

Beyond Response: Reimagining Disaster Management for a Changing Climate

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Abstract:

Opening Story

In November 2013, Typhoon Haiyan slammed into the Philippines with unprecedented force. Joanna, a mother of three living in Tacloban, watched as the storm surge—higher than any in living memory—swept through her coastal neighborhood.

“We heard the warnings, but nothing like this had ever happened before,” she told aid workers. “How could we prepare for something we couldn’t imagine?”

Six thousand lives were lost. Millions were displaced. And in the storm’s aftermath, a question emerged that resonates across our warming world: How do we prepare for disasters when the past no longer predicts the future?

The Climate–Disaster Paradox

We face a profound challenge today. Our disaster management systems were built for a world of relative climate stability—a world that no longer exists.

In Bangladesh, floods that once came every few decades now arrive annually, overwhelming conventional defenses. In Australia, the 2019–2020 “Black Summer” wildfires burned with an intensity that stunned even veteran firefighters. In Puerto Rico, Hurricane Maria’s devastation revealed infrastructure designed for yesterday’s storms, not tomorrow’s superstorms.

These aren’t isolated events—they’re glimpses of our new reality. Yet our disaster management frameworks remain stubbornly anchored in the past, focused on responding to disasters rather than reimagining how we live with an increasingly volatile climate.