Using disaster response to the 2017 Mocoa mudslide to build legitimacy in the post-Acuerdo de Paz context

Erin Kuipers

RESEARCH BRIEF #9

WHEN DISASTER MEETS CONFLICT

Key messages

- The post-conflict political context significantly affected the composition of the humanitarian response. The Colombian government, local authorities, NGOs and international actors all had an interest in asserting their legitimacy as responders. In particular, the government was attempting to regain and reaffirm its authority, while the international community also saw an opportunity to legitimize their continued presence.

- A strained relationship between the state and international humanitarian actors negatively affected the collaboration between actors and coordination of the response. State and non-state actors contested each other's legitimacy, with state officials saying international actors should take a back seat and many non-state actors accusing the state of failing to meet its responsibilities. As a result, parallel coordination structures were set up, leading to deficiencies in the response.

- The competition between the state and non-state response diminished the role of the smaller local actors. Many local non-state actors felt ignored and many resented the marginalisation of local authorities' role.

- The parallel institutional set-up came at the expense of the local population. Issues included duplication, exclusion and shortcomings in camp management.

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.

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Disaster response in a post-conflict scenario

In post-conflict settings, at least two conflicting parties have reached a political settlement either formally or informally. The post-conflict period is characterized by social and political changes and a focus on statebuilding by the international aid actors. However, tensions still linger, as settlements are often unstable and exclude certain parties, and the risk of resuming crises continues.

Post-conflict settings often experience challenges in the capacity or willingness to provide basic services for all their citizens. Therefore, international aid emphasizes the importance of promoting institutional reforms, especially since governance structures are considered part of the conflict drivers. The emphasis of aid turns to statebuilding, and disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies and practices typically revolve around the state. In the international community, the 'fragile states' discourse is closely related to how post-conflict states are perceived.

Disaster response in a post-conflict environment faces particular challenges due to the transitional nature of this period, the weaker capacity of the state to respond, and the strong presence and influence of non-state actors in disaster governance. As DRR frameworks centre around the state, non-state actors continuously balance the state's capacity and direction of the response, their support to the state and their own approaches. These elements can and do create tensions within the response. State institutions often find it difficult to monitor compliance and initiate more measures of control, translating into slow bureaucracy that can impede the response.

Aerial view of the flood damage. Source: Luis Robayo/AFP.

Introduction

In the early morning of 1 April 2017, the city of Mocoa suffered a catastrophic mudslide when torrential rains caused the rivers Mocoa, Mulato and Sangoyaco to burst their banks and release a massive flow of water, mud and rocks onto the city. What followed was the destruction of half the city, wiping out entire neighbourhoods. Although numbers differ slightly across institutions, official reports record 332 deaths, with 398 injured, and 1,462 houses and more than 22,000 people affected.[1]

The response was generally described by participants in our research as very challenging, despite the considerable capacity and resources dedicated to it, and its governance was characterized by parallel coordination by two sets of actors.

The political context in which the response took place strongly influenced the decisions diverse disaster response actors took, and how they engaged with each other. The disaster occurred months after the historic peace agreement (*Acuerdo de Paz*) signed on 24 November 2016, which formally ending over 40 years of civil conflict between the government and the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*). The peace remained fragile, however, which explains why research participants referred to the post-2016 as 'post-*acuerdo*' rather than 'post-conflict'.

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1   Data sourced from internal evaluation reports from the Colombia Humanitarian team (2017) and the National Disaster Risk Management Unit (2017).

This brief is based on research that focused on the co-governance of the 2017 Mocoa mudslide response by state, societal and humanitarian actors in this particular context.

This research addressed the following questions:
- How did the state, non-state actors and humanitarian agencies perceive the humanitarian crisis?
- How did the state, non-state actors and humanitarian agencies socially negotiate disaster response?
- How were institutional power, legitimacy and partnerships between the humanitarian actors affected by the humanitarian crisis?

Risk and disasters in Colombia

Colombia is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Due to its diverse geography, Colombia is subject to earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, floods and landslides. The World Bank reports an exposure level distribution of 86% of the population exposed to high and medium seismic activity, 28% to high flooding and 31% to high and medium landslide hazards. Environmental deterioration due to human intervention has resulted in increased hazards from floods, landslides and mudslides.[2]

Over the years Colombia has also experienced a number of high-profile natural disasters. The 2011 rainy season was marked by extensive flooding and landslides which threatened over 70% of the country,[3] made international headlines and led to the declaration of a national state of emergency. In February 2018, heavy rain and flooding occurred in the department of Nariño, affecting over 25,000 people.

Interconnections between conflict and natural disaster are many. Both the civil war and the 'war on drugs' have led to large-scale population displacement. Many people have been forced to migrate to areas particularly exposed to hazards and to live in conditions that make them highly vulnerable to disaster and violence. The majority of internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been marginalized groups such as children, Afro-Colombians and poor women.

The case of Mocoa

These disaster and conflict dynamics are very much present in Mocoa. Its location in the Amazon basin amid a confluence of rivers puts Mocoa at high risk of natural hazards, but the city has also had to deal with the pressure of unplanned urbanization. In

less than 20 years, the population of Mocoa has grown from 43,000 to 101,000, with many of the newcomers fleeing violence and seeking protection from the civil conflict. A shortage of housing and lack of regulations led many people to build informal settlements near the river bank.

The Putumayo department, of which Mocoa is the capital city, is one of the poorest departments in Colombia, and has been heavily marked by the armed conflict. Since 1982 the FARC has been present in the Putumayo region, especially in Mocoa's neighbouring municipalities and occasionally in the town itself. Although the FARC left Putumayo in 2012, the spaces they have left behind have been occupied by other armed groups that are profiting from the drug trafficking business. Owing to lack of economic or educational opportunities in the region, many people in the rural periphery earn their money through coca production. Mocoa and its surrounding region are said to have two kinds of participants in the conflict: those who take part actively (rebels and paramilitaries), and those who take part passively (the coca farmers).

Due to the large population of IDPs, Mocoa has become home to a large number of United Nations agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) as well as local Mocoa-based NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs). Most organizations run projects promoting human rights, peace and justice, and many have been working in the war-affected rural areas, focusing their efforts on working with the displaced populations, land restitution and community strengthening. Because of their long-term and community-based projects, they have built relations of trust with the community, operating independently of the local government structures.

Methods

The paper builds on four months of fieldwork conducted in Bogotá between September and December 2017, plus a 10-day field visit to Mocoa to obtain direct insight into the context and views of community members and Mocoa-based NGOs. The aim was to understand broader post-acuerdo dynamics as well as the Mocoa disaster response process and its activities, collaborations, decision-making processes, challenges and opportunities. Following an identification of key actors via reports and referral sampling, in-depth, individual qualitative interviews were conducted in English or Spanish with 26 disaster response actors, aiming to cover all key actor types.

Main findings on disaster response challenges in conflict-affected Mocoa

In April 2017, massive floods and landslides in Mocoa made international headlines as one of the worst natural disasters in Colombia in recent years. The largest proportion of the flood victims were IDPs[4]. Almost half of those affected by the floods were

2   Campos Garcia, Ana; Costa, Carlos R.; Diaz, Carolina G.; Dickson, Eric; Holm-Nielsen, Niels B.; Ramirez Cortes, Fernando; Rubiano Vargas, Diana Marcela. 2011. *Analysis of disaster risk management in Colombia a contribution to the creation of public policies* (Vol. 2) : Main report (English). Washington DC : World Bank. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/658361468018050201/Main-report
3   http://floodlist.com/tag/colombia

4   Data sourced from internal evaluation reports from the Colombia Humanitarian team (2017) and the National Disaster Risk Management Unit (2017).

also impacted by the armed conflict, and referred to as *doble afectadas*, i.e. 'doubly affected' by both the conflict and disaster.

A wide variety of local, national, international, state and non-state actors came to Mocoa's aid. The National Committee for Disaster Management – consisting of approximately ten different institutions – was almost mobilized from Bogotá and arrived in Mocoa the very next day. At the same time, an array of international organizations and UN agencies left their Bogotá country offices and made their way to Mocoa to reinforce the already strong local presence of international aid actors and smaller local non-state actors.

1. **The post-conflict political context significantly affected the composition of the humanitarian response.**

   - The composition of the humanitarian response was determined not so much by mandates as by **self-perceived legitimacies**. All actors considered their involvement in the response legitimate, putting forward various reasons:
     - Not only did the National Committee for Disaster Management see itself as mandated to respond and felt it had sufficient expert knowledge and capacity to organize the response independently, but the **Colombian state more broadly was seeking to strengthen its commitment to restoring its relationship with its citizens and building peace** in formerly FARC-dominated areas and tackling the issues of political exclusion and socio-economic disparities that had been at the root of the conflict. As a consequence, the state tended to keep international actors, including the UN, at a distance. On the night of the disaster, Bogotá mobilized a response consisting of an wide range of different national units, all under the umbrella of the National Committee. These included the National Disaster Risk Management Unit (UNGRD), the National Fire Department, National Police, Civil Defence, units of the Colombian army, the Unit for Comprehensive Victim Support and Reparation (UARIV), and various ministries, as well as independent institutions the Colombian Red Cross and the Ombudsman's Office (*Defensoría del Pueblo*).
     - Law 1523 states that **local authorities have primary responsibility for disaster management policies and implementation**, but following the mudslide it became clear very quickly that the magnitude of the disaster surpassed local governmental authorities' capacity. Although emergency protocols had been in place which set out specific roles for local actors in particular, they proved to be non-functional in the moment of truth.
     - Mocoa has long accommodated many locally rooted **NGOs**, such as *Alianza de Mujeres Tejedoras*, the indigenous organization OZIP, *Casa Amazonia*, and local diocese. With their local knowledge and experience, they felt capable of addressing the needs of the people and participating in the response. Additionally, saw themselves as brokers between communities and the state.
     - International actors put forward many reasons for taking a lead role in the

response. Some used the humanitarian mandate to legitimize their involvement, stating that they had a moral obligation to respond. Others claimed that, although they did not have a specific emergency response objective, in the urgency of the situation made their knowledge and experience critical. Some considered it their responsibility to help because of their long-standing presence in Mocoa and the region. Even though many of them did not work in disaster risk management, they felt they had a responsibility to help the community members with whom they felt they had developed a 'bond of trust'.

2. **A strained relationship between the state and international humanitarian actors negatively affected the collaboration between actors and coordination of the response.**

   - Both state and non-state actors **contested each other's legitimacy** in the response.
     - State officials said that the international organizations should have taken more of a backseat in the response because the country was 'already in the processes of peace' and therefore no longer in need of international humanitarian assistance.
     - By contrast, many international actors condemned the approach the national government had taken in the response, claiming it reflected a lack of knowledge of what the population needed. Most non-state actors indicated that, by favouring material aid over psychosocial aid, the National Committee had neglected the 'human factor' and failed to meet its responsibility as moral actor.

   - As a result of their strenuous relationship, the state and international humanitarian actors each set up their own response and organized themselves into **parallel coordination mechanisms**.
     - The national government set up a unified command post (*Puesto de Mando Unificado* – PMU) for decision-making and information-sharing between different governmental actors. Participation was mostly restricted to national government institutions and specialized agencies. Only one UN representative was allowed to participate in the meetings and could share only limited information with other international agencies.
     - The influx of international aid actors from Bogotá and Pasto added significant capacity and resources to the already strong presence of international aid actors in Mocoa. This led to the activation of a local coordination team (LCT), creating a formal space for coordination between UN agencies and NGOs affiliated with the cluster system. The UNHCR took the lead as the largest organization in Mocoa.

   - Having parallel coordination mechanisms led to exclusion, most importantly with respect to information. For example, information collected by the state was shared within the PMU and only sometimes and reluctantly shared with

the international community. Only the UNHCR, as official conduit for LCT, was allowed to receive the information and share a limited part of it with the rest of the international agencies.

3. **The competition between the state and non-state response diminished the role of the smaller local actors.**

- Many local non-state actors felt they had been ignored in the coordination of the response and that they were not strong enough to have a voice in the decision-making processes within the two larger response blocs.

- Some local NGOs joined the ranks of the LCT. Although one local NGO indicated they preferred to stay out of the 'UN circus', they also admitted that being part of it was necessary in order to prove their relevance to donors and other actors in the field. Other NGOs preferred to work at the margins of the humanitarian arena, trying to complement aid in places where needs had not been sufficiently met by either the national or international response.

- The national government was widely criticized from all sides, including the local community, for side-lining local government in the response and thus deviating from Law 1523. As a community participant said (05-12-2017), *'Our governor and our mayor were marginalised. Everything was directed at the national level, which does not adhere to the law because the law is very clear and says that it is the mayor who must assume responsibility for directing the reconstruction plan. But our leader pitifully dedicated himself only to repeat what the National Government said.'*

4. **The parallel institutional set-up came at the expense of the local population.**

- **Issues of duplication** were reported as being a major challenge, for example with **parallel needs assessments** by both the LCT and the National Committee which resulted in repeated visits from different organizations, to the frustration of the local community. Additionally, aid was often delivered to the same families twice, while others were left without assistance.

- Management of the 13 temporary shelter camps was divided between the national committee and the LCT: nine formal shelter camps were under the management of the government, while four additional informal shelter camps were assisted by the LCT. **The parallel management of shelter camps and overall shortcomings in camp management** led to deficiencies and confusion.
  - Disaster victims were sometimes dismissed from one camp because they fell under the responsibility of another. People were 'led from pillar to post', often confused where they could go to get the aid they wanted. People often did not know whom to turn to for assistance or where to direct any questions or complaints.

- Shortcomings in camp management meant that disaster-affected people regularly suffered from inconsistent and insufficient provision of food and water and hygiene facilities. People were randomly allocated to mixed-gender tents and separated from family members.
- Within the shelter camp managed by the Colombian military, the presence of soldiers and the random placement of people resulted in a lot of gender-based violence, especially for young girls. One example was that the shower facilities did not provide much privacy, which resulted in a high risk of young girls being harassed and assaulted in the showers.

- Community members indicated they felt excluded from decision-making processes and generally left out of the loop about what happened around them. In their interactions with the governmental response system, community representatives felt unwanted and not taken seriously. As one community participant said (06-12-2017): *'Participation in Colombia is not easy. Sometimes they think that we are a pebble in the shoe, that we oppose, that we are the toads.'*

- The result was deepened community mistrust of the government and perceptions of corruption and unfulfilled promises. They were angry at the national government for not upholding Law 1523 on local government decision-making, and felt that the National Committee had taken over leadership from those who should have been the rightful community 'bosses' (05-12-2017).

- While interviews with affected community members supported the long-present international actors' claim to have a degree of local credibility and trust, people were somewhat ambivalent about the relationship. In response to the questions 'who helped you?' and 'which organisations did you see?', most community respondents had to be explicitly asked about the role of the international actors, after which displayed a mildly positive attitude towards these actors but indicated minimal interaction.

Conclusion

- The case study of the Mocoa floods highlights the political environment in which the disaster response took place and emphasizes the notion that resources and capacity alone were insufficient to provide an adequate response. The main findings of this research are especially relevant for the recent paradigm shift which calls for a broader understanding and purpose of humanitarianism that reconsiders the boundaries between humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding.

- While assisting disaster-affected people, both state and international actors also pursued their own objectives. By claiming a strong and authoritative role in the disaster response, the national government attempted to regain and reaffirm its authority, not just to the local community but also to the international aid commu-

nity. In turn, the international community also saw the disaster as an opportunity to legitimize their continued presence in post-*acuerdo* Colombia.

- The Colombian government recognized the potential of the disaster response to address complementary development and peacebuilding goals, yet failed to strengthen its trust and legitimacy among the local population. This has implications for the way disaster response is conducted in post-conflict states: if governments do not balance the objectives of statebuilding and meeting humanitarian needs, both are undermined.

- There is a key role for the local government to bridge the elements of development, peacebuilding and the humanitarian response; though absent in terms of capacity and resources, the legitimacy of local government prevailed in the eyes of the disaster victims.

- Better integration and inclusion of all actors within the response would have enabled the national government to make use of the capabilities of non-state actors, such as local knowledge and networks, and thereby better achieve its humanitarian and statebuilding objectives.

- For non-state actors, it important to continue to engage with the different state structures involved the response and complement or support the statebuilding objectives of the national government. This is especially true in post-conflict contexts, where the strengthening of state institutions and capacities are important to long-term growth and stability.

More information

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