

**Disaster risk reduction in contexts of fragility and armed conflict: a
review of emerging evidence challenges assumptions.**

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1. Introduction

Little is known about how disasters interact with armed conflict and ‘fragile’ political contexts in countries and regions of the world. This is a major missing piece of the puzzle in thinking about how to design and deliver local and national strategies for disaster risk reduction (DRR). Scholarship within the DRR field has been slow to recognise and address the research gaps in this area. As a consequence, understanding how and why disasters interact with conflict and the outcomes this creates has been obfuscated by study of linear relationships between variables representing disasters and proxies for conflict (Selby et al, 2017), security driven agendas (Warner, 2013), and even priorities around efficiency of humanitarian projects and deservedness of beneficiaries (Field, 2018).

This lack of research attention has also contributed to a dearth of, and/or inadequate policies and interventions to address disasters in areas of conflict (CARE, 2009; UNDP, 2011; Mitra and Vivekananda, 2015). Funding blind spots, policy oversight and diverging political priorities have frustrated attempts to design tailor-made policies for disasters in fragile and conflict-affected areas (Peters and Budimir, 2016). This evident neglect in literature and in policy and practice is particularly significant for the Global Assessment Report (GAR) – and something that the GAR19 (and this paper’s contribution specifically) seeks to address.

This paper examines the reasons for this gap in understanding, and proposes ways to move forward. It challenges key assumptions guiding the DRR agenda, and then takes the conversation beyond the current focus in the literature on disasters in conflict-affected areas – namely whether a causal relationship exists between the social processes of disasters and conflict, and whether that relationship is positive or negative (see for instance LeBillion and Waizenegger, 2007; Nel and Righarts, 2008; Kreutz, 2012). Much attention has been focused on trying to establish a more direct causation between disasters and conflict instead of identifying potential opportunities to advance DRR interventions in conflict affected areas and addressing existing barriers and mis-understandings in this field. We argue that this has serious implications for achieving Target E: “*Substantially increase the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020*” of the Sendai Framework (UNISDR, 2015)

Over the last twenty years, it has universally been accepted that disasters are created when physical hazards interact with social vulnerability (Wisner et al., 2004). By definition, therefore, disasters are more likely to occur in places and societies where social systems (for dealing with extreme climatic shock) are severely degraded, such as in conflict-affected and fragile regions. Hence, while it is evident that disasters, displacement and conflict are linked, the lack of a coherent research or policy framework makes it easier for policy-makers to side-step the

issue of armed conflict when negotiating DRR instruments such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (Walch, 2015).

This neglect is slowly being recognised and addressed, especially through a recent issue of *Disasters* journal examining ‘Disasters in Conflict Areas’. This paper takes such new research and evidence as its starting point, specifically two central themes: first, that state-centric approaches to DRR may be limited in contexts of fragility and armed conflict (Walch, 2018); and second, that where state-led approaches fail to reduce or even manage disaster risk, more local, non-state actors may be in a better position to reduce vulnerability and build resilience (Pelling and Dill, 2010). Both themes challenge dominant narratives about the construction of disasters, and how risk can be reduced. Questioning these underlying assumptions about how disaster risk is constructed, and the appropriate site for action, has implications for Target E: of the Sendai Framework (UNISDR, 2015) – the design, delivery and monitoring of local-to-national DRR strategies, and the attainment of the Sendai Framework outcomes more broadly.

This paper argues that DRR frameworks and policies require a more nuanced and flexible approach when dealing with ‘the state’. State-centred frameworks, including Sendai, give ‘primary responsibility’ to the state for managing and reducing disaster risk (UNISDR, 2015). This assumes that all states are institutionally stable and fundamentally the same (Trouillot, 2001), when in fact it is increasingly recognised that ‘the state’ is not a universal category, and means different things to different people in different places (Fuller and Harriss, 2001; Corbridge et al. 2005; Sharma and Gupta, 2006). A more ethnographic understanding of the state in the Global South² will allow for more context specific local strategies to be designed, robust and targeted DRR interventions, and create an enabling environment for conflict and post-conflict societies dealing with disasters to reduce risk and build resilience.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides definitions of the key terms employed in this argument, alongside insight into why issues of conflict have been largely neglected in the DRR policy and convening spaces. Section 2 discusses two political turns within disaster studies that have enabled de-politicised and conflict-blind engagement to occupy mainstream space. Section 3 presents four substantive arguments to challenge

² ‘Global South’ as a term has evolved from dissatisfaction with categories such as ‘Third World’ or ‘Developing Countries’. It is the preferred term of scholars in postcolonial studies, who see it as less hierarchical than the latter. It is particularly valuable in highlighting historical contexts resulting in unequal power relations amongst the regions known as Global North and Global South.

fundamental assumptions regularly made within DRR frameworks. Section 4 discusses the implications for policy and the delivery of Target E of the Sendai Framework. Section 5 concludes by summarising the key findings and pointing to possible areas for future research.

1.1. The parameters of the debate: defining key terms

Key terms guiding the implementation of the Sendai Framework (UNISDR, 2015) were agreed by the Open-Ended Working Group on Terminology and Indicators (UNISDR, 2017), convened by UNISDR following the World Conference on Disasters, where the Sendai Framework was negotiated. This paper respects those definitions, for example, for the terms ‘disasters’³ and ‘disaster risk reduction’⁴.

Although not without problems – not least that they result from a political process – these definitions are situated within an extensive body of work on the construction of disasters and disaster risk. While attention has shifted over time from a focus on hazards to a focus on differentiated vulnerabilities, little has changed in definitional terms since the foundational work of Wisner et al. (2003), on which these definitions are loosely based.

More recently, closer scrutiny of the underlying drivers of vulnerability to disaster risk has drawn the attention of academics and policy-makers alike. The transition from the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015 (UNISDR, 2005) to the Sendai Framework (2015) saw what many commentators referred to as a maturing of the discourse, moving from ‘managing disasters’ to ‘reducing disaster risk’ (Wilkinson et al., 2017). But while our understanding and action on risk drivers may have developed, the Sendai Framework negotiations were notably different to other international processes under way at the time in that both the process and the outcome are conflict-blind (Peters, 2017a).⁵ Parallel international processes such as Agenda 2030 (United Nations, 2015) and the World Humanitarian Summit (OCHA, 2016) sought to ensure that international efforts in humanitarian response and sustainable development put just emphasis on the lived reality that ‘more than 80% of the world’s poorest will be living in fragile context by 2030’ (OECD, 2018: 7). Terms pertinent to this paper, such as ‘fragility’ and ‘armed conflict’, are not defined under the Sendai Framework terminology guidance and do not feature either in the Sendai

³ Disasters are: *A serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts* (UNISDR, 2017).

⁴ Disaster risk reduction involves: *preventing new and reducing existing disaster risk and managing residual risk, all of which contribute to strengthening resilience and therefore to the achievement of sustainable development* (UNISDR, 2017).

⁵ Except perhaps for the Paris Agreement on climate change, which has faced similar criticisms.

framework. This points to two limitations, first, that the DRR policy community has largely failed to keep pace with development, humanitarian and peace specialists, who *are* largely redirecting their efforts to understanding and acting in armed conflict and fragile contexts. Second, that DRR policy makers and practitioners wishing to engage in the topic of disasters and conflict need to look elsewhere for definitions and guidance on how to attain Target E in difficult operating environments.

The ‘politics’ of bringing issues of conflict and fragility into the DRR policy debates were laid bare at the Sendai Framework negotiations. Western governments and civil society groups advocating for explicit recognition of conflict and fragility, specifically as an underlying driver of vulnerability to disaster risk, were met with strong resistance by some negotiating parties (Peters, 2017a). Reasons for the push-back are varied and largely anecdotal, but include concerns over the: politicisation of what is conventionally seen as a ‘hard science’ and apolitical domain; negotiations veering into topics beyond the remit of the government negotiators present; relevance of conflict and fragility - stemming from a superficial understanding of how disaster risk is constructed; and use of the Framework as an underhand means to later justify foreign interventions. Ultimately, in order to secure a global framework, references to conflict were removed in the drafting process.

Efforts to ensure the inclusion of terms such as conflict, fragility and violence in the Sendai Framework were undoubtedly hindered by the lack of pre-agreed definitions. This is where we turn to next.

The term ‘fragility’ is highly contested, in part owing to its origins in a political shift in the early 2000s, rather than any solid conceptual or theoretical grounding (Putzel, 2009, 2014). The latest *States of Fragility* report (OECD, 2018: 82)⁶ defines fragility as: ‘the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. Fragility can lead to negative outcomes including violence, the breakdown of institutions, displacement, humanitarian crises or other emergencies’. This definition reflects several shifts over the 2000s. The term has moved away from the confines of the state as a unit of analysis to now include states, systems and communities along a spectrum (hence the move from the term ‘fragile state’ to ‘fragility’). Similarly, while fragility was first conceptualised in terms of economic

⁶ While many different definitions of fragility continue to be employed – including by the World Bank (Woolcock, 2014) – the OECD definition is used most frequently, as consensus was achieved to use this definition for the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

growth (2006) then institutional strength (2011), it is now understood to be multidimensional encompassing economic, environmental, political, security and societal aspects.

An important related concept is that of ‘armed conflict’. The term ‘armed conflict’ is the only term that has a legal basis (in international humanitarian law under the Geneva Conventions of 1949).⁷ While other operational definitions exist, particularly those tied to conflict databases, here we use armed conflict to refer to actions involving armed force, a minimum level of intensity and a degree of organisation (ICRC, 2008).

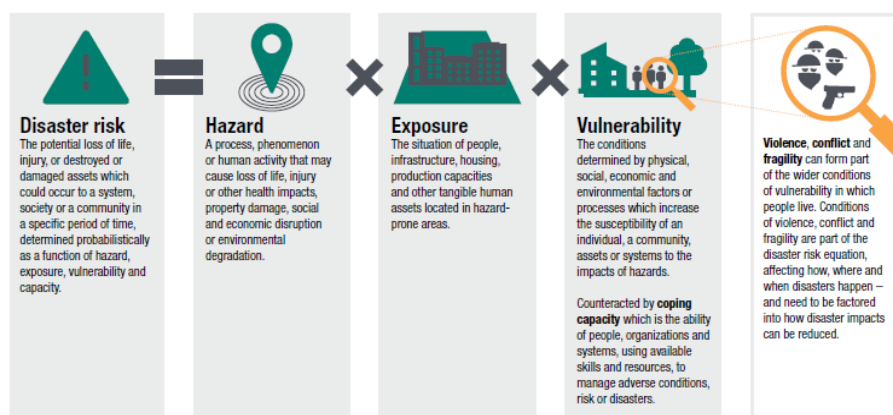
The lack of inclusion of armed conflict and fragility in DRR policy and programming approaches (Peters and Peters, 2018) exposes the disconnect between the scientific understandings of how disaster risk is constructed and current discourses on Target E. Anecdotal evidence, grey literature and academic writing have increased attention to the underlying drivers of vulnerability to disaster risk, and more specifically the place of violence, conflict and fragility within that equation (see Figure 1). These developments have not translated into changes to dominant policy approaches, unaided by the relative lack of inclusion of issues of conflict in the GARs.

To expand, previous GARs have not included in-depth analysis of this relationship, as a review of GARs in 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015 reveals:⁸ conflict coverage is uneven across the GARs, and does not make steady progress across time; terms related to conflict (and peace) do not appear in the GARs; security is addressed in the GARs, but not robustly and most often in contexts unrelated to this area of research; stability is not meaningfully addressed; and fragility is not addressed at all. This paper, and the inclusion of GAR19 *Section 3.4 Disaster Risk Reduction in contexts of fragility*, is thus a novel and welcome addition to the nascent body of work on DRR in contexts of fragility and armed conflict.

⁷ The Geneva Conventions of 1949 (http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/pdf/GC_1949-I.pdf).

⁸ Original analysis conducted by Laura Peters, August 2018.

Figure 1 The role of violence, conflict and fragility in the construction of disaster risk



Source: Peters, 2018: 9.

2. De-politicised and conflict-blind DRR is conceptually and practically inadequate

2.1 The politics of causation

The causation between disasters and armed conflict has been established in a few important works. From simple statistical modelling to evaluate whether disasters (droughts, earthquakes, epidemics) can be used as independent variables that trigger war, Genocide or regime change (Omelicheva, 2011), to more complex analysis of frameworks that determine government legitimacy or control after a disaster (Olson and Gawronski, 2010), to very specific analysis of how a particular weather condition impacts upon insurgencies (Eastin, 2016), there is , primarily statistical, research available on the subject (Streich and Mislán, 2014). Increasingly more attention is being paid to climate change and conflict, producing an array of studies looking at the impact of hydrological and climatological disasters (floods, storms, heat waves and droughts) on conflict in one or more countries (cf. IPCC, 2014; Buhaug et al., 2008; Gleditsch, 2012; Slettebak, 2012; Ide and Sheffran, 2014; Eastin, 2016).

At the same time scholars have themselves identified an obvious weakness in this work that is all too often focused on showing the correlation between disasters and conflict (Xu et al., 2016) and does little to move the debate beyond establishing causality. It has been noted that a more detailed engagement with structural factors that result in disasters in contexts of conflict and insecurity, is especially lacking. By over-emphasising causality, research on disasters in conflict-affected areas has remained apolitical and lacking in nuance. Limited engagement

with socio-political processes that create and sustain disasters in conflict-affected areas has also had enabled other, more apolitical narratives to take hold. This has been particularly visible in recent years through a marked increase in narratives of disasters and climate change as security issues (Warner, 2013) and an increasingly technocratic discourse on resilience employing Anglo-Saxon language (Joseph, 2013), dominated by state-centred DRR interventions.

Additionally, it has further been revealed that there is a tendency in the literature to focus on the same set of countries as case studies of climate change leading to conflict. For example, Sudan and Kenya are ‘the two most frequently mentioned countries’ (Adams et al., 2018) in disaster-conflict analysis. This also helps to maintain their ‘fragile’ status, creating a sampling bias that overstates the links between climate change and conflict more generally but also specifically feeds into a narrative that some states, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, are ‘naturally’ more violent than others (Adams et al., 2018, see also Hartmann, 2014). As Ide et al. (2018) argue, ‘cases experiencing both climate extremes and conflict are much more widespread in the sample of cases studied ... than in the general population of cases’.

2.2 The problem with ‘state-led’ DRR in situations of armed conflict

Research on disasters impacting political regimes and state legitimacy has been available for over 50 years. In 1966, one of the first studies examining the relationship between so-called ‘natural disasters’ and support for incumbent political regimes was published in the *American Political Science Review* (Abney and Hill, 1966). The authors used voting data from a mayoral election held shortly after a hurricane in Louisiana in 1965 to argue that ‘natural disasters create a crisis in a political system and test whether a government’s output capabilities can accommodate the resulting strain or will fail, causing one regime to replace another’ (ibid.: 980). Subsequent studies of electoral data in the aftermath of disasters have produced mixed results (Healy and Malhotra, 2009; Gasper and Reeves, 2011; Achen and Bartels, 2012; Bovan et al., 2018). While some find that incumbent politicians lose their mandate in elections after a disaster, others show that they are unable to have a significant impact on voting patterns.

While disasters may or may not influence voting intentions in elections, there is considerable evidence to suggest that response to them unequivocally affect citizens’ trust in, and the legitimacy of, state institutions and governments. In Chile, for example, Carlin et al. (2014: 9) show how disasters such as earthquakes or tsunamis ‘decreased the legitimacy of local government ... the democratic institution most proximate to Chilean disaster

victims'. Evidence from conflict-affected Kashmir suggests that flooding in 2015 deepened existing political divisions further alienating citizens from the Indian state. The disaster reinforced low levels of trust and reaffirmed the electorate's belief 'that the state government is ineffective and that the central government does not prioritise them' (Venugopal and Yasir, 2017). While the 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua is even considered a "critical juncture" that helped the revolution against Somoza's dictatorial regime (Olson and Gawronski, 2003).

The literature on the 'politics of disasters', and particularly work analysing the impact of disasters on voting patterns, state legitimacy and the health of the state-citizen relationship, illustrates the various ways in which citizens lose faith in state institutions. This problem is even more acute in conflict-affected contexts, where levels of trust are typically already low. In such contexts, giving the state 'primary responsibility' for disaster-related interventions is not only ineffective, but risks marginalising and alienating already oppressed populations and communities. In Indonesia, for example, the state used the military's control of the 'humanitarian space' - through disaster interventions - the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami to press their offensive against Acehese separatists (LeBillion and Waizenegger, 2007). In China, the state used the Sichuan earthquake in 2001 'as a vehicle of nationalist sentiment' to gain support (Pelling and Dill, 2010: 22). This illustrates the ways in which the state mobilises disaster response to meet political agendas and objectives. These do not always result in increased resilience and improved adaptive capacity of people and communities, especially if they are living amidst conflict.

This section has illustrated: (i) the over-emphasis on studying causality between disasters and armed conflict results in obfuscating the political agendas (such as security) creating and driving these tensions. (ii) In engaging apolitically with DRR as a technocratic intervention delivered through 'the state', such frameworks risk marginalising exactly those vulnerable populations who are oppressed or deliberately forgotten by 'the state'. We argue that 'bringing the politics in' is not just necessary but also the only way to deliver successful disaster risk policy and interventions in regions facing fragility and conflict.

3. Challenging assumptions and addressing misunderstanding around delivering disaster risk

3.1 The state is not a universal category of analysis

Existing policy frameworks place responsibility for DRR squarely on national governments. The Guiding Principles of the Sendai Framework, for example, are clear that ‘each State has the primary responsibility to prevent and reduce disaster risk’, and that ‘the reduction of disaster risk is a common concern for all States’ (UNISDR 2015). While there is some recognition that states have different capacities and capabilities, there is little understanding that the state itself, and more particularly state responsibility, is defined and shaped by socio-cultural factors that are not universal. Not all states can be defined as one standard type, despite a ‘tendency in scholarship on the state to reproduce the Weberian argument that formal legal rationality eclipses substantive cultural factors, so that all modern states are fundamentally the same’ (Fuller and Harriss 2009, 2). This tendency has had particularly unfortunate consequences for non-Western states, as modern liberal democracies are held up as the ideal against which all other states are judged, untethering ‘the unit of analysis – the state – from its cultural moorings’ (Sharma and Gupta, 2009: 10).

Specific socio-cultural processes play a significant role in how states are able, and expected, to respond to disaster risk. As discussed earlier, issues of trust and state legitimacy, especially in contexts such as Kashmir or Aceh, which are or have been dealing with prolonged anti-state insurgencies, will be deeply affected by the social and political culture in these places. Implementing successful DRR strategies without understanding the particularities of ‘the state’ is therefore very difficult, especially in conflict-affected contexts.

3.2 A state–citizen social contract determines citizen demands and state response around DRR

Accepting ‘that “the state” cannot (easily) be objectively described; the state means different things to different people in different locales at different times’ (Siddiqi, 2019) brings us to the second set of assumptions around the normative DRR agenda that must be challenged, especially in conflict-affected contexts. Just as the state is largely defined by, and produced through, socio-cultural processes, so too are local discourses and practices of citizenship. The understanding of what citizenship entails is not universal and different citizens are likely to *expect* different state responses to disaster risk. The state-citizen social contract determines this

negotiation. A social contract lens is therefore increasingly being used as a framework within risk governance research for understanding rights and responsibilities. This enables a more sustained discussion around state responsibility in relation to citizen demands in the aftermath of a disaster (Siddiqi, 2019; Siddiqi and Canuday, 2018; Blackburn and Pelling, 2018; Siddiqi, 2018; Blackburn, 2018; Siddiqi, 2013; Pelling and Dill, 2010).

In her book, Siddiqi illustrates the ways in which a universal state intervention, in this case in the aftermath of large-scale floods in Pakistan, was interpreted and 'experienced' by people as being a right or entitlement of their citizenship, fundamentally altering the terms of the social contract in the region (Siddiqi, 2019; Siddiqi, 2018; Siddiqi, 2013). This state-led intervention created a political moment where a minimum amount of disaster response, from the state, seemed to have been enshrined in citizenship in the region. Understanding the ways in which post-disaster interventions are framed, delivered and experienced requires a deeper historical contextualisation of the colonial and postcolonial state-citizen relationships, in these countries (Siddiqi and Canuday, 2018).

In situations of political instability and conflict, better and more targeted interventions to reduce disaster risk require a deeper and less Eurocentric engagement with the ethnographic terms of state-citizen social contracts and the role that non-state actors play in this relationship (Walch, 2014; Siddiqi, 2013).

3.3 All conflicts and insurgencies are not the same

Following on from the previous arguments that stress 'decolonising' ways of knowing the state, and emphasise the need to understand the state-citizen contract as reflecting different colonial and postcolonial histories at different points, this section challenges the assumption that 'insurgencies' or 'conflicts' can be referred to as a single category. Le Billion and Waizenegger's (2007) seminal work comparing the Indian Ocean tsunami's impact on the Acehese insurgency in Indonesia and the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka shows how the ground realities these two separatist movements faced were starkly different. While the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was able to engage the European Union (EU) and position itself as a legitimate actor in the region, in Sri Lanka the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) was regarded as a terrorist organisation and refused to cooperate with foreign actors. It is therefore possible to see that while some separatist, insurgent and armed groups may well be willing to engage in delivering development interventions, such as disaster response, others cannot. Non-state actors considered 'problematic' in the West may be considered legitimate and entirely trustworthy by local populations.

Walch (2018) makes this case by showing that in the Philippines and Mali, it was possible for non-state (even armed) actors that had established some degree of trust and legitimacy with local citizens, to deliver different services to people. Equally, groups involved in local governance (for example tribal and indigenous leaders) can and should be engaged in DRR strategies and interventions.

3.4 Resilience needs to be better situated within specific contexts of disasters in conflict areas

Thinking and talking about 'resilience' in the context of disaster risk and climate change has been criticised in recent scholarship. It's preoccupation with resilient socio-environmental 'systems' does not put enough emphasis on the fact that the system is made up of people, and not just a 'natural' system made up of physical processes (Brown, 2012). For example, culture plays a large role in determining how a disaster is understood, but also why people choose to live in certain risky places, and the different coping mechanisms that people take on to deal with the disaster (Adger et al, 2012).

It has therefore been argued that a traditional resilience-thinking approach might end up further marginalising the poor, as the focus on maintaining stability under stress could be detrimental. For example, one can theoretically be poor and unwell but possess remarkable resilience in preserving this situation over time. Resilience places more of an importance on the stability of a system as a whole rather than examining the structural and historical causes of vulnerability and power imbalances that arise at different scales.

Defining 'resilience' in this way only serves to deepen social conflict in disaster-affected communities as has been evidence by new research presented in the 2018 Special Issue of *Disasters*. Ensor et al. (2018) argue for a more political and contextualised understanding of resilience in disaster contexts which will have direct implications for social conflicts in these communities as well. This is possible by employing a rights-based approach that sees expanding and widening rights as a response to addressing issues of inequality, exclusion and limited opportunity.

4. Discussion: implications for delivering Target E by 2020

The assumptions underlying DRR policy approaches – exposed throughout this paper – have, for too long, shaped DRR discourse without appropriate critique. Revealing these assumptions raises questions about the ambition to develop local-to-national DRR strategies by 2020 – Target E of the Sendai Framework. Specifically, whether the reduction of disaster risk can be achieved by delivering strategies which rely on assumptions which may not hold true in contexts affected by armed conflict and fragility. And by extension, how strategies should or could be designed to better suit difficult operating environments. Until this is addressed, questions will continue to be raised about whether attainment of the Sendai Framework will genuinely deliver risk reduction for the most vulnerable communities: those living amid armed conflict and fragility.

The number of DRR strategies in existence is not known, though anecdotal evidence suggests that coverage is thin in contexts affected by armed conflict and fragility, in part due to the disruption that these conditions cause to the effective functioning of government, and in part due to the prioritisation of peace and security over the pursuit of DRR (Peters, 2017a). It is well documented that armed conflict and political upheaval stalled legislative processes related to the creation and revision of disaster risk management laws in the Hyogo Framework period – in Fiji and Nepal for example (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Where strategies do exist, delivery and monitoring may lag in fragile contexts, relative to non-fragile contexts, a problem not helped by the lack of development assistance for capacity-building and implementation of DRR measures specifically in contexts affected by violence, conflict and fragility (Peters and Budimir, 2016).

Moreover, no specialist or tailored support is provided to governments or non-government actors designing, delivering and monitoring DRR strategies in conflict contexts – a source of much criticism (see Peters, 2018). However Guiding Principle (i) of the Sendai Framework arguably provides space in which context-specificity – including conditions of armed conflict and fragility – *should* be explored: ‘While the drivers of disaster risk may be local, national, regional or global in scope, disaster risks have local and specific characteristics that must be understood for the determination of measures to reduce disaster risk’ (UNISDR, 2015: 13).

‘Know your context’ has long been a basic principle, if not always a practice, for the design of development or humanitarian programmes and is equally relevant to DRR strategies. A burgeoning array of approaches in the form of vulnerability and capacity assessments and hazard and risk assessments are now considered a standard part of DRR toolkits (Twigg, 2015). Yet methods to understand the socio-cultural, political and economic context

that focus more specifically on the dynamics of peace and conflict – such as conflict sensitivity (Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, 2015) and Do No Harm (Anderson, 1999; Swiss Peace, 2012) – are underutilised in DRR. Such tools seek to encourage critical self-reflection on the role that local and external interventions play in local power relationships and in dynamic conditions of conflict. Where conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm approaches have been explicitly used, this is most common among non-governmental organisations rather than government departments or sectors (to design DRR strategies, for example). One example is the application of a conflict-sensitive approach to drought and flood mitigation interventions in Concern’s Somalia Building Resilient Communities programme (Peters, 2017a). Such approaches could be useful in the design of DRR strategies in any context, but especially where armed conflict and fragility are present. To date there are no known examples of this happening systematically.

As a bare minimum, doing no harm requires DRR practitioners to fully engage with the dynamics of conflict and local politics, with as much emphasis on conflict analysis as is currently given to hazard and risk assessments. It has been argued that DRR practitioners have very different technical backgrounds from conflict management specialists (Interagency Resilience Learning Group, 2014), and as such are less likely to have the skills or capacities required to effectively negotiate the complexities of armed conflict and fragility. This remains disputed as many successful DRR interventions do exist in fragile and conflict contexts. However, the limited body of evidence on what this means for doing DRR differently remains under researched. As a result, empirical experiences have not been translated into routine learning or fed into the adjustment of programme or policy designs (Peters, 2017a); it is not the norm to integrate conflict and peace considerations into the design and delivery of DRR interventions, at least not systematically. Extending this consideration to the design, delivery and monitoring of DRR strategies, there is reason to believe that closer scrutiny of the conditions in which they are designed and/or implemented is warranted.

Evidence from Section 3 points to another, more fundamental challenge – that the state is not a universal category of analysis, and in some contexts relations between central state functions and specific locales may be weak, hostile or actively marginalising or oppressive towards certain vulnerable groups (LeBillion and Waizenegger, 2007; Pelling and Dill, 2010). In such contexts, it becomes necessary to consider who the local DRR strategy serves. Locally determined strategies *may* better represent the citizens they purport to protect. Principles and processes associated with so-called ‘good governance’ become important here. For example, what consideration has been given to the role of local stewardship in ensuring equitable multi-stakeholder representation in decision-making

processes associated with the determination of local risk priorities? Active and vocal DRR networks such as the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR)⁹ promote these kinds of principles, as does the 'localisation' agenda, which argues for a shift towards more locally-led humanitarian response.¹⁰

Working at the local scale should not be seen as a panacea. Academic challenges to the romanticising of the 'local' and of 'community' and how the two have become synonymous in DRR discourse, is pertinent. 'Community' and 'community-based disaster risk reduction', as Cannon (2014) argues, 'must not be taken for granted (as it often is currently in much Community Based Adaptation discussion) as a positive basis for any type of intervention unless it is also grounded in the conflicts and contradictions that are involved'.

Another fundamental assumption within DRR discourse is the notion that non-state actors may be better placed to deliver risk reduction measures in specific contexts. The Sendai Framework, and related Sendai Framework Monitor, acknowledges the role of non-state actors in service delivery as part of the fabric of society, and in playing a monitoring and accountability function for formal state-led efforts. But it remains the case that UNISDR is bound by its mandate and to its function as a UN entity accountable to Member States. Moreover, with DRR deeply rooted in civil protection and command-and-control structures - wherein primarily responsibility for civil protection lies with the State (Peters, 2017b) - finding ways to systematically and structurally support non-state actors in DRR has been limited.

At present there is no avenue for formally convening and supporting non-state actors to design, deliver and monitor DRR strategies in ways that run counter to the normative vision of what makes for an effective DRR system, wherein an effective and functioning state steers effort to reduce disaster risk for the most vulnerable. This permeates the entire process, including for example the Sendai Framework Monitor, which is predicated on formal inputs from government agencies. Even where counter-narratives and action are in operation, these are unlikely to be captured through the formal recording mechanisms.

On the surface, the attainment of Target E will require concentrated support at the local to national scale to devise DRR strategies in contexts affected by armed conflict and fragility. This may be through existing government structures, or in some cases may require support to alternative - non-governmental - strategies in contexts where the state is not providing effective processes through which to design strategies reflective of the constituents they

⁹ <https://www.gndr.org/>

¹⁰ Born through the World Humanitarian Summit discussions, and the subsequent <https://charter4change.org/>

aim to serve. Scratching below the surface, the design and delivery of effective DRR strategies in contexts of fragility and armed conflict may require DRR actors to think much more creatively about how the end goal of disaster resilient societies can be attained. This will likely require alternatives to normative technocratic approaches. This is where we turn to next.

5. Conclusion: why a technocratic approach will not deliver DRR in contexts of armed conflict and fragility

Designing, delivering and monitoring local-to-national DRR strategies – Target E of the Sendai Framework – in fragile contexts requires a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the relationship between disaster and conflict vulnerabilities and risk. To date, this has been an underdeveloped area of research and, arguably, of practice. As a consequence, the foundational concepts on which DRR is built namely the social construction of disasters (Wisner et al., 2004) have stagnated; basic consideration of violence, conflict and fragility (Peters, 2018) playing a role in disaster vulnerabilities rarely feature in disaster research, policy and practice. Interesting, it is in high disaster risk areas where we most clearly the underlying assumptions on which current DRR thinking and practice is grounded: for example, the notion of the nation state and of the state’s responsibility to protect citizens from disasters and disaster risk is often lacking in contexts affected by armed conflict and fragility. It is in these difficult operating environments where those underlying assumptions do not hold.

This paper has argued that state-centric approaches may be limited in contexts of fragility and armed conflict (Siddiqi and Canudy, 2018; Walch, 2018), and where this is the case, local and non-state actors (Pelling and Dill, 2010) may have a stronger role to play. We have shown how a depoliticised and conflict-blind DRR discourse is conceptually and practically inadequate: first by exploring how an overemphasis on research exploring causality between disasters and conflict discourages deeper analysis of the relationship, reinforcing an apolitical disasters discourse; and second, by showing how the literature on voting patterns, state legitimacy and the state–citizen relationship reveals the limits of state-led DRR. Both lines of argument challenge conventional wisdom about which actors and approaches will *genuinely* deliver DRR in ways that support people vulnerable to hazards, and living in conditions of armed conflict and fragility. That analysis was extended by revealing a set of truisms that emerge from the literature (Section 3). These assumptions are fourfold: the state is not a ‘universal’ category of analysis; the history and legacy of the state shapes the–citizen social contract; all conflict and insurgencies are not alike, and in

some contexts it is possible to engage with rebel forces to provide services; and resilience needs to be much better situated and context-specific in disaster and conflict scenarios.

The evidence presented here has implications for attaining Target E of the Sendai Framework ‘to deliver a substantial increase in the number of countries with national and local disaster risk reduction strategies by 2020’. Questions of armed conflict and fragility present additional challenges to be overcome in order to increase the geographical coverage of DRR strategies and thus achieve the global goals. Conversely, deeper analysis of the challenges presented by issues of armed conflict and fragility raise more philosophical questions about the extent to which the creation of DRR strategies will deliver the end goal – reduced disaster impacts – if they are designed and delivered in conflict-affected communities by the very structures that create and maintain disaster vulnerabilities in the first place.

If the empirical imperative is to build resilience and reduce disaster risk, then violence, conflict and fragility need to be considered as constituent components of vulnerability to disaster risk (Peters, 2018). The logic thus follows that conflict analysis could helpfully form part of the disaster risk assessment process, with consideration of non-state actors’ roles in delivering DRR outcomes, alongside greater financial support from development assistance for such efforts at the local level.

From this perspective, the GAR19 presents a unique opportunity to include within mainstream disaster literature the challenges involved in designing, delivering and monitoring DRR strategies in contexts affected by fragility. But equally, the ambiguity of the phrasing of Target E means that it could be ‘achieved’ without significantly addressing the limitations mainstream DRR approaches – which neglect armed conflict and fragility – that have been revealed through this paper.¹¹ By extension, issues around disasters and conflict raise questions about the premise behind the Sendai Framework; the Sendai Framework global targets are themselves a representation of a technocentric exercise which mirrors normative constructions of DRR. In this neoliberal vision of the international system, the state has primary responsibility for protecting its citizens against disaster risk – even though we know this does not hold true in some contexts. Practical and philosophical questions and tensions thus remain.

For the research community – and specifically the UNISDR-convened Science and Technology Advisory Group – important areas of research warranting attention include: how to marry the need for coherent DRR action across

¹¹ Also in light of the inconsistency in reporting which make it difficult to ascertain an accurate baseline.

scales in contexts where opposing groups (specifically state and non-state actors) lead DRR efforts; and how to identify and utilise the added-value of DRR actions by non-state actors in ways that contribute to the global reporting mechanism of the Sendai Framework.

There is also an urgent need to engage with the evidence, critiques and suggestions put forward by empirical scholars – such as the work in the recent issue of *Disasters* – who make a compelling and useful case around the need to contextualise universal ideas and categories and decolonise key terms and themes so that they are also meaningful in the non-Western world and the Global South. This paper constitutes one step in that direction.

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