Africa is exposed to a diversity of threats, including geophysical, meteorological and hydrological hazards and climate extremes, with droughts, floods, famines and disaster-related epidemics. These are aggravated by physical, social, economic and environmental factors, including poverty, fragile and degraded environments, limited access to services, weak governance and armed conflict.

The complex and dynamic character of Africa’s disaster risk profile clearly calls for significantly enhanced human capabilities and cross-disciplinary risk reduction skills. Unfortunately, the continent’s disaster risk reduction capacity has, in the past, been constrained by a severe lack of technically-oriented human resources. In-part, this gap has been due to a pattern of ‘outsourcing’ external assistance to international humanitarian agencies and consultants in times of duress. It can also be attributed to the exclusion of the continent’s higher education institutions from technical needs assessments or applied research opportunities directly relevant to postgraduate scholarship in the disaster risk and humanitarian action domains.

This paper describes the early successes achieved by the Periperi U consortium (Partners Enhancing Resilience to People Exposed to Risks), an innovative initiative to ‘jump-start’ cross disciplinary disaster risk scholarship across the continent. The partnership, involving ten universities ‘from Algiers to Antananarivo’ has worked effectively across languages and disciplines to generate new formal and non-formal education programmes in applied disaster risk reduction in ten countries. The paper underlines the value of harnessing the continent’s higher education institutions in advancing disaster risk reduction by drawing on accomplishments of the Periperi U consortium in strengthening human capacity in the disaster risk domain.