

Disaster response and DRR in high-intensity conflict settings

WHEN
DISASTER
MEETS
CONFLICT

Key findings

- While disasters are common in high-intensity conflict (HIC) settings owing to high levels of vulnerability, disaster response and disaster risk reduction (DRR) tend to be overshadowed, with more international political and media attention focused on the conflict.
- Fractured governance systems in HIC settings put international humanitarian actors at the forefront of coordinating and funding responses, with national and local actors doing most of the actual implementation.
- Decision-making and coordination of disaster-related actions are mostly designed around top-down agendas defined at international levels and promoted by external donors, UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and development organisations. Adapting these to local conditions is a challenge.
- DRR in HIC scenarios is often seen as unfeasible, but research demonstrates that it is feasible in geographically limited ways and providing it takes a conflict-sensitive, 'do no harm' approach.
- Advancing disaster response and DRR in HIC contexts requires recognition of the reciprocal impact of conflict and disasters in international policies such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. It also requires the mobilisation of funds and the development of strategies to address disaster in places affected by armed conflict.

Keywords

disaster risk reduction – disaster response – high-intensity conflict – humanitarian aid – governance – South Sudan – Afghanistan – Yemen

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**.



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



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

- This brief zooms in on disaster governance in the context of high-intensity conflict (HIC) based on research conducted in South Sudan, Afghanistan, and Yemen – countries characterised by periods of large-scale violent conflict amid protracted crises, significant levels of state fragility, and fractured governance systems.
- Disasters such as droughts, floods and earthquakes are social and political phenomena arising from the interaction between extreme natural events and people’s vulnerability to harm and loss. Conflict contributes to that vulnerability and erodes capacities to deal with disaster, yet international policies do not problematise how to respond to or reduce the risk of disasters in places affected by violent conflict.
- Disaster response and DRR in places affected by HIC are challenging due to insecurity or reduced access to the places affected.
- This brief shares key findings of research that examined the processes of DRR and disaster response in three country cases where HIC and disasters coincide: South Sudan in 2017, Afghanistan in 2018, and Yemen in 2019.

Features of HICs, and why it is interesting to study them

- **Fragmented governance** | In HIC settings, territorial control is divided between internationally recognised governments and one or more armed groups. Large-scale violence results in fragmented governance systems and the state’s inability to provide basic goods and services or to coordinate aid efforts.
- **High levels of violence** | HIC settings are characterised by violent clashes between armed groups, targeted attacks and other physical violence which, in addition to costing lives and affecting people’s livelihoods, hinder the provision of humanitarian aid. This creates dangerous environments that complicate logistics and access and threaten the lives of aid actors.
- **Humanitarian needs far exceed the local capacity for aid** | The conflict and fragmented governance systems often result in a large-scale social and humanitarian crisis, with people displaced within and outside the country. The number of people requiring assistance and the complexity of the crisis result in a large international aid presence, including international NGOs, UN agencies, and donor organisations.

Research focus and methods

Main objective | To examine how disaster governance is shaped and how DRR and disaster response are promoted and implemented by aid and societal actors (including state and non-state actors) in HIC settings.

Case studies | This research is based on three cases: the South Sudan case focuses on decision-making processes in HIC scenarios; the Afghanistan cases delves into DRR dynamics; the Yemen case studies the transition from development and DRR to relief.



Approach | Four to six months of qualitative fieldwork in each country, with semi-structured interviews, informal exchanges, observation and participatory activities. Research participants included community members, state officials, armed group representatives, civil society and private sector representatives, international humanitarian actors and donor agencies.

Challenges | Difficulties reaching affected territories, unsafe environments, corruption, mistrust, and problems related to the availability of and access to information, amongst others.

Findings

This section presents the findings from each case studied. These findings were then assessed, ratified, and further developed in relation to the other two cases. Following these case-specific findings, more cross-cutting findings are presented:



Learning from the cases

- **South Sudan** | To describe what was happening in South Sudan, the term of 'triage of aid' was developed to explain the continuous political decision-making processes around aid (beyond targeting) to decide to who, how, and when disaster response and humanitarian aid will be delivered. A key finding was that, as a result of this triage, humanitarian action is largely locked into path-dependent areas of intervention. This means that agencies tend to stay and work in the same areas and sectors over time, which contradicts its supposed flexibility for responding to the most affected people and places.

- **Afghanistan** | This case shows that DRR in HIC scenarios is possible and that it can play into in conflict dynamics, either positively or negatively. However, this requires recognition of different levels of conflict across HIC-affected countries, that sufficient time and funding be made available to support the work, and that disaster governance arrangements are in place.
- **Yemen** | There was little knowledge of and few attempts to coordinate the transition from development and DRR to relief in this case. This suggests opportunities for better integrating the two types of assistance.



On how disaster and conflict relate in HIC

- **Disaster and conflict relationships are multilevel** | Disaster and conflict interact in different ways at the macro (national), meso (regional/provincial) and micro (local) levels. This is important because even if a macro-level conflict ceased, for example between the Taliban and the Government of Afghanistan, there would still be multiple conflicts at the meso and micro levels, impacting people and interacting with disaster.
- **Disaster affects conflict primarily at the meso and micro levels** | Disaster effects, response, and DRR can trigger, exacerbate or reduce conflict. For example, the changing availability of river water as a result of floods or the building of flood prevention walls can create conflict between up- and down-stream communities.
- **HIC both affects and overshadows disasters** | At all levels, conflict can worsen people's vulnerability to disasters and create needs that surpass capacities to respond to them. Conflict dynamics also overshadow disasters, with most media and political attention focusing on the macro conflict.
- **Logistical challenges of working in HIC settings** | HIC scenarios create a challenging environment for responding to or reducing the risk of disaster. While the literature tends to focus on insecurity, access difficulties, or reduced supply of services and goods, most practitioners identified complex logistics as the overarching challenge. HIC scenarios multiply and magnify the many specific challenges and their effects, demanding large and expensive logistics operations.



Disaster governance, setting agendas, and decision-making

- **Disaster governance depends on international leadership** | In the absence of capable governance structures, DRR and disaster response in HIC scenarios rely on international funds and actors, whose agendas need to be adapted and politically negotiated by multiple aid and society actors at different levels.
- **Navigating through multiple authorities** | HIC settings are characterised by the presence of multiple authorities at different levels, including the internationally recognised government, the UN, the leadership of armed groups and other authorities at the sub-state or community levels, all seeking to further their own political agendas. Settings agendas, taking decisions, and acting requires capacities to negotiate and navigate through these constellations of overlapping and contested authority.

- **Decision-making is continuously negotiated** | The decision-making processes (to act or not and when and where) are negotiated in each country between multiple aid and society actors. These negotiations are then renegotiated in the 'triage of aid' at the micro, meso, and macro levels, meaning that local actors have some power to organise aid once it has been allocated.
- **Outsourcing risk** | Funding and implementation of aid are led by international actors but rely on local staff and local and national NGOs. This has benefits for legitimacy and access, as local actors know better the context in which they operate, but it is also associated with an 'outsourcing of risk' to local actors.



Linking disaster, development and relief

- **False assumptions about DRR** | In the HIC scenario, disaster governance is driven by the false assumption that only disaster response and humanitarian aid is possible, and that DRR must necessarily be associated with post-conflict development-related initiatives.
- **Development to relief transition** | When a territory enters a phase of HIC, many development-related programmes will cease and humanitarian relief will begin. However, this transition is often poorly coordinated and poorly informed, creating information, programming, and coordination gaps.
- **The importance of pockets of development** | In all three HIC cases, some places were not directly affected by the main conflict, allowing for the implementation of development or DRR projects. Such 'pockets of peace' or 'pockets of development' are important as they can serve as springboards for further DRR work once the intensity of the conflict reduces.



Disaster response and DRR in practice

- **Disaster response subsumed under humanitarian action** | Disaster response in HIC scenarios is usually subsumed under conflict-related humanitarian relief, which in practice can lack disaster-specific measures intended to facilitate disaster recovery and the prevention of future disasters.
- **Path-dependent cycle of operations** | Faced by the challenges of HIC scenarios and the need for local legitimacy, aid agencies often become locked in path-dependent cycles of operations, working mainly in areas and sectors where they already have projects. The same logic applies to their DRR work.
- **DRR in HIC is possible in limited ways** | DRR is possible and needed in HIC contexts, especially within 'pockets of development'. Its impact, however, is likely to be limited to those areas in which it can be implemented and where there is capacity to address the causes of disasters.
- **DRR focuses on mitigation infrastructure** | In all three countries, DRR projects tend to be hazard-oriented, with a focus on mitigation infrastructure and some community-level training on response-planning.

- **New, integrated DRR approaches** | While still in their infancy, new DRR approaches that integrate conflict sensitivity and ‘do no harm’ are slowly developing in HIC contexts.
- **Importance of flexible programmes and funding** | Noting the volatility of HIC contexts, our findings point to the importance of more flexible funding and programming.

Main conclusion and insights for policy and practice

Conflict affects disaster governance and needs to be addressed integrally.

- As conflict can affect disasters and disasters can affect conflict dynamics, findings suggest that effective disaster-related work in HIC requires high levels of conflict-sensitivity and a do-no-harm approach.
- While disaster governance in HIC is possible, it is rarely seen as a priority if it is perceived as feasible at all, with the main conflict taking up most of international attention and determining aid agendas.
- HIC results in lack of capable national governance structures to address disasters. As a consequence, disaster governance relies on international agendas and resources. These agendas, however, are not

easily adapted to conflict scenarios. It is therefore necessary to give more consideration to conflict in international disaster policies, especially global agreements like the Sendai Framework. This also requires the mobilisation of funds and the development of a long-term strategy.

Disaster governance requires a better link with humanitarian and development work.

- In HIC scenarios, disaster response is subsumed under humanitarian aid, whereas DRR is usually deemed unfeasible and seen as part of development-related programming. However, some DRR projects are implemented in HIC scenarios, usually to build mitigation infrastructure. This is slowly changing towards a more integrative approach to DRR.

More information

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

Mena, R. (2019). Prioritizing disaster response in a context of high-intensity conflict. The case of South Sudan. International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), EUR. <https://www.iss.nl/en/media/2019-04-drought-response-south-sudan>

Mena, R. (2019). Disaster Risk Reduction in a high-conflict setting: The case of Afghanistan (Research Brief No. 6). International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), EUR. <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/when-disaster-meets-conflict/societal-engagement>

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Mena, R., Hilhorst, D., & Peters, K. (2019). Disaster risk reduction and protracted violent conflict: The case of Afghanistan (p. 56). Overseas Development Institute (ODI) - International Institute of Social Sciences (ISS). <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12882.pdf>

Mena, R., Hilhorst, D. (2020) The (im)possibilities of disaster risk reduction in the context of high-intensity conflict: the case of Afghanistan, *Environmental Hazards*, DOI: 10.1080/17477891.2020.1771250

Mena R (2018) Responding to Socio-environmental Disasters in High-Intensity Conflict Scenarios: Challenges and Legitimation Strategies. In: Brauch HG, Oswald Spring U, Collins AE, et al. (eds.) *Climate Change, Disasters, Sustainability Transition and Peace in the Anthropocene*. 1st ed. Politik – Economics – Society – Science (APESS) 25. Berlin: Springer, pp. 27–66.

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.

About the author

Rodrigo Mena holds a PhD from the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague, part of Erasmus University Rotterdam (mena@iss.nl).

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International Institute of Social Studies

Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX The Hague
The Netherlands

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

