International
Institute of
Social Studies

When Disaster Meets Conflict

A scenario-based approach to the politics of disaster governance in conflict settings

WHEN
DISASTER
MEETS
CONFLICT

Key messages

- Existing research on the disaster-conflict nexus is commonly too general to inform practice. A scenario-based approach that centres on comparable cases can help aid actors to learn, identify and apply best practices in their specific context.

- Research from the 'When disaster meets conflict' programme analyses how state, non-state and humanitarian actors respond to disasters in three conflict scenarios: high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and post-conflict.

- International policy models for disaster response and risk reduction, including the Sendai Framework for Action, do not pay sufficient attention to conflict-affected settings and should be more attuned to the influence of conflict, structural and cultural violence on disaster impacts and response.

- Recognizing the importance of the co-occurrence of conflict and disaster dynamics, is not only relevant for high-intensity conflict, but should include contexts of post and low-intensity conflict, where structural and cultural violence overshadow physical violence and humanitarian activities and access may be hampered by legal restrictions, bureaucratic constraints, and a climate of uncertainty and fear.

- Aid actors in conflict-affected areas need to strengthen their analytical and advocacy capacities to enable a more strategic and contextual navigation of politics – adjusting their work to politics when they must, and advocating for marginalised communities and local actors when they can.

- Special attention must be paid to the roles of national actors, bearing in mind that the current localisation agenda that aims to 'localise' a top-down system, may in reality be selective and exclusive, and may exacerbate tensions and conflict between different groups and governance levels.

- Aid actors should at the very least unite in the commitment to do no harm in disaster-conflict settings. This requires investing in understanding disaster politics and conflict dynamics at the national and local levels.

Keywords

disaster response – humanitarian aid – high-intensity, low-intensity and post-conflict – authoritarianism – localisation – governance – Sendai Framework for Action – Grand Bargain – Afghanistan – South Sudan – Yemen – Ethiopia – Myanmar – Zimbabwe – Haiti – Sierra Leone - Nepal - everyday politics - hybrid state

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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**.

5 YEARS

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

AFGHANISTAN
MYANMAR
SOUTH SUDAN
YEMEN
NEPAL
HAITI
SIERRA LEONE
ETHIOPIA
ZIMBABWE

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

- Policy models for responding to disasters related to natural hazards have changed considerably in recent decades: away from reacting to disasters and towards more proactive risk reduction; and away from state-centred top-down approaches and towards involving non-state actors and communities.

- However, research and policy only recently started paying attention to how this works in conflict-affected settings, where more than 30% of disasters unfold. Disasters are more likely to occur in such settings because conflict intensifies vulnerability and erodes response capacities. The exacerbating effects work both ways, as disasters increase vulnerabilities and intensify the effects of conflict. However, existing disaster policy, such as the Sendai Framework for Action, does not take this into account.

- Most existing research on the disaster-conflict nexus either treats conflict as a single decontextualised reality or contends that context matters so much that insights cannot be generalised. Both tendencies are of little help to practitioners and policy-makers.

- It is clear that best practices are not consistently applied in humanitarian action. There are many reasons for this, including political interests and inertia. But it is also related to the fact the best practices are usually too general and decontextualised.

- To bridge these gaps, the 'When Disaster Meets Conflict' research programme takes a scenario-based approach. It studies humanitarian aid and disaster governance in three conflict-affected settings: high-intensity, low-intensity and post-conflict settings. In this way, the programme generates more applicable insights and lessons for aid actors.

Key findings

Decision-making and coordination

In conflict-affected places, the decision-making structures for and coordination of disaster-related aid are mostly designed around top-down agendas that are defined at international levels and promoted by external donors, UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and development organisations. This applies across HIC, LIC and PC settings, but important differences can be found between the three conflict scenarios.

Deciding whether to respond, where, with whom and for whom is socially negotiated between multiple aid and society actors at different levels (national, institutional, and local), and 'real' disaster governance evolves from these processes.

- Decision-making is always complex and based on more than need alone. Setting aid priorities happens at the level of formal arrangements, but also in everyday politics. Power plays a role in different ways: every stakeholder seeks through different means to set agendas and determine how aid is shaped.

- States – as all actors – try to use disaster to further their own agendas. In HIC settings, the state is usually contested, and stakeholders feel legitimised to circumvent it. LIC settings often have a strong state with authoritarian tendencies where the state effectively determines what happens, often to the detriment of minorities or the regions that are home to political opposition. In PC settings, disaster response gets intertwined

with state building, and there is often a disconnect between the central role accorded to states and aid actors' circumvention of state power. State roles can diverge from national to local levels, especially in PC and HIC scenarios.

- In the HIC scenario, aid action tends to be locked into path-dependent programming. Agencies tend to stay and work in the same areas and sectors over time, rather than moving to locations where aid is needed most. There are many factors that play into this, including operational challenges, inflexibility of humanitarian financing, the influence of local actors and the roles of private companies involved in aid delivery.

Coordination is made challenging by the presence of a high number of aid and development actors in affected countries.

- In HIC scenario, humanitarian aid actors are already present in the countries responding to the humanitarian crises resulting from the conflict. HIC settings have fractured governance systems placing international actors at the forefront of coordination and funding, but aid delivery is mainly done by national and local actors. Disaster response tends to be subsumed under conflict response.

- The LIC scenario features governance structures characterised by significant levels of state control and apparent collaboration between multiple aid and state actors. Tensions abound under the surface, however, with aid actors navigating bureaucracy and aiming to service people in need while avoiding confrontation with the state.

- In the PC scenario, aid actors tend to align with objectives of state-building and seek to validate the central role of the state. At the same time, they by-pass state aid actors at different levels because they perceive the state to have limited capacities for coordination and implementation. Tensions often abound between disaster response delivered by humanitarians and ongoing development programming.

Localisation and the role of local actors

Humanitarian actors have committed to localising humanitarian funding and governance. However, the localisation agenda often views 'the local' as a uniform category without understanding its multiple dimensions.

In all three scenarios, the localisation of disaster response governance is complicated by tensions between national and local actors, making 'the local' a contested political space. However, this plays out differently in each context.

- In the HIC scenario, fractured national governance systems result in a scattering of largely autonomous regional and local level systems of governance. Aid actors may not always operate through these systems, finding it challenging to fully understand and navigate evolving 'real' governance arrangements. This is further impeded when international political factors prevent aid actors from working with armed opposition groups.

- In the authoritarian LIC scenario, collaboration with local actors is often centrally controlled through legal and bureaucratic regulations. LIC dynamics often mean that only civil society actors that align with the state are acceptable, while the space for others, especially those working with or advocating support for ethnic or religious minority groups, is restricted.

- In the PC scenario, tensions abound between different levels and domains of the state, each seeking to expand its mandate and financial power. The central state is often far removed from the affected populations and local authorities. Aid actors may find themselves subject to the push and pull of intra-state competition, and will often tend to concentrate too heavily on the central state alone.

Due to the top-down and internationally centred nature of disaster response, civil society actors are often sidelined in disaster governance.

- In the HIC scenario, local actors often implement a large part of the response but are not part of central decision making. The ethics of 'outsourcing' security risks is a major issue.

- In the LIC scenario, international funding comes with restrictions on the scope of the response. Further, local actors face great difficulties developing in a restricted civil space, yet this is often framed by international actors as 'local actors lacking capabilities'. With so much attention paid to the tensions between national sovereignty and humanitarian intervention, local actors tend to fall outside of the picture.

- In the PC scenario, balancing state-building with humanitarian action leaves little space for local actors to take part in disaster governance. National and local NGOs are considered implementing partners but are not always accepted in state-aid coordination mechanisms. Further, intra-state tensions in the transitional institutional context overshadow civil society action and politicise the division of aid.

Although international aid actors collaborate with local response actors, different local actors are not always accepted as legitimate responders.

- In the HIC scenario, local actors face serious security risks. They provide and deliver the vast majority of humanitarian and disaster aid, including disaster risk reduction (DRR), but have little or no say over funding and coordination.

- In the LIC scenario, local actors are often represented as biased and partisan, even when raising legitimate concerns about the rights and needs of communities. This legitimises the continued dominance of international actors, who are framed as more 'neutral'.

- In the PC scenario, the discourse of 'the community knows best' is generally accepted, but in practice international aid actors often legitimise their presence by highlighting the weak capacities or corruption of both local NGOs and state institutions, while ignoring comparable problems with their own integrity and relying on a limited definition of 'capacity'.

(De)politicisation and humanitarian advocacy

Disaster response inevitably becomes part of the politics of conflict. Actors use the disaster in their struggle for control and legitimacy.

- The state may instrumentalise or even 'weaponise' the disaster response to achieve political goals. It can prevent aid from reaching certain areas so as to weaken an area held by armed opposition groups (as seen in HIC settings), or further marginalise a minority group (as seen in LIC settings).

- In the PC scenario, disaster response and state-building intertwine. Disaster response can play into – helpfully or not – legislative processes (for instance, accelerating the new constitution in Nepal) or can be exploited for electoral gain, as in Haiti and Sierra Leone.

On the other hand, **disaster response can also de-escalate conflict dynamics**, such as through DRR programmes in Afghanistan, **or be framed as a neutral and technocratic space enabling collaboration**, such as in the LIC contexts of Ethiopia and Myanmar.

The representation of disaster response as neutral and technical can help responders navigate politics but has important ethical and practical implications.

- In both the HIC and LIC scenario, disaster response is mainly framed as non-political. Aid actors depend heavily on authorities to provide them with legitimacy, access and safety. They rely especially on local authorities in the case of HIC and on the national state in the case of authoritarian LIC.

- In the LIC scenario, non-state actors find it difficult to openly challenge state-led response systems. Most non-state actors opt for a non-confrontational, self-censoring approach – navigating around challenges rather than tackling them head-on, and refraining from speaking out.

- In doing so, however, aid actors run the risk of effectively ignoring the needs of communities unfavoured by the state, reinforcing power imbalances, and contributing to shrinking humanitarian and civil society space.

- In the PC scenario, self-censorship is less common. There is more space for openly negotiating the targeting and deployment of aid, for confrontation and for advocacy. Local actors generally have more room for manoeuvre to shape aid practices.

Conclusions and recommendations

- **Adopting a scenario-based approach** that centres on comparable cases can help aid actors to learn, identify and apply best practices in their specific context.

- Aid actors need to **strengthen their analytical and advocacy capacities to enable a more strategic and contextual navigation of politics** – circumventing politics when they must and advocating for marginalised communities and local actors when they can. This is especially relevant in conflict-affected areas, where the politics of disaster may be more highly charged than in other places.

- International **disaster policy**, including the Sendai Framework, should become cognisant of the frequent **co-occurrence of conflict and disaster**, recognise the **varying roles of the state** in disaster response, and be more attuned to the widespread influence of **structural and cultural violence** on disaster impacts and response.

- Aid actors have different mandates with regard to disaster response and humanitarian assistance and differ in the extent to which they want to contribute to advocacy and peacebuilding. Yet, they should **unite in the commitment to do no harm**. This requires investing in understanding the disaster politics and conflict dynamics at the national and local levels.

About the researchers

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More information

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

Publications

A selection of key publications is listed below.

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