

GOVERNANCE IN THE 'IN-BETWEEN'

How grassroots organizations reconfigure multilevel disaster risk governance in urban informal settlements

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Abstract

Disasters disrupt systems and create interconnected needs that go beyond the remit of any individual stakeholder. Governments find themselves in a functional dilemma; they are either too large to understand granular footprints of a disaster or too small to sufficiently bridge the gaps disasters create. This situates multilevel governance as a practical tool to effectively address such wicked problems that do not recognise jurisdictional boundaries. The power of multilevel governance lies in redistributing resources and authority upwards and downwards across government layers and outwards to societal actors. While multilevel governance is structurally a multi-actor action arena, it remains significantly hierarchical and is slowed down by bureaucratic hurdles, state-centric practices, and assumptions that local authorities are the last layer of governance. In urban 'informal settlements', where formal and non-formal realities meet, governance practices vary and do not always come in the shape and form of governments. Life in these neighbourhoods is commonly characterised by high population densities, inadequate infrastructure and basic services, precarious housing, contested land ownership, unsustainable livelihoods, perpetual poverty, intersecting risks, and government support is often absent, inadequate, or too late. These conditions deepen vulnerability while limiting local adaptive capacities. At the same time, these areas are not merely risky places, sites of problems, or hotspots of vulnerability; they are also spaces where self-organisation, collective agency, innovation, and experimentation constantly overlap, bringing vitality into cities. The intersection of disaster risks and informality in these neighbourhoods destabilises governments and formal institutions and exposes the blind spots of standardised multilevel disaster risk governance.

Due to historical exclusion of communities in 'informal settlements' from formal disaster risk governance systems, non-traditional actors such as grassroots organisations start to manage risk from below. Grassroots organisations actively engage with and (re)configure governance to confront crisis.

> "Governance should fit the local realities of the people. When it doesn't, we do not attempt to squeeze into it, we improvise new structures. […] Our structure is very different for a reason. […] We must adapt to emerging needs and step up to the gaps that we see […] but most incidents culminate with complications that demand more capacity and resources than we can offer".

This grounded argument drawn from narratives of grassroots organisations operating in 'informal settlements' puts into perspective the central thesis explored in this dissertation. The argument vividly juxtaposes what we know with what we do not. Scholarships on urban informality, social movements, collective action, and adaptive governance have uncovered that grassroots actors mobilise quickly and strategically in areas that are underserved or excluded by state interventions. What remains unclear and undertheorised is how grassroots organisations of different typologies survive, contest, and collaborate in conditions of high volatility to shape governance outcomes. Confronting this blind spot, this dissertation examines how grassroots organisations navigate multilevel governance to influence disaster risk management in urban 'informal settlements'. This inquiry turns the epistemic approach to disaster risk governance upside down – so that instead of starting with governments, the study starts with grassroots actors and positions them as the central unit of analysis. Choosing to put the last first, and the first last, challenges the classical rhetoric that governance only resides in governments.

The work has zeroed in on both high-profile mega crises and everyday disasters to explore the architecture of networks within which grassroots organisations intervene and the granular, relational, and conflictual dynamics through which they negotiate their role. The dissertation achieves the research goal iteratively. First, through a multi-country analysis that examines the networking behaviours of grassroots organisations and disaster resilience outcomes in Sierra Leone, India, and Kenya during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the work then builds on these broad contours by weaving narrative and theatre-based participatory methodologies to unpack dynamic multilevel governance arrangements

applied by grassroots organisations to manage everyday fire disaster risks in the three largest ghettos[1] in Kenya. The work does not aim to create an extensive inventory of what grassroots organisations do, but to trace how they influence and reconfigure governance arrangements across scales. Multilevel governance theory is applied as the analytical entrée of this study. The analysis departs from a critically conscious epistemology that refrains from deficit narratives which discuss informality exclusively as a 'site of problems'. Furthermore, rather than tiptoe around internationally accepted terminologies which may reproduce harmful framings, this study amplifies locally legitimised framings over mainstreamed labels.

The results show that grassroots organisations confront disasters in polymorphic grassroots networks, characterised by a multilevel architecture, diverse linkages, and dynamic patterns. While grassroots organisations are broadly configured institutionally as (inter)nationally affiliated or local organisations, the networking behaviours they exhibit in these networks do not take a singular form. Behaviours vary across space and time. Grassroots organisations leverage polymorphic networks both as infrastructures for disaster risk management and as infrastructures for organisational survival. They become spaces for resource mobilisation, knowledge sharing, capacity enhancement, and solidarity building to negotiate legitimacy and contest 'gray spacing'.

In the ghetto, grassroots networks overlap established formal systems and emergent everyday configurations, leading to governance arrangements that are not only multilevel and multi-actor, but also dynamic, deeply relational, path-dependent, and liminal. On one hand, established protocols redistribute authority and disaster responsibilities from central governments to local authorities and auxiliary civil society organisations, while preserving standardised behaviour, bureaucracies, and strong hierarchies. Disaster institutions and functions are organised in securitised ways that structurally limit responsibility to technical and specialised units. Preservation of hierarchies and technocracy is intricately connected to colonial legacies, which are observed to endure in individuals, institutions, and systems. In Kenya's system, disaster risk and emergency management responsibilities are devolved to county governments and the Kenya Red Cross Society, but disasters are framed as 'police business' leaving sovereign disaster powers in the domain of national-level police units such as the National Disaster Management Unit and the National Disaster Operation Center. Jurisdictional conflicts and bureaucratic hurdles between the national- and county-level units, such as the county fire brigade, are observed to slow down emergency fire response, waste resources, and limit voluntary cooperation. Furthermore, the findings illuminate structural voids that create opportunities for corruption and clientelist politics. Politicians, for example, are positioned as a constitutive component of post-disaster recovery, thus creating enabling conditions for disaster relief to be appropriated as a patronage good for political mobilisation.

On the other hand, while the established multilevel governance structure is skewed towards technocratic framings of risk and structural concentration of power in specialised units, grassroots organisations do not become passive recipients of top-down multilevel governance interventions. Grassroots organisations remain excluded from statutory protocols, but they use their exclusion as a rallying point for solidarity. They adopt non-confrontational mechanisms by intervening first with the skills, knowledge, and equipment available to them while reshaping disaster risk management in ways that are dynamic, subtle, and often invisible. They improvise within the voids of established multilevel governance systems and connect to local and (inter)national networks to negotiate legitimacy. They rely primarily on old ties established with peers within their settlement, local administration (especially chiefs and village elders), philanthropists, non-governmental organisations, street-level bureaucrats, and religious leaders. While politicians emerge as a crucial linkage for grassroots organisations, relational ties are short-lived due to frequent changes in governance regimes. Grassroots organisations

[1] Ghettos is a locally legitimised nomenclature used in Kenya by residents to refer to their neighbourhoods which are otherwise labelled 'informal settlements' or 'slums' in the mainstream.

establish unique ties with non-conventional actors such as traditional self-governance units, gangs, reformist groups, and ‘cartels’, but these are observed to create tension in networks engaging local and national government institutions. In some instances, grassroots organisations were labelled ‘criminals’ or ‘illiterate’.

The dynamism of grassroots organisations was influenced by intrinsic factors linked to their organisational design and extrinsic factors linked to path-dependent community and extra-community conditions. The findings show that some grassroots organisations affiliated with apex organisations struggle with isomorphic patterns, bureaucratic processes that slow down decision-making, and organisational philosophies that compromise their relational ties with local communities. Some non-affiliated grassroots organisations over-relied on their founders' resources and networks, demonstrating founder’s syndrome. Culturally learned dependency and scarcity trauma, competition and gatekeeping, and gray spacing by regulatory frameworks further limit their capacity to shape long-term change. Furthermore, the predominant framing of a disaster shapes whether and how grassroots organisations intervene. Deep-rooted superstitions and sociocultural beliefs instil fear in first responders and impede timely emergency response. Everyday disasters demonstrate varying ontologies with excesses that reconfigured authority, identity, belonging, resource distribution, and sociotechnical relationships.

In its broad and granular analysis, this dissertation lands at two seemingly opposing imperatives: governments have a statutory responsibility to ensure multilevel governance is properly structured and coordinated to protect the public amidst crises, and grassroots organisations have a socialised responsibility to ensure multilevel governance is rooted in local realities and delivers more with less bureaucracy, technocracy, and more voluntary cooperation. I argue therefore that multilevel governance, especially in disaster contexts, is under-theorised since disasters recognise no jurisdictional boundaries, and their underlying root causes, risk drivers, and path dependencies fluctuate in ways that outpace bureaucratic structuring and hierarchical coordination. To reconcile the imperatives, the dissertation reconceptualises liminal multilevel governance, defining it as a living patchwork of decentralised and recentralised formal systems which continuously overlap with non-formal grassroots configurations without necessarily aggregating. The thesis underscores voluntary cooperation that is based on shared norms and values as a connective tissue for liminal multilevel governance.

Connecting multilevel governance to everyday grassroots realities rather than suppressing or ignoring them enriches multilevel governance scholarship and practice. By foregrounding grassroots organisations as the unit of analysis, the research reconciles top-down state-centric rhetorics of multilevel governance with bottom-up non-state (re)configurations. The study highlights a definitional conflict in the framing of disasters and positions everyday ‘marginalised disasters’ as crucial analytical tools to study the fluidity of governance. Additionally, the study reframes the ghetto and similar neighbourhoods as liminal spaces, thus pointing to a fresh lens through which future scholarship can better engage with such contexts meaningfully. Lastly, this work enriches knowledge by introducing a community-based, participatory methodological approach to study intricate development challenges in a robust and rigorous manner, while also contributing to impact pathways. Integration of storytelling and theatrics accelerated grassroots solidarity, particularly on fire disaster risk management, and created space for grassroots organisations to co-create practical interventions with local authorities and other actors. The outcomes have continued to unfold beyond the scope of this doctoral research.