

**Disaster Risk Governance and Humanitarian Aid in different Conflict
scenarios**

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1. Introduction

Every year, there are some 400 disasters triggered by natural hazards, mostly in lower and middle-income countries. A large number of these strike in countries affected by conflict (Wood and Wright 2015; Peters and Budimir 2016). However, in the different academic research fields of disaster, humanitarian aid, or conflict, little attention has been paid to the *nexus between disaster and conflict*. Academic attention to conflict and disaster has been disjointed, raising different questions and focusing on different solutions: peacebuilding and disaster risk reduction, respectively. This separation persists despite large commonalities in causes and effects of the two phenomena (King and Mutter 2014). Similarly, policy and practice are not often cognizant of the connecting linkages of conflict and disaster, nor of its ramifications for disaster response.

The nexus between disaster and conflict is important for several reasons.

Firstly, there is evidence that the effects of disaster are aggravated by conflict. Disasters are the outcome of the exposure to natural hazards, compounded by vulnerability and mitigated by capacities to respond. Conflict usually increases vulnerability and affects the capacity of people and communities to deal with disasters triggered by natural hazards (Hilhorst 2013; Bankoff, Frerks, and Hilhorst 2004). For example, while people in Yemen have developed coping strategies to deal with the common, prolonged droughts in their country, the current conflicts themselves are increasing the negative impacts of water shortages (Reliefweb 2017).

Secondly, there is evidence that disasters may intensify conflict (Wisner 2012; Omelicheva 2011). This depends largely on the history of the conflict preceding the disaster, as well as – importantly - on the way it is being dealt with. This means that responses to disaster need to be conscious of these dynamics in order to avoid harm and further fuel the conflict.

Thirdly, conflict complicates interventions in response to disasters, such as international or national relief programs (Desportes 2019a). Response models to disaster typically assume that there is a functioning government to deal with disaster response, and international policy guidelines generally do not provide guidelines on how to deal with the conflict-disaster nexus. International Humanitarian Law focuses exclusively on conflict, whereas the standing guidelines on disasters, the Hyogo Framework for Action (UN/ISDR 2007) and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (United Nations 2015) do not include the notion of conflict. Several of the 2016 United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) refer to disasters and SDG 16 is the only international goal that recognises that “disasters and conflict are mutually reinforcing”. Disaster response policies are thus of little help to deal with disaster situations where the government is incapable or unwilling to act, and where the risk of aggravating conflict is imminent.

In literature, the term conflict is usually meant to cover a wide range of situations that are very different in their effect on disasters and on effective humanitarian action. Existing research on situations where disasters and conflict collide treats conflict as a singular unit – whether in single case studies, or in large-scale research which lumps very different situations under the ‘conflict’ label. Arguing that a more generic and rigorous

understanding of disaster-conflict dynamics across *types of conflict* is needed and possible, this chapter distinguishes three scenarios: high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and post-conflict. The distinction is more of an analytical than a definite category, as many countries move between the different scenarios. Nonetheless, it is important to consider different scenarios as they present different challenges and options for disaster response.

This chapter aims to deepen the understanding of the relations between disaster and conflict and discusses humanitarian governance in high-intensity, low-intensity and post-conflict scenarios. It views humanitarian governance as the interplay between the government, international and national responders and the affected communities in responding to disasters.

The following theoretical section first elaborates on the intersections between disaster, conflict and humanitarian aid, discussing what is known from the literature and pinpointing gaps in present knowledge. It then defines what characterizes high-, low and post-conflict settings, and clarifies our approach towards humanitarian governance within these settings.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Disasters, conflict and humanitarian aid

There is evidence that conflict areas are disproportionately struck by disaster and that disasters increase the risks of conflict. Early claims that disasters tend to heighten the risk of conflict (Quarantelli & Dynes 1985; Cuny 1983) have been confirmed by large-scale comparative analyses. Drury and Olson (1998) showed that disasters are likely to result in political unrest. In a 185-country study spanning almost three decades, Brancati (2007) showed that earthquakes increased the likelihood of conflict, especially in low-income countries with a history of conflicts. Investigating multiple types of disaster in a larger sample over 50 years, Nel and Righarts (2008) reached a similar conclusion.

Wood & Wright (2015) showed that disasters related to natural hazards frequently co-occur with conflict – a finding that corresponds with analyses of 140 events from 1998-2002 (Buchanan-Smith & Christoplos 2004). Spiegel et al. (2007) revealed that 90% of conflict areas experienced one or more disasters triggered by natural hazards. And from 2004 to 2014, 58% of disaster related casualties were in the 30 top countries of state fragility (Peters and Budimir, 2016).

Conflicts are obviously caused by social processes, and this is also true for disasters. Research on disaster has overwhelmingly confirmed that disaster outcomes of natural hazards result from processes in the socio-political context (Wisner et al. 2004: 9; see also

O'Keefe et al. 1976; Hewitt 1983). Social processes generate unequal exposure to risk by making some people more vulnerable to disaster than others, and these inequalities are largely a function of the power relations operative in every society (Hilhorst & Bankoff 2004). Conflict can compound vulnerability and further weaken the response capacities of people and communities (Wisner et al. 2003).

Disasters tend to aggravate the military, socio-political and socio-economic effects of conflict (Billon and Waizenegger 2007). They can affect the military balance between parties, and relief operations can prompt additional military engagement from within or outside the country (Frerks 2008). Many conflicts have evolved or deepened because disasters evoked social protest or led to socio-political change (Pelling & Dill 2009; Drury & Olson 1998). In the socio-economic domain, there is evidence, for example, that disasters may exacerbate conflict by sharpening competition over scarce (relief) resources (Brancati 2007).

Conversely, there is also evidence that disasters can have positive effects on conflict prevention, resolution, peacebuilding or related processes. The differentiated effects of the Asian tsunami of 2004 have generated a great deal of scholarship on this issue (Alwis & Hedman 2009; Gamburd 2010; Le Billon and Waizenegger 2007; Waizenegger & Hyndman 2010; Gaillard, Clavé, and Kelman 2008). While conflict in Sri Lanka intensified following the event, the tsunami accelerated the peace process in Aceh. A body of literature has developed around the idea of disaster diplomacy, exploring how disaster-related activities can induce cooperation between enemy parties at the national or international level (Renner & Chafe 2007; Kelman 2011). This idea has also entered humanitarian policy that

seeks to use disaster events as opportunities to ‘build back better’ (Fan 2013; Birkmann et al. 2008).

Two major threads running through the disaster and conflict literature inform this chapter. Firstly, the effects of disasters are related to previous conflict histories. Whether disasters will trigger conflict is mostly dependent on pre-existing, country-specific conditions, especially the resilience of a state’s institutions to crisis (Omelicheva 2011). Secondly, how disasters are handled mediates their effects on conflict. The impacts disasters have on conflict and stability depend on the way a government responds (Olson & Gawronski 2003; Ahrens and Rudolph 2006).

What do these two insights mean for interventions focusing on the impact of disaster in a conflict situation? Firstly, it means that the specific history and context of conflict matters and should be taken into account. Whereas it would not be feasible to make this chapter specific for every individual conflict, we maintain that it is useful to make at least a distinction between *types* of conflict with regards to their intensity and some common features we can distinguish for different scenarios (van Voorst and Hilhorst 2017). Secondly, it means that disaster interventions can impact conflict dynamics, both positively and negatively. Humanitarian governance, as we maintain, comes about through the interplay of different actors. International interventions and their interplay with national/local actors can thus also play a large role and therefore also affect the dynamics of conflict.

Following from these considerations, a key contribution of this chapter is the differentiation of multiple conflict scenarios (high-intensity, low-intensity and post-

conflict) and the systematic analysis of specific patterns of interaction in disaster risk governance (between international and local aid and society actors) in these different scenarios.

2.2 High-intensity, low-intensity and post-conflict scenarios

A major limitation of the literature on conflict-disaster interactions is the general failure to distinguish between different conflict situations. This means that disaster-research tends to treat a highly violent conflict setting as Syria similar to a country like Nepal, where violent conflict has not disappeared entirely but faded into the background or simmering beneath the surface with sporadic tensions surfacing. However, it is also widely known that the intensity of conflict has a major effect on the local resilience of communities, the erosion of local institutional capacity and the access to and effectiveness of international aid. Conflict intensity is often operationalised by the number of fatalities per year, where 1000 is set as the breaking point between low- and high-intensity conflict (Human Security Centre 2005).¹ Moreover, the presence of a political settlement (indicating a post-conflict situation) has a major effect on how international aid deals with the state and other institutions in the affected country (Pospisil & Menocal 2017).

Different categorisations of conflict exist in other fields (not-disaster or aid-related) of academic literature. For example, conflict has been categorised by phase, types of actors,

¹ See also the database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, www.sipri.org

or presence of a political resolution (Ramsbotham et al. 2011). The frequency and type of exerted violence has also been used to define conflict typologies: for example, the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIK 2016) refers to low-intensity conflict as a ‘non-violent crisis’ in which only the threat of violence is sufficient, and it categorizes some ‘post-conflict’ settings such as Sierra Leone as medium intensity violent crises, because of continuing political power struggles.

Based on the above factors and on our literature review on the nexus between disaster, conflict and aid, we differentiate three conflict scenarios: low-intensity, high-intensity and post-conflict (van Voorst and Hilhorst 2017).

In *high-intensity conflicts (HIC)*, violence occurs on a large scale, and the authorities have a high level of involvement in the conflict. As such, an important consideration is that HIC scenarios are dynamic and not perpetual. Most of the time they represent specific moments in a protracted crisis, developing out of or leading to low conflict or post-conflict periods.

National and local governments and authorities have reduced or no effective control over (part of) the country, generating a high level of state fragility. Due to the level of violence, casualties most often exceed a thousand and the provision of goods and essential services is irregular, reduced or non-existent in some areas of the territory. The HIC scenario also presents deficiency of information or reduced access to data and complex governance arrangements, including the presence of state contesting parties, and economic crisis or disruption. As a result, people migrate at high rates to other regions of the country, neighbouring states, or even to other continents. This displacement can

expand the conflict over to other territories, leading regions to be affected beyond the main HIC area (Mena 2018).

Disasters in areas of high-intensity conflict have a major impact on local populations and their institutions. They are often impoverished and vulnerable after years of stagnating development and state negligence and are then further challenged by the multiple jeopardies of conflict and disaster. A large body of literature has focused on this scenario as it unfolded in Sudan, analysed as a ‘complex emergency’ where drought-induced famine intertwines with conflict (de Waal 1997; Keen 1994, 2008; Devereux 2009). This has detailed how international aid affected the conditions and parties of the conflict (Macrae and Zwi 1992). Aid agencies often find it difficult or impossible—due to perilous conditions or security restrictions—to operate in these areas (Healy & Tiller 2014) and often resort to the controversial method of ‘remote control’, where the delivery of aid is sub-contracted to local actors without ability to guarantee the monitoring and accountability of aid (Donini & Maxwell 2014).

Notwithstanding differences, Somalia, South Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria are some examples of countries who fulfil the above mentioned HIC scenario characteristics.

Low-intensity conflicts (LIC) have fewer deaths and are less intense than high-intensity conflict. They generally occur over extended periods of time with cycles of repression and re-emergence lasting from several years to decades (Rice 1988; Azar 1990;

Kinross 2004).² At one moment in time however and in comparison with high-intensity conflict, violence may still be substantial but is more sporadic or in a stalemate. Riots or targeted attacks often erupt as societal groups perceive the groups in power as repressive or not responsive to their needs (Azar 1990).

The government may be involved in the conflict (civil war) or may be an outsider to the conflict (non-state conflict). Overall in the LIC scenario as defined here, the state is contested by competing political factions and civil society groupings, provided those have the space to organize and mobilize. The government will generally respond to conflict and societal tensions with a firm grip, exerting its power to retain control, such as in authoritarian regimes. It continues to be functional in large parts of the territory, but may lose control at lower governance levels and in more peripheral areas, where parallel state structures can emerge (Debiel and Klein 2002). This leads to volatile and opaque authority structures.

All these issues can also be found in high-intensity conflicts, but there are three key differences that stand out as important when disaster strikes.

The first concerns the nature of violence. LICs may be in stalemate for decades, but are rarely stable, and escalation to higher levels of violence can occur. Structural inequalities, marginalization and discrimination processes are present and risk to fuel intra-societal resentment, tensions, targeted violent attacks or riots, and resumed or increased violence (Galtung 1996). This means that the presence of actual violent events

² As such, the term can be misleading. The cumulated effects can be intense, not least in terms of casualties. To name but one example, India lost more soldiers due to “anti-terrorist and LIC operations ranging from terrorism to insurgencies across Jammu and Kashmir and the North-Eastern states” than during its past four ‘conventional’ wars (Kumar 2016).

may not be the primary indicator of these conflicts, but rather structural phenomena such as systematic discrimination.

Secondly, where physical violence is not the primary (but always looming) weapon, policies and discourses are often the most important fuel to the conflict. In LIC scenarios, the different ways in which parties frame the causes and effects of disaster and conflict can be crucial. Where perceptions and emotions override objective facts, political rhetoric and manipulation will be ripe, including at the level of international fora (Hutchison 2014). International actors responding to a disaster must try and find their position within these tense intra-societal, state-societal and global dynamics.

Thirdly, the relation between the government, international, and national actors in disaster response are highly different from the HIC scenario. In the LIC scenario, functioning and sovereignty asserting state structures are clear primary interlocutors for humanitarian actors. This occurs both for practical and political reasons. Practically, the state is less dependent on international funding and organizational capabilities – relief operations are not as complex and unsafe as to call for airdrops or other expensive logistical solutions. Politically, the gap between an ever-growing humanitarian framework and what state sovereignty entails is stronger in the LIC scenario, especially when the state in question doubles up as an authoritarian state (Kahn and Cunningham 2013).

In *post-conflict situations (PC)*, a political settlement has formally or informally been reached, and the reconstruction process is underway – this is obviously different from a HIC and LIC setting. In reality, however, conflicts may still linger, as many settlements were either not inclusive or were internationally steered, and there is a large risk of resuming or

new conflicts. Nepal is a case in point, where new tensions arose between the government and the Madhesi people in the southern region, even after the peace agreement with the Maoists in 2006. Or Burundi, where, after the Arusha Accords 2000, a new crisis erupted in 2015.

Post-conflict states are often regarded as 'fragile states', lacking the capacity or being unwilling to provide basic functions for its citizens, as opposed to the stronger states of our LIC scenario. In the post-conflict period, much emphasis is placed on reforms and promoting an agenda of change, because governance systems were often seen as part of the drivers of the conflict (Brinkerhoff 2005). The external reconstruction efforts, therefore, centre around the state, where the emphasis is on statebuilding to prevent a 'relapse' and build stronger governance institutions.

The post-conflict scenario poses particular challenges for disaster response, mainly due to the political and societal changes that characterise its transitional nature. Whereas international aid actors are often restricted by the government in the LIC scenario, and by the security situation in the HIC scenario, the post-conflict scenario is characterized by a high density of international aid actors. Furthermore, civil society may also have assumed state functions or may be equally weakened because of the conflict. The relation between the government, international and national actors is therefore different from HIC and LIC scenarios. In PC-settings, disaster governance will – on paper – as much as possible follow the normal set-up where the state is the central actor in the response, but practice may diverge and aid actors seek to balance their respect for the role of the state with seeking influence over the process (see Melis 2018).

The arena of aid in these scenarios is often complex and dense. With regards to the international aid agencies there is an amalgam of – and possibly tensions between – agencies that were already present in the country and an influx of new agencies or specialists that come for the disaster response.

Characteristics of conflict, authorities & power, aid and local institutions in high-, low and post-conflict scenarios

	Violence	Authorities	Aid dynamics & major challenges for aid actors	Local institutions
High-intensity conflict scenario	Violence widespread, dynamic, but uneven in space and time Casualties 1000+ per annum Primary weapons: physical violence	National government has reduced/no effective control over (large parts of) country Complex governance arrangements and de-facto authorities	International actors restricted by security situation Hard to get access to populations: solutions sought in remote control aid No guarantee to monitoring & accountability	Economic crisis or disruption Increased poverty and vulnerability of local populations due to long-term state neglect and violence

	High involvement of government in conflict			
Low-intensity conflict scenario	<p>Violence less intense, more sporadic or in stalemate; violence returns over extended periods of time, cycles of repression</p> <p>Fewer casualties</p> <p>Primary weapons: policies and discourses politics of inclusion and exclusion</p>	<p>Government functional in large parts of country</p> <p>Government may be involved (civil war) or outsider of conflict</p> <p>Voids in governmental power and space for parallel governance</p> <p>Competing political structures, factions and civil society groups</p> <p>Government responds to</p>	<p>Internationals actors are restricted by authoritative government</p> <p>Humanitarian principles hard to maintain vis-à-vis strong state</p> <p>Relief operations take place on the ground</p> <p>State structures are primary interlocutors</p>	<p>Structural inequalities, marginalization and discrimination; these have contributed to violence</p>

		conflict with 'firm grip'		
Post-conflict scenario	Political settlement has been formally or informally reached Lingering conflict Risk or resuming or new conflict	National government pushes 'agenda of change' Aid to 'build back better'	Support often explicitly called upon by state High density of aid actors: risk of overwhelm with aid and undermining of real state agenda Non-state actors balance state's agenda and capacities with formal role of state in response	Socio-economic recovery may be uneven, humanitarian needs continue long after conflict Weak institutions, poverty and large availability of weapons may lead to high crime levels

2.3 Humanitarian governance

Our notion that humanitarian governance must be understood as the interplay of different actors tallies with theories on governance. However, as we will show, writing about humanitarian governance tends to overly focus on the *international* humanitarian

system, neglecting local and national actors' involvement. Also, governance theories of the 1990s show that state power is layered and fragmented, and that attaining collective purposes is not solely the domain of the state (Colebatch 2009). The shift from 'government' to 'governance', showed how "the state becomes a collection of inter-organizational networks made up of governmental and societal actors with no sovereign actor able to steer or regulate" (Rhodes, 1996: 57).

A similar shift could be witnessed concerning development and humanitarian operations. Kahn and Cunningham (2013: 141) highlight how prior to the 1990s, "the aid system had been dominated by the UN, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and bilateral aid, with only a handful of [international non-governmental organizations] routinely providing humanitarian assistance". Following the cold war, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) came to be considered more effective and intrinsically more inclined to make communities and participatory development the starting point of their endeavours, as opposed to the state (Edwards and Hulme, 1992, 1996). After acclaim for NGOs (at the expense of the state and large humanitarian organizations), it is now more common to understand aid processes as resulting from interactive governance, which is defined as "the complex process through which a plurality of social and political actors with diverging interests interact by means of mobilizing, exchanging, and deploying a range of ideas, rules and resources" (Torfing et al., 2012: 2). This results in different governance arrangements involving multiple types of actors (Torfing et al., 2012: 2; Howes et al., 2015; Parker, 2007).

Concerning disaster governance specifically, there is a marked difference between literature dealing with 'everyday' disaster governance and literature dealing with large-

scale humanitarian disaster response. In the case of major disasters leading to declarations of states of emergency, the state has typically been seen as the paramount actor. Yet, international aid flows which used to be channelled via government in the 1970-1980s largely bypassed governments in the 1990-2000s (Harvey 2013, 154). This explains why in the more recent humanitarian aid literature, governance has rarely been analysed in relation to the state in crisis-affected countries. Only very recently has the notion of humanitarian governance expanded to encompass national authorities and other national institutions shaping humanitarianism praxis. Today, disaster management is increasingly seen as an arena of co-governance where different actors engage in responding to (the risks of) disasters (Srikandini 2018), departing from the conceptualization of disaster response as an emergency form of politics in a military top-down style. The central role of the state is also highlighted in key texts, such as the Sphere guidelines settings standards for humanitarian response, and the Hyogo Framework for Action.³

Another way to frame discussions on humanitarian governance is to distinguish between normative and empirical angles. The normative angle stems from acknowledging the role of national authorities and aid providers in the international policy discourse on aid, and focusing on policy. Interactive governance designs acknowledge the roles of actors inside and outside government, but also point to the blurring of roles and responsibilities, the interdependence of actors' actions and the relative unimportance of command and

³ As cited in Harvey (2013, 152): "The Sphere Project guidelines and Humanitarian Charter recognises 'the primary role and responsibility of the affected state to provide timely assistance to those affected, to ensure people's protection and security and to provide support for their recovery' (Sphere Project, 2011, p. 21). The Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015 also notes that each state has primary responsibility for taking effective disaster risk reduction (DRR) measures and commits governments to ensuring that DRR is a 'national and local priority' (UNISDR, 2005)".

imposition (Colebatch, 2009: 63). Empirically, we need to look beyond the design of governance to question how this works out in practice—what some authors refer to as ‘real’ governance (Olivier de Sardan, 2011; Titeca and de Herdt, 2011). There may be large discrepancies and contradictions between formal and practical norms. Furthermore, different layers of complexity are involved in multi-actor governance; it includes actors who represent different types of institutions, and governance is understood as always negotiated and subject to multiple interpretations (Kraushaar and Lambach, 2009; Putzel and DiJohn, 2012). Studying humanitarian governance requires the development of an ‘antenna’ for these different interpretations and how they stagnate, promote or change programmes in the course of implementation.

Furthermore, there is a great deal of diversity within the categories that make up governance arrangements, such as grouping NGOs with different mandates and operating styles, local government officers who perform different practices than the central state, or organised community leaders with different views from more marginal community members. Although we acknowledge that this may lead to infinite and impossible levels of fine-tuning of our understanding of humanitarian governance, we maintain that it is important to be cognisant of potential diversities and to bring them into the analysis when they are significant. Therefore, this chapter analyses how multiple state and non-state actors involved in aid respond to disasters in different conflict-affected situations. For each of these scenarios, we discuss specific challenges for disaster response and humanitarian governance.

3. Methodology

The findings presented in this chapter are based on research conducted as part of the ‘When disaster meets conflict’ research programme; they are also separately presented in research briefs.⁴ Data were systematically collected through two main methods. First, three series of comparative studies of disasters in high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and post-conflict settings (nine country cases in total) were conducted. Of these, six case studies are presently completed: South Sudan and Afghanistan as cases of high-intensity conflict scenario, Ethiopia and Myanmar as cases of low-intensity conflict, and Nepal and Sierra Leone as cases of post-conflict. A break-down of study participants per country is provided in table 2.

Each case comprised four months of in-country data collection following a desk literature review, spanning 2017 and early 2018. During fieldwork, participatory observation, document collection and semi-structured interviews with members of governmental institutions, humanitarian agencies ranging from the United Nations to international NGOs (INGOs), local NGOs, civil society groups and disaster-impacted communities were the main data collection methods. In some cases, members of the private sector and the media were approached as well.

⁴ Please consult www.iss.nl/whendisastermeetsconflict for more research project details and research briefs on the overall project (Hilhorst 2019), the results of the Delphi Study (van Voorst 2019), Afghanistan (Mena 2019), South Sudan (Mena 2019b), Ethiopia (Desportes 2019b), Myanmar (Desportes 2019c), Nepal (Melis 2019a) and Sierra Leone (Melis 2019b)

Conflict scenario	Country case study	Semi-structured interview participants*
High-intensity conflict	South Sudan: drought and floods affecting the country, plus famine response in 2016 Fieldwork 2017	45
	Afghanistan: disaster risk reduction programs and disaster response strategies (policies, plans, programs and structures) present in the country Fieldwork 2018	60
Low-intensity conflict	Ethiopia: response to the 2016 drought which overlapped with the most sustained and widespread protests under the current regime, and a State of Emergency phase Fieldwork 2017	122
	Myanmar: response to 2015 cyclone Komen which caused widespread floods and landslides,	47

	including in peripheral States with strong ethnic and religious tensions Fieldwork 2018	
Post-conflict	Nepal: response to the 2015 earthquakes Fieldwork 2017	118
	Sierra Leone: response to the 2017 mudslide and floods in Freetown Fieldwork 2018	92

** Figure does not include focus groups and group interviews.*

Second, an international expert panel was conducted in which 30 key humanitarian actors with great experience in the field participated through two rounds.⁵ The expert panel contributes to the case studies by offering the longer-term, overall views of aid practice. The advantage of the cyclical structure of a Delphi study is that it allows participants to reflect on their earlier answers and it allows the researcher to ask additional questions throughout the interview process if these appear relevant. This method is useful in studies where judgmental information is indispensable (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004; see also Turoff & Lindstone, 2002). A Delphi study enables for group thinking on a problem that cannot be solved by ‘facts’ but that might be enlightened by the subjective opinions of experts.

⁵ A third round will be held in 2019

Moreover, as interviews are conducted anonymously, a Delphi method avoids the potential negative consequences of a group interview and it allows people to speak openly and thoughtfully. In our study, we chose not to work with questionnaires, as is most common, but with semi-structured in-depth interviews. This allowed for a discussion of a topic as complex as is humanitarian aid in conflict settings.

4. Results

The Delphi study confirmed our assumption that the types of challenges that practitioners encounter in their disaster aid programs differ significantly per conflict scenario. Likewise, the types of projects that are most effective also differ per conflict setting, as do the strategies that practitioners use to create and run successful programs (see van Voorst & Hilhorst 2017 for full findings). These findings largely overlap with the findings from our fieldwork in high-, low and post-conflict scenarios. Below we briefly recapture characteristics of each of the scenarios and discuss the current gaps in research, while elaborating major findings that are most relevant for each respective scenario.

4.1 High-intensity conflict

The intersection between disaster and high-intensity conflict has received little scholarly attention, and empirical case-studies are rare. Here, we present major findings on

disaster response and disaster management vis-à-vis the conflict in the HIC settings of South Sudan and Afghanistan.

Who responds and how

In the HIC scenario, reducing the risk of, responding or recovering from disasters is hindered by conflict. As a result, disaster response usually only occurs at the local level, carried out by the affected population, local authorities with relevant limitations, and later on by NGOs. Large-scale response, including that of international actors, only occurs when the number of casualties or the threat of people affected reaches high levels (e.g. in cases of drought-induced famines). Here, we discuss a number of major challenges of responding in the HIC scenario.

Challenges for disaster management and humanitarian aid

The HIC scenario present a set of specific challenges for humanitarian aid providers and disaster responders. The most obvious include insecurity, reduced access, or the difficulties of reaching people in need. On top of those, high levels of bureaucracy, complex logistics, and corruption are also commonly present in HIC. As a result of these challenges “UN agencies and INGOs are increasingly absent from field locations, especially when there is any kind of significant security or logistical issues” (Médecins Sans Frontières in Healy and Tiller 2014, 4). Nonetheless, we also see Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) programmes happening in the HIC scenario, although this also entailsspecific challenges.

Coverage

Most aid actors, despite the difficulties of providing humanitarian aid and responding to a disaster, are not primarily concerned with the question *how to do it* but where, when and for whom. Negotiating access, overcoming dangerous situations, reaching remote communities, airdropping food – all these are practices which aid actors have been implementing and improving for decades. However, the main challenge they face is that needs exceed funds and capacities available to aid everyone and every need. As mentioned by an aid actor in South Sudan, ‘we cannot aim to help everyone like in other places, here that will mean to help the whole country and beyond. We have to choose where we go and what we do’.

Complex logistics and costly response

Interestingly, most of the research participants, when asked about the main challenge of responding to disasters or delivering humanitarian aid at HIC, did not say safety issues first, but the complexity of the logistics and obtaining funds. All interviewees agreed that HIC settings are the most expensive places to provide humanitarian aid and disaster response. Security issues and the lack or poorly maintained infrastructures, such as roads, electricity or potable water makes the logistics of any action highly complex. Likewise, in vast regions of HIC affected places many services are not available, such as health, transportation, or business to buy supplies. It is not only a matter to reach places affected, but also how to maintain the response and cover the basic needs of the affected population and aid actors responding to the events.

To overcome these difficulties usually involves expensive solutions, including the payments of aeroplanes or helicopters, generators and fuel, and to build essential infrastructure from scratch. All the previous makes that, beyond the regular coordination of the delivery of aid, extra layers of logistics and costs need to be included, creating a 'logistics nightmare', as defined by one international NGO manager in Afghanistan and one UN manager in South Sudan.

Safety and security

Lack of security is an important challenge for disaster risk management, for both aid and society actors. During the multiple interviews and field visits to different regions of Afghanistan and South Sudan, every single participant mentioned feeling unsafe. Everyone, albeit with different degrees at different moments, is exposed to robbery, illegal check-points, ambush, landmines, bombs, shootings, or kidnapping, to name a few.

In the case of aid actors, the lack of safety of HIC settings is one of the main challenges when it comes to getting access to places affected and during the distribution and provision of aid. Apart from issues of physical safety of aid workers and the populations served, this has a number of secondary effects. Due to the insecure environment, people travel to different locations leaving disaster risk reduction, or recovery projects paused or cancelled. When it comes to disaster response, displacement also makes difficult to know the number and profile of the affected population in a specific affected locality.

Lack of or reduced access

Access to recipients, or rather the lack of it, is a complex and dynamic phenomenon in the HIC scenario, for multiple reasons. The first one is the risk of moving around for the lack of security depicted before.

Secondly, access in South Sudan and Afghanistan is hindered seasonally, especially during the rainy season where vast regions of the country ended up flooded or snowed in. Seasonal access's constraints can be present in any country, but in HIC settings it turns into a sustained problem when infrastructure is not maintained or destroyed because of the conflict, and alternative ways of access are dangerous or non-existent. For example, getting access by vehicle is impossible in many locations and, therefore, depending on the country, the only viable alternatives are flying or sailing, and even those alternatives are not always available. Landing strips can be damaged or compromised, and navigating through the river, in the case of South Sudan, can be unsafe for similar reasons. The access' restraint affects both aid and society actors, restricting the movement of all of them.

Weak, complex, and multi-actor governance systems

In the HIC scenario, the complexity of multi-actor governance systems is not only based on various and sometimes unknown systems, but also from the lack of knowledge that could enable a way of manoeuvring through them. Due to the social conflict, state-contesting or non-state armed groups present highly nuanced governance structures, as visible in Afghanistan and South Sudan. The vagueness or disconnection between the central and district levels of governance creates a blurry governance map.

Because permanent or stable peace agreements have not been reached at HIC, for aid actors in HIC the challenge of complex systems multi-actor governance systems entails having to negotiate with state-contesting or non-state armed groups, besides the negotiations with central and district levels of governance. Fieldwork shows that these negotiations are generally driven by political interest from both the groups controlling territories and from donors, national governments and the international community, which may wish to have a say in allowing or participating in negotiations. For instance, international aid actors see these negotiations as an opportunity to pursue other agendas, like peacebuilding, by imposing conditions on aid. At the same time, local actors – both responders and aid beneficiaries – also pursue their agendas and interests in the negotiations with humanitarian players.

DRR is happening in HIC scenario and has specific challenges

Both in Sudan and in Afghanistan, it was found that disaster relief was considered to some extent to be outside of the normal politics of conflict-related relief operations. This gave international actors more room for manoeuvre to operate, at the same time that makes operations more complex or difficult to set up by the lack of clear roadmaps to act.

In Afghanistan, this has evolved in a growing attention to disaster risk reduction activities. In the midst of many gaps of services and needs of the population, a number of agencies have opted to focus on DRR programming. In South Sudan, a number of agencies try to maintain livelihood programmes that seek to make communities more resilient, also for drought and other disasters. For example, food security program are trying to

reduce the impact of drought, and small scale DRR projects were found aiming to reduce the risk of floods due to river's overflowing.

Two challenges stand out in these approaches. Firstly, at the local level, disaster response and DRR is affected by local-level social tensions or conflict. These local conflicts may or may not be informed by the conflict at large, but when they escalate they are more likely to get intertwined with the larger, violent conflicts. This makes conflict-sensitivity of paramount importance. In Afghanistan, agencies are starting to adopt this, whereas in South Sudan the approach is still based on working around conflict by avoiding areas where the larger conflict plays out. Secondly, starting-up processes are long and tedious and require careful networking and processes of gaining trust. This means that DRR and/ or livelihood programmes are having a larger timeline. In addition, it results in a situation where agencies cannot easily move their programmes to other areas where perhaps a more immediate risk is emanating.

4.2 Low-intensity conflict

Although low-intensity conflicts (LIC) constitute the largest share of conflicts worldwide they are less studied than high-intensity conflict settings (HIIK 2016). We here summarize the main dynamics taking place in the LIC-disaster nexus, drawing on fieldwork cases Ethiopia and Myanmar and relevant literature.

Challenges for disaster management and humanitarian aid

Many challenges are common to high- and low-intensity conflict settings. However, they play out differently and may require different approaches from disaster responders. A major difference is that in the LIC scenario, some conflict-induced challenges cannot be discussed or resolved openly. Given the lesser intensity of the conflict, it is easier for the disaster to overshadow conflict dynamics, that may tend to be ignored even though they affect the disaster response.

Access is hampered in different, more duplicitous ways

Within the country, access to certain zones is not so much restricted by the danger of getting caught in a cross-fire or destroyed infrastructure. Rather, access may be regulated by checkpoints, blockades and separation walls. Control of certain areas by state contesting parties, such as the territories held by guerrilla movements in Colombia, should not be underestimated. Operating in LIC environments, local to international aid institutions often have no choice but to work hand in hand with the established local authorities. In Sri Lankan areas under control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelan (LTTE), this authority would for instance have been the extremely professional Tamil Relief Organization, which was termed the “humanitarian arm” of the LTTE by Flanigan (2008, 512).

But barriers can also be of legal and bureaucratic nature, such as strict rules applying to aid actors’ registration, activity plans, data collection and dissemination practices and funding. These everyday politics are a less visible manner of restraining humanitarian independence. It thus emerged that Ethiopia, although often regarded as a

humanitarian success-case where the government has a strong drought response system, co-funds and leads emergency response in close cooperation with international actors, presented a highly limited independent decision-making and operational space for both local and international disaster response actors. Government authorities, especially at the federal level, held a monopoly on information (Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst 2019).

Disaster response can be the conduit of conflict

According to Pelling and Dill (2010: 15), “disaster shocks open political space for the contestation or concentration of political power and the underlying distributions of rights between citizens and citizens and the state”. Disaster response can become the very conduit through which the LIC is played out, leading to further antagonism or even conflict escalation.

Population groups are always vulnerable to different degrees, depending on their economic status, social networks and many more. LIC, however, selectively increases vulnerability to disaster at a more pronounced level. The conflict fault lines further exacerbate existing structural inequalities, affecting already marginalized and discriminated communities. This may be spatial and visible in some parts of the country or spread throughout the area in pockets of vulnerability. In Myanmar’s Rakhine State, for instance, the government pushed for the 2015 cyclone relief to be distributed in terms of cash grants. These irremediably ended up in the hands of the local Buddhist elite, who are not structurally discriminated from operating local businesses, as is the case for Muslim minorities.

Marginalization can even stem from conscious political decisions by the more powerful conflict parties. The state can directly marginalize population groups in the response, delegitimizing disaster victims as citizens as they are not deemed worthy of support. This, for instance, occurred for the Rohingya minority when cyclone Komen struck Myanmar in 2015: according to reports from diaspora media (Burma Times Editor 2015), Rohingya were not allowed into government-hosted disaster displacement camps, unless they signed documents identifying them as Bengali – which would, in turn, allow the government to expel them from the country. Similarly, some protest hotspots in the Ethiopian region Oromiya were side-lined from the 2016 government-led drought response as punishment.

Disaster governance is instrumentalized to get political support or harm political opponents

All actors may seek to engage in disaster response to enhance their legitimacy. Non-state actors such as political opposition parties can increase legitimacy and in turn political support and new members, as occurred following the 1999 earthquake in Turkey or the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka (Jacoby and Özerdem 2008; Flanigan 2008). Conversely, inadequate disaster response can quickly (further) delegitimize actors.

In the LIC scenario, state and societal actors are especially likely to contest each other's legitimacy, capacity and will to protect all disaster victims. After all, the decision not to help a population group can less be grounded in practical arguments (costs, security, capabilities). It can more easily be framed as stemming from a wish to harm than in high-

intensity conflict. Aid in these contexts may thus be particularly prone to accusations of being uneven and partisan.

Concerning political tensions at international level, LIC-structured disaster response rests on a contradiction: Large-scale disaster events usually cry out for international aid – when the LIC discursive logic is more often to keep all ‘foreign influences’ out. State sovereignty is proclaimed particularly loudly in the LIC scenario, where state unity is perceived as ‘under threat’ (Koenig and Guchteneire 2007). The ever-present debate on (unwished) interference of the international community and aid actors in national state affairs is thus exacerbated in the LIC scenario.

More possibilities, but also pitfalls, of a local disaster response

Local actors will play a stronger role than in high-intensity conflict areas, where social networks and structures are destroyed or at least significantly altered. In the LIC scenario, local actors rely on invaluable knowledge in comparison to international emergency responders. They are more familiar with the local nuances of the conflict, may be confronted with fewer regulations than ‘international visitors’, and know to navigate authority structures which vary across time, place and scales. In Myanmar for instance, civil society actors are well versed at the ‘politics of silence’ and other strategies which allow manoeuvring even in the smaller interstices left open by authoritarian state structures, building on decades of accumulated experience (Desaine 2011; Matelski 2016; Desportes 2019).

Yet, it is also difficult for local actors to be perceived as neutral. Some are clearly positioned on one or the other side of the conflict constellation. That can be a difficult and

restrictive situation for local responders who face local state or community retaliation for their relief activities. It can also be deterring for international funders, who would like to channel support via local actors with better knowledge of the local context and needs, following the global call for an increasing 'localized humanitarian response'. In the LIC scenario, local aid actors can be party to the conflict themselves, making it difficult for humanitarian response to be both 'impartial' and 'local'. This was the case during the 2015 cyclone Komen response in Rakhine State, Myanmar. International humanitarian actors usually rely on local NGOs to carry out response operations in Myanmar's peripheral ethnic States. In Rakhine however, they described local actors as 'not principled', and largely had to find their place in the tense local networks so as to carry out the very sensitive operations themselves.

Disaster responders have to balance reputational risks and navigate complex actor constellations

International disaster responders themselves face positioning difficulties of a higher level. In strong sovereignty-asserting states where actors instrumentalize the disaster response to harm others, they are faced with a difficult dilemma: speak out and safeguard an independent humanitarian space, at the risk of being sidelined, or remain present and try to support communities in country whatever the compromises? Many organizations chose to self-censor in words and in actions. Organizations who self-describe themselves as 'loud' kept quiet in Myanmar. In Ethiopia, INGOs refrained from visiting areas they knew to be violently LIC affected so that the government would 'not know that they know' (interviewed INGO official cited in (Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst 2019, 26).

It follows that in the LIC scenario, state, societal and international disaster responders will thus not only be busy with the technicalities and governance of the actual response – from information gathering to resource allocation – but also the governance of how this response is perceived in the local to international political context. This emerged strongly in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, where international organizations and INGOs have to gain acceptance by both authorities and communities to effectively carry out their relief operations. They do not only depend on various Union-level and State authorities for memoranda of understanding and travel authorizations, but also on the acceptance of Buddhist communities, who felt provoked and did resort to violence as Muslim communities got international relief in 2015. As a result, all aid actors invest a lot of efforts in perception monitoring and visibility guidelines, both in the field and online.

In essence, disaster risk governance in the LIC scenario can be termed a balancing act. That applies to the sourcing of information (e.g. which impact numbers are the correct ones?), targeting decisions (e.g. if I provide aid to this most disaster impacted community group, will this not increase tensions?), to partnership decisions (does an alliance with this actor not burn bridges with this other actor, or the state?). It also applies to the state itself, who has to balance the expectations of distinct domestic and international audiences in their multiplicities.

4.3 Post-conflict scenario

In this section, the main and specific dynamics of disaster response in a post-conflict scenario are discussed, based on literature and fieldwork on the cases of the 2015 earthquake response in Nepal and the 2017 mudslide response in Sierra Leone.

Challenges for disaster management and humanitarian aid

Although some of the challenges described below can also be found in other conflict and even in non-conflict settings, the way they play out in a post-conflict scenario is different. The two main challenges are discussed.

Post-conflict politics both close and open windows in disaster response

As Pelling and Dill (2010: 27) argue, a disaster opens a “space for negotiation on the values and structures of society”. It creates political space for contestation of political power. State and non-state actors renegotiate their power in this vacuum. In a post-conflict scenario, these political processes are even more complex as this space for negotiation coincides and affects ongoing institutional changes in the transitional period. While in the LIC scenario this tension is primarily seen in the negotiation and contestation between the state and its citizens, in a post-conflict scenario these power struggles are more clearly seen between the different state institutions in charge of the disaster response. As the state is still in formation and fluid, different departments can be seen to use the disaster to engage in competition over authority, mandates, and financial control.

When the 2015 earthquake hit Nepal, the new constitution had not yet been promulgated and local elections not yet held. This meant that governance structures were still strongly centralized. However, as transitional decentralization processes were already underway, local districts were also in charge of the disaster response. The roles and responsibilities of each institution on both levels were not always clear. Local authorities and political parties on the village level used their power in aid allocation and distribution, both attracting aid to their preferred places and blocking aid by making it difficult for organizations to access other places, strengthening their legitimacy. The ambiguity between the central and district levels of governance also created a space for decisions to be taken at both levels irrespective of each other. This was often used by aid agencies as an approval from either level would be sufficient to operate. While the transitional politics of the post-conflict scenario created confusion among various actors, it also opened space to manoeuvre.

In Sierra Leone, the main state institutions in charge of the response were created at the end of the civil war. After the 2017 mudslide and floods, the government institution in charge of the coordination (the Office of National Security, or ONS) and the ministry in charge of the registration of affected people (the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs) were contesting each other roles in the response. Internal power politics between different ministries and state institutions determined legitimacy of the lead authority in charge. Accusations of mismanagement were made to delegitimize the other and strengthen their own position. Only after the intervention of the president's support to the ONS, other government institutions accepted their authority.

These struggles for legitimacy and the contestation between the state institutions often impact the response directly and mostly result in delays or unresponsive bureaucracy. Other aid actors acknowledge these challenges in their collaboration with the various state institutions, but they also believe the state should be responsible to coordinate the response, according to the DRR frameworks. However, many aid actors also by-pass the state institutions, or creatively comply with the state's approach, as a way to deliver aid more effectively, which creates another challenge in the post-conflict scenario.

Coordination struggles and power politics: the power of non-state actors shaping the state's response

These struggles for legitimacy combined with a high density of aid actors often result in aid actors by-passing coordination mechanisms. The post-conflict politics and the space created by the ambiguity of the transitional period both pushed, and allowed, aid actors to find ways to manoeuvre around the state. In scenarios where the density of aid actors is higher, this dynamic will be more strongly present. Both state and non-state actors employ strategies to regain more authority as the response progresses. Unlike in LIC settings, in post-conflict settings the international actors have more power to influence the implementation of the response in different ways.

In Nepal, the government was overwhelmed with the magnitude of the disaster and relied on international aid for the emergency response. Many aid agencies did not participate in the national or local coordination mechanisms and implemented directly. In the first phase of the response, much duplication was reported, while other areas were under-serviced. As the response progressed, the government increased its control. It

proclaimed a one-door policy and restricted INGOs. They also pushed for a blanket approach to aid distributions, while most INGOs advocated a targeted approach. The INGOs continued to operate through creative framing and flexibility. For example, when taking a blanket approach, they would target the most-hit areas. Also, they did not always try to get approval on all government levels.

In Sierra Leone, because the disaster was more localized, coordination mechanisms were relatively quickly set up. However, in the beginning, coordination was still chaotic. Aid actors implemented directly without coordinating, which was seen as a major challenge by the government and was mostly resolved as the response progressed. But in the beginning, it was not clear to different responders in which meetings decisions would be taken. The decision-making structure with different meetings for strategic to operational issues was only set up after the intervention of an international partner. Within the coordination meetings, the power politics between state and non-state actors was evident. While larger donors could push the government to provide Humanitarian and Early Recovery Cash Transfers in a certain way, INGOs often felt they could not challenge the government in these meetings. However, when the government requested INGOs to not implement directly but to send all aid to the government storage units, the INGOs continued their direct implementation with the government eventually agreeing to it.

In both countries, it was found that the immediate disaster response to some extent disrupted ongoing post-conflict recovery programming. However, during the reconstruction phase, the long term recovery efforts were mostly integrated, or added to, existing programs. This was especially the case in Nepal. In Sierra Leone, the initial

response almost completely took over regular activities of the INGOs and the UN, but aid to the affected areas mostly ceased after the emergency phase.

The struggle for legitimacy between the state and non-state actors is strong in post-conflict settings, where the state often depends on international aid, while also being responsible for the response (see Melis 2018). As many post-conflict states are still dependent on external aid actors, these actors exercise more power over the government than in the LIC scenario. However, this is in contrast to the agenda of most of these actors to shift the power to the local actors. When the state increases their authoritative resources and pushes for stricter control, aid agencies manoeuvre around the state with their material resources to continue their response. And while the discourse revolves around the (in)capacity of the state to legitimize their role, the space to manoeuvre has been created by the transitional power politics of the post-conflict institutions themselves.

5. Conclusions and discussion

It is known that disaster is co-shaped by conflict; just as conflict is affected by disaster. The setting in which a disaster strikes will significantly impact disaster response strategies, including DRR, and humanitarian interventions. Yet at present little is known about the exact ways in which conflict, disaster and aid may impact each other. This holds particularly true for the dynamics that go beyond policy level: the everyday politics of disaster risk governance in practice.

Considering the relevance of the interlinkages between disaster, conflict and aid, it seems necessary that any agenda on disaster management and risk reduction needs to

include insights on the type of conflicts affecting the places where the initiatives are implemented. However, disaster literature tends to lump together different types of conflict, which is especially problematic if it informs disaster policies for responders. While academic literature already offers relevant information about the differences in responding to quick-onset versus slow-onset disasters, knowledge on differences to responding to disasters in different types of conflict seems low.

Linking disasters and conflicts without recognising the nuances between the type of conflict and disaster could result in ill-equipped policies and practices.

For all the above reasons, it appears relevant to distinguish different conflict scenarios in research and policies for disaster response, including DRR. Our research shows that specific challenges for aid actors, as well as specific aid dynamics, occurred in different conflict settings. We have proposed a categorization of three scenarios (high, low and post-conflict). Even though there is much empirical overlap between the scenarios, analytically distinguishing them may help intervening actors to attune to specific challenges in their area of work. The distinction between high intensity, low intensity and post-conflict was also considered relevant for a panel of humanitarian actors that participated in a Delphi study.

One challenge that we identified in all three scenarios was the complexity and multi-layeredness of disaster governance. The power balance between actors and the room of manoeuvre that different humanitarian actors had, differed significantly per scenario. For example, in the post-conflict scenario, internal power politics between different ministries and state institutions determined legitimacy of the lead authority in charge. The position

for the leading institutions was uncertain because of the transitioning and unclarity of this period. In contrast, in the (authoritarian) low-intensity scenario, the power play was not so much occurring between the different government institutions, as there often was a clear lead. Resultantly, state structures behaving differently from the political centre's instructions would be considered traitors or saboteurs – these actors had very little room of manoeuvre. In each case, a disaster opened up political space for contestation of political power, with state and non-state actors renegotiating their power. Often humanitarian aid was the 'tool' or the medium through which to do so. But while in the LIC scenario this tension is primarily seen in the negotiation and contestation between the state and its citizens, and state and international actors, in a post-conflict scenario these power struggles are more clearly seen between the different institutions in charge of the disaster response.

The high-intensity scenario is different again, in that most of the power struggles between actors involved in humanitarian governance were not so much taking place on the level of disaster policies, but in gaining access, and subsequently in navigating power struggles at the local level. Because of the costly use of helicopters, air dropping aid, or remote techniques, the financial power of humanitarian actors is a dominant factor in these scenarios in deciding who will be included or excluded from services.

This research project is ongoing, and in this chapter we have presented findings on the basis of six conducted fieldwork studies and one international survey. Three more

fieldwork studies are currently undertaken. Important new questions that emerge from this analysis, and can guide further research, are:

- *How can disaster response take into account different types of conflict considering the different challenges and best practices that these entail?*

- *(How) can types of programs that work well in specific contexts, such as adaptive management in HIC settings, be used or scaled up in other contexts?*

- *How can disaster response improve the effectiveness of aid within their rather limited room for manoeuvre and in the political structures in which they work?*

- *Should humanitarian actors take a more proactive approach towards non-state authorities as well as 'new' actors in the aid field, most particularly private sector actors, and if so, how?*

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