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South Asia Research Notes

Fall 2025

SHOCKS AND POLITICS

Understanding Disaster Preparedness

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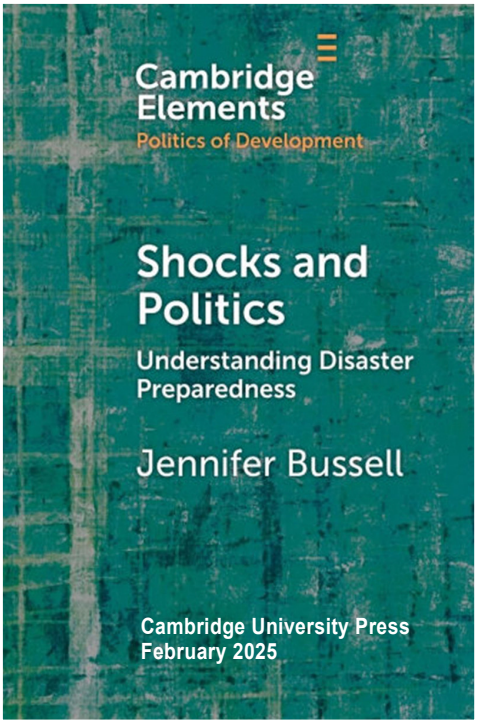
Governments are often assumed to be reactive in the face of disasters — stepping in only once a flood, cyclone, or earthquake has struck. Much of the existing research supports this view, arguing that leaders have little political incentive to invest in preparedness, since the benefits are long-term, uncertain, and harder for voters to recognize.

Jennifer Bussell's *Shocks and Politics* challenges this assumption. She argues that preparedness does occur, but only when two conditions align: motivated ruling elites and a capable state apparatus.

Elites can become motivated when past disasters create a clear memory of government failure and when there is a strong political opposition ready to exploit that failure. Under such conditions, leaders begin to see preparedness not just as a technical matter, but as essential to their own political survival. In other words, fear of future political instability can transform disaster preparedness into a rational political strategy.

However, elite motivation alone cannot guarantee effective outcomes. The character and quality of preparedness depend on whether the state has the capacity to plan, coordinate, and implement measures — from early warning systems to resilient infrastructure and community education. A weak state may produce only fragmented or symbolic efforts, while a strong state can institutionalize preparedness across sectors.



To test this theory, Bussell adopts a medium-N comparative case study approach, looking at ten countries in Africa (such as Ghana, Kenya, and Malawi), three in South Asia (including India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan), and detailed subnational analysis in India. India is particularly important in this study: its repeated exposure to natural hazards, coupled with political competition, has driven substantial preparedness initiatives, especially in states like Odisha.

The book shows that preparedness is not a given, nor is it absent everywhere — it is deeply political. By linking hazard exposure, political incentives, and state capacity, Bussell provides a framework for understanding why some governments prepare for disasters while others remain dangerously unready.

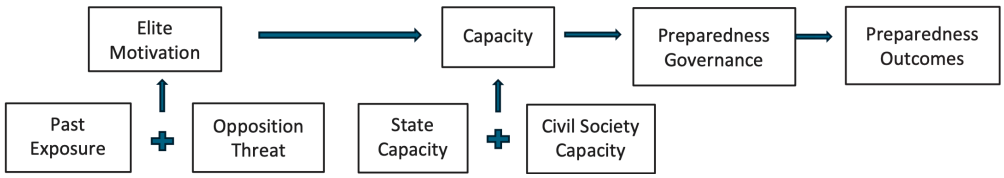
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JENNIFER BUSSELL, Associate Professor of Public Policy and Political Science and Director of the Center on Contemporary India, is a political scientist specializing in comparative politics and the political economy of development, focusing on South Asia and Africa. Her research explores how formal and informal institutions—such as corruption, federalism, and coalition politics—shape governance and policy outcomes in developing democracies. She is the author of Clients and Constituents: Political Responsiveness in Patronage Democracies (Oxford University Press, 2019) and Corruption and Reform in India: Public Services in the Digital Age (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Her work has appeared in journals including Political Analysis, Governance, Comparative Political Studies, International Studies Quarterly, Perspectives on Politics, and Economic and Political Weekly. Before joining UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy, she taught at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, Austin. She earned her Ph.D. in Political Science from UC Berkeley.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The book opens by challenging the common assumption that governments rarely prepare for disasters because citizens fail to reward such investments at the ballot box. Bussell argues instead that preparedness is possible and occurs when two factors align: **political motivation** and **state capacity**. Political elites are most likely to invest when they fear political backlash from future disasters — especially if the country has suffered heavily in the past and if a strong opposition exists to hold them accountable. Yet, motivation alone is not enough; a state must also have the bureaucratic ability to coordinate and implement plans effectively. The introduction lays out this **dual-conditions framework** and positions the study within a comparative analysis of African and South Asian countries, as well as Indian states.

A POLITICAL INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF PREPAREDNESS



"I argue that disaster preparedness can, and does, occur in the context of both motivated ruling elites and a capable state. Ruling elites must be willing and the state they oversee able."

CHAPTER 2
ASSESSING PREPAREDNESS

Because standardized data on preparedness are scarce, Bussell develops her own framework based on the **Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015)**, which breaks preparedness into **five key components**: (1) political priority and institutions, (2) risk assessment and early warning systems, (3) public knowledge and education, (4) reducing underlying risks (such as land-use and building codes), and (5) strengthening disaster response. Using this framework, she evaluates countries in Africa and South Asia, as well as Indian states, classifying them into high, medium, and low performers. India emerges as a strong performer overall, though with notable variation among its states (Odisha stands out as particularly advanced). This chapter emphasizes that preparedness is measurable and varies widely even among countries with similar exposure.

"The concept of disaster preparedness refers to the range of efforts that prepare for, and can reduce the effects of, natural hazards, with the potential to prevent a hazard from evolving into a natural disaster."

MEASURING DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

Components of Preparedness	Measures/Examples of Activities and Proposed Outcomes
1. Ensuring that disaster risk reduction (DRR) is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation	- Institutional mechanisms (national platforms) with designated responsibilities - DRR part of development policies and planning - Assessment of human resources and capacities - Foster political commitment - Community participation
2. Identifying, assessing, and monitoring risks and enhancing early warning	- Risk assessments and maps - Indicators on DRR and vulnerability - Early warning; people-centered information systems - Scientific and technological development including data sharing, space-based earth observations, climate modeling, and forecasting
3. Using knowledge, innovation, and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels	- Information sharing and cooperation - Networks across disciplines and regions - Use of standard terminology - Inclusion of DRR in school curricula - Training on DRR for communities and local authorities - Public awareness and media
4. Reducing the underlying risk factors	- Sustainable ecosystems and environmental management - DRR strategies integrated with climate change adaptation - Food security for resilience - Protection of critical public facilities - Recovery schemes and social safety nets - Public private partnerships - Land use planning and building codes - Rural development plans and DRR
5. Strengthening disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels	- Policy, technical, and institutional disaster management capacities - Dialogue and coordination between disaster managers and development sectors - Regional approaches to disaster response with risk reduction focus - Preparedness and contingency plans - Emergency funds

Flood level marker at Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India — a stark reminder of recurring disasters and the need for sustained preparedness.

Photo credit: Jennifer Bussell

CHAPTER 3

ELITE MOTIVATION TO PREPARE FOR NATURAL HAZARDS

This chapter digs into **why politicians might decide to act before disasters strike**. Bussell argues that elites consider preparedness a political strategy when two conditions are met: the country has **past experience with disasters**, and there is a **credible political opposition** that could exploit failures. Where both conditions exist, citizens can compare past disasters with current outcomes, making preparedness investments visible and politically valuable. By contrast, opposition threat without past exposure rarely generates preparedness, since voters lack a benchmark. Through comparative analysis, Bussell shows that India (with high exposure and competitive politics) fits the model well, while places like Pakistan or Ghana fall short. This chapter reframes preparedness as a **politically rational choice** under the right circumstances.

"Past exposure can generate electoral incentives for engaging in preparedness even where there are lower levels of electoral threat, but the opposite is not the case for high levels of opposition threat in the absence of past exposure."

PREDICTING ELITE MOTIVATION

		Opposition Threat	
		Medium	**High**
Past Natural Hazard Exposure (Individuals Affected)	**Low**	"Low Motivation" Chhattisgarh Jharkhand Madhya Pradesh West Bengal	"Low-Medium Motivation" **Andhra Pradesh** **Karnataka** Maharashtra Rajasthan Tamil Nadu Uttar Pradesh
	High	"Medium-High Motivation" Assam **Gujarat** Uttarakhand	"High Motivation" Bihar Haryana Kerala **Odisha** Punjab

Note: State cases in bold.

CHAPTER 4

CAPACITY TO PREPARE FOR NATURAL HAZARDS

Political will is not enough — without **capacity**, even motivated governments fail to deliver. Bussell defines capacity broadly as the ability to design, coordinate, and implement preparedness programs. She identifies two dimensions: **state capacity** (bureaucratic competence, coordination, funding) and **civil society capacity** (NGOs, aid dependence, grassroots networks). Based on their mix, countries fall into one of four governance models:

- *State-Led* (both strong)
- *State-Dominant* (strong state, weak civil society)
- *Society-Reliant* (weak state, strong civil society)
- *Uncoordinated* (both weak).

While NGOs and donors can help, Bussell stresses that **state capacity is the decisive factor** for comprehensive preparedness. Case examples from Bangladesh, Mozambique, and India highlight how variation in bureaucratic competence shapes outcomes in countries with similar exposure.

"High levels of preparedness are most likely in those cases where the state has capacity to coordinate actors relevant for preparedness efforts and those actors, either within or outside the state, have the capacity to design and implement preparedness initiatives."

COMBINED CIVIL SOCIETY COUNTRY CAPACITY PROFILES

Lower Capacity	Higher Capacity
Bangladesh	Gambia
Ethiopia	Ghana
India	Kenya
Malawi	Mozambique
Pakistan	Senegal
Zambia	Togo
	Zimbabwe

CHAPTER 5

ASSESSING OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSION

In the final chapter, Bussell combines the **motivation** and **capacity** dimensions to explain cross-country and subnational outcomes. Four typical patterns emerge:

- **Strong Performance** (high motivation + high capacity, e.g., India, Gujarat, Malawi).
- **Substantial Effort** (high motivation + low capacity, e.g., Bangladesh, Mozambique).
- **Window Dressing** (low motivation + high capacity, e.g., Ghana, Senegal).
- **Minimal Performance** (low motivation + low capacity, e.g., Pakistan, Togo).

The analysis shows that repeated exposure to disasters can spark political incentives even in resource-poor settings, but sustainable preparedness depends on **building state capacity**. Bussell concludes that as climate change intensifies hazards worldwide, political incentives may grow — but only states with effective bureaucracies will achieve consistent preparedness.

"Disaster preparedness efforts will be insubstantial where ruling elites do not have incentives to support them, even in the context of high state capacity."

MATCH OF THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS TO EMPIRICAL OUTCOMES

		Electoral Incentives	
		Lower	**Higher**
Capacity	**Lower**	"Minimal Performance" **Gambia** *Pakistan* **Togo** **Karnataka**	"Substantial Effort" **Bangladesh** **Ethiopia** *Kenya* **Mozambique** *Zimbabwe* **Odisha**
	Higher	"Window Dressing" **Ghana** **Senegal** **Andhra Pradesh**	"Strong Performance" **India** **Malawi** *Zambia* **Gujarat**

Note: Countries in bold match the expectations of my argument; those in italics display some variations from expectations.

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