RESEARCH BRIEF

Disaster risk governance in different conflict scenarios

Dorothea Hilhorst

Key messages

- **It is important for aid actors to be cognizant of conflict's interaction with disaster and the impact this can have on disaster response.** There is evidence that the effects of disaster are aggravated by conflict, that disaster impacts conflict, that conflict complicates responses to disasters, and that disaster responses can be instrumentalized in conflict.

- **The specific history and context of conflict matters. It is useful to distinguish different types of conflict scenario, as these present different challenges.** A useful typology is to distinguish high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and post-conflict scenarios.

- **Disaster response is increasingly seen an arena of co-governance where different actors engage in responding to (the risks of) disasters.** It is important to look beyond the normative design of humanitarian governance to question how this works out in practice: there may be large discrepancies and contradictions between formal and practical norms.

- **In many low-intensity and post-conflict scenarios, disasters have opened up political space for contestation of political power, with state and non-state actors renegotiating their power.** Often humanitarian aid was the 'tool' or the medium through which these politics were played out. But while in the LIC scenario this tension is primarily seen in the negotiation and contestation between the state and its citizens, and state and international actors, in a post-conflict scenario these power struggles are more clearly seen between the different institutions in charge of the disaster response.

- **In high-intensity conflict scenarios the power struggles between actors involved in humanitarian governance is often not so much on the level of disaster policies but in gaining access and then navigating power struggles at the local level.** Because of the cost of operating in such environments, the financial power of humanitarian actors is a dominant factor in these scenarios in deciding who is included or excluded from services.

WHEN DISASTER MEETS CONFLICT

Erasmus University Rotterdam

This research is part of the programme 'When disaster meets conflict'

Responses to disasters triggered by natural hazards have changed considerably in recent decades: away from reactive responses to disasters and towards more proactive attention to risk reduction, as well as away from state-centred top-down approaches towards more deliberately involving non-state actors and communities in the formal governance of disaster response.

However, in research and policy, little attention has been paid to scenarios where disasters happen in conflict situations, even though a significant proportion of disasters occur in such contexts. There is evidence that conflict aggravates disaster and that disaster can intensify conflict – but not much is known about the precise relationship and how it may impact upon aid responses.

This five-year research programme analyses how state, non-state and humanitarian actors respond to disasters in different conflict-affected situations. Because the type of conflict matters – for how disasters impact communities and for how aid actors support the people affected – we distinguish different conflict scenarios, notably high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict, and post-conflict.

The core of the research programme consists of case studies in conflict countries where disasters occur, but our interest extends beyond the disaster events. In particular, we seek to understand how the politicisation of disaster response affects the legitimacy, power and relations between governance actors.

Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan. Source: Thea Hilhorst

Introduction

Among the 400 or so disasters triggered each year by natural hazards, more than 30% strike in countries affected by conflict.[1] However, in the research fields of disaster, humanitarian aid, or conflict, little attention has been paid to the nexus between disaster and conflict. Similarly, policy and practice are not often cognizant of the linkages between conflict and disaster, nor of the ramifications for disaster response.[2]

The nexus between disaster and conflict is important for several reasons. First, there is evidence that the effects of disaster are aggravated by conflict. Disasters are the outcome of the exposure to natural hazards, compounded by vulnerability and mitigated by capacities to respond. Conflict usually increases vulnerability and affects the capacity of people and communities to deal with disasters triggered by natural hazards.[3]

Second, disasters have an impact on conflict.[4] Disasters can intensify conflict or aggravate the military, socio-political and socio-economic effects of conflict, affecting the military balance, leading to social change, or exacerbating competition over scarce

1   Wood, R. M., & Wright, T. M. (2016). Responding to Catastrophe: Repression Dynamics Following Rapid-onset Natural Disasters. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *60*(8), 1446-1472. Peters, K. and M. Budimir. *'When Disasters and Conflict Collide: Facts and Figures'.* 2016. London: Overseas Development Institute

2   King, E., and J. Mutter. 'Violent Conflicts and Natural Disasters: The Case for Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue.' *Third World Quarterly* 35(7) 2014.

3   Bankoff, G., G. Frerks, and D. Hilhorst (eds.) *Mapping Vulnerability: Disasters, Development, and People*. London: Earthscan Publications, 2004.

4   Wisner, B. 'Violent Conflict, Natural Hazards and Disaster'. In *The Routledge Handbook of Hazards and Disaster Risk Reduction*, 65-76. New York: Routledge, 2012.

resources. Conversely, there is evidence that disasters can have positive effects on conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding or related processes, as happened in Aceh-Indonesia after the tsunami of December 2004. Either way, international interventions and their interplay with national/local actors affect the dynamics of conflict.[5]

Third, conflict complicates interventions in response to disasters, such as international or national relief programmes. Models of disaster response typically assume that there is a functioning government to deal with, which is often not the case in these areas, and international policy guidelines generally do not provide guidance on how to deal with the conflict-disaster nexus.

Conflicts are obviously caused by social processes, and this is also true for disasters. Research on disaster has overwhelmingly confirmed that disaster outcomes of natural hazards result from processes in the socio-political context. Social processes generate unequal exposure to risk by making some people more vulnerable to disaster than others, and these inequalities are largely a function of the power relations in every. Conflict can compound vulnerability and further weaken the response capacities of people and communities.

Previous research has provided two important insights on the effects of disaster in conflict situations. First, the effects of disasters are related to previous conflict histories. Whether disasters will trigger conflict is mostly dependent on pre-existing, country-specific conditions, especially the resilience of a state's institutions to crisis.[6] Second, how disasters are handled mediates their effects on conflict. The impacts disasters have on conflict and stability depend on the way a government responds.

This means that the specific history and context of conflict matters and should be taken into account in any disaster response. This is why we made a distinction in our research between *types* of conflict with regard to their intensity and some common features we can distinguish for different scenarios.

The general failure to distinguish between different conflict situations conflict-disaster literature means that research tends to treat a highly violent conflict setting as Syria similar to a country like Nepal, where violent conflict has not disappeared entirely but faded into the background or simmering beneath the surface. However, it is also widely known that the intensity of conflict has a major effect on the local resilience of communities, the erosion of local institutional capacity and the access to and effectiveness of international aid.

5   Ahrens, J. and P.M. Rudolph. 'The Importance of Governance in Risk Reduction and Disaster Management'. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 14(4) 2006: 207-20; Olson, R., and Gawronski, V. 'Disasters as Critical Junctures? Managua, Nicaragua 1972 and Mexico City 1985'. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 21(1) 2003: 5-35.
6   Omelicheva, M. 'Natural Disasters: Triggers of Political Instability?' *International Interactions* 37(4) 2011: 441-65.

Arguing that a more rigorous understanding of disaster-conflict dynamics across *types of conflict* is needed, we distinguish three analytical scenarios: high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and post-conflict. We use this categorization in the systematic analysis of specific patterns of interaction in disaster risk governance (between international and local aid and society actors) in these different scenarios.

Three conflict scenarios

In high-intensity conflict (HIC), usually considered as conflict with over 1000 deaths a year, violence occurs on a large scale, and the authorities have a high level of involvement in the conflict. Most of the time, a HIC represents a specific moment in a protracted crisis, developing out of or leading to low conflict or post-conflict periods. In HIC, national and local governments and authorities have reduced or no effective control over part of the country, generating a high level of state fragility. Information is difficult to access, governance arrangements are complex, and levels of population movement are high.

Disasters in areas of HIC have a major impact on vulnerable local populations and institutions. International aid agencies find it difficult to operate in these areas, sometimes resorting to working remotely by subcontracting to local actors without accountability guarantees.
Low-intensity conflict (LIC) scenarios have fewer deaths and are less severe than high-intensity conflict. They generally occur over extended periods of time with cycles of repression and re-emergence lasting from several years to decades.

The government may or may not be an actor in the conflict and will continue to be functional in large parts of the territory, but may lose control at lower governance levels and in more peripheral areas, where parallel state structures can emerge.

There are a number of key differences between LIC and HIC scenarios. One is that in LIC the presence of actual violent events may not be the primary indicator of conflict, but rather structural phenomena such as systematic discrimination. Policies and discourses rather than cycles of violence are often the most important fuel to the conflict. In such scenarios, the different ways in which parties frame the causes and effects of disaster and conflict can be crucial. International actors responding to a disaster must position themselves within tense intra-societal, state-societal and global dynamics.

Unlike the HIC scenario, functioning and sovereignty-asserting state structures are clear primary interlocutors for humanitarian actors. The gap between fast-developing international humanitarian frameworks and the imperatives of state sovereignty is wide in the LIC scenario, especially when the state in question is authoritarian in nature.

In post-conflict (PC) situations, a peace settlement has formally or informally been reached, and the reconstruction process is underway. Conflicts may still linger and there is a risk of new ones, and some PC states may still be 'fragile' and lacking the capacity to provide basic functions for its citizens. External reconstruction efforts centre on the state, where the emphasis is on building stronger governance institutions.

Where international aid actors are often restricted by the government in LIC scenarios, and by the security situation in HIC scenarios, PC scenarios are characterized by a high density of international aid actors that are present to rebuild institutions and to aid post-conflict recovery. Disaster governance will – on paper – follow the normal processes where the state is the central actor, but in practice may diverge as aid actors seek to balance their commitment to state-building with an effective humanitarian response.

'Real' humanitarian governance

Humanitarian governance must be understood as the interplay of different actors. However, writing about humanitarian governance has tended to overly focus on the *international* humanitarian system, neglecting local and national actors' involvement. International aid flows largely bypassed governments in the 1990-2000s. Only more recently has the notion of humanitarian governance expanded to encompass national authorities and other national institutions shaping humanitarianism praxis. Today, disaster response is increasingly seen as an arena of co-governance where different actors engage in responding to (the risks of) disasters, departing from its conceptualisation as an emergency form of politics in a top-down military style. [7]

It is important to look beyond the normative design of humanitarian governance to question how this works out in practice – what some authors refer to as 'real' governance. There may be large discrepancies and contradictions between formal and practical norms. Studying humanitarian governance requires the development of an 'antenna' for these different interpretations and how they stagnate, promote or change programmes in the course of implementation.[8]

It is important to be cognizant of potential diversities in humanitarian governance and to bring them into the analysis when they are significant. Therefore, this brief analyses how multiple state and non-state actors involved in aid respond to disasters in different conflict-affected situations.

Methods

The 'When disaster meets conflict' research programme uses two main methods. First, series of comparative studies of disasters in three different conflict settings were conducted (nine cases in total, with the following six complete): South Sudan and Afghanistan for HIC; Ethiopia and Myanmar for LIC; and Nepal and Sierra Leone for PC. Each case comprised four months of in-country data collection following a desk literature review. Data was collected through participatory observation, document collection and semi-structured interviews with members of governmental institutions, humanitarian agencies ranging from the UN to international NGOs, local NGOs, civil society groups and disaster-impacted communities.

Second, an international expert panel was conducted in which 30 experienced humanitarian actors participated in two rounds to offer longer-term overviews of aid practice. The cyclical structure of this 'Delphi technique' study allows participants to reflect on their earlier answers and allows the researcher to ask additional questions throughout the process.

Results

The Delphi study confirmed our assumption that the types of challenges that practitioners encounter in their disaster aid programmes differ significantly in different conflict settings. Likewise, the types of projects that are most effective also differ according to conflict setting, as do the strategies that practitioners use to create and run successful programmes.

These findings largely overlap with the findings from our fieldwork in high-, low and post-conflict scenarios. Below, we briefly recap characteristics of each of the scenarios and discuss the current gaps in research, while elaborating major findings that are most relevant for each scenario.

High-intensity conflict: disaster response on the edge

Given the insecurity and access limitations of the HIC scenario, disaster response mostly occurs at the local level, carried out by the affected population, local bodies, and later on by non-governmental organisations.

Most aid actors are not primarily concerned with the question of whether to respond but how, where, when and for whom. Negotiating access, overcoming dangerous situations, reaching remote communities, are established part of the work. But in HIC, needs often exceed capacity. An aid actor in South Sudan said, 'We cannot aim to help everyone, like in other places. Here that will mean to help the whole country and beyond. We have to choose where we go and what we do.'

The main challenges are logistical complexity and obtaining funds for the costly activities. Solutions to access problems are often expensive and extra layers of logistics

7   Srikandini, A.G., D. Hilhorst and R. van Voorst (2018) Disaster Risk Governance in Indonesia and Myanmar: The Practice of Co-Governance. *Politics and Governance* (ISSN: 2183-2463) 2018, Volume 6, Issue 3, Pages 180-189
8   Hilhorst, D., Desportes, I., & de Miliano, C. Humanitarian governance and resilience building: Ethiopia in comparative perspective. *Disasters*, 43(S2) 2019: 109-131.

and costs need to be included, creating a 'logistics nightmare'.
The lack of safety of HIC scenarios is a major issue. Work must often be left paused or cancelled. Displacement also makes difficult to know much about the affected population in a specific locality.

The complexity of multi-actor governance systems and a lack of reliable knowledge about them hinders manoeuvring through them. The disconnection between the central and peripheral levels of governance creates a blurry governance map.

Aid actors also find themselves negotiating with non-state armed groups that control territory. National and international actors will usually seek to influence these negotiations: for example, international aid actors see them as an opportunity to pursue other agendas, like peacebuilding, by imposing conditions on aid, while local responders and beneficiaries also seek opportunities to pursue their interests.

In view of the complications with immediate disaster response, it is remarkable that actors do nevertheless pay attention to disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities. In South Sudan, a number of agencies try to maintain livelihood programmes that seek to make communities more resilient, also for drought and other disasters.

Two challenges stand out in these approaches. First, at the local implementation level, disaster response and DRR are affected by local-level social tensions or conflict. These local conflicts may or may not be informed by the conflict at large, but when they escalate they are more likely to get intertwined with larger violent conflicts. This makes conflict sensitivity of paramount importance. In Afghanistan, agencies are starting to adopt this approach, whereas in South Sudan they still work around conflict by avoiding areas where the larger conflict plays out.

Second, start-up processes are long and tedious and require careful networking and processes of gaining trust. This means that DRR and/or livelihood programmes need a longer timeline. It also results in a situation where agencies are not agile in responding to immediate needs or disasters outside of their area of implementation.

Low-intensity conflict: a balancing act
Many challenges in LICs are similar to those in HICs. A major difference is that in the LIC scenario, some conflict-induced challenges cannot be discussed or resolved openly. Given the lesser intensity of the conflict, it is easier for the disaster to overshadow conflict dynamics, which may tend to be ignored.

Access may be not so fundamentally restricted but may instead be regulated by checkpoints, blockades and separation walls, while in some areas it may be necessary to work with authorities associated with non-state armed groups. Barriers can be of legal and bureaucratic nature, such as strict rules applying to aid actors' registration, activity plans, data collection and dissemination practices and funding found in Ethiopia.

One significant finding is that disaster response can become the very conduit through which the conflict is played out. LIC can selectively increase vulnerability to disaster at a more pronounced level. The conflict fault-lines further exacerbate existing structural inequalities, affecting already marginalized communities. In Myanmar's Rakhine State, for instance, the government pushed for the 2015 cyclone relief to be distributed in terms of cash grants. These ended up in the hands of the local Buddhist elite, who unlike Muslim minorities are not structurally discriminated against with respect to operating local businesses.

In other cases, the state can directly marginalize population groups in the response, delegitimizing disaster victims as citizens as they are not deemed worthy of support.

Another finding is that disaster governance can be instrumentalized for political gain. In the LIC scenario, state and societal actors are especially likely both to seek to engage in disaster response and to contest each other's legitimacy, capacity and will to protect all disaster victims.

State sovereignty is loudly proclaimed in the LIC scenario, where state unity is perceived as under threat. The ever-present debate on interference of international actors is thus exacerbated.

Local actors will play a stronger role than in high-intensity conflict areas, where social networks and structures are destroyed or at least significantly altered. They know better than international actors how to navigate varying authority structures. In Myanmar for instance, civil society actors are well versed at the 'politics of silence' and other strategies which allow manoeuvring even in the smaller interstices left open by authoritarian state structures, building on decades of accumulated experience.

International disaster responders themselves face positioning difficulties. In strong sovereignty-asserting states, they are faced with a difficult dilemma: speak out and safeguard an independent humanitarian space, at the risk of being sidelined, or remain present and try to support communities in country whatever the compromises. Many organizations chose to self-censor in words and in actions. It follows that in the LIC scenario, state, societal and international disaster responders will thus not only be busy with the technicalities and governance of the actual response, but also managing how this response is perceived in local and international political contexts.

Post-conflict: room for manoeuvre in states of flux
Post-conflict politics both close and open windows in disaster response. Disasters usually create space for political contestation, but in a PC scenario this is even more complex as this space for negotiation coincides and affects ongoing institutional changes in the transitional period. While in the LIC scenario this tension is primarily seen in the negotiation and contestation between the state and its citizens, in a post-conflict scenario these power struggles are more clearly seen between the

different state institutions in charge of the disaster response. Different departments can use a disaster to engage in competition over authority, mandates, and financial control.

When the 2015 earthquake hit Nepal, a centralized state had just embarked on a process of decentralization. Local authorities and political parties on the village level used their power in aid allocation and distribution, both attracting aid to their preferred places and blocking aid by making it difficult for organizations to access other places, strengthening their legitimacy. The ambiguity between the central and district levels of governance also created a space for decisions to be taken at both levels irrespective of each other. While the transitional politics of the post-conflict scenario created confusion among various actors, it also opened space to manoeuvre, as aid agencies used the ambiguous authority to their advantage.

Struggles for legitimacy can combine with a high density of aid actors to result in aid actors by-passing coordination mechanisms. The struggle for legitimacy between the state and non-state actors is intense in post-conflict scenarios, where the state often depends on international aid, while also being responsible for the response.

Many post-conflict states are still dependent on external aid actors, whose agenda is in turn to shift the power to the local actors. Yet when the state pushes for stricter control, aid agencies manoeuvre around the state with their material resources to continue their response. International NGOs did this in Sierra Leone, where they continued direct implementation in response to the 2017 mudslides, despite government attempts to channel aid supplies through their own storage units.

While the discourse revolves around the (in)capacity of the state to legitimize their role, the space to manoeuvre has been created by the transitional power politics of the post-conflict institutions themselves.

Conclusions

Disasters shape conflict, as conflicts shape disaster, but linking the two without recognising the nuances of the type of conflict and disaster can result in ill-equipped policies and practices. Our analytical categorization of three types of conflict scenario, while not without overlaps, may help intervening actors to attune to specific challenges in their area of work.

In all three scenarios, disaster governance is complex and multi-layered, but the power and room for manoeuvre differs in each scenario.

In both LIC and PC scenarios, disasters have opened up political space for contestation of political power, with state and non-state actors renegotiating their power. Often humanitarian aid was the 'tool' or the medium through which these politics were played out. But while in the LIC scenario this tension is primarily seen in the negotiation and contestation between the state and its citizens, and state and interna-

tional actors, in a post-conflict scenario these power struggles are more clearly seen between the different institutions in charge of the disaster response.

In HIC scenarios the power struggles between actors involved in humanitarian governance were not so much on the level of disaster policies but in gaining access and then navigating power struggles at the local level. Because of the cost of operating in such environments, the financial power of humanitarian actors is a dominant factor in these scenarios in deciding who is included or excluded from services.

This research project is ongoing, with three more fieldwork studies in progress. Important new questions that emerge from this analysis, and can guide further research, are:
- How can disaster response take into account different types of conflict considering the different challenges and best practices that these entail?
- How can types of programmes that work well in specific contexts, such as adaptive management in HIC settings, be scaled up and/or used in other contexts?
- How can disaster response improve the effectiveness of aid within their rather limited room for manoeuvre and in the political structures in which they work?
- Should humanitarian actors take a more proactive approach towards non-state authorities as well as 'new' actors in the aid field, most particularly private sector actors, and if so, how?

More information

- Find the project details here.
- For more information, please contact the author at hilhorst@iss.nl.