

"Not all crises are created equal": Online narratives about COVID-19 and induced earthquakes in the province of Groningen, The Netherlands

Elisabeth N. Moolenaar¹

Regis University, USA

Abstract

This article explores the COVID-19 pandemic as it interacts with other vulnerabilities, risks, and disasters people experience. It examines online narratives about COVID-19 from people suffering from induced seismicity in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands, posted on social media, blogs, and websites, complemented with ethnographic data. Focusing on social and discursive practices, the article looks at how risk, disaster, and crisis are talked about and mobilized. The narrative data shows interrelated layers of vulnerability and the experience of a compounded disaster. Narratives indicate that their composers and sharers understand disasters as produced and constructed, and use COVID-19 to reframe risk, disaster, and crisis. More importantly the data demonstrates how COVID-19 is employed as an opportunity to draw attention to marginality, inequality, and the experience of another type of disaster, and to reveal taken-for-granted power relations and impel political action.

Keywords: disaster, risk, crisis, induced earthquakes, COVID-19, marginalization

Résumé

Cet article explore la pandémie de COVID-19 comme faisant partie d'autres vulnérabilités, risques et désastres que les gens vivent. Il examine les récits en ligne sur le COVID-19 provenant de personnes souffrant de chocs sismiques induits dans la province de Groningen, aux Pays-Bas. Ces récits ont été distillés à partir de commentaires postés sur des médias sociaux, des blogs et des sites web, complétés par des données ethnographiques. En se concentrant sur les pratiques sociales et discursives, l'article examine comment les risques, les catastrophes et les crises sont abordés et mobilisés. Les données narratives montrent des niveaux de vulnérabilité interdépendants et l'expérience d'une catastrophe combinée. Les récits indiquent que leurs compositeurs et partageurs comprennent les catastrophes comme étant produites et construites, et utilisent COVID-19 pour recadrer le risque, la catastrophe et la crise. Plus important encore, les données montrent comment COVID-19 est utilisé comme une opportunité d'attirer l'attention sur la marginalité, l'inégalité et l'expérience d'un autre type de catastrophe, et de révéler des relations de pouvoir considérées comme acquises. Elle incite également à l'action politique.

Mots-clés: catastrophe, risque, crise, tremblements de terre induits, COVID-19, marginalisation

Resumen

This article explores the COVID-19 pandemic as it interacts with other vulnerabilities, risks, and disasters people experience. It examines online narratives about COVID-19 from people suffering from induced seismicity in the province of Groningen, posted on social media, blogs, and websites, complemented with ethnographic data. Focusing on social and discursive practices, the article looks at how risk, disaster, and crisis

¹ Dr. Elisabeth Moolenaar, term professor, Regis University, Denver, USA. Email: [emoolenaar "at" regis.edu](mailto:emoolenaar@regis.edu). Thank you to the reviewers for their extremely helpful comments, and my colleagues in the Risk & Disaster Topical Interest Group and the ExtrACTION & Environment Topical Interest Group of the Society for Applied Anthropology for their ideas, comments, and thoughtful questions at annual meetings that have helped me further advance this work over the last few years. Very special thanks to Dr. Roberto Barrios, who kindly donated his time and energy during the surge of the pandemic to comment on a draft for this article. His generous comments, suggestions, and especially encouragement were immensely valuable and provide lasting inspiration.

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1. Introduction

"Why are there billions of euros almost instantly available for handling the effects of the Corona crisis while we have been waiting for financial compensation for years?" Followed by, "Something isn't right" or "What about us?"; and, "We are supposed to stay home but what if your house isn't safe?" or "'Safer at home' is that true?"

These are some commonly shared remarks posted on social media since the Dutch government announced and implemented its COVID-19 measures in March 2020 by people from the city of Groningen, who have been impacted by induced seismicity from conventional natural gas extraction.

As Roberto Barrios points out in his article, 'What does catastrophe reveal for whom? The anthropology of crises and disasters at the onset of the Anthropocene' (2017b), "crisis" and "disaster" are, as analytical concepts, frequently used loosely, interchangeably, and often amalgamated. Definitions of "crisis" and "disaster" by scholars and researchers can differ from its usage in everyday conversations, and in political discourse. Moreover, analytical categories are sometimes conflated with "folk notions." Crisis and disaster are terms used to describe extraordinary conditions and are often drawn on in order to indicate an individually or collectively experienced moment where that which people consider "normal" becomes disrupted (Barrios, 2017b: 151, 2020). "Disaster" is often liberally employed to talk about "a situation where an expected course of events becomes catastrophically disrupted by factors considered to be beyond people's control or when the operations of a social group are disrupted in ways that exceed its capacity to maintain a sense of normalcy" (Barrios, 2017b: 151). "Crisis" is used to mark a transition between epochs and has a teleological implication. It is used to mark a moment of truth and to think about history (Barrios, 2020, 2017b; Fabian, 1983; Roitman, 2020, 2011). Crisis might also be "defined as instances when 'the real is made bare'", used as a diagnostic of the present, and helping us think about a norm or normalcy (Roitman, 2020, 2011). In common usage, disaster and crisis are often meant to highlight the departure from daily life—a situation out of the ordinary and with detrimental impacts. Anthropological definitions understand disasters as the consequence of historical processes "by which human practices enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacities of geophysical phenomena, technological malfunctions, and communicable diseases and inequitably distribute disaster risk according to the lines of gender, race, class, and ethnicity" (Barrios, 2017b: 151).

"Risk" is understood in various ways by different people, as Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky establish in *Risk and culture: An essay on the selection of technological and environmental dangers* (1983). Douglas and Wildavsky discuss our comprehension of risk as tied to education and priorities, and the importance of our understanding of risk as tied to action (1983). Risk is a relational construct intended to inform beliefs about what is harmful and what causes and processes may potentially lead to harm (Boholm, 2015: 162; Sun & Faas, 2018: 267). Asa Boholm demonstrates in *Anthropology and risk* (2015) that understandings of risk are related to "knowledge claims", cultural assumptions, and positionality, and these inform the way we perceive and communicate risk (Boholm, 2015). The perception, framing, and construction of risk or a hazard is political (Beck, 1992; Sun & Faas, 2018: 627). Additionally, people experience risk, disaster, and crisis not as constructs or as analytical categories, but as "real" on a bodily, emotional, and intellectual level (see also Barrios, 2017a).

This article builds on the political ecology of hazards and critical disaster scholarship focused on social vulnerability (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994; Collins 2008, 2009; Comfort *et al.*, 1999; Hewitt, 1983; O'Keefe *et al.*, 1976; Wisner *et al.*, 2012), by unpacking layers of vulnerability and interrogating the role of the state in an examination of how multiple crises interact. While the social constructedness of disasters is very much recognized in political ecology, this article furthers our understanding of that process with an (anthropological) emphasis on meaning-making and power. It does this through its ethnographic description and analysis of the experiences, discourses, and social actions as shared and enacted online during the COVID-19 pandemic by people impacted by induced seismicity in Groningen, the Netherlands. Moreover, it adds knowledge about the socio-spatial impact of disasters and how subjectivities and identities factor into the perception and endurance of these disasters (Bakema *et al.*, 2018: 20). Additionally, the article is situated among critical examinations of the normalization of exploitative and environmentally destructive activities, here gas extraction, as these activities contribute to the vulnerability of human populations to disaster (Gould *et al.*, 2016: 96).

In this research, Groningers' narratives and words are foregrounded, instead of analytical categories or scholarly definitions, in order to enhance our understanding of the perception, experience, and social construction and production of risk, disaster, and crisis among people simultaneously exposed to induced earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic (Sun & Faas, 2018). Drawing on Douglas and Wildavsky (1982), Boholm (2015), and on Sun and Faas (2018), I focus on active social and discursive processes that articulate and shape risk and disaster, and mobilize crisis (Roitman, 2020). The narratives illustrate claim-making and the serving of institutional interests in relation to the time-space framing of disaster. They address power relations and unpack how priorities for action are framed (Barrios, 2017b; Fortun, 2001; Tierney, 2007).

Methodology

Since 2012 I have been conducting ethnographic research on the socio-cultural impacts of conventional natural gas extraction in the province of Groningen in the Netherlands. Inspired by rather provocative remarks about how the "*Coronacrisis*" was affecting people in the area, such as those above, I decided to research their experience of COVID-19, as narrated online.

I collected and analyzed locals' narratives on social media, blogs, websites, and in the news media from March through December 2020. I collected this narrative data from five Facebook groups hosted by and for people who are suffering from earthquakes and/or are opposing gas extraction, with between 400 and 10,000 followers. I also collected narratives from blogs and from websites published by well-known grassroots and interest groups for people suffering from earthquakes and/or opposing gas extraction (some of which are linked to these Facebook groups). I selected these outlets as they are well established and widely known among people in Groningen. Many informants from my broader research project are organizers, posters, followers, or occasional visitors to these groups online. Furthermore, I collected statements by these groups and locals on Twitter, and perused news items that were referred to on Facebook, Twitter, and the blogs and groups' websites. Even though all narratives appear in "public space", to protect people's identities I will use descriptions instead of names unless I am referring to news items published by journalists or public figures. I analyzed *what* people were posting and sharing about COVID-19 and *what words* were used in these narratives. I complement this data with previously collected data from ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2012-2017 (involving participant observation, interviews, and perusal of texts) in order to create context and provide a fuller ethnographic understanding.

The article first addresses induced seismicity in Groningen, then analyzes the COVID narratives, and finally notions of risk, disaster and crisis. I show that COVID-19 is almost inextricably interwoven with the impact of induced earthquakes for some Groningers, and that the experience of the virus is experienced as a layered vulnerability, or a compounded disaster. But more importantly, I argue that Groningers use the pandemic as a moment to redirect attention to the risk, disaster, and/or crisis they are experiencing from induced earthquakes in hopes of revealing inequality and power relations and impelling political action.

2. Induced earthquakes in Groningen

Groningen province is located over one of the largest extractable natural gas fields in the world, from which gas has been extracted since 1963. Since the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1805), mining laws have promoted exploration. The deep layers below the surface (and the resources extracted therefrom) have belonged to the national government of the Netherlands. The government thus holds all mineral rights and is the primary beneficiary of all proceeds together with its commercial operating partners, the national oil company, *Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij* (NAM), ExxonMobil and Shell, which have a 60% stake (van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015). The government started a national gasification program and between 1963 and 1965 a pipeline system was built to provide the whole country with gas. By 1965 all coal mines in the Netherlands had closed. Groningen gas was sold on the international market as well. The gas proceeds provided continuous revenue for major infrastructure projects and social programs. Yet most of the gas revenue did not directly benefit Groningen; instead, the bulk went to the *Randstad*, the political, economic, and cultural center of the country (Moolenaar, 2020; van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015).

Groningen's gas is contained in sandstone. As gas is extracted (conventionally), subsidence takes place and, more importantly, tension occurs along breaks in subsurface layers which over time cause movement (Koninklijk Nederlands Meteorologisch Instituut, 2019). As a result small earthquakes have been occurring in Groningen since the late 1980s, with a notable one of 3.6 on the Richter scale, with its epicenter in the town of Huizinge in 2012 (Vlek 2019). For many years, locals suspected that the tremors were related to gas extraction, but their claims were not taken seriously. In general, people who warned of the negative effects of gas extraction were ignored or ridiculed in the press (Brandsma *et al.*, 2016: 70–75). The 3.6 earthquake in Huizinge finally led to official acknowledgement by both the Royal Dutch Meteorological Institute (Koninklijk Nederlands Meteorologisch Instituut, 2019) and the government that the quakes were, indeed, related to the natural gas extraction in the province.

The quakes in Groningen are small on the Richter scale (between 1 and 4) but occur near the Earth's surface. As a result of this, and the water-saturated characteristics of the Groningen soil (van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015), they travel far and are felt more vigorously than earthquakes of the same magnitude caused by natural fault lines. The earthquakes are increasing in frequency, from less than 20 per year in the early 1990s, to between 20 and 50 per year in the first decade of the 2000s, and between 80 and 125 per year since 2011 (Koninklijk Nederlands Meteorologisch Instituut, 2019). During the time span of this research, 61 earthquakes occurred, with magnitudes between 0.2 and 2.7, according to the social media outlets I was following to collect narratives.

3. Marginalization

As earthquakes began to occur more frequently and damages continued to accrue, I discovered that the materiality of cracks and fissures bore witness to deeply-experienced social divisions (Moolenaar, 2021). Originally part of the Hanseatic League and a breadbasket for the country, Groningen had developed rather differently from the political, economic, and cultural center of the country located to the West, the *Randstad*. The province is mostly rural and the capital is the largest city in the province with a population of approximately 200,000 out of a total of 600,000. The overwhelmingly rural character of the sparsely populated province as compared to the densely populated and highly urbanized center of the country, and the physical distance from it, has led to the economic, political, and cultural marginalization of Groningers.

Groningen houses some of the poorest people of the Netherlands. Whereas there is certainly poverty in the *Randstad*, as a whole it is considerably wealthier than Groningen. The economy of the *Randstad* (Figure 1) grew rapidly with the majority of Dutch industrial and (financial) services located there, as well as it being the strategic location of the Rotterdam port as a gateway to Europe and Schiphol, a major airport hub. Governmental economic policies and investments have favored the *Randstad* over the rest of the country, especially since the 1980s. One report that became the foundation for these policies said 'Don't back the losers, but pick the winners', and the support for provinces outside of the *Randstad* has decreased drastically since that time (Milikowski, 2020). The gas proceeds have disproportionately benefitted the *Randstad*, e.g., major infrastructural projects for the *Randstad* were financed from gas proceeds. While the *Randstad* grew

economically stronger and increased in population over time, Groningen became poorer and fewer people wanted to live and/or work in the area. The area did not attract many tourists either. This unpopularity led to even less income and consequentially also a reduction in public services, which further negatively impacted the attractiveness of the region. Politicians speak of this phenomenon as *krimp*, i.e. regional decline (literal translation, shrinkage). In the 2000s, municipal and provincial politicians and collectives of local entrepreneurs developed plans to attract more people to the region and to deal with the economic effect of the *krimp*. Municipal and provincial politicians have become increasingly worried about the effect of the earthquakes on the pre-existing *krimp* in the region. Many people have suffered financially as their houses dropped in value, properties were damaged beyond repair, and/or businesses were struggling due to physical damage (van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015). People consider the region has become even less attractive to live in and travel to.

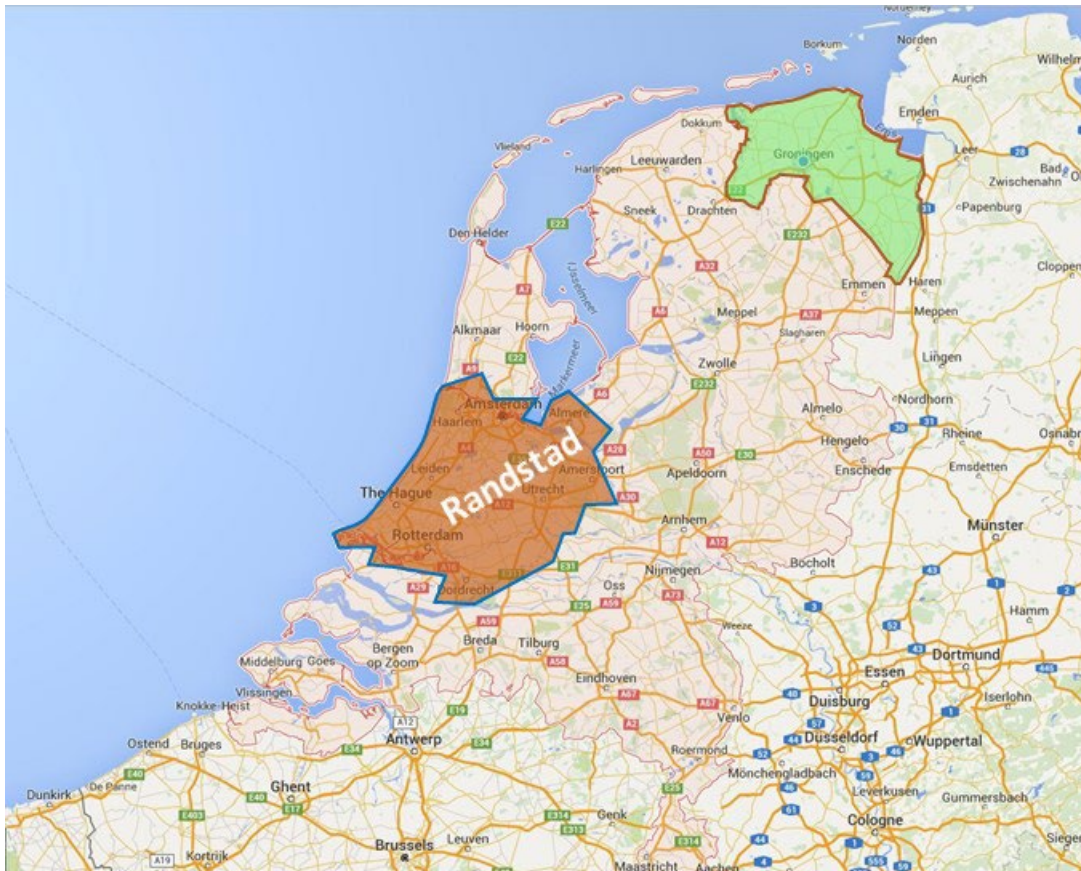


Figure 1: Groningen (green, top right) and the Randstad (orange). Base source: Google Maps.

Groningers have been underrepresented in national politics, along with people from other provinces outside of the *Randstad*. With precious few politicians in office from Groningen and in their peripheral position, some Groningers feel that national politicians have no interest in their region. My informants say that these politicians hardly ever visit, and do not know what life is like there. Previously collected data indicate that, in the aftermath of seismic events, many Groningers are convinced that politicians make decisions for them but do not have their best interests at heart. Some feel disenfranchised and unheard (Moolenaar, 2021). Mitigating the impact of the gas extraction, and the flow of aid to the region has been slow, inefficient, and ineffective. Damage compensation protocols have still not been fully developed since the quake in Huizinge in 2012. Planned government-led earthquake-proofing of houses has been slow. Many Groningers suffering from

earthquakes feel the government does nothing to protect or help them, and instead is just making money from the region. Some informants contended that politicians would have taken action immediately had the earthquakes happened in the *Randstad* (Moolenaar, 2021; van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015).

Many people from the *Randstad* see Groningen province as extremely remote and an undesirable location. There is a Dutch saying (frequently employed by people who live in Groningen) that the distance from Groningen to the *Randstad* is not as far as the distance from the *Randstad* to Groningen. Groningers have been culturally marginalized in national discourse, similar to, for instance, the cultural marginalization of people from Appalachia (another poorer area of resource extraction) featured in internationally distributed movies and TV shows (Scott, 2010). People from Groningen are portrayed as poorly educated, uncultured, and speaking a less desirable form of Dutch (even though *Gronings* is a legitimate dialect). In the media they are often ridiculed and/or caricatured as "hicks." The earthquakes have laid bare notions of difference, e.g., inferiority and inequality. Initially, people in the *Randstad* did not take the situation in Groningen seriously and treated Groningers as though they were exaggerating. This only changed after primetime shows and national news outlets started reporting more on the earthquakes, and expressive activism reached a wider audience.

Since the earthquake in Huizinge in 2012, not much has changed for the people suffering from earthquakes. Damage compensation protocols remain underdeveloped and compensation processes continue to take a very long time. And while finally getting a commitment from the national government in 2019 to reduce the gas extraction significantly to mitigate earthquakes, with an end date for extraction of 2030 (Vlek 2019), reduction has not brought about rapid or significant improvement in seismic activity nor in the conditions of daily life for locals. Many informants feel they are always waiting and, in the meantime, their situation might worsen. Some of my informants shared that they feel they are treated like second-class citizens. Over the years, some locals have begun speaking about being a 'resource colony' and that the province and its inhabitants are being sacrificed for the benefit of the rest of the country² (Moolenaar, 2021). This context of marginalization is crucial to understanding Groningers' experience of and narratives about COVID-19; the earthquakes, damage compensation, and marginalization are referred to in many of the narratives.

4. A "disaster in slow motion"

Several years before the outbreak of COVID-19, people in Groningen were already talking about a "disaster" taking place in their province (e.g., in the media, online, and in personal interviews with me). What they mean by disaster is the destruction of material heritage, homes, landscape, and livelihoods; the complexity of and obstacles to getting damage compensation or financial aid; and the perceived absence of political interest, care, and action. Moreover, it includes effects on one's mental and physical health, sense of community, home life, happiness and prospects for the future (see also Bakema *et al.*, 2018). Many Groningers perceive they are at risk and/or put at risk. Informants express living with angst over when the next earthquake will hit, anxiety about whether their cracked structures will collapse, and a constant fear for their safety and the safety of others (see also van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015). A few people have even built escape shelters and stocked them with food and water. They also worry about being able to absorb the financial impact of not being able to sell their houses (frequently below market value), or of not being able to conduct business from damaged buildings. Informants also speak of mental and physical risk from dealing with the physical and financial damages and the effects of having to wait for years to receive help and/or compensation (Moolenaar, 2021; van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015).

This perception of, and discourse of disaster and risk is uniquely local. It is contested by state experts and experts from the NAM (see also Bakema *et al.*, 2018). They focus on technological assemblages, use calculations of "potential for collapse", and purport that risks are minimal. This expert risk assessment is tied to the extent of political action, mitigation, and aid. A great number of locals have disputed this expert

² Their narratives primarily focus on the gas extraction but should be placed in a context of Groningen as a resource colony for many years prior, as parts of Groningen were exploited for peat (also used for fuel) for centuries. Informants use "resource colony" even though, or perhaps because, they are aware of the historical peat extraction. They also talk of peat colonies (*veenkoloniën*).

assessment (sometimes through the courts) and criticize the lack of action in the press and on blogs, websites, and in diverse social media. Initially various forms of activism, especially expressive, were aimed at demonstrating how serious the situation was (Moolenaar, 2020). In 2015 Groninger Kor Dwarshuis coined the term "disaster in slow motion" (*ramp in slow motion*) on his personal website to describe the situation. Since then this term has been used consistently in blogs, on social media posts, and in news articles and interviews by people suffering from earthquakes and/or opposing gas extraction. Activists and local journalists use the term and it is present in several of the collected COVID narratives as well. After the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (*College voor de Rechten van de Mens*) indicated the gas extraction was a violation of human rights in 2013 (van der Voort & Vanclay, 2015), a grassroots group opposing the gas extraction, *Groninger Bodem Beweging* (Groningen Ground Movement), addressed the issue as a human rights violation with regard to life, privacy, and family (life). They took it to the Human Rights Committee of the UN in 2017. The committee reported to be concerned about the safety and wellbeing of people in the area and implored the national government to take action (Groninger Bodem Beweging, 2017). With the outbreak of COVID-19 in the Netherlands in February 2020, new and additional narratives of risk and disaster (and also crisis) emerged in Groningen, interacting with the experience of risk and disaster stemming from induced seismicity described above.

5. Narrating COVID-19

COVID-19 delaying fortification and damage compensation

The first concerns voiced on social media about the impact of COVID-19 on the people suffering from earthquakes were about delays in fortification and compensation. Both compensation and fortification rely on an in-person inspection of one's property by experts. In general, before COVID-19, damage compensation procedures have been unclear and tend to take a long time. Locals describe the process as spaghetti, Kafkaesque, and viscous (Moolenaar, 2021). The fortification of houses is a governmental mitigation project to ensure buildings can withstand earthquakes and are safe to inhabit. The project requires government labeling of houses or neighborhoods as priorities in need of earthquake-proofing. This is done based on expert assessment of the risks (of potential magnitude of future quakes and of the stability of the buildings in the area); but it is also linked to research on the disruption of daily life and psychological impact (Staatstoezicht op de Mijnen, 2019). This project has also proceeded very slowly since its start in 2013, and according to *Staatstoezicht op de Mijnen* (Governmental Supervision of the Mines), it must increase in speed (van Hofslot, 2020).

The social distancing measures as part of the "intelligent lockdown" announced by the national government in mid-March 2020 resulted in the delay of damage compensation and fortification of housing for people suffering from earthquakes, since in-person visits by experts were deemed unsafe. Any and all news about the delays of fortification and damage compensation was shared widely on social media among Groningers. News of the delays were sometimes met with exasperation. Many people seeking damage compensation and/or fortification had already been waiting for a long time, as expressed in many social media posts, blogs, and grassroots and interest group websites (in addition to news articles that feature local voices, e.g., van Keken, 2020). Posts about delays due to COVID stopped after April 2020 except for a Facebook post by a grassroots group in September 2020 regarding how the pandemic diminished the attention of institutions on damage compensation, rendering a difference between cases that were dealt with before and during the pandemic. And, in October 2020 an advocacy group posted a regional newspaper article on how the processing of damage claims had been slowed by social distancing, and because inspectors had contracted COVID and some were in quarantine.

Who is worth what?

During a press conference near the end of March 2020, the national government announced to the nation their approach to what they labeled the "*Coronacrisis*." They stated that they had put together a crisis management team and committed to a set of economic measures, totaling several billion euro, primarily aimed

at mitigating economic impact, financial aid for e.g., small business, bar and restaurant owners, and the arts. Almost immediately, people from Groningen responded in the media and on social media. For instance, groups shared an editorial for the local newspaper *Dagblad van het Noorden*, which states: "How is it possible that many billions are available right now? The people in Groningen have been waiting for damage compensation for their homes for years" (de Veer, 2020). In an article on a local news website, *RTV Noord*, posted to Facebook by grassroots groups, a local senior couple who run a hair and beauty salon were interviewed. The couple had not been able to retire because of the financial losses they suffered related to the earthquakes. They commented that they were surprised that the government distributed so much money, "corona billions" (*coronamiljarden*), so easily to entrepreneurs as a COVID measure and they expressed their frustration. They pondered how it is possible that all of a sudden there was money available and opined that this is because of the difference between the West and the North; "The North is just a resource colony and the people shouldn't complain" (RTVNoord, 2020).

One of the grassroots groups also posted the following on their website in mid-May: "Do we, Groningers, matter at all, or is it merely the oh so important gas underneath our feet that puts Groningen on the political agenda in The Hague?"³ One can see similar sentiments recurring constantly in other narratives. Locals ask, "are we secondary"; "do we not matter?" Journalist Peter Middendorp was quoted on Facebook from his column in the national newspaper *Volkscrant* with the probing premise, "what if the virus had started in Groningen?" He states that the government would have sacrificed the area and contained the virus there. He explains this by reviewing the inequality between Groningen and the *Randstad*, stating that if the earthquakes had happened in Amsterdam⁴, action would have been taken immediately (Middendorp, 2020). These thoughts and statements resonate with what informants told me in 2012-2017: that if the earthquakes had happened in the *Randstad*, politicians would have taken action immediately; that people in the rest of the country simply do not care about the people or events in Groningen; that Groningen was just a resource colony for the rest of the country; and that Groningers' homes and livelihoods were being sacrificed for the benefit of the rest of the country and for financial gain.

After the news that airline KLM received a four billion euro bailout from the national government, a local sent a letter to *Dagblad van het Noorden* with comparable content on May 1st 2020 (shared on social media) about how easily and quickly money was given to this company while people in Groningen have been waiting for money from the government for so long. Several groups reposted an article first published by one of the interest groups to their website (and shared on social media by others thereafter) that contrasts the governmental approach to the corona crisis with their approach to the earthquakes in Groningen. It starts off similarly, posing the question why it is taking more than seven years to obtain the four billion euros that are allocated for Groningen. And it continues, "While the cabinet tries to amend the economic damages caused by the corona crisis with billions of euros for companies and citizens, the people in earthquake country are observing it all with frustration. Why does the state pay out so quickly now?" (Butler, 2020).

On May 3rd 2020, the chair of the interest group *Groninger Bodem Beweging* sent an open letter to the Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Mark Rutte, which became widely shared on social media and in the news media. In this letter, the chair points out that the Prime Minister advised the population of the country to stay at home, however people in Groningen are not safe in their homes because these are damaged by the earthquakes and are still in need of fortification. He states that staying at home gives people a "double sense of unsafety." He then moves on to argue that the approach to the "corona crisis" stands in stark contrast with the governments' policy measures in Groningen, where people's safety and health is under threat as well. The lack of safety in one's own home is not being addressed. He mentions that in the last seven years only 4% of the houses in the area have been fortified under the government-funded project. In his letter he also mentions that a disaster in slow motion is taking place in the area according to scientific research.⁵ Government is not addressing worries about safety, and the long wait for damage compensation and fortification has had serious

³ The Hague is the seat of government.

⁴ Amsterdam is the biggest city in the *Randstad*.

⁵ He is referring by the research project *Gronings Perspectief* carried out by a research team from the University of Groningen that has been researching the health and psychological impact of the earthquakes for the last several years.

physical and mental health impacts. Additionally, the author of the letter pointed out, as did others on social media, that small business owners were struggling more and more in Groningen. They were already experiencing financial hardship because of the earthquakes, and now they were forced to close because of COVID-19. This concern for extra economic hardship was also brought up by Akke Groenewoud, part of the Groningen Economic Board⁶, in an article on the economic impacts of COVID in the province shared on social media by one of the groups. Groenewoud contends that the economy in Groningen is more tenuous⁷ than elsewhere in the country (Zwerver, 2020).

On June 2nd 2020, one of the Facebook groups shared an opinion piece from *The Post Online* by Vicky van Lommel, about the inaction of national politicians when it comes to the earthquakes. Van Lommel particularly focuses on the inaction regarding damage compensation and fortification but her article also addresses COVID-19. She writes:

The government has demonstrated that she is willing to send the country into poverty for risks, a virus, that is a part of life, and as a result forces⁸ Groningers into even more (financial) misery because everyone in the Netherlands has been faced with the costs of corona. With their corona policies they have knowingly and willingly tortured Groningers even further in their cracked houses. (van Lommel, 2020).

Facing two disasters simultaneously

The letter to the Prime Minister and the opinion piece both indicate that COVID is compounding risks and disastrous effects for people. National politician of the Socialist Party, Sandra Beckerman, who lives in Groningen, wrote on Facebook on March 23 2020 about a "double hit" and the plight of fighting "the corona crisis and the Groningen crisis simultaneously":

While this crisis shows its own unprecedented dynamic and sorrow, the last few weeks have been extra hard on many Groningers. Because they are right at the center of that other life-destroying crisis [sic]. We have to stay home as much as possible, but our house frequently feels even less safe than the outside world. Hence my call to action: move away from the political habit of looking away from Groningen, look at the amassing of our misery and act upon it. Because if not now, when?

And she says,

If safe houses save us in the times of corona, then we can only fight this crisis and what comes next if we assure safe housing for each and every person everywhere. Groningen cannot be forgotten again but has to – just like everything else of value now – come first on the political and social priority list. Now that politicians are able to swiftly free up billions we have to make sure they do that for Groningen as well. This is not a plea but a demand from our neglected resource colony.

An article that was shared several times on social media amplifies the voice of a local preacher who offers social and mental health services (van Keken, 2020). The preacher says he is very busy these days. He shares that many young families with growing children are worried; families that have been dealing with the impact

⁶ The Groningen Economic Board was established to stimulate the Groningen economy.

⁷ She uses the word *ijler* which literally means thin or rarified as in thin or rarified air.

⁸ The Dutch reads "kicks" (*schoppen*).

of the earthquakes such as damaged homes and who experience a loss of security, happiness, and prospects for the future. According to the preacher, the corona crisis adds to those worries.

In the beginning of April 2020 several grassroots groups drew on the "expert voice" of Professor Tom Postmes on social media, sometimes quoting him *verbatim*. Postmes has been doing research on the psychological effects of the earthquakes since 2012 and currently on the effects of COVID-19. In public statements for regional news outlet, *Dagblad van het Noorden*, he hypothesized that either COVID-19 can offer a bit of a breather or it can cause extra or built-up stress (*gestapelde stress*) in the area affected by earthquakes (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2020). The latter part of his hypothesis was shared by some of the Facebook groups and linked Twitter accounts. His term *gestapelde stress* resonates with locals and has been used (somewhat altered to *stapelstress*) since then by others, for instance on a blog and a grassroots website. Postmes also spoke of people getting a double whammy mentally (or "a double mental hit") (Dagblad van het Noorden, 2020). Elsewhere on social media a group called it, "rubbing salt in a wound [sic]", as "Groningen has been in crisis for many years already." While in another narrative it is mentioned that COVID is "just another crisis" and that people from the area have gotten used to dealing with crisis over the past few years.

The concern for safety and houses not being safe, as mentioned by Beckerman, appears in multiple social media posts right after the Prime Minister announced that people should stay indoors to prevent the spread of the virus. It is also in the letter to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister had said in a briefing to the nation that one is safer at home. People from Groningen express online they experience that differently, and question "Safer at home, is this actually true?" Another group posted: "Living in Groningen safe? Not in the times of Corona." Several groups shared on social media a blog post from a local woman about the experience of working from home in a house that has earthquake damage. She was home during a recent earthquake and explains that having to stay at home all day and feeling an earthquake doesn't make her feel safe at all. The letter to the Prime Minister states that being forced to stay home gives people a double sense of insecurity.⁹ People feel that their houses are not safe, and so they aren't actually safer indoors at home. Narratives also point to the psychological impact of being confronted with the damage all day long when staying at home. Several groups posted a newspaper article from a national newspaper, *Trouw*, about how the lockdown is experienced in Groningen. Its headline states: "The whole day we are being confronted with our damaged houses" (van de Lustgraaf, 2020).

Comparing crises

Once governmental discourse focused on COVID as a "crisis" and announced its mitigation and aid measures, there was a shift in wording of the online narratives. They started to focus on and include the word "crisis" to demarcate the situation in Groningen, instead of disaster (in slow motion). As the above discussion of data shows, Groningers are comparing the governmental response to the situation in Groningen and that to COVID-19. In the letter to the Prime Minister from *Groninger Bodem Beweging*, and some social media posts and newspaper articles which followed the letter and echoed much of its content, there is a discussion that not all crises are the same. They acknowledge that perhaps people might find it uncouth to compare crises, but they are offering a comparison. This comparison addresses that the government never considered what was happening in Groningen as a "national disaster" but rather a regional problem, and it contemplatively offers suggestions as to why not. According to this narrative, it is because COVID is understood to have happened to people; "an invisible, potentially deadly, enemy the consequences of which have to be fought with all possible measures." In contrast, the gas extraction and its consequences are considered human-made; "It was a deliberate choice to expose Groningen to the risk of earthquakes." From the wide reposting and other posts with similar content, it is clear that this comparison resonates with many Groningers who suffer from earthquakes.

There appears to be uncertainty in the online narratives regarding the needs to be addressed first. In the letter to the Prime Minister, there is mention that even the collective of social organizations meant to advocate for and support people suffering from earthquakes, *Groninger Gasberaad*, had stated that the government has matters to worry about other than Groningen. That "the only thing that matters is that we get through the Corona

⁹ The Dutch uses "unsafety" (*onveiligheid*)

crisis as quickly and as best we can." The letter concludes with the concern that the urgency of the problems from the gas extraction have disappeared in the context of COVID and that people must be even more patient for a longer period of time. The governmental measures regarding the pandemic interfere with attention and aid to the region, and are experienced as compounding problems for many Groningers. Yet others view the Corona disaster, crisis, and risk as competing with their continuous experience of another disaster, crisis, and risk.

Almost all COVID-related posting stopped after June 2020. The posts after June deal with new developments directly related to the gas extraction and earthquakes, such as Shell potentially discontinuing their business in the Netherlands, a (long-awaited) parliamentary investigation into gas extraction and its effects, the potential location of a nuclear power plant in the area, a pipeline leak, compensation for children with psychological problems resulting from the earthquakes, and a €1.5-billion (\$1.53 billion) governmental deal for financial compensation in the province. There were a few posts in the fall of 2020 that returned to the discourse on crisis, but did not mention COVID. These posts discussed the importance of demarcating and treating the earthquakes as a crisis by the government in order to get better and faster financial compensation, establish more effective protocols, and improve the daily lives of Groningers (as compared to treating it as a regional problem as had been done in the past eight years).

6. The production of an energy disaster

In the common usage of "disaster", and in "naïve realist perspectives" according to Sun and Faas (2018), natural and technological hazards are often emphasized. But drawing on political ecology and informed by Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman's pioneering and seminal work, *The Angry Earth: Disaster in anthropological perspective* (1999), anthropologists have come to understand disasters as "long-unfolding historical processes involving constitutive interactions between people (with their culturally contingent values, political systems, technologies, and practices) and their material environment" (Faas & Barrios, 2015: 289). It is human actions and policies that enhance the materially destructive and socially disruptive capacities of a hazard (Faas & Barrios, 2015: 289). Ben Wisner *et al.* (2003) argue that social conditions determine whether a triggering event may result in disaster. They stress that we must examine the vulnerability of different groups of people, writing that "vulnerability is generated by social, economic and political processes that influence how hazards affect people in varying ways and with differing intensities" (Wisner *et al.*, 2003: 7). Similarly, Ilan Kelman argues that disasters are social and they arise from hazard combined with vulnerability. The latter he deems the causative factor in disasters; human choices leave people unprepared and at risk (Kelman, 2020). Sun and Faas (2018) state that social vulnerability determines to some extent whether a hazard becomes a disaster, "...while the roots of social vulnerability and disaster are located in power-laden social relations and processes" (Sun & Faas, 2018: 625).

The "disaster in slow motion" is Groningers' term for a kind of slow-onset disaster, and is mobilized to talk about an energy disaster—techno-scientific hazards interacting with geophysical processes stemming from human interventions with the environment. This energy disaster entails slow, continual, and often latent processes that are met with ambivalence because they also produce wealth (Benadusi, 2020: 47, see also Browne & Milgram, 2008; Schuller & Maldonado, 2016). It has been produced over the approximately 60 years of gas extraction. This disaster was created through economic policies favoring the *Randstad* over Groningen; the prioritization of the gas proceeds over the needs of people living over the gas field; the peripheral positioning of Groningen; and, the marginalization of its inhabitants. Additionally, echoing the findings of Bakema *et al.* (2018), informants argue that it is the insufficient and ineffective government response to earthquakes that make them a disaster.

As mentioned above, the earthquakes laid bare the inequality with the *Randstad* and also worsened feelings of marginalization. A discourse (re-)emerged among Groningers about the province being a colony of the country, sacrificed for the benefit of the rest of the Netherlands. This also emerges in some of the COVID narratives. Faas and Barrios state that disasters reveal to us important aspects of societies, political economies, and human-environment relations, and expose social and political inequities (Faas & Barrios, 2015: 290). Additionally, in 'What does catastrophe reveal for whom? The anthropology of crises and disasters at the onset

of the Anthropocene' (2017), Barrios critically examines the idea of the *crise revelatrice*, the crisis that reveals (Oliver-Smith, 1996; Sahlins, 1972; Solway, 1994). He points out that crises may reveal inequalities, yet political actors can exploit disasters to conceal them while subaltern groups (frequently burdened with the disaster's socio-material effects) may draw on a disaster as an instrument to illustrate experienced precarity due to racism, dominant economic systems, and development policies (Barrios, 2017, 2020).

My own university students have remarked, in their reflections on COVID and race, gender, class and legal status, that "the virus doesn't discriminate" but that it reveals and widens existing inequalities. However, *people* do discriminate, and this engenders vulnerability and disaster. Marginalization has left Groningers vulnerable to the seismic events affecting their region. In turn the "disaster in slow motion" has made them more vulnerable to other hazards, such as COVID. The impact of COVID, however, is mostly indirect in form. Groningen province has relatively few confirmed cases of COVID-19, less than 1% of the total number for the entire country (Rijks Instituut voor Volksgezondheid en Milieu, 2020). As narratives indicate, COVID measures may compound problems for some Groningers. And as Ilan Kelman argues, reflecting on COVID-19, "disaster occurs at multiple levels simultaneously, with responses to a hazard exposing as many vulnerability problems as the original hazard" (Kelman, 2020). Additionally, expectations of further disaster layers include deterioration of mental and physical health and of social wellbeing (Kelman, 2020). The data show that Groningers are very much aware of the social production of the "disaster in slow motion" (see also Bakema *et al.*, 2018) and use COVID-19 as an opportunity to discuss this other crisis (Barrios, 2017b). The narratives here indicate that their composers draw on COVID as a moment to "reveal", or rather magnify or put into focus, (latent) inequality and marginalization as well as the compounded layers of vulnerability they experience in the hopes of mobilizing political action. COVID can be viewed as a kind of *crise revelatrice*, aimed at the rest of the nation.

7. Framing and claim-making

It is well established in anthropological and political ecology scholarship to treat disasters as socially constructed (Tierney, 2007), and some researchers also treat them as partially or entirely subjective. Some even treat natural hazards themselves as socially constructed (e.g., Bankoff, 2004). As discussed above, it is the immediate impact of the seismic events as well as their aftermath entangled with Groningers' marginalization that produces a disaster. However, outside of the region and in some political offices in the Netherlands, the term disaster is not used (see also Bakema *et al.*, 2018). Bakema *et al.* say the social creation of disasters can be examined from the perspectives and subjectivities of the actors involved and "the mere framing of a situation as a disaster, by some of all groups of actors" is a part of the social creation of disasters (Bakema *et al.*, 2018: 3, 20). Responding to government discourse and action related to COVID-19, there appears to be a restating of the disastrousness of the situation in Groningen. The first posts that appeared on social media relating to COVID were discussions of how these measures affected expert inspection visits. The narratives are about practicalities and discuss the kind of delays to expect. But when the government announced it had appointed a crisis management team and crisis measures, such as financial support for businesses, and included the word crisis in their discourse, there was a shift in narratives. The word crisis became contested. Narratives discussed how there already was a crisis in Groningen, and Groningers were dealing with multiple crises at once. Tensions surrounding various intentionalities, interests, and claim-making arose (Sun & Faas, 2018: 627). Who gets to claim what is a crisis? Which crisis is more important? And, who gets to decide what is a disaster (and what is not)? These were the questions that formed the basis for many of the online narratives.

The claim-making and disaster definitions used by institutional actors and their priorities for ameliorative action (Tierney, 2007: 507-508) are challenged in these posts. 'Intelligent lockdown', and political discourse about being 'safer at home' evoked narratives about risk. Ulrich Beck stated that deciding what is a risk is an act of power (Beck, 1992). There was a tension between Groningers' perceptions of risk, and the government and its experts' assessment of risk and hazard exposure (Boholm, 2015; Checker, 2007). The letter to the Prime Minister from *Groninger Bodem Beweging* illustrates this, but also various posts challenging the 'safer at home' expert discourse spread in the city. Groningers do not experience their homes as safe.

The collected narratives show an awareness among Groningers that a disaster is, indeed, constructed and that the framing of what is a crisis (and what is not) is political and connected to mitigation and aid. Some of the narratives discuss that, if the government considers something a crisis, there will be a large amount of money made quickly available for mitigation and recovery; whereas, if it deems something a local problem, there is a lot of debate regarding the financial compensation and it takes a long time to dispense any financial assistance. As Bakema *et al.* (2018) argue, the government response to hazards is key for determining the cause and the consequences of a socially created disaster. By using the word crisis for the situation in Groningen, comparing crises, and writing about being faced by two crises, a 'double crisis', or being 'doubly hit', Groningers are attempting to reframe and mobilize "crisis", and redirect attention in order to spur action toward compensation, mitigation, and government assistance. The narratives also discuss the political-economic interests behind claims-making; Groningen is a resource colony, and the government prioritizes its economic interests. After the posts about COVID and government responses to COVID began to stop, social media posts still continued that emphasized the importance of defining and treating the situation in Groningen as a crisis in order to provoke political action.

What is a disaster, and according to whom, are questions that emerge from a group's techno-scientific and legal practices, and as political ecologists argue, they are linked to political and economic forces (Barrios, 2017a). The Dutch state and experts have mobilized scientific knowledge to specify the occurrence and scope of a disaster and its catastrophic effects. They also determine who can claim compensation or aid. People suffering from earthquakes assert that it is precisely these techno-scientific and legal practices that refute the catastrophic impact of the earthquakes and, as a result, produce a disaster of their own; they have made people more vulnerable to other hazards such as COVID. Groningers exercise agency through their continued discussion of disaster definitions and institutional actions, and by combatting political and media discourse on social media (see also Sun & Faas, 2018). Bonilla & Rosa (2015) and Hanna *et al.* (2016) describe the unique opportunities for protest using social media (amplifying voices, opposing political decision-making, and political mobilizing & organizing) in terms of accessibility and reach. The online narratives can be seen as expressions of a virtual "enunciatory community" (Fortun, 2001) that attempts to influence the determination of where and when a disaster begins, and who is worth what (Barrios, 2017b; Fortun, 2001) in financial terms but also for care (Browne, 2015). These included statements made by Professor Tom Postmes in *Dagblad van het Noorden* about a type of double stress; the politician Sandra Beckerman stating that Groningers are hit twice ('double hit'); and the social media narratives in general but especially those comparing other disasters. All be considered as part of the enunciating of disaster that challenges the single one (prioritized) crisis, as constructed by the government.

8. Conclusion

In order to understand the impact of COVID in Groningen, one must examine how the differences between the *Randstad* and Groningen are made, sustained, and affectively experienced in the shaping the socio-material impacts of disasters. Moreover, one must acknowledge that these differences are linked to the ability to obtain aid and political action (Barrios, 2017a: 258). Marginalization and the "disaster in slow motion", an energy disaster, influence the impact of COVID-19 in the region. COVID-19 produced additional and new risk, and still poses increased challenges to a region that is economically weaker than others in the country. Its people experience an amalgam of physical, mental, and socio-cultural impacts of the earthquakes. The failure of risk reduction, impact mitigation, and the distribution of compensation and aid to those suffering from earthquakes linked to institutional interests has left them more vulnerable (Bakema *et al.*, 2018). The layers of disaster compounded by the pandemic have not all been recognized by the government and, as a consequence, no action has been taken to decrease vulnerability, resulting in the experience of a compounded disaster for many Groningers (cf. Kelman, 2020). Following Bakema *et al.* the socio-political decisions made at crucial moments, and the mitigation measures chosen, have not matched the actual needs of Groningers and this has amplified disaster impacts (Bakema *et al.*, 2018). The narratives indicate that the experience of COVID cannot be separated from the experience of the "disaster in slow motion."

The response by the national government to the pandemic amplifies the disjuncture between locals' perceptions and discourse of risk, disaster, and crisis and the state with its use of expert views and discourse. For Groningers, "normal" life was disrupted by extraordinary events with catastrophic effects for several years before COVID. The narratives they generated also implied that what the government considers a 'crisis' is actually 'normal' for people suffering from earthquakes. COVID-19 is used by them as a window to discuss Groningers' marginalization and the "disaster in slow motion" in the hopes of revealing this, "making the real bare" (Roitman, 2011), and generating action. In comparing crises, they unpack how the disaster is socially produced. By questioning who is deserving of aid and care, they unpack claim-making and the political and economic interests behind these claims. By discussing the experience of two crises or disasters at the same time, they reveal power structures, uneven risk distribution, and vulnerability. Moreover, their narratives enunciate disaster and mobilize crisis.

Groningers desire accountability for the situation in Groningen and more attention, care and action from the government. Socialist Party politician Sandra Beckerman writes in her column *Now it is time for us!* (Beckerman, 2020), that COVID gave a glimpse or insight (*inkijkje*) into where the state's loyalties lie and now it is time for political action in Groningen. Her column exemplifies the hopes of Groningers that COVID functions as a type of *crise revelatoire*. One that lays bare latent inequality and power relations, as well as the energy-related disaster it engendered. Moreover, it is a moment for Groningers to reframe disaster and mobilize crisis to attain political leverage and spur action.

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