DELPHI STUDY

When disaster meets conflict

Roanne van Voorst

Key messages

- **Some challenges practitioners encounter in disaster aid programmes differ according to conflict scenario**, broadly categorized into high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and post-conflict scenarios.

- **Other challenges are inherent to the aid industry**, especially the gap between the types of actions and solutions that practitioners believe will solve major issues in their sector and the actual decisions and actions they take to deal with problems in practice, as well as tensions around the localization agenda.

- **Perceptions on the state of the humanitarian sector systematically differed between practitioners with an INGO/Northern background and those with a local NGO/Southern background.** Issues include the localization agenda and the involvement of 'new' aid actors.

- **Best practices differ according to conflict setting.** In high-intensity conflict, mobile, flexible and adaptive projects work best, and conflict resolution and development programmes are a priority. In low-intensity conflict, successful programmes were characterized by a firm grounding in the area, including relations of trust with the government, though these come with risks. In post-conflict settings, success cases focused more on the prevention and mitigation of disasters, rather than relief, and were often led by civil society.

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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.

Source: Johnny Saunderson

Introduction[1]

Literature on humanitarian aid and disaster generally fails to distinguish between different conflict situations, while it is widely known that the intensity of conflict has a major effect on the local resilience of communities, the erosion of local institutional capacity and the access to and effectiveness of international aid. Arguing that a more rigorous understanding of disaster-conflict dynamics across types of conflict is needed and possible, we distinguish between high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and post-conflict settings. We use this categorization in the systematic analysis of specific patterns of interaction in disaster risk governance (between international and local aid and society actors) in these different scenarios. The core of the research programme consists of case studies in conflict countries where disasters occur. Next to fieldwork in these settings, 30 key humanitarian actors with great experience in the field participated in an expert panel. We used a Delphi method which has a cyclical research design with several rounds of questioning.

WHEN DISASTER MEETS CONFLICT

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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.

Research focus

The expert panel contributed to the case studies by offering the longer-term overviews of aid practice. The aim was to understand better, from a practitioner's viewpoint, the complexity and perverse outcomes that characterize the engagement of the international aid sector with local political realities in conflict settings – and how to deal with them. The overall goal of the expert panel was to establish an informed, evidence-based study about some of the most pressing challenges that are currently hampering the effectiveness of aid, as well as to collect observations of highly experienced practitioners on trends and recent experiences in the field. In particular, emphasis was placed on 'best practices' and success factors for aid projects in different conflict settings, new actors and coalitions in the aid industry, and insights on the usefulness of new technologies and other promising dynamics. Moreover, in the interviews it turned out that there were systematic differences in the way that international and local actors reflect on themselves, on each other and on the conditions and practices of aid in which they are involved. These topics became an important part of the research.

Questions that we focused on were:
- What challenges do humanitarian agencies encounter in situations where natural disasters and conflict meet?
- What are best practices and success factors?
- How do humanitarians regard their own role and functioning in the field, and the role of other organizations and aid actors?
- What is needed for humanitarian agencies to work more effectively in different scenarios and settings?

In this brief, we share some of the insights generated by the panel. We end with raising new questions and themes that need be addressed in order to make aid more effective.

Delphi study

The Delphi is a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem. In our study, the aim was to gather expert insights on the complex issue of humanitarian aid in conflict settings. The advantage of the cyclical structure of a Delphi study is that it allows participants to reflect on their earlier answers and allows the researcher to ask additional questions throughout the interview process if these appear relevant. A Delphi study allows for group thinking on a problem that cannot be solved by 'facts' but that might be enlightened by the subjective opinions of experts. Moreover, it avoids the potential negative consequences of a group interview and it allows people to speak openly and thoughtfully. In our study, we chose not to work with questionnaires, as is most common, but with semi-structured in-depth interviews. All interviewees remained anonymous to other participants, so that everybody could speak freely.

A Delphi study does not depend on a statistical sample that attempts to be representative of any population. It is a tool intended to gather insights from a group of qualified experts who have deep understanding of the issues. One of the most critical factors for a valuable outcome is the selection of the key informants. In our study, we selected 30 qualified experts (the number of participants was based on recommendations from the literature on the Delphi technique) through a snowballing method. We first asked a committee of highly experienced practitioners and aid scholars to identify some experienced 'reflective practitioners' that we should talk to, approached those people for interview, and then asked each selected participant for further recommended names.

All interviews were directly transcribed and stored in the software analysis programme NVivo, together with the audio files.

Method

In the first round of the research, participants were interviewed for one to three hours over Skype or face-to-face. In the second round, this was followed up by additional questions by email or phone that had emerged from analysis of the first round. The goal of the expert panel was to establish an informed, evidence-based study about some of the most pressing challenges currently hampering aid effectiveness, as well as to collect observations of highly experienced practitioners on trends and recent experiences in the field. Emphasis was placed on 'best practices' and success factors for aid projects in different conflict settings, new actors and coalitions in the aid industry, and insights into the usefulness of new technologies and other promising dynamics.

Panellists all have at least seven years of experience in the field, mostly working for different international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) or humanitarian think thanks and almost always have experience in several crises involving conflict and disaster. Of the 30 informants, 50% were male and 50% female. The youngest participant was 32, the oldest 65. There was a large diversity of nationalities among the participants: the USA, Spain, UK, Poland, Slovakia, the Netherlands, France, Kenya, India, South Sudan, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Japan and Colombia. About half of the panellists were from the Global South. They work for organisations including MSF, ICRC, Save the Children, Oxfam Novib, Adeso, UNICEF, UNOCHA, WFP, MercyCorps, CoARC, Action against Hunger, SEED India, Lebanon-support, Community Healthcare Initiative, CARE, AAR, and AMEL. The settings in which they were professionally engaged in humanitarian aid are, among others, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Nepal, Liberia, India, Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Darfur, Haiti, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Iraq, Colombia, Nigeria, Syria, Turkey and Somalia.

Table 1. Time table and design of Delphi methodology

Activities	Period	Key participants
Formulation of research questions and themes for discussion	March - August 2016	Research team (Dorothea Hilhorst and Roanne van Voorst)
Pre-selection of candidates	February - August 2016	Research team and committee of five practitioners and aid-scholars
Testing of research questions	August-October 2016	Research team & committee of five practitioners and aid-scholars
Round 1: interviews	October 2016 - January 2017	30 informants
Analysis of data round 1	December 2016 - February 2017	Research team
Round 2: interviews	February and March 2017	24 (out of 30) informants
Analysis of data round 2	March 2017	Research team
Writing Intermediary Report	March and April 2017	Research team
Round 3: workshop/group discussion	TBA in 2018	Research team and selected participants from panel

Main findings

1. Some challenges differ according to conflict scenario

- According to our panellists, the types of challenges that practitioners encounter in their disaster aid programmes differ significantly in different conflict settings. These observations largely accord with the findings of our team on the ground. (For details see our nine case study research briefs.)

- For high-intensity conflict (HIC) scenarios, the most pressing challenges are lack of basic infrastructure, logistics, lack of access, overwhelming amounts of work due to the involvement of relatively few aid organizations in the area, and the high level of population movement.

- For low-intensity conflict (LIC) scenarios, the most pressing challenges experienced by our panel members are funding scarcity, differing priorities between state and INGOs, the unsustainability of programmes, overstretching INGO portfolios to get funding, and the low capacity of local actors in combination with a high turnover of international staff.

- In post-conflict (PC) scenarios, the most common challenges include the over-

whelming number of INGOs and competition among them, culturally inappropriate programmes, the lack of (effective) exit plans, lack of basic infrastructure, and the existence of political sensitivities and lingering conflict below the surface that cannot be openly considered or reported.

2. Other challenges are inherent to the aid industry

- One major problem that hinders the aid industry in all types of conflict settings is that a gap exists between the types of actions and solutions that practitioners believe will help to solve or improve major issues in their sector, and the actual decisions and actions they take to deal with problems in daily practice. Trying to deal with bureaucratic challenges and the disadvantages of the financial structure of the aid system, practitioners often find creative ways to get funding, such as overstretching the capacities of their organizations in funding proposals. Also, they are not always transparent about their actual activities in evaluation reports for donors.

- Another problem is that practitioners have limited room for manoeuvre. They want to deliver aid in the way that seems most effective in a given situation. However, many of their strategies ensure resilience in the individual agencies but are not effective in ensuring the quality of the aid system in the long run. This finding suggests that, in order for practitioners to improve the aid system, they need more room for flexible action.

- Instead of moving away from individual projects and focusing on knowledge transfers and transparency/government processes (which would be the logical direction for the aid industry to go, according to most panellists), practitioners constantly make small amendments to projects and their own ways of working in the hope that it will work. In our study, we call this 'futureproofing' strategies.

- While there is a lot of talk about localization and increased cooperation, in the daily practice in the field, we found that humanitarians adhere to 'othering' strategies as a means of legitimacy: framing 'the other' in ways that enhance one's own presence. While international staff question whether it is ever possible for local staff to be completely 'neutral' in a conflict, local staff raise similar questions about their foreign colleagues. As this topic appeared to be a major issue for many our panellists, we elaborate this issue further under the subheading 'North/South differences', below.

3. Perceptions on the state of the humanitarian sector differed between practitioners with an INGO/Northern background and those with a local NGO/Southern background

- There are huge differences in the ways that employees of larger (Northern) INGOs and employees of local (Southern) NGOs regard the status quo in the sector. Although this 'gap' is by no means a new topic, a relevant contribution to

this debate is the consistent difference in perceptions that we found between aid actors working for larger INGOs and local NGOs working in areas characterized by conflict and disaster.

- This differentiated experience pertains especially to the ways in which the localization agenda is working in practice, particularly with regard to the issues of subcontracting of local NGOs by INGOs and UN and Red Cross organizations instead of working on equal base in partnership, and the extent to which local practitioners trust the outcomes of international policy meetings.

- Another 'gap' was found in opinions on the involvement of so-called 'new' aid actors, donor governments and private sector agents. While it is a great concern of all practitioners that aid agencies are gradually being side-lined by private sector actors and foreign governments, particularly the 'new' donor states, there is relatively little long-term and transnational cooperation with these new aid actors. While practitioners with a Northern background generally regard the involvement of private sector actors as inevitable but problematic because they do not adhere to humanitarian principles, panel members with a Southern background tend to regard this as a strength as it allows for fast and large-scale interventions that improve infrastructure and development.
  - Southern panellists also pointed out that the concept 'humanitarian aid' is itself a Northern concept. In their daily work and in communication with local aid actors, they avoid the term and instead speak of partnerships and development, as these concepts resonate more in the local context.
  - Local NGOs are currently establishing and working through interest groups and consortia to pursue their own agenda. In some cases, these prove successful in pulling more power and funding opportunities towards local aid organizations. One example is the NEAR network of 30 African organizations, 21 from Asia and five from the Middle East, which has been successful in mediating a $100 million cash funding programme in Somalia by forming a consortium of smaller, regional NGOs. Similarly, the Lebanese Amel Association is extremely active in its region as well as in hubs of the international community, such as Geneva. High on their agenda is the issue of localization – and they have had successes with partnerships between local NGOs and INGOs or foreign donors that, according to different panellists, may serve as best practice.

4. Best practices differ according to conflict setting

Despite all these challenges, our expert panellists felt they have been engaged in successful programmes and best practices in their areas of work. Our analysis of their descriptions shows that the type of projects that work best differ for high-intensity, low-intensity and post-conflict settings. We discuss these best practices below and elaborate on the most important factors that, according to aid practitioners, contribute to success.

- In HIC settings, projects that are mobile and adaptive work best. While it is a common belief that in HIC settings humanitarian aid should be prioritized over development programmes, about half of our panel members (with Northern and Southern backgrounds alike) believed otherwise. They suggested that despite conflict, donors and aid actors should prioritize conflict resolution and development programmes over humanitarian aid, as the latter is perceived to be unsustainable, ineffective or even counterproductive in these settings because it may feed into conflict.

- Interviewees described as most successful those programmes characterized by their mobility and ability to adapt. 'Adaptive management' is a concept that was mentioned by different aid actors working for different organizations in different high-conflict settings, and was praised as a way of working that is particularly suitable for fluid environments. Adaptive management entails an iterative working process, room for reflection and adjustment of the programme, the freedom for people 'on the ground' to follow their gut-feelings and change things if necessary. A programme with mobile health clinics in South Sudan and a programme involving mobile water pumps in Nigeria are concrete examples of best practice featuring adaptive management and mobility. Another example were cash programmes.

- Flexible funding was sometimes perceived as a condition that facilitates adaptive management (this was the case for organizations that make a lot of use of private funding, but generally not for organizations dependent on donors).

- Another best practice is strictly defining projects in all communication with beneficiaries in a way to avoid disappointment or complaints. Struggling with access and overwhelmed, in order to make sure their projects are regarded as successful by peers and donors, practitioners indicated that they often try to lower expectations towards communities in advance, telling people very clearly what they can expect, and what not. Although several panellists believed that this strategy had resulted in less complaints and thus more positive evaluations, they also said that the rigid approach and firm tone of voice had disturbed relationships with local communities.

- For low-intensity conflict areas, the best practices or most successful programmes typically mentioned were not characterized by lightness and mobility, but instead by a firm grounding in the area. Long-term capacity-building programmes were most frequently mentioned as a typical example of a programme that aid actors deemed successful: these could be programmes where governance staff was trained over a timespan of several years, or programmes where communities were trained for new forms of production or livelihoods.

- Aid actors in LIC settings would typically emphasize their own country experience as a success factor, with nationals referring to their backgrounds and international

HIC **High-intensity Conflict**	**LIC** **Low-intensity Conflict**	**PC** **Post Conflict**
Mobility	Groundedness	Long-term development
Adaptive management	Cultural understanding	Prevention
Lowering expectations	Local networks	Working with civil society groups
Strictly defining projects	Working with local NGOs on sensitive issues	Exit programs
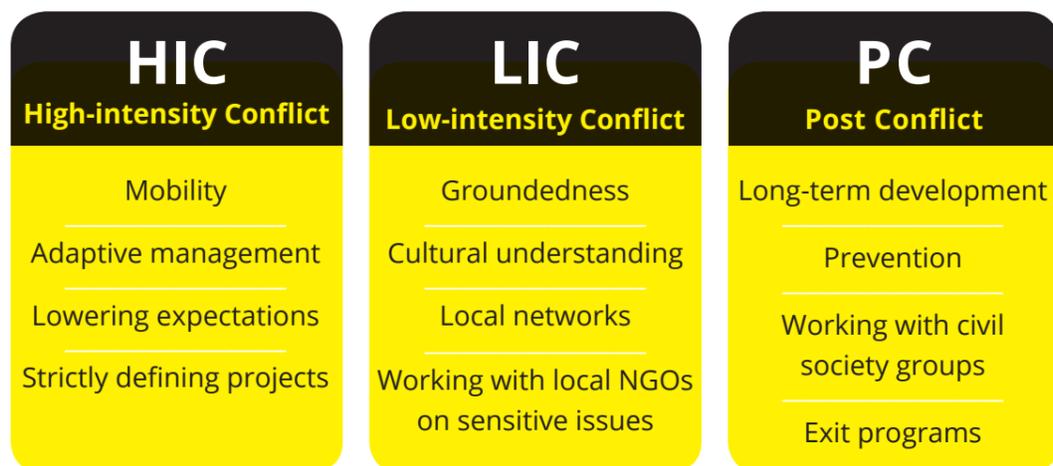
staff explaining that they had been in the country for several years already and could therefore be regarded 'almost a local'. This made it possible for them to work around the central government, if necessary through personal channels and networks. At the same time, relations of trust with the government were also deemed a prerequisite to be allowed to work long-term in these countries. As paradoxical as this may seem, several panellists explained that working with as well as around the government was a strategy that helps aid actors in these settings to continue their work and not be expelled. However, one could also argue that this strategy leads to excluding marginalized people in need. A clear example of this strategy and the issue of politicization of aid is described in our brief on Ethiopia, where aid actors self-censored in order to avoid conflict with the government. The brief also a solution for this issue, used by practitioners: asking ambassadors to negotiate on their behalf.

- Programmes that were considered a success by aid practitioners in post-conflict settings were first and foremost those focusing on prevention and mitigation of disasters, rather than on disaster relief. Such programmes typically take into account the fragility of the setting, and learn how people respond despite their vulnerability. Examples of programmes perceived as successful in post-conflict settings were rescue techniques taught to vulnerable communities and the building of earthquake-resistant structures in Nepal. Other successful programmes were those in which civil society was engaged, or leading, in disaster response, particularly youth groups. In these best-practice examples, the aid offered was, in the words of a female project manager with Southern background, 'a-la-carte', rather than the 'fixed menu' style in which it is usually offered. It was always a local group or community that would ask the agency for specific types of aid, whether technical, financial or expertise-based, with the aid organisation filling in those gaps as requested.

Next steps

The challenges, persistent problems and best practices that were identified by our panellist are highly relevant considering the increasingly frequent situations where conflict and disaster coincide, and the increasing gap between the needs of people around the world and the aid that donors and humanitarian agencies are currently providing.

In 2019, the third round of this expert panel will take place in the form of a workshop with selected participants about how humanitarian aid might work in different scenarios. A selected group of panellists will be invited for a discussion around different response scenarios for different conflict/disaster settings. In this discussion, one aim is to establish some sort of consensus over what works best in which type of conflict setting. Another is to come up with more practical tools and experience-based insights. For example, if 'adaptive management' seems to be the current buzzword for HIC settings, thinking about scenarios might be a way to investigate how this type of programme could work outside the specific context in which it was developed by practitioners.

More information

- The full report upon which this brief is based is available here.
- Find the project details here.
- For more information, please contact the author at vanvoorst@iss.nl.