

Constructing disaster response governance in post-conflict settings: Contention, collaboration and compromise

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Abstract

What happens ‘when disaster meets post-conflict’? After a disaster unfolds in a post-conflict environment, a myriad of state and non-state actors negotiate the conditions of the response. Although the co-occurrence of disasters and conflict has been increasingly recognized in the academic literature, disaster response policies and practices are seldom sensitive to the post-conflict governance setting, which is typically described as ‘fragile’. In the response to disasters, contrasting governance systems — including the fickle processes of statebuilding and the international machinery of disaster response — become intertwined. International disaster governance policies, especially the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, accord a central role to the state, which is assumed to be clearly organized and capable. This contrasts with the reality of the hybrid nature of post-conflict governance that is in institutional flux and (internally) contested. In this thesis, I take an empirical, actor-oriented approach and set out to understand *how aid, state and societal actors socially negotiate the governance of disaster response in a post-conflict scenario*.

Using a qualitative, small-N, multiple case study I was able to construct a post-conflict ‘scenario’ of disaster response. I started the research with a review of current literature, which was complemented by an exploratory study in Burundi, to create a theoretical framework based on literature from conflict-, disaster- and humanitarian studies. I then selected three cases: the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal, the 2017 Regent landslide and floods in Sierra Leone, and the 2016 storm, Hurricane Matthew, in Haiti. Over twelve months of in-country research resulted in a total of 273 qualitative, semi-structured interviews and 18 community-based focus group discussions. Each of the case studies focused on a specific governance relationship, between international and national actors, within the state, and between state and society, enabling a deeper understanding of the research problem and the construction of the post-conflict scenario.

In the first case, Nepal (chapter 4), I focus on the more traditional aid-state relationship, finding that the main point of friction concerned the contradiction between post-conflict statebuilding and international humanitarian response. This resulted in what might be described as the ‘wheeling and dealing’ of aid; aid actors creatively complied with the state-centred response when the Nepali state increased compliancy measures to reclaim control over the response. In the second case, Sierra Leone (chapter 5), I focus on the complexities of intra-state relations, finding a tension between the state-centred policies that imply a certain homogeneity, and the hybridity of the state in practice. State actors on multiple governance levels contend with each other for a larger role in the response, as a result of which there are limited roles for local authorities and community stakeholders. In the third case, Haiti (chapter 6), I take a more bottom-up perspective, finding that — humanitarian commitments for a more locally led response notwithstanding — the space for societal actors in disaster response remains limited due to the disarticulation they experience, particularly in relation to the state. To negotiate response outcomes, societal actors resist certain aid practices and seek out alternative forms of solidarity.

Finally, similarities between these cases in relation to the role of ‘the local’ led me to deconstruct the multiple dimensions of the local in post-conflict disaster response (chapter 7). The findings exposed three main constructions and their consequences; ‘the local as locale’, which ignored local power dynamics; ‘the local as governance’, where local–national relations and intra-national strife were not adequately taken into account and the focus on national actors excluded local actors from disaster response; and ‘the local as legitimation’, where responders used the discourse on local actors to legitimize their own role as response agents.

Based on the analysis of the case studies and the multi-local comparative focus, I conclude the thesis with the construction of a post-conflict scenario of disaster in which the convergence of different forms of governance produces three main points of tension: 1) an imbalance between statebuilding and humanitarian action; 2) a misunderstanding of state hybridity and the multi-local; and 3) a limited space for societal actors to take part in disaster governance structures. Response actors socially negotiate the conditions, roles and responsibilities of governance through tactics of contention, collaboration and compromise, which all actors deploy in different degrees and combinations, depending on inter-actor relationships.

With these findings, I challenge the social construction of post-conflict ‘fragility’ and the power relations between global, national and local actors in disaster response. In order for the governance of disaster response to practise what humanitarian commitments and disaster policies preach — namely a combined state and locally led governance of the response — these constructions need to be better understood by practitioners and reflected in such global policies and frameworks as the Sendai Framework and the Grand Bargain.

This research contributes to filling a gap in the humanitarian literature on the post-conflict and post-disaster nexus, with its inherent tensions and paradoxes. Further, it advocates for a more nuanced understanding in both disaster and humanitarian policies and frameworks of how aid, state or locally led governance is socially negotiated in practice. Moreover, throughout the research, it was my goal to translate theory in order to contribute to practice by engaging with different humanitarian practitioners and policy-makers in workshops and meetings, producing research briefs of the case studies, working as a consultant in practice-oriented research, and supporting the creation of a free massive online open course (MOOC) on disaster response in different conflict contexts.

Keywords: *disaster response; post-conflict; governance; humanitarian aid; localization; Burundi; Nepal; Sierra Leone; Haiti*