International Institute of Social Studies

Constructing disaster response governance in post-conflict settings

WHEN DISASTER MEETS CONFLICT

Key findings

- This research brief is based on a four-year research project on disaster response governance in post-conflict settings. The findings of three case studies – Nepal, Sierra Leone and Haiti – resonate with each other in the way aid, state and societal actors negotiate the governance of the disaster responses.

- When a disaster unfolds in a post-conflict setting, aid actors need to balance their post-conflict statebuilding agendas with humanitarian action. Getting it wrong risks undermining or delegitimising the state's role in the response, excluding local actors and reproducing unequal power relations or other drivers of the previous conflicts.

- State-centred international disaster governance policies and humanitarian commitments wrongly assume that the state and the local are homogeneous entities. In reality, states are made up of different, co-constitutive, formal and informal institutions and mechanisms, and the local has multiple dimensions (the multi-local). This poses particular challenges for inclusive disaster response governance.

- The role for societal actors in the governance of the response is partly defined by tensions in state–society relations, where power is contested by everyday resistance (such as not following rules, or foot-dragging) and communities rely on solidarity (such as sharing aid and organising community work).

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
ETHIOPIA
HAITI
SIERRA LEONE
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

- Although the co-occurrence of disasters and conflict has been increasingly recognised in the academic literature, international **disaster governance** policies, especially the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, accord a central role to the state, which is assumed to be organised and capable. This contrasts with the reality of the hybrid nature of **post-conflict governance**, characterised by institutional flux and internal contestation.

- **Humanitarian governance** has traditionally been characterised by a mandate of exceptionality, resulting in top-town, centralised interventions by international actors. Current frameworks and commitments, such as the localisation agenda and the Grand Bargain, promote locally led humanitarian governance but do not consider the power relations involved or distinguish between post-conflict and other governance contexts.

- This research brief shares key findings of research that explored the social negotiations by state, aid and societal actors when humanitarian, disaster and post-conflict governance systems converge. It analysed three cases of disaster response governance in a post-conflict conflict setting: Nepal after the earthquakes in 2015, Haiti after Hurricane Matthew in 2016, and Sierra Leone after the mudslide and floods in the Regent area of Freetown in 2017.

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Features of post-conflict settings and why it is interesting to study them

Although there is no single definition of what constitutes 'post-conflict', this research distinguishes between the different dimensions of a post-conflict setting: **as a temporal state** – a place and time different from others; **as a set of conditions** – starting from a peace agreement; and **as a governance discourse** – legitimising certain practices.
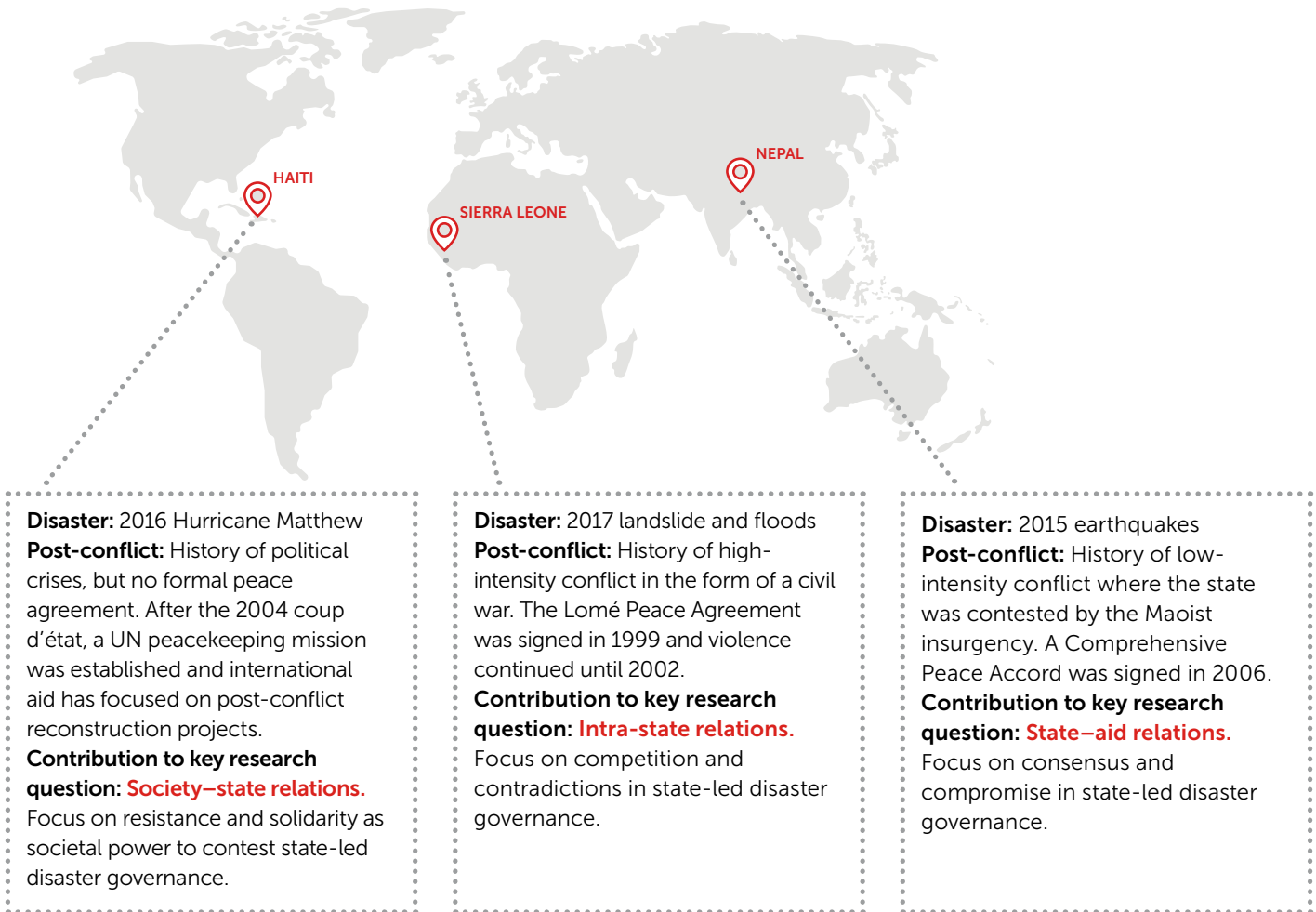
- As a **temporal state**, post-conflict is delineated by a preceding period of violent conflict that has been at least partly subdued. However, the risk of recurrent conflict remains and the history of conflict strongly shapes state-society relations. To understand the different dimensions of post-conflict requires a historical perspective that extends to post-colonial power relations between and within different categories of responders in a globalised setting.

- As a **set of conditions**, post-conflict is characterised by state-centred, top-down policies and practices since the 1990s associated with externally designed and driven 'liberal peacebuilding and statebuilding' to strengthen institutions and reduce the risk of renewed conflict. This fits with the discourse of post-conflict states as 'fragile states' needing strengthening because of their diminished capacity for basic state functions.

- As a **governance discourse**, post-conflict is often guided by a paradigm of statebuilding and characterised by uncertainties in a transitional space, heightening everyday politics and contention between actors – particularly within the state and in state–society relations.

Research focus and methods

The research explored the challenges of the convergence of humanitarian, disaster and post-conflict governance systems, focusing on three country case studies: Nepal, Sierra Leone and Haiti

Key research question | How do aid, state and societal actors negotiate disaster response governance in post-conflict setting?

Approach | The findings are based on 273 qualitative semi-structured interviews with diverse state, aid and societal actors, eight participatory focus groups with a total of 120 affected persons, as well as informal exchanges and observations during four months of fieldwork in each of the case study countries.

HAITI

SIERRA LEONE

NEPAL

Disaster: 2016 Hurricane Matthew
Post-conflict: History of political crises, but no formal peace agreement. After the 2004 coup d'état, a UN peacekeeping mission was established and international aid has focused on post-conflict reconstruction projects.
Contribution to key research question: Society–state relations. Focus on resistance and solidarity as societal power to contest state-led disaster governance.

Disaster: 2017 landslide and floods
Post-conflict: History of high-intensity conflict in the form of a civil war. The Lomé Peace Agreement was signed in 1999 and violence continued until 2002.
Contribution to key research question: Intra-state relations. Focus on competition and contradictions in state-led disaster governance.

Disaster: 2015 earthquakes
Post-conflict: History of low-intensity conflict where the state was contested by the Maoist insurgency. A Comprehensive Peace Accord was signed in 2006.
Contribution to key research question: State–aid relations. Focus on consensus and compromise in state-led disaster governance.

Findings

Case study overview

Nepal

Contradictions between post-conflict statebuilding and international humanitarian response | The high influx of aid organisations, with their own mandates and approaches, overpowering the state was a central issue in Nepal's post-conflict context that was undergoing political reforms. Therefore, the state took measures to reclaim control over the response and aid actors adapted in different ways to creatively comply and continue to balance consensus-oriented disaster response governance with the humanitarian imperative to support those most in need.

Sierra Leone

Challenges of state-centred disaster policies amid intra-state tensions | Internal state tensions on multiple levels created contention within the state-led response, wherein different state institutions vied for a larger role and increased legitimacy. This led to delays in the response, with local authorities feeling side-lined and increased societal mistrust of the state.

Haiti

Limited space for societal actors in the governance of the response | Societal actors felt excluded from decisions on the conditions of aid, so they relied on community solidarity and resistance to certain response practices, for example by refusing to follow instructions and by seeking to increase their access to aid in informal ways. This highlights the challenge of collaborative disaster response where a state disregards the people's needs and wants, and where 'bouncing back' translates into resisting the power of both state and aid actors.

Cross-case, multi-level challenges

This section presents three core challenges that resonated in all three cases and shows how aid, state and societal actors socially negotiate the governance of disaster response in post-conflict settings.

The contradiction between statebuilding and humanitarian action

- **State control and capacity and legitimation discourses |** The discourse of aid actors centres around 'supporting the state' with 'the state in charge', in line with current disaster governance and post-conflict statebuilding policies. In practice, however, many aid actors perceive certain states as incapable, untransparent and potentially corrupt – a perception that served to legitimise their own control of aid resources and strengthen their decision-making power in the response.

- **Creative compliance to negotiate control |** To balance the state's role with humanitarian action, aid actors often found ways to creatively comply with the state approach. However, they also by-passed certain levels of the state. The state often tried to regain control over external aid actors by focusing on compliance through bureaucracy, rules and regulations: this increased the state's control and strengthened its legitimacy, but also enabled it (on certain levels) to use aid for political gain.

- **The power of historical pathways favours aid actors |** Histories of conflict and colonialism strongly shape inter-actor relations, with the idea of the 'the international' partly deriving authority from post-colonial power relations and their institutionalisation in current practices.

Misunderstanding of state hybridity and the multi-local

- **The multi-local and state hybridity do not fit international governance |** Humanitarian policies and practices often see the state and the local as homogenous entities. This is part of a discourse of 'local governance', wherein national and local governance levels are often treated as one, and the 'local' and 'national' are used interchangeably. The multiple dimensions of the local and state hybridity that characterise national and local actors in post-conflict settings were generally ignored.

- **Intra-state and local–national tensions were not recognised |** Intra-state (within and between state institutions) and local–national competition complicated the responses, making collaboration more difficult, causing delays and negatively affecting the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the affected communities.

- **Legitimating response roles |** The 'local' was used for legitimation or de-legitimation by state, aid and societal actors alike. For example, while all actors stress that 'the community knows best', state actors also asserted that people needed to be more strictly controlled. The 'local as legitimate' was also seen in community participation practices. Being perceived to be closer to the affected community strengthened the legitimacy of the aid actor.

- **Persistent power imbalances |** The power imbalances between the local, national and global actors have not been redressed in the practice of aid localisation. In the end, the blurred boundaries of the state and the local prevented power relations from being transformed.

> **" Intra-state (within and between state institutions) and local–national competition complicated the responses, making collaboration more difficult, causing delays and negatively affecting the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the affected communities. "**

The limited space for societal actors to take part in disaster governance structures

- **The centre of power remains at the national and international level |** While there was a large societal response in all the case studies, the role of societal actors in the formal disaster governance structures and mechanisms remained limited due to the power of both aid and state actors. The further the state authorities were removed from the communities, the more communities saw them as outsiders who were corrupt and responsible for the failings of the response.

- **Responses increased pre-existing vulnerabilities |** Tense society–state relations contributed to the reproduction of vulnerabilities. Although recognising the state's responsibility for disaster response, societal actors often rejected its authority.

- **Real localisation entails the power to resist |** Although societal actors did not feel they have much power to address these issues effectively, there were instances of everyday resistance and claim-making that were directed at the state at different levels. This resistance was a means to renegotiate the centre of power from the bottom up.

- **The exclusion of societal actors from decision-making platforms |** Civil society groups and private sector responders generally opted out of collaboration within the state aid coordination systems. People often felt excluded by these systems, and aid was not always seen as appropriate.

> **" The localisation of humanitarian governance, in its current form, is inherently contradictory; to 'localise' is a top-down action targeting the 'local' actors who can fit — or be made to fit — within a global system, regardless of how different local governance structures already function. "**

Conclusion

- Post-conflict settings pose particular challenges for disaster response, mainly due to the **political and societal changes that characterise their transitional nature**, and the high density of aid actors with long-term mandates.

- Both the post-conflict and the humanitarian governance contexts are marked by **volatility and transition**, which creates a political space in which response actors compete over disaster response roles.

- The role of aid actors is highly contested and **power relations remain unequal between international and national/local organisations**. Similarly, the role of state actors is generally undermined by the **contradictions between state-centred disaster response policies and international aid centred practices**.

- Furthermore, **the role of societal actors is overshadowed** by the centrality of international aid and national state actors.

- The localisation of humanitarian governance, in its current form, is inherently contradictory; to 'localise' is a top-down action **targeting the 'local' actors who can fit – or be made to fit – within a global system**, regardless of how different local governance structures already function.

- Consensus-oriented disaster governance thus **risks benefiting those actors who already have more authority and resources**. By understanding the power relations between different response actors, how these are negotiated, and the impacts they have, different types of compromises can be made, and collaborations can be sought.

- Adopting a **multi-local lens**, the tensions **between national and local responders** remains one of the main challenges to be overcome for a more locally led disaster response in post-conflict settings.

Recommendations

- **Better recognise local and national capacities |** Post-conflict states are often seen as 'fragile'; in terms of disaster response this fragility is socially constructed by the response actors as national and local actors' inability to effectively respond or to coordinate the response and as their susceptibility to corruption. This serves to delegitimise the role of the state and local actors and legitimise external interventions.

- **Support local-national collaboration |** The relationship between the state and societal actors requires downward accountability from the state in order to open the space for societal collaboration. International aid actors' support for a more inclusive response can serve to strengthen local-national relations.

- **Advocate inclusive governance in humanitarian practices |** Multi-level and multi-actor governance arrangements need to be integrated in disaster response. Otherwise, disaster response practices will strengthen only national-level state-centred disaster governance while failing to support local-level capacities. This risks increasing existing tensions between society and the state.

- **Strengthen participation and accountability |** Voices from outside of the aid system must be recognised and listened to. Policies and practices should be reconfigured by the people whose lives are most impacted by disasters and the responses to them.

More information

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

This brief is predominantly based on a series of published reports, country-specific research briefs, and journal articles. For more findings see:

Melis, S. (Accepted, 2020). Post-conflict disaster governance in Nepal: One-door policy, multiple-window practice. Disasters, disa.12455. https://doi.org/10.1111/disa.12455. And research brief.

Melis, S., & Apthorpe, R. (in press, 2020). The politics of the multi-local in disaster governance. Politics and Governance, 8(4).

Melis, S., & Hilhorst, D. (2020). When the mountain broke: disaster governance in Sierra Leone. Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal (ahead-of-print). https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-03-2020-0076. And research brief.

Melis, S., & Jean, M. (under review). Weathering the storm: Contesting disaster governance after Hurricane Matthew in Haiti. Journal of International Humanitarian Action.

About the author

Samantha Melis holds a PhD from the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) of Erasmus University (EUR) in The Hague (melis@iss.nl).

Acknowledgement

International Institute of Social Studies
Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

www.iss.nl
+31 (0)70 426 0460