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Governance and social vulnerability in disaster risk management: a systematic review of Latin American literature (2005–2025)

Gobernanza y vulnerabilidad social en la gestión del riesgo de desastres: una revisión sistemática en América Latina (2005-2025)

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Abstract

This study analyzes the relationship between disaster risk governance and social vulnerability in Latin America through a systematic literature review covering the period 2005–2025. Following the PRISMA protocol, 18 peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, and SciELO were selected and analyzed in order to identify theoretical approaches, analytical patterns, and research gaps regarding the social construction of disaster risk. The findings show that disaster risk governance has evolved from predominantly institutional and reactive approaches toward more complex frameworks that integrate social vulnerability, state capacity, and community participation as interdependent dimensions. Evidence consistently indicates that vulnerability is not a static condition but a socially produced process shaped by structural inequalities, urban segregation, and institutional weaknesses. The review also reveals a persistent gap between international policy frameworks and their effective implementation at national and local levels, limiting risk reduction outcomes. In addition, community participation is found to enhance resilience, although its effectiveness depends on institutionalization levels and power asymmetries within governance arrangements. The study concludes that disaster risk governance in Latin America is characterized by an incomplete transition in which technocratic and socio-political approaches coexist, highlighting the need for more integrated frameworks that better articulate state, society, and territory in the production and reduction of risk.

Keywords: disaster risk governance, social vulnerability, Latin America.

Resumen

La presente investigación analiza la relación entre gobernanza del riesgo de desastres y vulnerabilidad social en América Latina mediante una revisión sistemática de literatura científica publicada entre 2005 y 2025. El estudio, desarrollado bajo el protocolo PRISMA, sistematiza 18 artículos indexados en bases de datos académicas, con el objetivo de identificar enfoques teóricos, patrones de análisis y vacíos de investigación en torno a la configuración social del riesgo. Los hallazgos evidencian que la gobernanza del riesgo ha transitado desde enfoques predominantemente institucionales y reactivos hacia perspectivas más complejas que integran la vulnerabilidad social, la capacidad estatal y la participación comunitaria como dimensiones interdependientes. Se constata que la vulnerabilidad no es un atributo estático, sino un proceso socialmente producido asociado a desigualdades estructurales, segregación urbana y limitaciones institucionales. Asimismo, se identifica una brecha persistente entre marcos normativos internacionales y su implementación efectiva en los contextos nacionales, lo que limita la reducción del riesgo. La evidencia también muestra que la participación comunitaria fortalece la resiliencia, aunque su impacto depende del grado de institucionalización y equilibrio de poder en la gobernanza. Se concluye que la gestión del riesgo en la región constituye un campo en transición incompleta, donde coexisten enfoques tecnocráticos y socio-políticos, siendo necesario avanzar hacia marcos integrados que articulen Estado, sociedad y territorio.

Palabras clave: gobernanza del riesgo, vulnerabilidad social, América Latina.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, disaster risk management (DRM) has undergone a substantial conceptual shift, moving away from emergency-response models and toward frameworks built around prospective risk reduction, resilience, and governance (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2015). This shift has redirected analytical attention away from natural hazards as such and toward the political, institutional, and social factors that shape the conditions of exposure and vulnerability faced by populations.

Within this framework, risk is understood not as a purely natural phenomenon but as the outcome of historical processes of land occupation, social inequality, public decision-making, and institutional capacity, in which governance plays a structuring role (Oda et al., 2025; Lavell et al., 2023).

This issue is particularly salient in Latin America, where high exposure to natural hazards coexists with entrenched structural inequality and considerable variation in state capacity to implement risk-reduction policies. Despite the policy advances driven by the Hyogo Framework for Action and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, regional evidence suggests that the mere existence of institutional frameworks does not, on its own, guarantee an effective reduction in social vulnerability (UNDRR, 2015; Cabral-Ramírez et al., 2025). Gaps in interinstitutional coordination persist, along with fragmented mandates, centralized decision-making, and limited participation by local actors, all factors that constrain the effectiveness of DRM (Campos & Gil, 2025; Alves et al., 2021).

Seen from this angle, risk governance is not merely an administrative coordination mechanism; it is an analytical category that helps explain how the state, civil society, the private sector, and communities interact in shaping responses to risk. Governance thus bears on the formulation and implementation of public policy as much as on resource distribution, access to opportunity, citizen participation, and a territory's capacity to anticipate, confront, and recover from disasters (Ulbrich et al., 2023; Rivas et al., 2024). Research conducted in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Peru shows that well-articulated, multilevel governance models incorporating community participation tend to produce better outcomes in both risk reduction and post-disaster recovery (Melo et al., 2024; Ramos-García et al., 2024).

At the same time, the concept of social vulnerability has moved beyond a narrow focus on socioeconomic conditions (poverty, say, or inadequate infrastructure) toward approaches that also account for institutional and political dimensions. Vulnerability, in this sense, is not a fixed condition but a socially constructed process shaped by public decisions concerning land-use planning, urban development, resource allocation, and the inclusion of social actors in risk management (Lavell et al., 2023; Monteiro dos Santos et al., 2024).

It follows that territories exposed to comparable hazards can display markedly different levels of vulnerability depending on their institutional arrangements and governance models. Empirical evidence from Latin America bears this out, showing how informal urban settlement, structural poverty, and institutional fragmentation heighten exposure while eroding adaptive capacity (Rivas et al., 2024; van Minnen & Coates, 2025). Comparative research likewise indicates that meaningfully incorporating local actors improves equity within risk governance arrangements (Ulbrich et al., 2023; Blanco et al., 2025).

Even so, despite steady growth in scientific output between 2005 and 2025, the Latin American literature continues to treat categories such as risk governance, state capacity, public policy, community participation, and social vulnerability in a fragmented way. This thematic specialization has produced important advances, but it has also left an analytical dispersion that limits an integrated understanding of how these factors interact in shaping vulnerability.

As a result, an explanatory gap remains around the mechanisms through which governance models influence the production or reduction of risk. This shortcoming manifests as a lack of integrative frameworks capable of systematically linking risk governance to social vulnerability, since the literature has tended to run parallel lines of analysis without adequately establishing their causal relationships or interdependencies (Oda et al., 2025; Natenzon, 2023).

The research problem addressed here, then, is not a shortage of studies but the scattered nature of their findings. Drawing on the social construction of risk and multilevel governance perspectives, it becomes necessary to bring these lines of inquiry together in order to understand, with greater precision, how institutional structures and governance models shape social vulnerability across Latin American contexts.

This study adopts that perspective through a systematic review of indexed academic literature produced in Latin America between 2005 and 2025, with the aim of identifying patterns, theoretical approaches, and research gaps in the relationship between risk governance and social vulnerability.

The guiding research question is therefore the following: how does the Latin American literature address the relationship between governance and the configuration of social vulnerability in disaster risk management between 2005 and 2025?

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The study's overarching objective is to systematically analyze Latin American academic production on the relationship between risk governance and social vulnerability, identifying theoretical approaches, dominant analytical categories, and research gaps. More specifically, it seeks to (i) map the principal theoretical currents in risk-governance scholarship, (ii) examine how social vulnerability has been conceptualized, and (iii) assess whether and how these two fields are integrated, or instead treated separately, in the literature.

Taken together, this study offers an integrative reading that positions governance not merely as an institutional component of DRM, but as a structuring factor in the production of social vulnerability across Latin America.

Methodology

This study followed a qualitative, documentary approach aimed at analyzing and interpreting the scientific literature on the relationship between disaster risk governance and social vulnerability in Latin America over the 2005–2025 period. It is descriptive-analytical in scope, seeking to identify and understand the principal theoretical approaches, conceptual categories, and patterns of academic production that clarify how different governance models relate to the configuration of social vulnerability to disasters.

The methodological design is that of a systematic literature review, following the guidelines of the PRISMA statement (Page et al., 2021), which helps ensure transparency, traceability, and rigor throughout the process of identifying, selecting, and analyzing the included studies. This approach is well suited to synthesizing scattered and heterogeneous evidence, as it supports procedural reproducibility and helps limit selection bias in the literature (Higgins et al., 2022).

The study takes a diachronic scope, covering scholarship produced between 2005 and 2025, a period spanning the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005–2015) and the implementation of the Sendai Framework (2015–2030). This time horizon makes it possible to trace how governance and social-vulnerability approaches have evolved in the Latin American literature, as well as the shift from response-centered approaches toward ones grounded in risk reduction and institutional resilience (UNDRR, 2015).

The document population consisted of scientific articles indexed in the Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and SciELO databases, chosen for their academic rigor and their coverage of the social sciences, public policy, and disaster risk management research. The search strategy combined Spanish- and English-language descriptors related to risk governance, social vulnerability, state capacity, resilience, and public policy in Latin America, linked through Boolean operators and following standard systematic-review criteria to ensure exhaustiveness and reproducibility (Booth et al., 2016).

The study-selection process followed the phases set out by PRISMA: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Bibliographic records were first identified across the selected databases, after which duplicates were removed and titles and abstracts were screened. In a third phase, full texts were assessed against previously established eligibility criteria concerning thematic relevance, methodological quality, and regional applicability. The final corpus comprised 18 scientific articles, which constitute the empirical basis of the qualitative synthesis.

Inclusion criteria admitted only peer-reviewed articles published between 2005 and 2025, in either Spanish or English, that explicitly addressed risk governance, social vulnerability, institutional capacity, or public policy in connection with disaster risk management in Latin America. Excluded were grey-literature documents, non-indexed technical reports, editorials, essays lacking methodological grounding, and studies focused solely on describing disaster events without examining institutional or governance processes.

Data were analyzed through qualitative synthesis and comparative thematic analysis, drawing on the coding and categorization procedures typical of qualitative analysis in systematic reviews (Thomas & Harden, 2008). A data-extraction matrix was used to systematize relevant information from each study, including authorship, year of publication, country, methodological approach, theoretical framework, and main findings concerning the relationship between governance and social vulnerability. On this basis, the data were coded into analytical categories that helped identify recurring patterns, conceptual tensions, and research gaps within the reviewed literature.

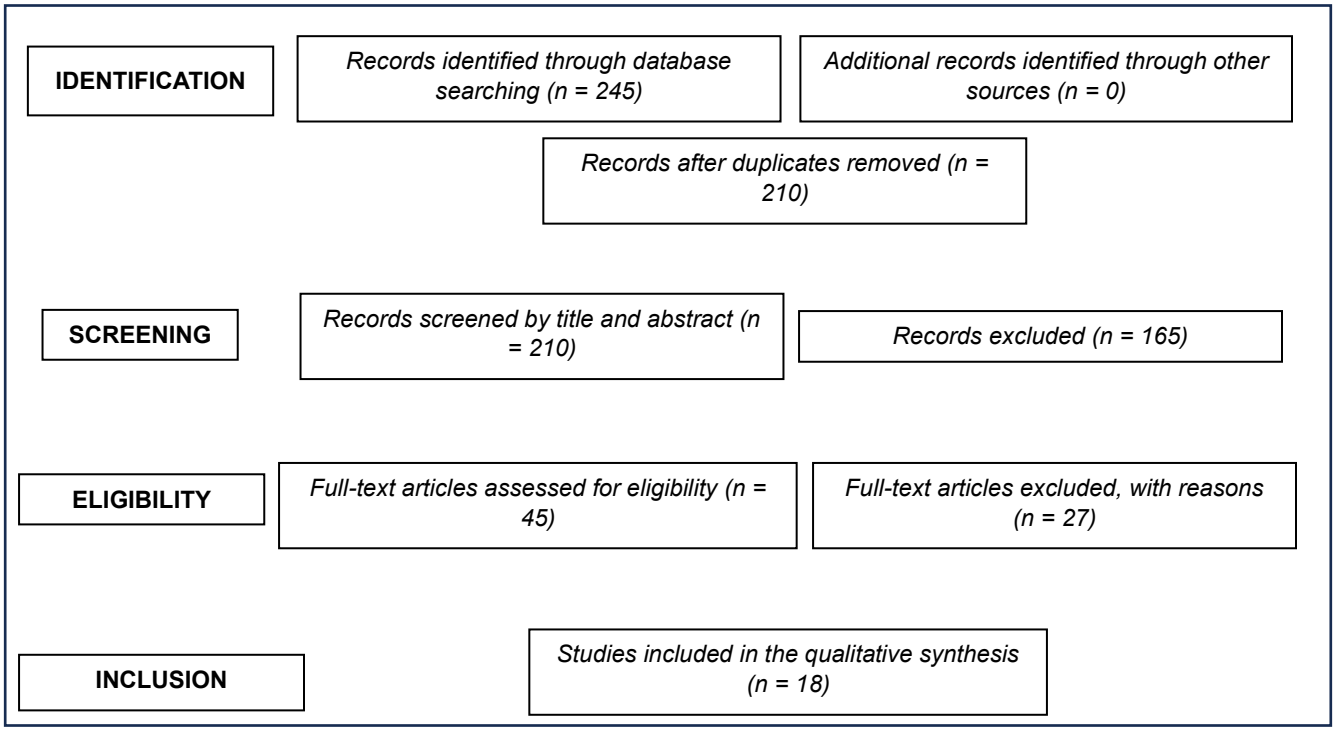
The analytical categories were organized around five main dimensions: disaster risk governance; social vulnerability and inequality; community participation and governance; state capacity and public policy; and international frameworks for risk reduction. This structure made it possible to examine, in an integrated way, how the Latin American literature has conceptualized the relationship between governance and social vulnerability, along with the transformations this relationship has undergone over the period studied.

From an ethical standpoint, the study relied exclusively on the analysis of publicly available secondary sources, in keeping with principles of scientific integrity, methodological transparency, and proper attribution of

consulted sources. It did not involve human participants or the collection of sensitive information (Wager & Kleinert, 2011).

Finally, among the study's main limitations is the restriction of the corpus to indexed databases, which may exclude relevant literature published in other repositories. The methodological heterogeneity of the analyzed studies may also introduce variation in the comparability of findings. Even so, adherence to the PRISMA protocol lends consistency to the review process and supports the validity of the resulting synthesis.

Figure 1
PRISMA diagram of the study selection process



Source: Author's own elaboration based on the guidelines of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021).

Results and discussion

The findings of this systematic review show that disaster risk governance in Latin America has moved away from predominantly institutional, reactive approaches toward more complex frameworks in which social vulnerability, state capacity, and community participation operate as interdependent dimensions. This transition is far from uniform: it is marked by ongoing tension between technocratic management models and socio-political approaches that treat risk as a structurally produced process (Natenzon, 2023; Oda et al., 2025).

First, the evidence reviewed points to broad consensus that disaster vulnerability cannot be explained by physical exposure to natural hazards alone; it is also shaped by pre-existing social inequalities. Empirical studies in urban settings such as Lima and various Brazilian cities show that risk is distributed unevenly according to socioeconomic conditions, access to services, and urban segregation (Lavell et al., 2023; Monteiro dos Santos et al., 2024). Along these lines, comparative findings indicate that social vulnerability is a relational, cumulative process rather than a static condition, further underscoring its structural role in the production of risk.

Viewed from this angle, the reviewed literature converges on the finding that risk governance in the region is marked by considerable institutional heterogeneity. Analyses of the Valparaíso mega-fire and of state capacity in Brazil, for instance, show that management effectiveness hinges not merely on the existence of policy frameworks but on coordination across levels of government, operational capacity, and the state's territorial presence (Rivas et al., 2024; Oda et al., 2025). Campos and Gil (2025) add that state legibility constitutes an institutional capacity through which states gather, classify, and organize territorial information to guide public intervention in the face of disasters. The authors caution, however, that these very processes can also create blind spots by oversimplifying complex social realities.

A recurring finding across the literature is the persistent gap between the normative design of risk-management policy and its effective implementation. Despite the adoption of the Sendai Framework throughout the region, numerous studies document that its application remains fragmented, reactive, and heavily dependent on uneven local capacities (Alves et al., 2021; Mitchell, 2024). Natenzon (2023) has conceptualized this gap as the “risks of management” (p. 2), situations in which institutional structures, policies, or government decisions themselves generate or amplify new forms of vulnerability.

In contrast to this institutional focus, a substantial body of research emphasizes the community's role as a central actor in risk reduction. Evidence from participatory action-research experiences in Colombia and from processes of social knowledge appropriation shows that community participation strengthens resilience and improves local response capacity (Ramos-García et al., 2024; Blanco et al., 2025). Regional reviews likewise confirm that resilience across Latin America rests primarily on social processes of adaptation rather than on formal state capacities considered in isolation (Sandoval-Díaz et al., 2023).

The literature also cautions, however, that community participation does not always translate into genuine empowerment. In some cases, risk governance unfolds within contexts of power asymmetry, where participation is instrumentalized or constrained by state and corporate structures (Melo et al., 2024; van Minnen & Coates, 2025). This suggests that including local actors does not by itself guarantee equitable decision-making or an effective reduction in vulnerability.

The review further shows that international risk-reduction frameworks, chiefly the Hyogo Framework for Action (2005-2015) and the Sendai Framework (2015-2030), have significantly shaped the discursive and institutional transformation of disaster risk management in Latin America. These instruments encouraged a shift away from response-centered models toward preventive approaches grounded in existing-risk reduction, institutional strengthening, and multilevel governance. The studies reviewed indicate, however, that their adoption has been largely normative, since limitations tied to state capacity, financing, interinstitutional coordination, and territorial uptake persist. Incorporating international standards, consequently, does not by itself ensure an effective reduction in social vulnerability, as its impact depends on the institutional and social conditions specific to each territory.

Another relevant thread identified in the review concerns risk communication and the social perception of danger. The studies analyzed show that communication strategies have a direct bearing on community preparedness, although they frequently lack institutional continuity and territorial focus (Marcillo-Delgado et al., 2021). Citizen-science research likewise indicates that risk perception is dynamic, shaped by prior experience, access to information, and institutional trust (Alves et al., 2021).

In regional comparative terms, the included studies reveal common patterns across Latin America: a predominance of sectoral approaches, weak multilevel coordination, and limited incorporation of differential approaches based on gender, poverty, and territory. Progressive advances toward more integrated approaches are nonetheless observable, particularly in the growing incorporation of nature-based solutions and in the articulation between climate change and risk management (Lucatello & Alcántara-Ayala, 2024; Cabral-Ramírez et al., 2025).

These findings support the claim that risk governance in Latin America remains in a phase of incomplete transition. Traditional models centered on response and normative planning coexist with emerging approaches grounded in resilience, adaptation, and social participation. This coexistence generates structural tensions that help explain why high levels of vulnerability persist even in contexts with advanced regulatory frameworks.

Theoretically, the evidence reviewed reinforces the view that social vulnerability is not a contingent outcome of disaster but a structural condition produced by unequal development models and fragmented institutional arrangements. The effectiveness of risk governance thus depends as much on state capacity as on its social legitimacy and its capacity for territorial coordination (Oda et al., 2025; Ulbrich et al., 2023).

Finally, from a critical standpoint, the review shows that risk governance is not a neutral field. It is, rather, a contested space in which political priorities are set, resources are allocated, and inequalities are either reproduced or reduced. The principal contribution of the reviewed literature is accordingly not only technical or institutional but epistemological: it shifts the analytical focus away from disaster as an isolated event and toward risk as an ongoing social, political, and institutional process.

Conclusions

This systematic review leads to the conclusion that disaster risk governance in Latin America has evolved into an increasingly complex field of analysis, one in which state capacity, social vulnerability, and community participation cannot be understood in isolation from one another. The findings confirm that risk is neither a purely

natural nor a purely technical phenomenon, but a socially produced process whose configuration is closely tied to the persistent structures of inequality found across the territories examined.

Social vulnerability, accordingly, does not emerge as a contingent by-product of hazard exposure but as a structural condition rooted in historical patterns of exclusion, as the studies on urban inequality and disasters in Lima, Brazil, and Colombia make clear. The evidence reviewed shows that even where risk-management frameworks are comparatively advanced, social inequalities continue to determine the severity of impacts, confirming the limits of approaches centered solely on institutional response or regulatory planning.

State capacity likewise proves to be a decisive but insufficient factor in explaining the effectiveness of risk governance. The studies analyzed show that institutional effectiveness depends not only on technical or regulatory resources but also on interinstitutional coordination, the state's territorial presence, and its capacity to recognize social diversity. Risk governance is thus best understood as a problem of multiple capacities, in which weakness along any single dimension opens implementation gaps that reproduce vulnerability.

Community participation and the social appropriation of knowledge likewise emerge as essential components of risk reduction, though their effectiveness hinges on the degree of institutionalization and recognition that governance frameworks afford them. The evidence shows that when participation is confined to formal or consultative mechanisms, its impact on resilience remains limited; where processes of knowledge co-production and collective action take hold, by contrast, local adaptive capacities are strengthened.

With regard to international frameworks, the evidence reviewed demonstrates that instruments such as the Sendai Framework have helped consolidate new paradigms of risk management; their effectiveness, however, depends on national and local institutionalization processes capable of translating these principles into operational capacities and concrete territorial action. The influence of international frameworks should therefore be understood as a process of incomplete institutionalization, in which normative progress coexists with structural limitations that constrain its effective application in vulnerable territories.

Building on the evidence reviewed, this analysis concludes that the central problem facing risk management in Latin America is not a lack of regulatory frameworks but institutional fragmentation, weak coordination across levels of government, and the persistence of unequal social structures that constrain the effective implementation of public policy. Risk, in this context, takes shape as a phenomenon produced through the interaction of institutions, territory, and social inequality.

Finally, the review identifies notable gaps that point to future lines of inquiry. Integration between risk-governance approaches and scholarship on the political economy of development remains limited, and empirical evidence on the mechanisms through which community participation directly affects measurable risk reduction is still insufficient. Further intraregional comparative research is also needed to explain why, under similar regulatory frameworks, some territories achieve higher levels of resilience than others.

This study thus argues that the central challenge for risk governance in Latin America is not merely technical or institutional but deeply political and structural, one that calls for new analytical approaches capable of more consistently integrating the dimensions of power, inequality, and state capacity in the production of risk.

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