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# Politics of disaster response in authoritarian low-intensity conflict settings

WHEN  
DISASTER  
MEETS  
CONFLICT

## Key findings

- This brief zooms in on disaster governance in the context of authoritarian low-intensity conflict (LIC) settings.
- It is based on research conducted in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe – three countries characterised by intense political tensions and violence, yet sometimes also backgrounding of these same tensions and violence.
- In all three countries, civil society and international humanitarian organisations responding to disaster had their activities and access hampered by legal restrictions, bureaucratic constraints, and a climate of uncertainty and fear.
- Powerful actors, including international aid actors, set the rules of disaster governance, which largely leaned towards the state – as aid actors turned a blind eye to the politics and power relations of disaster response. This meant that political interests rather than need steered who and what would be protected from disaster impact.
- The majority of aid actors complied with or navigated around these challenges rather than confronting them, resulting in a depoliticised and homogenous approach to the politics of disaster response in which no one was prepared to challenge human rights abuses or political restrictions. Even non-state aid actors prioritised maintaining humanitarian operations and cordial relations with the government over protecting marginalised groups and the humanitarian/civil society space.
- The harm done by this approach included consolidating power imbalances and inequalities, leaving key issues of marginalisation unaddressed, and exacerbating feelings of distrust and injustice.

## Keywords

Authoritarianism – conflict – depoliticisation – disaster response – governance – humanitarianism – politics – Ethiopia – Myanmar – Zimbabwe

# Programme at a glance

When Disaster Meets Conflict is a **five-year programme** that analysed how state, non-state and humanitarian actors respond to disasters in three conflict scenarios: **high-intensity conflict**, **low-intensity conflict** and **post-conflict**.



The project asked how the politicisation of disaster response affects the legitimacy, power and relations between governance actors.



It aimed to learn about the challenges, experiences, and success factors for aid in each of the three conflict scenarios.

## Data collection

Data collection drew on nine country case studies and a diverse expert panel of 30 practitioners.



**30** experts

## 9 country case studies



- High-intensity conflict
- Low-intensity conflict
- Post-conflict



## Key features of each conflict scenario



### High-intensity conflict (HIC) – fractured governance

- Large-scale violence, including state violence
- High level of state fragility and fractured systems of governance
- Usually a phase of a longer conflict
- Humanitarian needs far exceed provision



### Low-intensity conflict (LIC) – authoritarian governance

- Violence manifests in structural ways, for example through repressive laws, restricted movement, or discrimination against ethnic groups
- Actual physical violence may also erupt through riots, targeted attacks or state repression
- Authoritarian practices, leading to humanitarianism-sovereignty tensions



### Post-conflict (PC) – fragile governance in flux

- Intensified social and political change with risk of renewed crises
- Reduced state capacity or willingness to provide basic services for all citizens
- Institutional reforms lead to institutional flux and evolving power relations
- International aid focused on state-building

# Introduction

- When disaster unfolds, an interplay of different actors is needed: state, civil society, community and international humanitarian, taking a variety of different roles and approaches.
- Disaster governance in conflict areas is a growing humanitarian policy concern given the common co-occurrence of disaster and conflict and the multiple ways in which their dynamics interact.
- Disaster response revolves around more than rescue, relief and recovery. Allocating aid resources inevitably privileges certain needs and people over others, and this can expose struggles, inequities and political narratives. This is particularly true for low-intensity conflict (LIC) settings, where legitimacy and power are highly contested. Disaster responders themselves may gain or lose legitimacy and power depending on how their actions and motivations are framed by others.
- This brief shares key findings of research that examined the politics of disaster response in the context of LIC and authoritarian practices. The research analysed disaster governance in the drought in Ethiopia in 2016, the 2015 floods in Myanmar, and the 2016–2019 drought in Zimbabwe.

## Features of LICs, and why it is interesting to study them

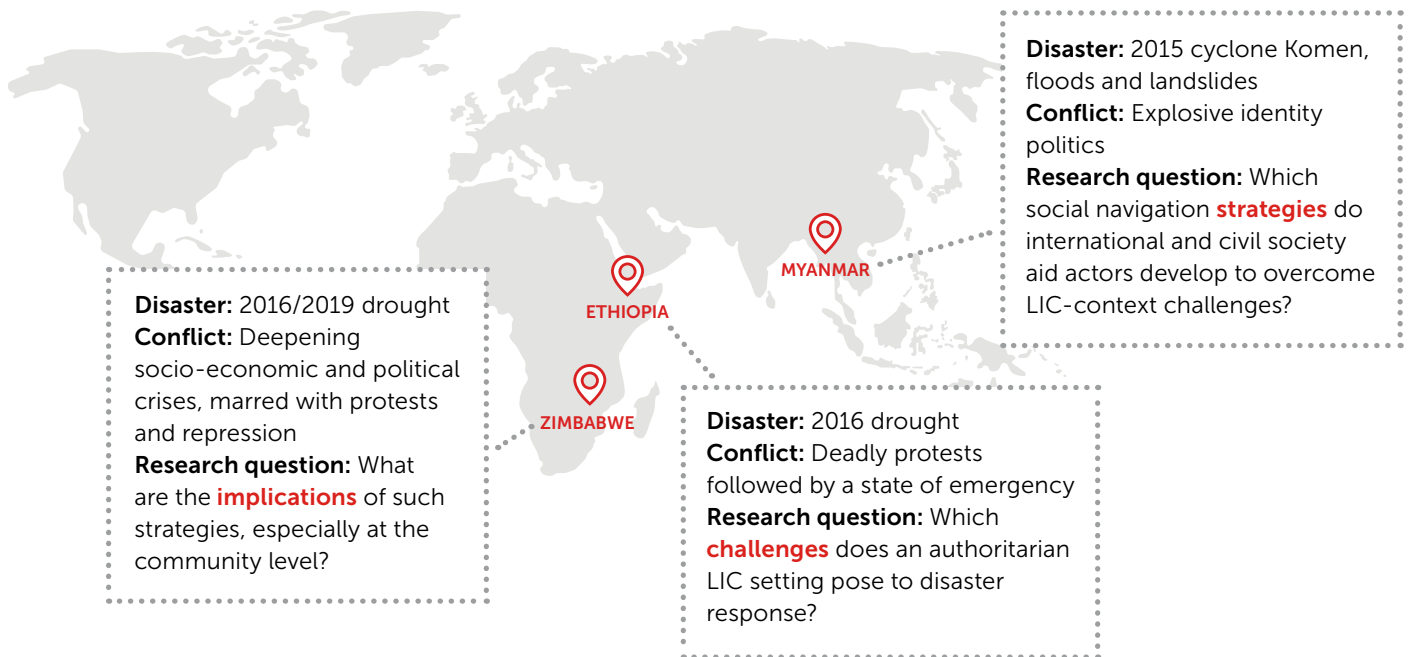
- **State–society disarticulation** | Part of society perceives their needs as not represented by those in power. Legitimacy and power are contested, and when disaster occurs, the legitimacy of both aid providers and aid recipients is debated.
- **Specific forms of violence** | Violence involves direct physical harm (e.g. riots, violent clashes and targeted attacks), but is mostly reflected through discriminatory discourses and policies and other forms of structural and cultural violence which fuel tensions within and across groups. Violence and exclusionary politics can also be expressed through disaster responses.
- **Authoritarian practices and the nature of the state** | In LIC settings, the state is mostly functioning, yet opaque and repressive. Human rights infringements and authoritarian practices often go hand-in-hand. While current international disaster policy identifies the state as the primary responder, there is limited understanding of how governments use disaster response to advance their interests at the expense of affected communities, minority groups or political opposition.
- **Sovereignty-humanitarianism tensions** | In LIC settings, the tensions between state sovereignty and humanitarian intervention run particularly high. The state holds the authority and coercive power to allocate resources and restrict non-state actors; international actors are often called in to fund and implement humanitarian action but are perceived as interfering in domestic matters. The space for civil society actors is severely restricted.

# Research focus and methods

The research examined the **politics of disaster response** in context of LIC and authoritarian practices, focusing on three country cases: Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe.

**Main objective** | To understand the processes through which LIC and authoritarian practices affect societies' ability to respond to disaster.

**Key research question** | When a disaster unfolds in authoritarian LIC settings, how do state, civil society and international humanitarian actors engage with the politics of disaster response, and with which implications?



- **Approach** | Four months of qualitative fieldwork in each country, including informal exchanges and observation. In total, 271 research participants (community members, state officials, civil society and international humanitarian actors) participated in semi-structured interviews and participatory activities, such as focus group discussions.
- **Fieldwork challenges** | Trust-building and access to sensitive information (e.g. reliable data on drought-induced health impacts in Ethiopia), to key areas (e.g. Rakhine State in Myanmar), and to key actors (e.g. state actors in Zimbabwe), amongst others.

## Findings

There were striking similarities as regards the disaster response challenges, follow-up strategies and their implications across the three different cases.



## Challenges – mistrust and authority control

### Perception and mistrust

- **States using disaster to gain control** | In all cases, the state was perceived as using the disaster to gain control and legitimacy and advance its political goals, although most state and international actors framed disaster response as an apolitical, technical process. States used disaster to quell protests (Ethiopia), marginalise ethnic and religious minorities (Myanmar) and assert ruling party power (Zimbabwe). Mutual suspicion and accusations were part of most conversations between state and aid actors.
- **Government power plays** | Competition for power also occurred within governments, for example between different ministries (Zimbabwe) and different levels of government (Ethiopia).
- **Suspicion of non-state actors** | In all three cases, international aid actors were accused of being ‘Western agents’ with their own political agenda. On the other hand, they were also perceived by some of their own staff members or civil society as being aligned with the government. In Zimbabwe, such criticism came from community members active in community governance structures.
- **Importance of memories of historical disasters** | Past disaster events associated with political instrumentalisation were frequently referred to: the droughts in Ethiopia of the 1970s and 1980s, cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008, and the drought in Zimbabwe in 2008. This highlighted how institutional memory co-shapes state–aid–society relations as much as the (geo-)political agenda of the day. This memory serves to legitimise present fear and mistrust.

### Authorities’ control of disaster response – restrictions, bureaucracy, uncertainty and fear.

- **Control through bureaucracy** | States controlled the ‘who, when, where and how’ of disaster response through the bureaucratic mechanisms related to declaring emergencies or issuing visas and authorisations, and memoranda of understanding on humanitarian activities. In all three countries, formally registered NGOs had to submit organisational budgets and plans to state authorities. Powerful non-state actors, in particular international organisations or international NGOs channelling funds civil society actors, at times reinforced these restrictions.
- **Control through information management** | While analyses of disaster needs were presented as technical, multi-actor endeavours, states retained control over the flow of information and, in turn, the areas prioritised in the response.
- **Control through uncertainty** | States created uncertainty through ambiguous guidelines and their inconsistent application, such as the ‘70/30 declaration’ which limits administrative costs of aid activities at 30%, without clear definition of what these costs entail. Disaster response operations were officially managed by civil servants, but often they were influenced behind the scenes by political party or security bodies without an electoral mandate or clearly delimited role.
- **Control through fear** | Restrictions and uncertainty were particularly effective when civil society or international humanitarian actors felt monitored or even ‘infiltrated’ by state actors, and when there were repercussions for potential breaches. International aid actors faced the threat of expulsion, while in all three countries state security actors assaulted or intimidated civil society actors.

“ In all cases, the state was perceived as using the disaster to gain control and legitimacy and advance its political goals, although most state and international actors framed disaster response as an apolitical, technical process. ”





## Non-state actor strategies – comply within the system, try to beat it from within, or resist

Humanitarian action taking place in authoritarian LIC settings is fraught with moral dilemmas and compromises. The **line between compliance, complacency or even complicity is very difficult to draw**. Navigating a ‘minefield of perceptions’, non-state disaster responders need to balance the expectations of various groups. They must present themselves as respecting state sovereignty while being seen as fair by aid recipients. Non-state actors applied three strategies.

- **Comply** | Actions undertaken to comply with state control included self-censorship in words, action and in knowing, including strategically re-interpreting mandates and humanitarian principles. For instance, neutrality was re-interpreted as staying out of conflict zones altogether (Ethiopia).
- **Socially navigate** | Non-state actors used different approaches to navigate state control of humanitarian responses. One approach involved the use of technical discourses that align well with the state’s technicality and over-reliance on guidelines. In Zimbabwe, for instance, non-state actors pretended not to notice that food aid beneficiaries were selected based on party affiliation, and instead framed targeting inefficiencies as a technical issue. Another approach involved addressing sensitive issues in very cautious ways, for example by downplaying certain issues, or screening the ethnicity of staff members. A third approach involved strategic (un)partnering, for example by partnering only with locally accepted civil society organisations (CSOs). A fourth approach, seen in Myanmar, was openly departing from needs-based targeting to distribute aid equally across religious groups.
- **Resist** | Resistance was the least common strategy, and where it occurred it was rarely openly confrontational. In such cases, civil society and international humanitarian actors bypassed the system via parallel routes. Non-state and state actors boycotted specific processes, while for international actors it meant leaving the country.

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## Implications

The disaster response challenges and strategies discussed above impacted upon communities and broader aidstate–society relations in specific ways.

Accorded **high priority** were:

- **Maintaining humanitarian operations** | As a result of the various strategies adopted by non-state disaster responders, disaster response operations were largely able to proceed in all three countries. Authorisations were granted, programmes kept running, meetings were held and relief supplies dispatched.
- **Cordial relations** | In all three countries, the large majority of non-state actors did not want to antagonise state authorities or increase tensions. Non-state actors were quite aware that their humanitarian operations do not take place in a vacuum and have an impact on broader conflict dynamics.

“ Among disaster-affected populations, the handling of responses provoked deep sentiments of distrust, injustice, powerlessness and hopelessness. ”

Accorded **lower priority** were:

- **The protection of humanitarian space** | In all three countries there was evidence of homogenisation of humanitarian practices, without the broad range of mandates and (more critical) approaches usually emerging from the interplay of different disaster response actors. In some cases, international organisations further contributed to this by disciplining CSOs to ‘play by the rules’ of the government. In all three countries, local CSOs (except those affiliated with the government) were more critical of the limited humanitarian independence than international aid actors, and national staff employed by international aid actors were more critical than their foreign colleagues. The homogenisation of humanitarian practices has wide-ranging implications for the humanitarian space, in particular humanitarian independence, neutrality and impartiality.
- **The protection of civil society space** | Although protecting civil society space and redressing unequal power relations are not part of the humanitarian mandate, a few participants noted that humanitarian operations needed to avoid legitimising restrictions and reinforcing deep-seated inequalities if they were to accord with the ‘do no harm’ principle. By taking a non-confrontational course, non-state actors can further tilt the balance of power in favour of governmental and humanitarian powerholders.
- **The protection of already marginalised groups** | Ultimately, the core principle of humanitarianism –relieving suffering wherever it is found – was negatively impacted. The politicised targeting of aid deepens existing marginalisation and leaves sensitive issues unaddressed. Among disaster-affected populations, the handling of responses provoked deep sentiments of distrust, injustice, powerlessness and hopelessness.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

- This research highlights the dangers of homogenised approach and the **importance of diverse modes of engagement with the politics of disaster response** instead. A division of labour between more or less risk-averse disaster response actors is to be encouraged.
- **Humanitarian donors and policy-makers have a role to play in supporting these diverse modes of engagement**, by providing strategic, financial and/ or diplomatic backing. Examples include funding conflict analysis and advocacy, or allowing for more long-term sustained presence within communities.
- Each course of action decided upon by disaster practitioners involves trade-offs, and there is a difference between depoliticising disaster response for strategic, coerced, or routine managerial reasons. **There is a place for ‘strategic’ depoliticisation**, where its implications are the subject of careful reflection.
- Disaster policy should more explicitly consider the possibility of **non-benevolent state roles** in disaster response and offer guidelines for dealing with it.

# Conclusion

- The authoritarian LIC contexts of Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe differ widely, yet there **were strong resonances between the three cases** in terms of their challenges, strategies, and implications.
- In all three countries, **non-state disaster responders had their activities and access hampered** by legal restrictions, bureaucratic constraints, and a climate of uncertainty and fear. Powerful actors who set the rules of disaster response tend to self-discipline with these rules.
- Facing these challenges, **the majority of non-state actors opted for a non-confrontational approach**. This resulted in problematic homogenisation and depoliticisation of the disaster response, the consolidation of existing power imbalances, deepening marginalisation for some social groups, and diminished humanitarian and civil society space.
- In the LIC scenario, state, societal and international disaster responders must concern themselves not only with the technicalities of the actual response – from information gathering to aid

distribution – but also with the governance and politics of disaster response, including **how their own actions are perceived** in local and international contexts, and these perceptions can be manipulated. The importance of framing disaster response operations, such as accusing certain aid actors to be politically motivated, can hardly be overestimated. Disaster response is the outcome of actor interactions, which are partly discursive.

- **Humanitarian actors can also be powerful authorities**, and studies of aid dynamics in authoritarian settings should detail how they co-shape the ‘rules of the game’, in particular concerning information management.

“ **The importance of framing disaster response operations, such as accusing certain aid actors to be politically motivated, can hardly be overestimated. Disaster response is the outcome of actor interactions, which are partly discursive.** ”



## More information

The research was conducted as part of the project 'When Disaster Meets Conflict'. To find out more, watch this [animation](#) and visit the [project page](#) with links to other publications.

This brief is predominantly based on Desportes, I. & Hilhorst, D. [Disaster governance in conflict affected authoritarian contexts: The cases of Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe](#). *Politics and Governance*, 8(4), 343-354. For more country-specific findings:

**Ethiopia** – Desportes, I., Mandefro, H. & Hilhorst, D. (2019). [The Humanitarian Theatre: Drought Response during Ethiopia's Low-Intensity Conflict of 2016](#), *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 57(1), 1-29; and [research brief](#).

**Myanmar** – Desportes, I. (2019). [Getting Relief to Marginalised Minorities: The Response to Cyclone Komen in 2015 in Myanmar](#), *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 4(7), 39-59; and [research brief](#).

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