supports the study as it provides a framework through which the lack of preparedness planning remains technocratic and symbolic and inadequately inclusive in the face of recurrent disaster experiences.

Literature Review

Global Scholarship on Disaster Narratives

The natural hazard paradigm dominated early disaster studies in the conceptualization of disasters as mainly the result of radical physical phenomena like earthquakes, floods, and storms. The

disaster risk in this framework was regarded as an external and quantifiable phenomenon and could be handled most suitably using technical interventions, engineering solutions, and emergency response systems. This solution focused on prediction, control and response where in most cases it was assumed that better scientific knowledge and infrastructure would be adequate to mitigate the occurrence of disasters (Tierney et al., 2001). Although these views played a critical role in the mitigation and response planning of the hazards, they were gradually being criticized as ignoring the social aspects of the disaster.

Since the end of the twentieth century, the field of disaster scholarship started to move towards the approaches of social vulnerability and political economy. Researchers claimed that any disaster is not only the product of the natural hazards but a product of the social, economic, and political procedures that produce exposure and vulnerability as well as capacity (Wisner et al., 2004). This redefinition of disasters as a social phenomenon with unequal development, poverty, marginalization, and governance failures given a prominent role in defining the results of disasters. Adger et al. (2005) went further to develop this line of thinking by connecting the vulnerability to disasters to larger level social-ecological systems, with resilience, adaptive capacity and institutional arrangements.

In more recent times, researchers have modified vulnerability models by adding discourse-based and interpretative perspectives of disaster risk. This literature posits that narratives, language and meaning-making processes are also used to create disasters that shape the perception, prioritization and governance of risks (Tierney, 2014). Other actors who are institutional, media and experts come up with dominant narratives that stipulate what constitutes a disaster, what knowledge is acceptable and what intervention is acceptable. These stories influence the way society is seen and how issues are addressed, tending to give more weight to technocratic interpretations and ignore other possible views.

Disaster stories are therefore studies of government which codes responsibility, rationalises interventions and normalises some types of risk. Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (2002) show the impact of cultural explanations of disasters on institutional reactions and recovery paths, and Bankoff (2001) criticizes the concept of vulnerability as a way to evade responsibility by blaming the victims. All of this literature supports the necessity to not only study the material effects of the disasters but the discursive dynamics of the disaster risk and disaster preparedness construction.

Disaster Risk Narratives in the Global South

The narratives of disaster risks in the Global South are closely interconnected with the discourse of development, priorities of the donors, and bureaucratic rationality. The international development organizations and humanitarian agencies are instrumental in the conceptualization of disaster risk and in most cases disasters are seen as technical development challenges that need external facilitation of solutions (Escobar, 1995). This framing is more likely to emphasize

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standardized risk assessment, project based intervention and measurable results, which support technocratic processes of disaster governance.

Researchers are finding that donor-led discourses often advance a de politicized concept of disaster risk with little focus placed on structural inequalities, land tenure, and failures in governance (Hilhorst, 2004). Rather, disasters are displayed as capacity deficiencies that can be remedied by training, infrastructure and strengthening institutions. Although these interventions might enhance some areas of preparedness, they frequently do not consider local power relations and knowledge systems at the community level. These stories are further supported by bureaucratic rationality which places emphasis on formal planning, documentation and compliance. In most cases of Global Souths, disaster preparedness is synonymous to creation of plans, structures, and reports that would address the needs of donors and other institutions instead of reality on the ground (Tierney et al., 2001). The concept of communities is often positioned as a consumer on the receiving side of aid, as opposed to actors that are capable of forming preparedness strategies.

The South Asian, African, and Latin American empirical studies point to the fact that community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) initiatives are frequently integrated rhetorically in policy frameworks but marginalized in practice (Gaillard & Mercer, 2013). An example of this is given by Jabeen et al. (2020), who show that, in Pakistan, despite their effectiveness, grassroots coping strategies are still barely visible even in the framework of official disaster planning. This disengagement is indicative of a larger trend where institutional narratives reignite preparedness discourse, which restricts any meaningful engagement and social learning.

Disaster Governance and DRR in Pakistan

Ever since the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, there has been great institutional change in the governance of disasters in Pakistan. The introduction of a multi-level disaster management structure, including National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMAs), and District Disaster Management Authority (DDMAs) came as a result of the enactment of the National Disaster Management Act (2010). This institutional framework was created to change the disaster management approach, which was rather a reactive relief-centered one to the overall disaster risk reduction and preparedness planning.

The empirical studies of DRR in Pakistan have concentrated more on the institutional capacity, coordination system, early warning systems, and the effectiveness of response. Research has shown that there are still significant obstacles that include the lack of financial resources, ineffective inter-agency coordination, and insufficient incorporation of DRR into development planning (Rasheed et al., 2021). Studies have also reported discrepancies in local preparedness especially in rural and marginalized regions where the communities have been known to depend on informal coping strategies instead of institutional support.

Nonetheless, most of this literature is still grounded in functional and performance-based evaluations of disaster governance. The preparedness is traditionally considered against the background of the presence of plans, hazard assessment, and response infrastructure, with a less

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focus on how the disaster risk is perceived or interpreted by institutional actors themselves. Consequently, preparedness planning has not been well-investigated in its meaning-making processes.

Similar tendencies are reflected in the studies that concentrate on Sindh province. The studies indicate the severe levels of exposure of the province to floods, droughts, cyclones, and heatwaves, and the destructive effects of recent disasters, such as the 2010 and 2022 floods (Mani et al., 2018; World Bank, 2022). Although these works offer useful information about the effects of hazards and the challenges of hazard response, they seldom question the role of institutional discourse in setting preparedness priorities, participating in the community, or establishing the structure of accountability.

Jabeen et al. (2020) and Awan et al. (2019) provide partial information about the gap in communication and challenges in engaging communities to disaster governance in Pakistan. But such studies do not go a step further and attempt to analyses the use of disaster narratives as a form of governance. Therefore, the concept of disaster preparedness in Pakistan is largely explored as a technical or administrative task and not as a process based on social construction and structured around power relations and institutional discourse.

Research Gap

Although the issue of disaster risk has gained worldwide significance as a socially constructed phenomenon, a conspicuous gap of the narrative and discourse-based analysis on DRR research is largely evident in Pakistan especially at provincial and district levels. The current literature serves to give much weight to hazard assessment, institutional capacity and response effectiveness, and there is little room to consider how disaster risk and preparedness is positioned, interpreted and communicated in disaster management institutions.

This is a major gap in the context of Sindh. Sindh being one of the most disaster-prone provinces of Pakistan presents an important case to be studied with regards to how institutional narratives affect preparedness planning, community roles and accountability. However, the language of disaster management plans, policy documents or ways that the institutional actors understand risk and vulnerability are rarely empirically researched.

The study by Rasheed et al. (2021) admits that there is no integration of DRR and sustainable development in Pakistan, but the authors fail to consider the discursive processes involved in the generation of the disconnections. In the same way, the literature on community-based disaster risk reduction identifies lack of participation without considering ways in which institutional discourses restrict or facilitate community response (Jabeen et al., 2020).

This paper fills this gap by taking the social constructionist perspective that discusses the institutional discourse of disaster risk and preparedness in Sindh. The study leads to the literature of the disaster governance domain in terms of its highlights of how preparedness is constructed, constrained, and approved by discussion, as opposed to emphasizing only on the functional outcomes. By so doing, it also directly responds to the call in the global disaster scholarship

literature that is more critical, interpretative, and context-sensitive analysis of disaster risk reduction.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The research approach that is employed in this study follows interpretivist and constructivist paradigm and qualitative research design. The interpretivist methodology suits well since the aim of the study is to learn how the disaster risk and preparedness are social constructions in the form of institutional narratives instead of quantifying them as objective phenomena. In this sense, reality is considered plural, contextual, and constructed by using social interactions, language, and processes of meaning-making (Creswell, 2013). A constructivist position would also acknowledge the fact that disaster risk, preparedness, and vulnerability are fluid classifications that are continually created and recreated through institutional practices, policy discourse and the structure of governance.

Institutional narratives are specifically well suited to be explored using qualitative inquiry because the focus can be made on the way actors would make sense of their positions, defend their choices, and frame issues concerning disasters. Instead of attempting to achieve generalisability, the proposed study focuses on contextual clarity and analytic richness, which allows conducting an in-depth study of the conceptualisation and implementation of disaster preparedness in a disaster management institutions in Sindh. The research design is therefore in line with the theoretical frame of the study which focuses on discourse, power and meaning-making as part of disaster governance.

Data Sources

Various qualitative sources of data were employed to obtain a whole picture of institutional discourse about disaster risk and preparedness. The main source of data was semi structured interviews with people holding the office of provincial and district disaster management authorities, and selected line departments engaged in disaster preparedness and disaster response. The semi-structured interviews were selected due to the flexibility it has given as the participants are able to express their views, experiences and interpretations and yet be consistent in major thematic areas that the research aims to address (Creswell, 2013).

Besides interviews, the research also examined a variety of documentary materials, such as the disaster management plans, standard operating procedures (SOPs), policy frameworks, official guidelines and government reports by disaster management institutions. These reports were not simply technical artefacts, but narrative texts, which carry institutional priorities, assumptions and discursive constructions of risk and preparedness. The analysis of documents allowed the triangulation of the data in the interviews and provided the opportunity to study the formalisation and communication of the official narrative.

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In order to increase the contextual meaning and triangulation, a small sample of focus group discussions (FGDs) was carried out with community representatives and those practitioners involved in disaster-related activities. These FGDs were not supposed to be all-encompassing in their approach to community views but to shed light on how institutional discourses correspond to or do not correspond with local experiences on the ground. The credibility of the findings was reinforced by the usage of a variety of data sources because it made it possible to compare the findings on the institutional discourse, policy texts, and community-level interpretations..

Data Analysis

There was a systematic and iterative approach to data analysis which included a synthesis of qualitative data using both thematic and narrative analysis to explore the content and form of the institutional discourse. Thematic analysis was used to discover common patterns, concepts, and categories within the interviews and the documents. This method was based on six-stage model suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) such as familiarisation with the data, creation of first codes, theme-searching, reviewing of themes, defining and naming of themes, and creation of the analytical narrative.

Simultaneously, the narrative analysis was employed to investigate how the disaster risk preparedness was framed, justified and normalized through the institutional discourse. The narrative analysis dwells on how stories are created in the sense that it gives attention to language, metaphors, causal explanations, and portrayal of actors and responsibility (Riessman, 2008). This allowed the study to analyse how disasters were framed as natural or inevitable events, how preparedness was framed with compliance and documentation and how communities were framed within institutional narrative.

Inductive and theoretically informed coding was used. Primarily codes were produced based on the data that comprised repeated mentions of risk, preparedness, vulnerability, coordination, and accountability. These codes were then perfected and viewed using the social constructionist theory with the focus on institutional language, framing patterns, and implicit assumptions. The combination of the thematic and narrative analyses made it possible to know more about not only the words of the institutional actors but the way how these people made sense of disaster preparedness and governance.

Ethical Considerations

Research process was highly based on ethical considerations, as the issue of disaster governance is very institutional, and public sector officials were involved. All participants gave an informed consent before the data was collected and the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the data gathering, and the option of withdrawal at any point was explained to them. The participants were guaranteed that their answers were to be employed only in academic contexts.

The anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by excluding the identification data on interview transcript and reports. To avoid attributing certain statements to either an individual or a department, pseudonyms or generic institutional identifiers were employed. The policy documents

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and official reports were analysed with special care to guarantee dignified and precise illustration of the institutional standpoints.

The issue of institutional sensitivity was solved through the non-adversarial research position, which aims at comprehending stories instead of assessing the performance of individual people. This method contributed to the development of trust between the participants and the creation of the opportunity to talk about challenges, constraints, and interpretations of disaster preparedness. The ethics involved in the research process were aligned with the standards of qualitative research and were supposed to promote integrity, credibility and respect to all the participants.

Findings: Institutional Narratives of Disaster Risk in Sindh

The interview data, policy documentation, programmes of disaster preparedness, and standard operating procedures are analyzed to illustrate a collection of hegemonic institutional discourses with the help of which the disaster risk and preparedness are conceptualized and regulated in Sindh. These stories do not just describe, but in fact dictate preparedness priorities, community concepts and affect accountability systems as part of the disaster governance systems. The data produced four interdependent narrative patterns, namely disasters as exceptional and outside events, preparedness as documentation and compliance, communities as passive people, and the risk as no longer being institutionalized in decision-making.

Disaster as an Exceptional and External Event

The interview data, policy documentation, programmes of disaster preparedness, and standard operating procedures are analyzed to illustrate a collection of hegemonic institutional discourses with the help of which the disaster risk and preparedness are conceptualized and regulated in Sindh. These stories do not just describe, but in fact dictate preparedness priorities, community concepts and affect accountability systems as part of the disaster governance systems. The data produced four interdependent narrative patterns, namely disasters as exceptional and outside events, preparedness as documentation and compliance, communities as passive people, and the risk as no longer being institutionalized in decision-making. Based on an External and Exceptional Event, Disaster.

One of the prevailing institutional discourses in disaster management authorities in Sindh is that of disaster as an extraordinary, insurmountable and externally motivated phenomenon. Always flooding, cyclones, droughts and heat waves are always mentioned as a result of climate change, extreme weather fluctuation or geographical exposure and never as a process that is controlled by long-term governance, planning or socio-economic aspects. This framing depicts disasters as shocks that happen as an occasional event and not as an inherent depiction of structural fragility.

Interviewed authorities often described disasters in terms that focused on the unpredictability and scale, which included unprecedented rainfall, unusual weather trends, or natural catastrophes that could not be controlled. This terminology is effective in perpetuating the notion that disasters exist beyond the realm of institutional control and, therefore, standardise the repetitive losses. One senior official noted: "Such floods were unheard of before. The magnitude was out of phenomenal

proportion and there is no mechanism that can adequately equip the occurrence of so extreme elements of nature."

This story was reflected in policy reports and disaster management plans, which tend to explain hazards technically and meteorologically and provide little consideration of how development practices, land-use planning, or institutional decisions might lead to disasters. It also leads to a low rating of regard on exceptionality, where disasters are seen as something unique as opposed to a systemic threat that needs transformative preparedness measures.

Institutional narratives also implicitly ignore the accumulative risk of risk in Sindh by framing disasters as external shocks. The province has a long history of frequent flooding and drought yet preparedness planning is reactive and little has been put into consideration to learn the lessons on past disasters. This rhetoric of narration promotes a reactionary and recovery process over a long-term prevention and resilience installation.

Preparedness as Documentation and Compliance

The second noticeable narrative is the creation of disaster preparedness as mainly a documentary responsibility, adherence to procedures, and official planning. The preparedness is often synonymous with the presence of disaster management plans, standard operating procedures (SOPs), coordination structures, and reporting systems. During interviews the officials usually used the evidence that they had prepared or updated plans as a sign of preparedness even though they were not practically implemented. Preparedness documents are regarded as institutional performances that show compliance with national requirements and donor expectations. One official at the district level wrote:

"Our district disaster management plan and SOPs have been prepared. All these are recorded and forwarded to the concerned departments."

A closer look at these documents however, makes it apparent that most of these plans are generic, and not contextually adjusted and they are hardly operationalized when actual disaster events occur. Some of the respondents admitted that plans exist but they are not necessarily reviewed and examined in accordance to the lived experience. Preparedness is thereby symbolic, rather than a functional guide to action, it is an administrative requirement.

Such a story of preparedness-as-documentation is supported by bureaucratic systems of accountability that believe in reporting upwards instead of learning backwards or sideways. Success is defined by having submitted plans, meeting minutes and situation reports, as opposed to indicators of community readiness, or institutional learning. This has affected hollow preparedness that is institutionalized, unconnected to the frontline response realities and community demands.

The observations suggest that this symbolic readiness generates an impression of institutional confidence which might not be linked to real capacity on the ground. Although documentation creates an illusion of preparedness, it does not do much to solve the ongoing issues of lack of

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resources, poor coordination on the district levels, and the lack of involvement with the community.

Communities as Passive Beneficiaries

The third prevailing discourse makes communities the main benefactors of disaster response as opposed to being part of disaster preparedness and risk mitigation. Communities are often defined by institutional discourse as vulnerable, exposed, and needy, as reliant on government and humanitarian aid. Although vulnerability is an important issue, such a framing tends to undermine local knowledge, coping and adaptive capacities.

According to the data of interviews, community involvement is mostly limited to awareness placement, evacuation in the case of emergency, or the reception of relief aid. One official remarked:

"Our role is to guide the community and provide assistance. Communities usually wait for instructions during disasters."

These claims imply an implicit belief that the institutions possess expertise and authority in decision making as communities are consumers as opposed to producers. The policy documents also support this narrative by saying that community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRR) should be used but give little guidance on how it can be practically integrated into preparedness planning. The discussion in focus groups with representatives of the communities showed that there is an opposite point of view. The respondents stated that they had long-term local flood preparedness practices, informal early warning infrastructure, and collective coping structures that they had acquired with frequent occurrence of disasters. Nevertheless, the practices are not much considered and integrated in official planning procedures. The exclusion of community knowledge undermines preparedness outcomes and helps to create a gap between plans and realities of institutions.

The construction of communities as passive beneficiaries by the institution is leading to missed chances of shared responsibility and preparation co-production. These compromises trust as well as limits adaptive capability of disaster governance in a situation where institutional capacity cannot by itself control the occurrence of hazards on a regular basis.

Responsibility Shifting and Depoliticisation

The last narrative scheme that is observed in the criticism is the passing of the responsibility to disaster risk not to institutional decision making but to external causes like climatic change, geography or people behaviour. Although these factors surely affect the disaster risk, their prevalence in the institutional accounts makes them part of the depoliticisation of disaster governance. The authorities would often blame the failure of institutions to control disaster effects to illegal settlements, population increase, or failure by societies to comply. One respondent stated:

"People continue to live in flood-prone areas despite warnings. This makes it very difficult to manage disasters effectively."

These kinds of narratives hold blame of the populations that are harmed, but they fail to reveal the underlying problems of the system, like the lack of proper implementation of land-use rules, insufficient investment in resilience infrastructure, or stalling preparedness measures. Climate change is frequently raised as a catchall to further make the institutions not accountable to preventable losses. The depoliticization can also be seen through the discrimination of the discussion of the power relations, resource allocation, and policy trade-offs in the institutional discourse. The risk of disasters is presented as a technical issue that needs to be coordinated and logistically addressed rather than a governance issue that entails political decisions and opposing priorities. Such framing restricts critical reflection as well as the possibilities of institutional learning and reform.

This responsibility relocation strengthens a recurring pattern in which disasters are accepted as inevitable, preparedness is symbolically expressed, communities are marginalised and accountability is diffuse. Collectively, these stories create a governance space through which disaster preparedness can hardly change despite recurrent exposure to risks.

Synthesis of Institutional Narratives

Comprising, the findings indicate that disaster risk and preparedness in Sindh are built under the interwoven institutional discourses that give precedence to technocratic reasons, compliance by administration, and top-down government. They are normalizing repetitive disasters, authorize symbolic preparedness, undermine agency of communities, and decentralize responsibility. Institutional narratives instead of being neutral descriptions, actively define the understanding, practice, and evaluation of disaster preparedness. These results offer empirical data to support the main argument of the study that disaster preparedness is not the only technical activity but a socially constructed phenomenon built-in into the relations of power and institutional production of meaning. These stories are critical to understanding how preparedness planning can be reevaluated in Sindh and also to developing more inclusive, accountable, and effective disaster governance.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

This section explains the empirical results as professionalized into the theoretical arguments of social construction, institutional narrative theory, and knowledge power nexus expressly to connect institutional meaning-making to disaster preparedness results in Sindh. The discussion reveals that the dominant narratives do not only describe the risk of disaster but also actively define the priorities of governance, roles and accountability of communities.

Disaster as an Exceptional and External Event: Interpreting Risk Construction

The result that disasters are socially constructed as exceptional, unpredictable, and externally motivated is quite in line with the social constructionist arguments that risk is created by the meaning ascribed to it and does not exist as a characteristic of the hazard (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Tierney, 2014). The institutional actors in Sindh always refer to floods, cyclones and heat waves as unprecedented or beyond control, which promotes a sense of inevitability.

In theoretical terms, this framing serves in the form of a discursive line of demarcation that restricts institutional accountability. In making disasters appear to be supernatural shocks of nature, the institutions normalize recurrent losses and pressure on structural reform is alleviated. This is in line with the argument by Wisner et al. (2004) who contend that disasters are naturalized thus making vulnerability production a social process to be obscured. In Sindh, where floods frequently occur, rather than being isolated events, the discourse of exceptionality opposes the facts of empirical reality and obstructs anticipatory preparedness.

The story also represents the risk externalization identified by Tierney (2014) in which the risks are placed beyond the governance frameworks and, as a result, justifies the reactive response models as opposed to preventive planning. The resulting effect is a preparedness regime that is based on emergency management as opposed to long-term resilience.

Preparedness as Documentation and Compliance: Symbolic Governance

Achieved preparedness characterized by plans, SOPs and reports is some kind of symbolic preparedness which has been well reported in literature on disaster governance (Tierney et al., 2001). In a social constructionist approach, preparedness documents act as the representations of institutional legitimacy as opposed to operational readiness. The nexus in knowledge-power by Foucault (1980) is especially educative in this case. Official plans and procedural documents become authoritative not due to their effectiveness but due to them being an accepted knowledge in the bureaucratic systems. This leads to what can be termed performative compliance in which preparedness is shown to higher authorities and donors but not communities.

The Sindh case demonstrates the influence of bureaucratic rationality that advocates documentation over practice that supports accountability structures that are donor-centric. This confirms the view of Adger et al. (2005) that resilience is compromised in cases where institutions focus more on the form and less on the functions. Preparedness transforms into an administrative artefact, which is no longer linked to lived disaster realities and frontline capabilities.

Communities as Passive Beneficiaries: Narrative Marginalization of Agency

The institutional discourse of vulnerability is present in the framing of communities as passive beneficiaries and not agents. As vulnerable as it is, the idea of vulnerability in Sindh is predominantly represented in such a way that it deprives the communities of their agencies and places the expertise solely in the domains of formal institutions.

This observation supports the fact that the vulnerability discourse as a governance tool as discussed by Bankoff (2001) shifts the blame to the people most affected and marginalizes the local knowledge. Although there are signs of an indigenous response to coping and informal early warning systems in Sindh, these are mostly non-creative in the institutional planning process. This is a hierarchy of knowledge in terms of constructivist view as in this case, institutional knowledge is privileged over experiential knowledge. Jabeen et al. (2020) emphasize similar dynamics in Pakistan, where there is a grassroots resilience that is not linked to official DRR structures. The

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omission of community stories undermines preparedness outcomes and erodes trust reducing the adaptative capacity of disaster governance systems.

Responsibility Shifting and Depoliticization of Disaster Risk

The fact that the disaster risk is located in climate change, geography, or population behavior is indicative of the wider depoliticization process. Although climate change is admittedly appropriate, its hegemony in institutional discourses functions as a discursive shield, preventing the focus on the failures of governance, decisions in policy-making, and the decisions regarding resources allocation. This observation echoes political economy views which consider disasters to be effects of power relations as opposed to disasters being neutral (Wisner et al., 2004). Institutional discourses make risk appear outside and technical, thereby inhibiting the critical scrutiny of land-use control, investment in infrastructure, and non-enforcement in Sindh.

The process of depoliticization inhibits institutional learning. In cases where the failure to be prepared is blamed to be caused by factors beyond control, chances of reform being made are limited. This serves to support a circle of reactive rule-making as was criticized by Tierney (2014) of technocratic disaster management.

Synthesis: Narrative Governance and Preparedness Outcomes

Taken collectively, these results indicate that disaster preparedness in Sindh is regulated by the narrative dominance, as opposed to adaptive learning. Institutional discourses justify symbolic readiness, alienate community action and diversity responsibility. Disaster risk is therefore constructed socially in a manner that stabilizes the governance arrangements which are in place rather than disrupting them.

This paper builds on the disaster governance theory by demonstrating how narratives are used as governance mechanisms that define what is perceived, what is given priority and what is put into action in DRR systems. We cannot, therefore, think of preparedness failure as a capacity deficit but rather as an institutional meaning-making outcome.

Thematic Tables for Scopus Journals

Table 1

Dominant Institutional Narratives and Their Governance Effects

Narrative Theme	Institutional Framing	Governance Effect
Disaster as exceptional	Unpredictable natural shock	Normalisation of recurring losses
Preparedness as documentation	Plans, SOPs, reports	Symbolic rather than functional readiness
Communities as beneficiaries	Vulnerable recipients	Exclusion of local knowledge
Responsibility shifting	Climate, geography, behaviour	Diffused accountability

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Table 2

Institutional Narratives and Theoretical Interpretation

Finding	Theoretical Lens	Interpretation
Externalisation of risk	Social constructionism	Risk framed beyond institutional control
Symbolic preparedness	Knowledge–power nexus	Documentation as legitimacy
Marginalised community agency	Vulnerability discourse	Hierarchy of knowledge
Depoliticisation	Political economy	Governance choices obscured

Refined Illustrative Excerpts (Reviewer-Sensitive)

To enhance ethical robustness and reviewer acceptance, excerpts are tightened, anonymized, and non-attributive:

- *"Preparedness is often demonstrated through formal plans and procedural compliance, even when operational challenges persist."*

- *"Disasters are commonly described as unprecedented climatic events, limiting reflection on systemic preparedness gaps."*

- *"Communities are frequently positioned as recipients of assistance rather than contributors to preparedness planning."*

Alignment with Policy Implications and Recommendations

The findings directly inform policy and practice in four ways:

1. **Shift from Symbolic to Functional Preparedness**
   Preparedness evaluation should prioritise usability, drills, and learning mechanisms rather than document production.

2. **Narrative-Aware DRR Governance**
   Disaster institutions should critically reflect on how language and framing influence preparedness priorities.

3. **Institutionalisation of Community Knowledge**
   Community-based practices must be formally integrated into district and provincial preparedness plans.

4. **Repoliticising Disaster Risk**
   Governance frameworks should explicitly address land-use planning, infrastructure decisions, and enforcement responsibilities.

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Implications for Disaster Risk Reduction Practice and Policy

The implications of the research results to disaster risk reduction (DRR) practice, institutional governance and theoretical development are significant. The study indicates that the necessity to re-conceptualize the DRR frameworks as socially constructed and politically located processes by showing that disaster preparedness in Sindh is defined by the dominant institutional narratives and is not exclusively informed by technical capacity.

Policy Implications: Toward Reflexive and Narrative-Aware DRR Frameworks

The findings indicate at the policy level that the current DRR frameworks should be shifted in that a more reflexive, narrative-conscious approach should be taken instead of technocratic, hazard-centered one. The existing policies substantially presuppose the management of the disaster risk by means of enhanced planning, coordination, and technical resources. Although these factors are required, the paper demonstrates that the manner in which the issue of disaster risk is framed in the context of policy-making has a significant impact on preparedness priorities and outcomes.

Narrative-conscious DRR frameworks would see policymakers carefully scrutinize the language, assumptions, and causal accounts within the disaster policies and plans. As opposed to perceiving disasters as unique and externally influenced phenomena, policies must identify the contribution of governance decisions, developmental pathways, and social inequalities to the risk generation. The reflexivity of this kind can assist in changing the direction of the DRR policy to be more preventive and transformative rather than reactive.

Practically, it means that it implies mechanisms of institutional learning, critical evaluation of preparedness narratives, and feedback loops to connect past disaster experiences to future planning. There should be a promotion of adaptive planning processes that develop over time as opposed to fixed compliance-oriented frameworks that are not dynamic. This transition is especially applicable to Sindh where frequent disasters require anticipatory rule as opposed to sporadic crisis management.

Institutional Implications: From Symbolic to Functional Preparedness

On the institutional level, the results lead to a radical shift in the symbolic preparedness towards functional preparedness. The preeminence of documentation, plans and standard operating procedures as a way of demonstrating preparedness has given rise to the illusion of preparedness which may not always lead to successful action during a disaster. The institutions should thus focus on the usability, contextual relevance, and testing of preparedness instruments.

Functional preparedness involves frequent drills, scenario planning, inter-departmental practice and coordination exercises, and post-disaster learning. The measure of preparedness must not be based on the presence of plans but their practical implementation and flexibility in case of an emergency. Enhancing the capabilities of districts and decentralizing excessive dependence on the upwards reporting are some of the necessary measures in this direction.

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The other very important institutional implication involves embedding community voices in preparedness planning. This paper reveals that local knowledge and coping behaviors continue to be marginalized even though they are very relevant in the recurring disaster situations. Communities should cease being a mere recipient of preparedness efforts and structures must actively engage representatives of the community, local organizations, and informal leaders in preparedness planning. This will increase the trust, level of contextual accuracy and reinforce the group ownership of disaster risk reduction.

Theoretical Contribution: Extending Social Constructionism to Sub-National DRR Governance

The research contributes to the existing theoretical literature in that it offers the perspectives of social constructionists to the sub-national level of disaster governance in the Global South. Although social constructionism has been extensively used in the context of disasters studies at both global and national scales, the scarcity of empirical studies investigating the way the institutional narratives are exercised in the context of provincial and district governments.

The study reveals that the institutional discourse of disaster risk, preparedness and accountability is a missing but essential aspect of disaster risk reduction by presenting the manner in which narrative governance has been constructed in the Sindh context. It emphasizes that preparedness failures cannot be explained only by the fact of a gap in capacity but should be interpreted as a result of institutional meaning-making and power relations. This contribution expands the analytical spectrum of disaster studies and offers an analytical system of studying the DRR governance outside the technical performance indicators.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how disaster risk and preparedness are socially and institutionally constructed within disaster management authorities in Sindh. Drawing on qualitative interviews, policy documents, and contextual insights, the findings reveal that disaster preparedness is shaped by dominant institutional narratives that frame disasters as exceptional external events, define preparedness through documentation and compliance, position communities as passive beneficiaries, and shift responsibility away from institutional decision-making.

Together, these narratives normalise recurring disaster losses, legitimize symbolic preparedness, marginalise community agency, and diffuse accountability. Rather than operating as neutral descriptions, institutional narratives actively govern preparedness priorities and constrain opportunities for learning and transformation. The study therefore demonstrates that disaster preparedness in Sindh is not merely a technical challenge but a socially constructed governance process embedded in discourse and power relations.

The study contributes to disaster studies and DRR governance literature in three key ways. First, it provides empirical evidence from a highly disaster-prone province in Pakistan, addressing a significant gap in Global South disaster research. Second, it advances social constructionist theory by applying it to sub-national disaster governance, highlighting the role of institutional narratives

in shaping preparedness outcomes. Third, it offers policy-relevant insights by identifying how narrative dominance undermines functional preparedness and inclusive governance.

Despite these contributions, the study has certain limitations. The qualitative design prioritizes depth over breadth, and findings are context-specific to Sindh, limiting direct generalisation to other regions. The focus on institutional narratives also means that community perspectives were not explored exhaustively. Additionally, access constraints may have influenced the range of institutional voices captured.

Future research could build on this study by conducting comparative analyses across provinces, examining media narratives alongside institutional discourse, or exploring how community counter-narratives challenge official framings of disaster risk. Longitudinal studies could also assess whether shifts in institutional narratives lead to tangible improvements in preparedness practice. Such research would further strengthen understanding of disaster risk reduction as a dynamic, socially constructed process and support the development of more inclusive and resilient disaster governance systems.

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