# SIERRA LEONE

# Localizing disaster response in a post-conflict setting

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WHEN DISASTER MEETS CONFLICT

## Key messages

- In Sierra Leone's post-conflict and post-Ebola setting, **institutional volatility created space for competition between state institutions** in the response to the 2017 mudslide and floods, causing delays.

- **Some donors were able to steer the state-led response**, partly because of the lack of institutional clarity in the state-led response. After initial mistrust subsided a co-governed response evolved with the government in the lead.

- In a country with a recent history of conflict and contested authority, including cleavages between local and national levels, **the state's presence at the community level negatively affected communities' perceptions.** Chiefs felt marginalised by state 'encroachment' and the registration process was especially difficult. Aid actors could help by strengthening the capacities of state institutions and chiefs and mediating between state and local authorities, including both in their response strategies.

- Following from this, **the localization of humanitarian aid requires unpacking what the local means** and understanding the state at different levels.

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## 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.

## 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.



*IDPs in the makeshift camps in Mortomai. Source: Samantha Melis*

## Introduction

On 14 August 2017, after days of incessant rain, the top of a mountain in the Regent Area of Freetown in Sierra Leone broke and plunged down, causing a mud flow and flash floods that killed more than 1000 people and left thousands more homeless. The disaster struck a country that was still recovering from Ebola and a prolonged civil war. This brief is based on research that closely followed the response in real time. It focuses on the politics of disaster governance at the national level – the interplay of different ministries, civil society and international donors – as well as the response in the communities. The research took special interest in the way in which the international aid policy of 'localization' was translated in this response.

The research for this brief lasted four months and focused on the co-governance of the response wherein different state and non-state actors negotiated and offered aid to affected communities. (The flooding in Culvert and Dwarzak is not part of this research.)

This research aimed to address the following questions:
- How did state, aid and societal responders negotiate a state-led response in Sierra Leone after the 2017 mudslide?
- How did the response affect the legitimacy and institutional capacity of the state?
- How did the post-conflict context impact the response?
- What does this mean for the governance of disaster response in post-conflict settings?

## Context

Sierra Leone can be considered a post-conflict, post-colonial, and post-disaster country. All these 'posts' impact the current socio-political climate. When the civil war started in 1991, the political landscape was divided, with the two major political parties, the Sierra Leone's People Party and the All People's Congress, involved in coups and power struggles. After the peace agreement in 1999 and cessation of violence in 2002, institutional reforms and reconciliation processes were introduced but core vulnerabilities have not yet been fully addressed.

These vulnerabilities were the product of another 'post' period. After independence in 1961, Sierra Leone's post-colonial period came to be characterized by tensions between different formal and informal state institutions, by economic crises and patriarchal power structures that marginalized young people.

Another period that affected the social, political and economic state in Sierra Leone was the Ebola crisis and its aftermath. After the outbreak that ended in 2016, post-disaster lessons were learned in terms of the collaboration between government and international partners and the importance of the communities' role in disaster management.

## Disasters and risks

In 2018, Sierra Leone is ranked as the eighth most vulnerable country to adverse climate change effects[1] and it is prone to floods, landslides, droughts, epidemics, coastal erosion, sea level rise and storms. The Western Area, where Freetown is located, is especially exposed to landslides (causing 42% of national geophysical mortalities between 1990 and 2014), while floods occur all over the country (affecting over 220,000 people and killing 145 between 1980 and 2010).[2]

Exposure to such hazards is relatively low: it is the vulnerability of Sierra Leone's population to them that is high. Urbanization, which is partly a consequence of the civil war as people from the rural areas sought refuge in Freetown, has contributed to precarious settlement constructions in river beds and along the steep, deforested hills.

In 2004, the National Disaster Management Department was established in the Office of National Security (ONS) to focus on DRR, and a National Disaster Preparedness and Response Plan was created. The ONS is in charge of the coordination of disaster risk preparedness and response, and works together with other state departments, ministries and (international) partners.

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1    Eckstein, D., Hutfils, M.-L., & Winges, M. *Global Climate Risk Index 2019: Who Suffers Most From Extreme Weather Events? Weather-related loss events in 2017 and 1998 to 2017*. Bonn: Germanwatch, 2018
2    See the Hazard and Risk Profile Information System – Sierra Leone: www.harpis-sl.website

## Sierra Leone's response in the context of localization

Global commitments to the localization of humanitarian aid emerged in the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the subsequent 'Grand Bargain' between donors and humanitarian aid organizations. In post-conflict countries such as Sierra Leone, localization becomes even more important as it is connected to the reinforcement of capacities of national and local actors and becomes part of the long-term social and political reconstruction and development processes.

There is great potential for a more locally led response, with many international partners available to offer support to national and local structures. However, the power of national and local actors to negotiate within the response may be limited in practice. The complex relationships between national and local actors, often affected by the conflict history, create a complicated context for international actors to navigate. In Sierra Leone, national-level competition and a contentious relationship between the national state and local actors were exacerbated in the response.

## Methods

Fieldwork was conducted between mid-September 2017 and mid-January 2018 and consisted of 88 semi-structured interviews with 19 state representatives, 11 national and 28 international aid actors and 30 community members, volunteers and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Of the 19 state interviewed representatives, four were community chiefs, nine were ONS officials and eight belonged to other ministries or response pillars. As the response was still on-going, the access to the state representatives who were in charge is especially valuable, as there is a high turnover in these offices.

Additionally, four focus group discussions were held with community stakeholders in Mortomai, Bangbaila, Kamayama and Pentagon. The researcher also attended a high-level 'lessons learned' event. The transcriptions were thematically coded in NVivo.

## Main findings

Immediately after the August 2017 mudslide, the government proclaimed an emergency and requested the support of national and international partners. The response was organized quickly and community leaders played a vital role. However, as in any response, there were a number of challenges.

- Although the registration of affected people was quickly set up by the state, it did not capture all affected people. Many community members felt they were left out; the state organized verification rounds and a new registration period.
- The IDP camps were set up after initial emergency response centres in the commu-

nities. However, the operational period and capacity was limited and the selection criteria for access to the camps were not clear to the community members, leading to rumours of fraud.

- Additional camps were organized by the community in Regent. As Camp 1 was most visible, some aid agencies concentrated on that camp, under the impression that aid would get redistributed to Camps 2-4. In practice, Camp 1 leaders did not always do this.
- Humanitarian and recovery cash transfers were allocated to the registered affected people and proved to be an effective way to localize the response. However, there were delays and people did not view the amount as sufficient to find new housing.
- Aid donated to state responders was kept in storage facilities run by the Army and ONS. To access the goods in the facilities, responders had to be approved by a fiduciary agency. This increased accountability but often delayed the release of goods and frustrated the Army officials.

International partners supported a state-led response. State institutions took full responsibility for the coordination and response. This shows how localization on a national level can succeed in a post-conflict setting. There are also lessons to be learned for future responses in post-conflict and/or weaker institutional settings.

## 1. Institutional volatility and hierarchical governance structures created space for competition between state institutions, leading to delays in the response

- New social and security institutions, such as the ONS, the Ministry of Social Welfare and the National Commission for Social Action (NaCSA), were created after the war and grew in institutional capacity over the years. In the response, however, these different state institutions were divided, complicating DRR policies. They all sought to increase their role, especially with respect to the registration process. After the authority of the Ministry of Social Welfare as the lead institution for registration was established, the division in tasks and responsibilities became clearer. Yet contestation continued in relation to the speed of registration and disputes over who had been included.

- While the response pillars were set up quickly thanks to their institutionalization during the Ebola crisis, the intra-state institutional challenges were also found in the inter-pillar collaboration, where coordination was sometimes difficult between the pillar leads and the ONS. As the disaster response differed from the health-focused Ebola response, these institutions had to renegotiate their authority, roles and activities. This inevitably slowed the response.

- With the help of an international donor, the decision-making structures were clarified, but strong hierarchical governance and miscommunication delayed decision-making. Large international donors had more influence than national



*A community chief in the affected area. Source: Samantha Melis*

institutions on the higher state levels. This is important to note when different non-state actors want to negotiate with the state as more could be accomplished through collaboration between the different non-state actors.

- Strong accountability measures were effected, which was a major lesson from the Ebola crisis. In particular, a fiduciary agency was appointed to deal with the funds and disbursements. Although this was a crucial condition for success and collaboration, it increased bureaucracy to a point where daily activities were at times impeded. Some pillars and camp managers experienced delays in getting access to the storage facilities.

- Non-state actors were sometimes able to mediate intra-state tensions. At the camp level, one aid agency was involved in the discussion over the division of responsibilities between ONS and NaCSA. Thanks to the support of another agency, the Ministry of Social Welfare was able to improve the registration process.

2. **The voices of non-state responders had different weights in the response. Within the state-led response, some donors were able to steer response outcomes, such as the implementation of the cash transfers**

- An initial lack of clarity in the response and the institutions in charge created room for non-state and international actors to co-define the parameters of the response. A co-governed response evolved with the government in the lead but significantly influenced by the international community.

- Relationships improved over the response period. In the beginning, the inter-action between the state and international actors was marred by mistrust, but over the course of the response disputes were mostly settled and stronger relationships developed.

- Although the response was state-led, larger donors were able to strongly influ-ence certain outcomes. This was especially seen in the cash transfers. A first proposal to advance cash transfers from the working group of state institutions and international agencies was turned down by the president. After mediation by a high-ranking diplomat, this decision was reversed.

- While the state preferred cash payment, mobile transfers were a condition for funding due to accountability checks. After a second round of registration and additional need for cash transfers, the initial international donor did not contin-ue because of the lack of transparency in the process. The state found another Sierra Leonean donor organization and implemented the transfers with cash payments. This enabled them to set up the transfers more quickly without the mobile company and was preferred by the communities.

3. **The state's presence at the community level limited the role of the chiefs and**
   **affected communities' perceptions of the state**

- Competition between different state institutions spilled over into the local gov-ernance systems. After the mudslide and floods, the chiefs started the registra-tion process and felt bypassed when the state institutions took over. Rumours of corruption arose on both sides. The state representatives present were not seen as part of the communities, in a context where all actors reiterated that 'the community knows best'.

- Chiefs who were able to better connect to aid agencies, the state representa-tives and young people of the community were more appreciated by the com-munity members, which increased their authority. Where chiefs were not able to mediate between the different actors, their authority was more limited. In one community, amid accusations of corruption and a tense relationship be-tween one of the chiefs and a state representative, a community committee

took over the mediating role in the response. In a neighbouring community, by contrast, the chief's role was celebrated by community members, aid agencies and state representatives.

- Co-defining the conditions of the response, the chiefs and community stakehold-ers successfully advocated an extended registration period through the media and in a communal meeting with the ONS. However, they would have liked to have seen more inclusion of the chiefs and stakeholders in the state's response.

- The community perceptions of the state were more negative where the regis-tration process was contested: in the two IDP camps run by ONS, management was believed to be corrupt, fraudulent, violent and/or collaborating with security forces against IDPs. Protesting IDPs who went to the president's office to petition for change were blocked by the security forces and several were injured. Many affected people felt they could not express criticism for fear of being excluded from the camp.

- In the unofficial camps in Mortomai, IDPs felt left out. They mainly organized themselves, but the distribution of relief and food items over the camps was seen as unfair. The chief was implicated in rumours of providing that aid to his partisans, but their frustration was again directed towards the state and the registration process.

## Conclusion

The main findings from Sierra Leone are relevant to other post-conflict settings where a large influx of aid actors complicates governance, institutional changes are frequent and politicized, and the capacity of the state to respond to high-impact disasters is limited. The case also suggests a new way to look at localization challenges, with a focus on the multiple local levels.

The case shows that the localization requires unpacking what the local means – not only on the level of NGOs or community-based organizations, but also on the different levels of the state and the relationships between them. The state is not a homogenous entity and when it is divided at the national level and tensions exist between local and national authorities, this creates additional challenges for the response.

- The lessons from the Ebola response regarding accountability were applied. This ensured improved state accountability and responsibility, while the close relation-ships that were formed on a pillar level between state and non-state actors were also valuable. However, it also created challenges as the ONS was less involved in the Ebola crisis and needed to re-establish its authority in the 2017 disaster re-sponse.

- The most sensitive issue in the response did not concern the type of services and aid provided, but the question of who was included. The registration process led to a lot of controversy at both national and local levels. The response to the 2015 floods provided a precedent and lessons for the mudslide response as it was also centrally coordinated by the state, but the registration process was also a contested issue in 2015. Therefore, aid agencies involved in this process should focus on training and capacity strengthening for state institutions before a disaster to enable a more accurate and efficient process. This would be a cornerstone for a locally led response in a post-conflict scenario.

- Institutional volatility and hierarchical governance delayed the response but ultimately strengthened the authority of the responsible state institutions. International actors working on preparedness should support the state in strengthening these institutions and help build the state's capacity to lead the response locally. A separate disaster management institution could help further strengthen the authority of the coordinating bodies.

- Negotiations between state and non-state actors over the governance of the response, as seen in the case of cash transfers, can both strengthen and weaken state authority in different ways. The collaboration led to more accountability but also caused cash transfers to be delayed. Therefore, planning and preparing these collaborations with other actors, such as mobile phone companies, and training state officers in the use of different approaches, such as digital databases for the registration of affected people, is an important aspect of disaster preparedness.

- While authority lay with the state, the resources needed for the response were still mainly concentrated with the non-state actors, with the exception of the aid items in storage. The cash transfers went from the donor to an implementing partner to the affected people. If the state became a direct partner, this could enhance their capacity to take up cash transfers more efficiently in the future and strengthen a localized response.

- This case shows the importance of understanding the state at different levels in the localization debate. A cleavage between local and national levels can do harm in the long term, especially when this is exacerbated by the response. The inclusion of local authorities such as chiefs is important, not only in aid agencies' projects but also by state actors (especially given that governance challenges such as these contributed to the past conflict). Aid agencies can play a mediating role in this, including different state levels in their response.

- The post-conflict environment was particularly evident in the relationships between the state and the communities. The state encroachment that the communities perceived was partly due to the historical cleavage that exists. This disconnect could be bridged by the state further building the capacities of the chiefs. Non-state actors collaborating with both the local and national states could diminish some of the tensions and support a response on multiple levels.

## More information

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