

## DISASTERS IN CONFLICT

UNDERSTANDING DISASTER GOVERNANCE, RESPONSE, AND RISK REDUCTION DURING HIGH-INTENSITY CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN, AFGHANISTAN, AND YEMEN

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In this thesis I focus on the knowledge and practice of disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster response during periods of high-intensity conflict (HIC). HIC represent 'moments' of a protracted crisis with the presence of large-scale violent conflict, significant levels of state fragility and fractured governance systems. The occurrence of disasters is common in places under HIC. Disasters like droughts, floods or earthquakes are a social and political phenomenon based on the interaction between extreme natural events and people's vulnerability to harm and loss during these events. Conflict contributes to that vulnerability, thus explaining disasters and conflict co-occurrence.

Deciding to respond to or reduce the risk of disasters is challenging during HIC for humanitarian aid and societal actors due to insecurity or reduced access to the affected zones. In this study I seek to move beyond international frameworks promoting and guiding DRR and disaster response because they neither include nor problematise ways of addressing disasters in conflict-affected contexts. While contributing to addressing these gaps and challenges, I answer the following research question: How is disaster governance shaped and how are disaster response and disaster risk reduction promoted and implemented by aid and societal actors (state and non-state ones) in a context of high-intensity conflict? The thesis is based on the cases of South Sudan (2017), Afghanistan (2018), and Yemen (2019).

In order to describe and analyse the socially-constructed processes of disaster response and risk reduction in HIC settings, I developed a theoretical framework using the concepts of disaster governance, aid-society actors, humanitarian arena, violent conflict, and everyday politics and power relationships.

Empirical data collected was collected over more than fifteen months of fieldwork research on the cases of South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yemen and a comprehensive literature review in the fields of disaster response, DRR, and humanitarian aid actions. Employing a qualitative, small-N case study methodology, the general strategy was to have a particular focus of study in each case to delve into different angles of the main research problematique and case-specific questions. The case of South Sudan focuses on decision-making processes in HIC scenarios. The case of Afghanistan delves into DRR dynamics. The case of Yemen studies the gap and transition from development and disaster risk reduction to relief.

I organised my thesis into nine chapters. Chapter 1 presents the research problem, justification, and question. Chapter 2 presents an overview of the cases and information on the interaction between conflict and disaster. Chapters 3 and 4 present the methodological and theoretical frameworks and the literature review. Chapters 5 to 7 present the journal articles with the results of each studied case. Chapter 8 presents a comparative analysis of the results to respond comprehensively to the research

sub-questions. Chapter 9 closes with an answer to the main research questions, a discussion of the studies and the results, and the implications and contribution of my thesis to the fields of disasters and humanitarian aid.

In the case of South Sudan I developed the notion of 'triage' of aid to study the continuous and political decision-making processes in HIC scenarios. I found that humanitarian action is largely locked into path-dependent areas of intervention, which contradicts its supposed flexibility to respond to the most affected people and places. In the case of Afghanistan I found that DRR in HIC is possible and can play a relevant role in conflict dynamics (positive and negative). However, this requires that different levels of conflict be acknowledged, sufficient time and funding be available, and that disaster governance arrangements be in place. In the case of Yemen, I found a lack of knowledge and coordination in the transition from development and DRR to relief. However, this also reveals spaces and opportunities to advance towards a better integration of the two types of assistance.

My comparative analysis of the cases found that disaster governance, DRR, and response are possible and needed during HIC moments, but the scale and impact of those actions are likely to be limited. In addition, due to the lack of (capable) governance structures and significant levels of state fragility, DRR and disaster response promotion and implementation during HIC moments rely on top-down international agendas, which are adapted and politically negotiated by multiple aid and society actors at different levels.

In terms of contributions, *empirically*, I present real case evidence and knowledge based on fieldwork research, studying a broad range of actors and practices. I also contribute by providing novel information on disasters and disaster-related actions during high-intensity conflict in countries where this information is generally limited. *Theoretically*, I contribute to bridging humanitarian and disaster studies, thereby allowing for the study of disaster-related action in an interdisciplinary manner. I also reflect upon, deepen and sharpen the concepts of high-intensity conflict, triage of aid, and the development-humanitarian nexus. My thesis also contributes to the debates and knowledge on the relationship between disaster and conflict, the path dependency of humanitarian action, the humanitarian arena, and to the study of real governance processes such as decision-making and agenda-setting in the disaster and humanitarian context. *Methodologically*, I contribute to the development of safer and more secure fieldwork procedures in high-intensity conflict situation; while operationalising ethical norms in research practices.

Through my dissertation I provide important *insights and recommendations for policy and practice*. First, attempting DRR in high intensity conflict is necessary because despite its often limited short-term feasibility, addressing disaster in conflict-affected scenarios brings positive long-term benefits, which includes saving lives, facilitating education continuity, or creating more resilient livelihoods. Second, including conflict in disaster policies and agendas, especially global agreements like the Sendai Framework for action is necessary and would require the mobilisation of funds and the development of a long-term strategy. Third, DRR and disaster response in HIC requires better and more informed links with humanitarian and development aid agendas.

*Keywords: disaster risk reduction, disaster response, high-intensity conflict, humanitarian aid, governance, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen.*

