

Disaster Risk Reduction in a high-conflict setting

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RESEARCH BRIEF #6

Key messages

- Afghanistan's institutional set-up for disaster-risk reduction (DRR) is not reflected on the ground, where it is deemed too difficult, so DRR activities are mainly funded by international aid actors. **DRR faces a wide range of operational issues, meaning projects that work in or on conflict require lengthy preparation and implementation time.**
- Conflict impedes DRR at all levels, while DRR can create or exacerbate conflict at the community level. However, **some recent DRR projects have sought to work on conflict and address it directly.** The current focus of DRR in relation to conflict is to do no harm. In practice, however, this often requires working on conflicts – namely, those conflicts that may evolve (directly or indirectly) from the everyday politics of DRR projects in interaction with the wider political economy.
- **The focus tends to be on Afghanistan's macro conflict whereas local-level manifestations of conflict, which may or may not relate to the main conflict, may be much more important** for the development of appropriate DRR policies, financial schemes and programme implementation.
- To advance on current efforts to develop DRR in the country, especially with a conflict-sensitive approach, it is important first **to recognize the relevance of micro and meso conflict and urbanization, and second to strengthen DRR efforts with a specific HIC lens while remaining cognizant of developments within the field of DRR.**

WHEN
DISASTER
MEETS
CONFLICT

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 high-intensity conflict scenario

In high-intensity conflicts (HICs), violence occurs on a large scale, and the authorities have a high level of involvement in the conflict. HIC usually represent specific moments in a protracted crisis, developing out of or leading to low conflict or post-conflict periods. National and local governments and authorities have reduced or no effective control over at least part of the country, generating a high level of state fragility. Due to the level of violence, casualties most often exceed a thousand and the provision of goods and essential services is irregular, reduced or non-existent in some areas of the territory.

Disasters in areas of HIC have a major impact on local populations and their institutions. They are often impoverished and vulnerable after years of stagnating development and state negligence and are then further challenged by the multiple jeopardies of conflict and disaster. HIC countries usually have large population movements and (internal) migrants are even more vulnerable to disaster.

There are many challenges for disaster management and humanitarian aid in these scenarios. The most obvious include insecurity, reduced access, and the difficulties of reaching people in need. The role of the state is problematic and the humanitarian principles are crucial in these areas. Nonetheless, we also see disaster risk reduction (DRR) programmes happening in HIC scenarios, although these also know specific challenges.



Drought in Afghanistan. Source: Rodrigo Mena

Introduction¹

Afghanistan has been beset by recurring high levels of conflict since the late 1970s. It is also exposed to multiple social and natural hazards, which makes it very disaster-prone. Over the last three decades, nearly all of its 34 provinces have been affected by at least one major disaster², including earthquakes, landslides, avalanches, drought, storms and floods.

When preparing research on disaster response in Afghanistan, we were struck by the fact that despite a general idea that disaster risk reduction (DRR) cannot be done in areas of high conflict, there were in fact many DRR initiatives in the country. Our study in South Sudan, for example, found relevant livelihood approaches that could be considered as DRR but which were framed in other ways. This, then, became the special focus of the case study on Afghanistan.

There are many reasons to promote DRR in areas beset by conflict: reducing mortality rates in disaster-prone areas, reducing the costs of post-disaster health treatment, reducing hunger and malnutrition, enhancing coordination and cooperation between multiple stakeholders, reducing deforestation and green-house emissions, and im-

¹ This brief draws on fieldwork for the project 'When disaster meets conflict'. It is based on a report written as part of the project 'When disasters and conflict collide: uncovering the truth', a collaboration between the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Additional fieldwork for this project was done in December 2018.

² NEPA and UNEP. *Climate Change and Governance in Afghanistan*. Kabul: National Environmental Protection Agency, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and United Nations Environment Programme, 2015.

proving or restore water and soil conservation. DRR can also be used to address climate change causes and effects, and facilitate climate change adaptation.³

The research aimed to address the following questions:

- How did DRR become a priority in conflict-affected Afghanistan?
- How is DRR implemented in Afghanistan?
- What are the main challenges of the implementation of DRR projects, and how are these challenges been overcome?
- How have DRR projects changed and adapted during the time to the local and national context?

Context

Afghanistan is a prime example of a multi-hazard landscape, with social, political and ecological hazards rooted in its volatile recent history. Disasters related to natural hazards affect over 200,000 people per year on average and have since 1980 resulted in over 20,000 casualties per year, making it the country with the second highest fatality rate related to disasters worldwide.⁴

One of the main factors contributing to the disaster proneness of the country is its protracted social conflict and crisis. More than 30 years of conflict and war has resulted in low levels of socio-economic development, weakened coping mechanisms, reduced disaster risk management efforts, weak levels of governance, and reduced capacities to recover and build resilience. Afghanistan also presents a fragile system of governance, with high levels of corruption and a low level of human development. The geography of the country makes it disaster-prone. Cold winters lead to landslides, avalanches and floods around the mountainous regions, while hot, dry summers produce drought conditions in vast areas of the country. Climate change is likely to lead to more frequent or severe climatic events.

Different levels of conflict: working around, in and on conflict

Conflicts occur at the macro, meso and micro level in Afghanistan. Across the country, the Taliban insurgency against the government continues, but there are also overlapping conflicts at the provincial level involving the presence of warlords and other armed opposition groups and at the community level between competing local elites, often relating to access to and management of land and water. While these conflicts have their own dynamics, these are affected by conflict at other levels.⁵

³ FAO. *Benefits of farm level disaster risk reduction practices in agriculture*. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2017; Kelman, I. *Natural Disasters Do Not Exist (Natural Hazards Do Not Exist Either)* Version 3, 9 July 2010; Kenny, C. Disaster risk reduction in developing countries: costs, benefits and institutions. *Disasters* 36(4) 2012: 559-588 (DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7717.2012.01275.x.); Twigg, J. *Disaster Risk Reduction*. Good Practice Review 9. London: Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, 2015.

⁴ GFDRR. *Disaster Risk Profile: Afghanistan*. Washington DC: World Bank, Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery, 2017.

⁵ See Kalyvas, S. *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

In analysing DRR interventions, we took into account the question of whether programmes aim to work *in*, *on* or *around* the conflict.⁶ Working around conflict means that projects avoid conflict areas; in conflict means that they work in conflict areas and aim to be conflict sensitive and avoid doing harm; whereas working on conflict means that there is an ambition to use DRR to address the conflict and its causes, seeking to solve or modify its dynamics.

The institutional and regulatory landscape for DRR

The main national institutional framework for disaster management in Afghanistan comprises the High Commission of Disaster Management (HCDM) and the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA). The institution has a mandate to coordinate all disaster management aspects in the country, from disaster mitigation to preparedness and response. Alongside the ANDMA's National Office, the authority has 37 provincial offices that coordinate with Provincial Disaster Management Committees (PDMCs) and District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs).

At the community level, the existence of Community Development Councils (CDCs) is highlighted, which, in coordination with *shuras*⁷ and other relevant community committees (mosques, schools, elders or their figures such as the *mullahs* [religious leaders] and *maliks* [village representatives]), are the main links between civil society (including NGOs), the government and UN agencies.

When it comes to DRR, the ANDMA has a Mitigation, Prevention and DRR department working on the law and role of institutions in DRR. The ANDMA acts as the focal point for the implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, and through these efforts DRR information is collected and systematized.⁸

Methods

This research is based on six months of fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan during 2017 and 2018, and an additional research trip in the context of a collaboration with the Overseas Development Institute.

A total of 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted along with participant and semi-participant observations of over 20 meetings and seven visits to the field. The selection of participants included international and local staff of UN agencies, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local and national NGOs, governmental actors at national level, local authorities, recipients, donors, academic and research actors, conflict party officials, and the private sector.

⁶ Goodhand, J. A. *Synthesis Report: Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Nepal and Sri Lanka*. Centre for Defence Studies, 2001.

⁷ *Shuras* are development councils at the village level with the role of local parliaments.

⁸ UNISDR. *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030*. Geneva: UNISDR, 2015.



Map 1. Afghanistan. Source: UN Cartographic Section (2011)

The analysis was informed by four initial theoretical themes:

1. DRR promotion and implementation;
2. Implementation challenges and (best) practices;
3. DRR adaptation to HIC/national/local context;
4. DRR vis-à-vis national conflict.

Main findings

1. The institutional set-up for DRR is not reflected on the ground, so DRR activities are mainly funded by international aid actors

- Afghanistan has a number of policies pertaining to disasters and has adopted the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. However, the institutional DRR set-up has not been reflected in DRR activities on the ground. These were deemed too difficult to implement by the Afghan Government, with large parts areas not under state control. The main institutions carrying out DRR projects and strategies are, therefore, national and international NGOs and UN agencies. One reason why the government has little active engagement in DRR and disaster response more generally is because it prioritizes its peacebuilding agenda.

DRR initiatives are mainly being funded by international governmental donors – for instances, DFID, SIDA, GIZ of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and ECHO. Donors’ representatives mentioned in interviews that they are likely to fund DRR initiatives as they can see the long-term benefits. They usually see DRR as part of an integrated approach to address climate change and community-level development.

2. Conflict impedes DRR at all levels, while DRR can create or exacerbate conflict at the community level, although some recent DRR projects have sought to address conflict

- The Afghan government’s disaster policy acknowledges the nexus between disasters, peace and stability. The National Strategic Plan for disasters was formulated with the promotion of peacebuilding and stable development in mind. However, as presented, in Afghanistan DRR is NGO-driven with an isolated presence projects and programmes. The question was how these deal in practice with the nexus.
- At the national level, projects can predominantly be seen to work *around* the macro conflict and they are only planned in government-held areas. This is not a clear-cut issue, because the conflict border constantly moves and government-held provincial capitals can be surrounded by armed opposition group-held rural areas. The main effect of the macro-level on disaster response is that DRR is backgrounded in view of the conflict, and that there are many bureaucratic and security impediments related to the conflict.
- At the provincial level, where the macro conflicts are translated into more localized conflict dynamics and competition between authorities and factions, bureaucratic impediments play an even larger role than at the national level. At the provincial level, agencies often have to negotiate with different authority figures, ranging from the government, armed opposition groups, commanders or religious authorities, whose blessing is needed to be able to operate. It is at this level that problems of corruption and embezzlement were reported most frequently.
- At the local level, the macro-level conflict remains significant, if only indirectly. However, every research participant concurred with the notion that DRR projects and programmes can create or exacerbate conflict at the community level. DRR projects alter the landscape and natural resource base of communities, which can exacerbate tension. A common example given was the construction of mitigation walls for flash floods, which, by changing a river’s flow also affected natural-resource users living at different points along the river. DRR in these cases may affect inequalities between communities. There are multiple cases in which DRR projects have had to be postponed or cancelled because of localized social conflict.

- DRR projects have adapted as best as possible to these conflict dynamics. Recently there have been a number of projects that explicitly aim to address conflict as part of DRR, and hence aim to work on conflict. Examples include a project carried out by a consortium including of four INGOs and the United Nations Environment Programme to develop a tool to analyse conflict in order to integrate it into their projects,⁹ and policies developed by a national NGO to integrate the risk of conflict in project planning. A third example concerns the ‘Wiederherstellung von Waldlandschaften (Forest Landscape Restoration) in Afghanistan’ project that started implementing in 2019, and aims to work on conflict by establishing committees and procedures that directly focus on the management or resolution of conflict.
- Participants in the study agreed that peacebuilding and conflict strategies and programmes rarely take DRR into account. This was confirmed by reviewing multiple project plans and strategies. A notable exception comprises some cases that work on conflict and peacebuilding at the micro level through school programmes and natural-resource management.

3. DRR faces a wide range of operational issues, meaning projects that work in or on conflict require lengthy preparation and implementation time

- Even though there is an emergent trend towards new approaches, DRR in Afghanistan has been characterized by hazard-centred approaches based on a narrow conception of DRR, and many research participants used language of ‘natural disasters’ without understanding the broader context of socially constructed vulnerabilities.
- An important challenge to DRR concerns problems of access. These were referred to in most of the interviews – and can be security related. It is also important to emphasize the role played by weather and road conditions. Many disaster-prone areas are not accessible during long periods of the year due to snow, landslides or fog. Weather conditions, according to many interviewees, account for most of the project delays. Infrastructure and access problems are a common theme in HIC scenarios.
- Problems of corruption or lack of accountability were constantly mentioned in the interviews and stated in some policy documents. Afghanistan ranks 177th out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perceptions Index.¹⁰ Funds and items to be used in disaster management and risk reduction may thus be embezzled or end up being used for non-humanitarian or disaster-related purposes. Specifically for DRR, the question was raised that unchecked infrastructure may give a false sense of security and protection.

⁹ Mena, R. *Manual on Conflict Analysis Tools: Preventing, mitigating and reducing the risk of social conflict in Civil DRR Projects*. Kabul, Afghanistan: Afghanistan Resilience Consortium (ARC), Oxfam, 2018.

¹⁰ Transparency International. *Corruption Perceptions Index*. Transparency International, 2017.

- In view of the complex conditions and security situations, participants agreed that the planning and initial implementation of projects takes much more time than it would in more stable contexts. The need for lengthy preparation and implementation time is more pronounced in programmes that explicitly aim to work *in* or *on* conflict. Assessing and understanding the possible tensions that exist in a community requires time and care. As an INGO programme manager mentioned, ‘there are too many things to see: The differences that they have, the problems the projects can create, and also the problems that exist between different communities.’
- Interviews and a review of literature on DRR in conflict-affected areas bring out a number of issues that are relevant to DRR and conflict in Afghanistan, not all of which have hitherto received systematic attention in DRR programming. Climate change is the most relevant cross-cutting topic when it comes to the design of DRR projects. Urbanization is another topic deserving closer inspection. Displacement due to conflict, disaster and poverty has caused a huge migration of people to the main urban areas of the country. Many urban areas in Afghanistan consist of informal settlements, without developmental plans or adequate services. In relation to this, refugees, internally displaced persons and returnees are also relevant topics intersecting with DRR. Gender is mentioned in the country’s Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and other policy documents, yet is not systematically given attention in all projects. Finally, there is as yet little attention to disabilities and inclusion.

Conclusion

This brief analysed the interaction between DRR and conflict. It recognised that conflict in Afghanistan must be seen as layered, wherein macro, meso and micro conflicts are related but all unfold with their own dynamics. One main conclusion is that in Afghanistan, as in most HIC scenarios, the focus tends to be directed towards the macro conflict whereas local-level manifestations of conflict, which may or may not relate to the main conflict, may be much more important for the development of appropriate DRR policies, financial schemes and programme implementation.

DRR in Afghanistan meets a number of operational challenges. These are not uniquely related to conflict but are exacerbated by the conflict conditions and include issues of access and transparency. There is growing attention to DRR but the approaches are often hazard-centred and there is little attention to disaster in urban areas and to intersectionalities with gender and with disabilities.

Implementing DRR projects with a conflict-sensitivity approach is deemed positive and necessary by all actors. With an awareness of working in conflict situations, the current focus of DRR is to do no harm. In practice, however, this often requires working on conflicts – namely, those conflicts that may evolve (directly or indirectly)

from the everyday politics of DRR projects in interaction with the wider political economy.

To advance on current efforts to develop DRR in the country, especially with a conflict-sensitive approach, it is important first to recognize the relevance of micro and meso conflict and urbanization, and second to strengthen DRR efforts with a specific HIC lens while remaining cognizant of developments within the field of DRR.

More information

- For more information, please contact the author at mena@iss.nl.
- Find the project details [here](#).