SOUTH SUDAN

International Institute of Social Studies

Prioritizing disaster response in a context of high-intensity conflict

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RESEARCH BRIEF #3

WHEN DISASTER MEETS CONFLICT

Key messages

- Despite the difficulties posed by working in high-intensity conflict scenarios, **the main challenge of disaster response is not safety but the complexity of the logistics and obtaining large amounts of funding**. In such overwhelming situations, not everyone who needs help can receive it.

- Insecurity and access problems nevertheless also impact the prioritization of aid, **causing aid actors to favour working with communities in or near areas they have worked with before.**

- **Aid is highly political** and humanitarian actors need to maneuver through complex, multi-actor governance systems. They engage in negotiations with multiple actors navigating multiple interests.

- Confronted by situations where priorities must be managed, aid actors engage in a 'triage of aid'. Unlike *a priori* targeting, **this is a continuous process of prioritization and decision-making**, for example through rapid response assessments. They also use flexible programmes and adaptive management, getting 'creative' with the logistics and sometimes turning to private funding. Aid actors should be continuously reflecting on the priorities and the triage, but in practice donor conditions do not always provide such flexibility.

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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.

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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.

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IDP Camp in South Sudan. Source: Rodrigo Mena

Introduction

The research focused on South Sudan's seasonal droughts and floods of 2017, looking at how the response is shaped by and affecting the relations, power, and legitimacy of these actors.

The main focus was to:

1. Identify the challenges of disaster response in a high-intensity conflict setting
2. Understand multi-actor collaboration (between local, national and international aid and society actors)
3. Identify potential solutions and best practices.

South Sudan is situated in this project as an example case study of a high-conflict scenario, together with case studies Afghanistan and Yemen.

Context

South Sudan became independent from Sudan following more than 40 years of conflict. A Comprehensive Peace Agreement, signed in January 2005 between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army, provided a six-year period of autonomy before a referendum confirmed the formation of the new country in 2011. However, in 2013 conflict between South Sudanese factions led to a devastating civil war.

This conflict, in combination with an economic crisis, resulted in more than 50,000 people being killed by 2016,[1] 2 million people internally displaced and another 2 million displaced as refugees, mainly in neighbouring countries.[2] As a result, South Sudan experienced a severe humanitarian crisis that has persists to the present day.

In October 2015, a Presidential decree divided the country into 28 states, replacing the historical ten previous states. In January 2017, a new decree subdivided some of the new states, creating a new 32-state administrative system. Yet there are still no official maps showing the new states and, therefore, most international and national organisations still operate according to the previous boundaries.

Disasters and risks

Adding to the crisis was the fact that South Sudan is a country prone to multiple hazards in different regions. The most common disasters are droughts and seasonal floods affecting large areas of the country. The country also faces regular bushfires, cholera and malaria outbreaks, and earthquakes. These natural events turn from hazards into disasters when people are highly vulnerable (for example due to conflict), and coping and adaption mechanisms are weak. In 2017, famine was declared in some areas of the country.[3] The cholera outbreak that lasted from 2014 to 2017 killed hundreds,[4] while there were over a million cases of malaria and severe malnutrition in 2016 and 2017.

Methods

The research comprised four months of in-country data collection following a desk literature review, spanning 2017 and early 2018. Fieldwork was conducted between February to June 2017 in Uganda and South Sudan. This period corresponds to summer and mainly dry season in both countries, allowing direct observation of the effects of the lean season, droughts and floods. Fieldwork included 45 semi-structured interviews with members of governmental institutions, humanitarian agencies ranging from the UN to international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local NGOs and disaster-impacted communities. The total number of participants, presented sought to represent all type of actors in the country. Participatory observation, document collection and semi-structured interviews were the main data collection methods; transcriptions were thematically coded in NVivo. The fieldwork was carried out partly solo, and partly in partnership with the South Sudan Joint Response of the Dutch Relief Alliance and its lead organisation, Save the Children Netherlands.

1 Reuters. *Study estimates 190,000 people killed in South Sudan's civil war*. Reuters, 26 September 2018.
2 UNHCR. *South Sudan*. (accessed 5 March 2018).
3 United Nations. *Famine declared in region of South Sudan – UN*. 20 February 2017; WHO. WHO South Sudan crisis (accessed 22 May 2017).
4 WHO Africa. *Media Release: South Sudan declares the end of its longest cholera outbreak*. 7 February 2018 (accessed 8 July 2018).

In the cases of 'meetings participation' and 'field visits', the number in the sample represents the amount of activities attended.

Finally, all information collected was analysed at different levels and moments by at least one of the following techniques: Content analysis, process tracing, and explanation building technique. All the analyses were done using QSR NVivo 11, a qualitative data analysis software programme.

Main findings

Response to disasters in a HIC country is always extremely challenging. In South Sudan infrastructure is poor, roads are in a bad condition, for several months vast areas of the country are flooded. Since the conflict broke out, almost 90 humanitarian workers have been killed in the country, while in 2017 OCHA recorded an average of over 96 humanitarian access incidents per month, including attacks, threats, intimidation and harassment.[5]

Floods and droughts have mixed impacts in the conflict and the response:

- Floods reduce the level of violent conflict, as they can create access constraints for all conflict parties. The rainy season in general comes together with cholera and malaria season, also inhibiting fighting.
- At the same time, floods restrict humanitarian access to affected areas. They increase the cost of responding, chiefly due to the needs to reach places using flight services, including helicopters.
- Drought can intensify the conflict especially when hunger is used as a military strategy. Extended drought also degrades people's livelihoods, creating the bases for future conflicts.
- Conflict diminishes people's coping mechanisms and affects their regular livelihoods.

Large-scale responses to floods and droughts, including by international actors, were only observed when these hazards, compounded with the conflict, threatened to claim a large number (hundreds) of victims. As a result, smaller-scale disaster response usually only occurs at the local level, carried out by the affected population and local authorities.

5 OCHA. *South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Snapshot* (January 2018). UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

The main findings on core challenges are highlighted below, after which best practices and solutions to these challenges as used by humanitarians are discussed.

1. The main challenge of disaster response is not safety but the complexity of the logistics and obtaining funding.

- HIC scenarios are the most expensive places to provide humanitarian aid and disaster response. Security issues and the lack or poor maintenance of infrastructure, such as roads, electricity or potable water makes the logistics of any action highly complex. According to interviewees in South Sudan, it were these issues – and not so much the safety concerns often considered the major hindrance for aid in HIC settings – that were obstructing effective aid.

- In vast regions of South Sudan, many services are not available, such as health, transportation, or markets to buy supplies. It is difficult for aid actors to reach affected places, maintain interventions or meet the basic needs of the affected populations.

- Access to recipients was further reduced due to recurring flooding. While seasonal access constraints can occur in any country, in South Sudan this is a sustained problem as infrastructure has been destroyed because of the conflict and alternative means of access are dangerous or non-existent. For example, access by vehicle is impossible in some locations and navigating the river can be unsafe in rain season.

- To overcome these difficulties, aid actors typically invest in expensive solutions, such as aeroplanes or helicopters, generators and fuel, and building essential infrastructure from scratch. This creates a financial and 'logistics nightmare', according to a UN manager in South Sudan. This, in combination with the security issues elaborated below, explains why UN agencies and INGOs are occasionally absent from field locations.

2. Insecurity impacts the prioritisation of aid, as well as the way in which it is provided.

- Security is another important challenge for disaster risk management. Without exception, study participants mentioned feeling unsafe: all were exposed to illegal check-points and risks of robbery, ambushes, landmines, bombs, shootings or kidnappings.

- For aid actors, the lack of security impacted access to affected places and the distribution and provision of aid. Developing projects or responding to disasters in these circumstances is highly challenging and aid actors risk physical and mental harm. During periods of conflict, disaster risk reduction work is often paused or cancelled. Displacement also makes it difficult to know the number and profile of the affected population in a specific locality.

- In a context of insecurity, where needs exceed funds and capacities, aid actors are forced to prioritise some affected people over others. Measures that allow humanitarian actors to work in relative safety are also a priority: for example, flying instead of travelling by roads, taking extra security measures in offices and accommodation, or contracting private services for 'remote control aid'.

3. Aid is highly political and aid actors need to manoeuvre through complex, multi-actor governance systems

- Conflict has led to highly complex governance structures involving state-contesting or non-state armed groups. The disconnection between the central and district levels of governance creates a blurry governance map, making it even harder for aid actors to provide effective aid, as they sometimes lack knowledge that could enable them to manoeuvre through multi-actor governance systems. Aid actors sometimes have to negotiate with state-contesting or non-state armed groups, in addition to central and district governments.

- Such negotiations are generally driven by political interest from the armed groups controlling territories as well as from donors, national governments and the international community. For instance, international aid actors see these negotiations as an opportunity to pursue other agendas, such as peacebuilding, by imposing conditions on aid. At the same time, local actors – both responders and aid beneficiaries – also pursue their agendas and interests in the negotiations with humanitarian actors.

Confronted with these challenges, interviewees emphasized that not everyone in need of help can be helped, so priorities must be managed. This can be understood as the 'triage of aid'.

Solutions and best practices

1. Triage of aid

When there are limited resources and capabilities to provide aid to all the people affected, it is necessary to sort and prioritise among them. In South Sudan, as in other HIC scenarios, the number of people in need of help is overwhelming. It is here when the triage of disaster response and humanitarian aid plays a role. Aid actors face moments of deciding whom to help immediately and which groups to attend to later.

In the humanitarian sector of South Sudan, a commonly used tool to help aid actors in this decision-making process is the rapid response assessment (RRA). OCHA and the humanitarian clusters are the main actors coordinating humanitarian and disaster response. When an aid organisation informs OCHA that there is a group in need of help (due to conflict and/or disaster), the first step is to organise an RRA. This procedure entails a visit to the place affected to assess the situation and make

recommendations on whether an intervention is needed or not. Five INGOs mentioned that they also do their own RRAs.

Besides the needs established by the RRA, other criteria play a role in the decision to provide aid. For example, some donors try to make the decision based on technical and objective indicators by assessing their capacities to respond and the constraints that specific settings present. Moreover, the majority of INGOs said that they usually decide to assist communities in or near to areas in which they have already been working. The main reasons provided for this were: security and access constraints make it difficult to start new programmes; establishing rapport with local communities and recruiting local staff takes time; knowing the territories, people and needs makes it easier to develop project proposals and implement them.

2. **Flexible programmes, adaptive management**
   Most of the INGOs find support from donors, but some interviewees said that negotiating with donors to modify programmes can be challenging. Where modifications were easy it was usually a matter of aiding a different village in the same state, or adjusting the specifics of the response (doing different activities under a water, sanitation and hygiene or non-food item scheme). But in other cases it was necessary to be 'creative' with the logistics. One example was raising funds from private sources to allow the organisation the flexibility needed to manoeuvre through unexpected challenges. For example, the Government of South Sudan decided to increase the working fees for international staff: three actors (a donor and two INGO staff members) said that they dealt with this additional financial burden via private funding, as these costs were beyond the project planning budget.

3. **Peacebuilding programmes**
   Somewhat unsurprisingly, all actors agreed that the best solution to these challenges would be an effective and lasting peace agreement. There must be more investment and efforts in peacebuilding and a sustainable peace agreement in the country. Without that, they remain stuck in a long, protracted, expensive cycle of providing temporary and inefficient aid.

Conclusion

A major finding is that in the HIC scenario of South Sudan, prioritization is central in determining responses to disaster. The decision making-process in which aid actors are engaged is complex and political, and takes places in an arena where multiple actors negotiate the outcomes, resources and benefits of aid. Humanitarian actors engage in 'triage' based on the funds available, the feasibility of response and the real needs faced as part of a *systematic* and *continuous* process of deciding who will be helped and who will not. This concept goes beyond targeting, as more than defining targets *a priori, triage is about how to prioritize continuously.*

Dealing with violent conflict and multiple disasters and crises, aid actors frequently select familiar populations and relatively accessible areas as suitable for intervention. Although understandable, this prioritization has serious impacts for the humanitarian imperative of assisting the most vulnerable. If aid actors prioritize affected communities in areas where they have previous experience; affected communities in other areas are not assisted – even if their needs are higher. Ideally, in a dynamic and high-conflict settings such as South Sudan, aid actors would need to continuously reflect on the priorities and the triage, but in practice, donor conditions do not always provide such flexibility.

The findings of this research go beyond the idea that HIC areas are too complex to operate in. For most aid actors in South Sudan, despite the difficulties of providing humanitarian aid and responding to a disaster, the primary concern is not *whether to do it* but how, where, when and for whom. Aid actors have been finding ways of negotiating access, overcoming dangerous situations and reaching remote communities for decades. There are multiple challenges in HIC scenarios but the research shows that it is often possible to operate in them: aid actors and local organizations are in fact doing so, but not at the scale required.

This case has highlighted some dynamics that are crucial in the aid debate, such as the decision-making processes that underlie interventions and the temporary solutions that aid workers seek to overcome challenges. The lessons can be further explored to better understand how more effective aid can be provided in insecure, complex and dynamic settings.

More information

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