

**Disasters without Borders:  
The Coronavirus Pandemic,  
Global Climate Change and the Ascendancy of Gradual Onset Disasters**

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Throughout much of its history, the sociological study of human communities in disaster has been based on events that occur rapidly, are limited in geographic scope, and their management understood as phased stages of response, recovery, mitigation and reparedness. More recent literature has questioned these concepts, arguing that gradual-onset phenomena like droughts, famines and epidemics merit consideration as disasters and that their exclusion has negative consequences for the communities impacted, public policy in terms of urgency and visibility and for the discipline itself as the analytical tools of sociological research are not brought to bear on these events. We agree that gradual-onset disasters merit greater attention from social scientists and in this paper have addressed the two most significant ongoing disasters that are gradual in onset, global in scope and have caused profound impacts on lives, livelihoods, communities and the governments that must cope with their effects. These disasters are the coronavirus pandemic and global climate change both of which include dimensions that challenge the prevailing definition of disaster. We begin with an examination of the foundational work in the sociological study of a disaster that established a conceptual framework based solely on rapidly occurring disasters. Our focus is on several components of the existing framework for defining and studying disasters, which we term “borders.” These borders are temporal, spatial, phasing and positioning, which, in our view, must be reexamined, and to some degree expanded or redefined to accommodate the full range of disasters to which our globalized world is vulnerable. To do so will expand or redefine these borders to incorporate and promote an understanding of significant risks associated with disaster agents that are gradual and potentially catastrophic, global in scope and require international cooperation to manage.