

COMPOUNDING RISK: DISASTERS, FRAGILITY AND CONFLICT

SUMMARY

This policy brief outlines the relationship between conflicts and disasters, specifically focusing on how the impacts of natural disasters increase the risk of conflict and fragility. The evidence is organised around three drivers of conflict: exacerbating vulnerabilities and grievances, stresses on governance capacities to respond and delivery of humanitarian assistance, with case studies provided.

INTRODUCTION

Recent high-profile disasters in fragile contexts such as the droughts in Syria and Mali have put a spotlight on the links between disasters and conflict, and the ways in which fragility and vulnerability can reinforce each other. From 2005 to 2009, more than 50% of people affected by natural disasters lived in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.¹ Projections indicate that this will continue to increase, with climate-related disaster vulnerability predicted to be felt most acutely in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.²

Natural disasters are defined by the UN as: “the consequences of events triggered by natural hazards that overwhelm local response capacity and seriously affect the social and economic development of a region”; they include slow-onset disasters such as drought as well as sudden shock events.³ By definition natural disasters are linked to the human capacity to respond, which means, in a fragile context with weakened state structures and social systems, the most likely response will be inadequate to meet the needs of those affected.

CONFLICT AND DISASTER INTERFACE

The relationship between disasters and conflict is not one of direct causality, whereby ‘disaster X leads to conflict Y’ or vice versa. However, the relationship is mutually reinforcing. The type of disaster or conflict, as well as the nature of the local context in which it occurs, determines its interface. In most cases, the co-location of disasters and conflicts hampers recovery efforts and worsens the risk of future crises.⁴

Conflict → Disaster: Fragility and conflict can make natural disasters more likely. Contexts where state structures

and social systems are already weakened by conflicts are less able to respond to disaster risks, increasing the likelihood that an environmental shock will become a natural disaster. Conflicts destroy the livelihoods, safety nets, infrastructure and basic services that make people resilient. For example, the complex political crisis in Darfur, Sudan has hindered the long-term investment in livelihoods, services, infrastructure and capacity (see Box 1). Conflicts also increase people’s risk by displacing them into areas more exposed to hazards (see Box 2). Governments can also exacerbate post-disaster suffering by inhibiting aid on security grounds or appropriating humanitarian aid to support conflict objectives (see Box 3).

Disaster → Conflict: There is little evidence that disasters can cause conflict in and of themselves. But extreme weather events and disasters can exacerbate the challenges people already face and create new risks. Disasters can damage people’s livelihoods, assets, safety nets and health, and can lead to increased displacement. In fragile contexts, disasters put additional stress on already stretched and usually weak governance systems.

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The lack of effective responses or coping mechanisms can fuel grievances, especially against the government. Inability and failure to limit the damage from foreseeable extreme weather events and poorly designed humanitarian interventions can exacerbate the situation and increase

the risks of conflict. Conversely, disaster prevention and disaster response efforts could provide opportunities to improve resilience, build trust in the government and potentially contribute to building peace in fragile contexts.

PATHWAYS THROUGH WHICH DISASTERS CAN INCREASE THE RISK OF FRAGILITY

This section examines how natural disasters affect conflict and fragility. The evidence is organised around three drivers of conflict: exacerbating vulnerabilities and grievances, stresses on governance capacities to respond and humanitarian assistance.

Disasters increase vulnerability and compound grievances

Natural disasters can affect resource availability and erode people's livelihoods. Extreme weather events, particularly at the sub-national level, can affect livelihoods and the capacity of communities to prepare for and respond to future disasters, eroding their overall resilience.⁵ Natural disasters can affect the availability, access and distribution of natural resources, which in turn intensifies competition over them, potentially leading to violence and instability. When grievances and resource competition follow slow-onset protracted

disasters and lead to conflict, the result is often localised violence and communal conflicts, not involving the state.⁶

Natural disasters can degrade existing coping mechanisms.

Disasters can destroy many key coping mechanisms such as savings schemes, alternative livelihoods and options to migrate, which communities traditionally need to cope with shocks and stresses. In Haiti, the impacts of violence and disasters together contributed to entrenching chronic poverty. Lack of basic services, particularly education and health, increased the population's crisis risk and resulted in undermining the resilience of many Haitians who subsequently engaged in high-risk coping strategies.⁷

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Natural disasters can worsen pockets of fragility by displacing people and destabilising communities. Disasters and climate-induced population movements can lead to tensions between those displaced and the host communities

BOX 1: NATURAL DISASTERS AFFECTING LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

In Turkana, Kenya, many nomadic pastoralists have turned to fishing as pastures required to feed their herds have dwindled in the face of recurring droughts, leading to deadly conflicts between rival Kenyan tribes and with Ethiopian fishermen on the other side of Lake Turkana.

In the arid north of Mali, frequent severe droughts, increasingly erratic rainfall and rampant desertification have severely undermined natural resource-dependent livelihoods and communities' capacity to recover from shocks. The 2005, 2010 and 2011–12 droughts degraded the water table, killed off livestock and spurred a mass exodus of young people. Along with resource scarcity, unemployment, economic fragility, weak governance, terrorism and crime have combined with the many other grievances to underpin several Tuareg rebellions, including the 2012 rebellion that led to an international military intervention.

In Sudan, desertification and drought reduced the availability of key land and water resources heightening competition between settled farmers and pastoralists over access to them. In some cases, farmers deliberately set fire to pasturelands and destroyed water points to deter pastoralists from grazing their livestock, worsening the conditions of drought and food insecurity.⁸

BOX 2: SYRIA: DROUGHT, LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY AND DISPLACEMENT

Between 2006 and 2011, Syria suffered a severe long-term drought. It hit the northeast region – the country's breadbasket – the hardest. Herders in the northeast lost nearly 85% of their livestock, affecting 1.3 million people. Nearly a million rural villagers lost their farms in the face of total crop failure.

The drought was exacerbated by a long legacy of resource mismanagement. The government heavily subsidised water-intensive wheat and cotton farming, and encouraged inefficient irrigation techniques. Farmers sought to increase supply by tapping the country's groundwater resources. As the drought continued into its second and third year, the Syrian government cancelled a number of state subsidies, which multiplied the price of diesel fuel and fertilisers overnight.

The massive loss of livelihood led farmers, herders and rural families to migrate to overcrowded cities, stressing urban infrastructure and basic services and increasing urban unemployment. More than one million people were food insecure. The government failed to respond to the humanitarian crisis, fuelling simmering discontent in the rural areas. The first protests began in the rural town of Dara'a, where secret police arrested and tortured a group of teenagers. People in other cities gathered in support for the 'children of Dara'a'.

over pressures of sharing scarce resources, land tenure disputes and pre-existing ethnic/tribal tensions. In 2008, flooding and overflow from the Koshi River in the Terai region of Nepal led to large-scale resettlement, which resulted in increased tensions with host communities. These tensions were exacerbated by political groups who used flood victims' dissatisfaction over lack of clean water and shelter to feed anti-government sentiments.⁹

Temporary displacement and mobility of populations is sometimes necessary and expedient to cope with disasters to ensure communities are not trapped in environmentally vulnerable and high-risk areas. However, some people may be unable to move because of ongoing violence or conflict. Armed conflict in Somalia has hindered pastoralists from relocating in the face of drought and keeps humanitarian organisations from getting to areas in need of assistance.

Stresses on governance

Disasters can overburden and undermine the capacity of already fragile institutions to adequately respond, heightening grievances among communities. Disasters particularly impact fragile and conflict-affected contexts, as the capacity of institutions – both governmental and in society – to prevent and respond to disasters is weak. The 2011 East African drought intensified political instability by compounding grievances between groups over the poor governance of the food crises, leading to a full-scale humanitarian crisis and incidents of violence across the region.¹⁰

Disaster mismanagement can erode the social contract. Ineffective disaster responses and the failure to manage natural disasters can challenge the legitimacy and authority of governance providers and can (further) erode the social contract that exists between the government and affected communities. In Sindh, Pakistan, the perceived inability of the state to adequately support affected communities following the 2012 floods led to feelings of increased political marginalisation and disaffection among flood-affected groups.¹¹

Failure to provide emergency relief or distribute it equally can cause frustration with the government and lead to protests and public demonstrations. For example, in its response to the 2006 earthquake, the Kyrgyzstan government's lack of transparency and weak public information systems spurred tension over the apparent unequal distribution of disaster assistance.¹²

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Given the high visibility of disasters (especially high-impact ones), the lack of adequate or equitable response can generate widespread popular discontent at the national level even when the disaster itself is geographically limited.

Natural disasters can create power vacuums and can lead to increased criminal activity. Natural disasters weaken state capacity and legitimacy by reducing state resources while increasing the demands placed on it. By weakening the state, natural disasters can create power vacuums and spaces for new political elites to partake in conflict and usurp power. They can also present economic opportunities for criminal activity encouraging the appropriation of resources by some groups, which can lead to violence. Between 2006 and 2007, droughts in Afghanistan's northern Balkh region forced downstream villagers to look for new livelihood opportunities, which for some young men meant joining armed groups.¹³ The conditions of drought were exacerbated by unequal distribution of water rights by elites following the fall of the Taliban rule in 2001.¹⁴

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Humanitarian disaster responses lacking conflict- and climate-sensitivity can increase fragility

Humanitarian organisations play a critical role in disaster response, particularly in complex political settings, where communities are vulnerable to compound risks including natural disasters, economic shocks and violent conflict. Humanitarian responses to crises, however, have the potential to negatively impact on the context. In rapid-onset disasters, the need to respond quickly can result in operations being conflict-insensitive and risk escalating conflicts. By failing to take environmental issues into consideration, humanitarian disaster responses can undermine their very purpose: to save lives and preserve and restore livelihoods.

Humanitarian disaster assistance can cause harm. Inappropriate humanitarian disaster responses can increase community vulnerabilities and inadvertently bring them more harm causing anger among people and leading them to protest and resort to violence. While responding to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, the UN peacekeeping forces failed to treat water sources for cholera, a water-borne disease that they themselves introduced via untreated human waste. This caused the death of thousands of Haitians prompting demonstrations, rioting, road blockades and clashes between protestors and UN troops. The Haitian police had to be called in to offer protection to the UN troops.

Failure to be climate-sensitive can lead to unsustainable operations. Unsustainable disaster responses that fail to consider links between the disaster response and subsequent implications for the environment and climate change can result in the response contributing to increased vulnerability. They can also increase the risks of conflict and insecurity by destroying the natural resources communities rely on, thus jeopardising their

BOX 3: INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI: COMPARING ACEH, INDONESIA AND SRI LANKA

Indonesia and Sri Lanka both experienced the same large-scale rapid-onset disaster, the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, in 2004. At the time, both Sri Lanka and Indonesia were embroiled in protracted conflicts. The disaster response in Aceh is credited with helping to resolve the long conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the national government. But in Sri Lanka, the response increased tensions between the Tamil Tigers (LTTE) and the government.

In Indonesia, the large-scale devastation unleashed by the tsunami ended nearly three decades of conflict, led to the signing of a peace agreement in 2005 and was hailed in the press as a victory for 'disaster diplomacy'. Without the capacity to rebuild Aceh, the government had to depend on the international community, which ended the decades-long isolation imposed on Aceh during the years of the separatist conflict. Indonesia's newly elected president had already launched an initiative to renew peace talks between the central government and GAM, but it is widely believed that the disaster played a major role in bringing these talks to fruition. The international community provided not only disaster relief but also a sense of security to the population. Both strong international support and committed political leadership, against the background of an acute catastrophe, led to the renewal of peace negotiations.

The post-tsunami recovery in Aceh was seen as a historic opportunity to 'build back better', approaching both tsunami recovery and post-conflict reconstruction in a more unified way. To guard against the unequal distribution of funds, the president created a special agency, the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency for Aceh and Nias, to rehabilitate the region not only physically, socially and economically, but also psycho-socially and culturally, thereby jointly addressing the impacts of the tsunami and the conflict.

When the 2004 tsunami struck Sri Lanka, the peace process was similarly stalled, and the LTTE held a strong position. Worried that the LTTE would use the tsunami to gain international sympathy, recognition and direct assistance, the government blocked opportunities that it feared would benefit the LTTE. The Tamil population felt that more assistance was delivered to people in the South, mostly Sinhalese, while those in the North and East, mostly Tamil, did not receive a proportionate share. Efforts to develop a joint response between Sinhalese and Tamils failed. Differential treatment for people displaced by conflict and those displaced by the tsunami added to the tensions. Tamils complained that the government failed to provide adequate assistance and Muslims felt ignored and discriminated against. Inter-communal incriminations returned and the violent conflict reignited in late 2006. In 2009, the Sinhalese-dominated government defeated the LTTE.¹⁵

livelihoods. Humanitarian operations in Darfur exacerbated deforestation, an already critical consequence of conflict, by increasing demand for construction. Brick-making kilns burned about 52,000 trees a year, and caused soil extraction and destruction of valuable agricultural land. Overall, the unsustainable use of scarce resources negatively impacted the already fragile livelihoods of the millions affected and displaced by conflict.¹⁶

Unequal distribution of humanitarian aid can exacerbate inequalities or create new ones. The challenging operating environment in fragile and conflict-affected contexts can result in humanitarian responses exacerbating pre-existing or creating new inequalities through unequal distribution of aid. In Pakistan, poor coordination between NGOs responding to the floods of July–August 2010, combined with a complex security situation and difficulties getting access to permits to distribute aid, resulted in uneven distribution of aid. In some cases, even within the same village, relief packages were widely different, leading to tensions both within the community and with the NGOs providing the aid.¹⁷

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In Haiti, the magnitude of the disaster and the imperative to respond rapidly meant that consultations were limited and relationships with the host and surrounding communities around the intended camps were left unexplored. An initial outpouring of sympathy turned to a feeling of exclusion among host communities. This resulted in incidents of conflict between camp residents and people living immediately outside of the camp, largely over the absence of services for the latter. Humanitarian agencies had to repair these relationships. They subsequently included host community representatives in camp committee meetings and developed 'neighbourhood strategies' to help facilitate the transition of camp residents to more permanent homes in resettlement areas.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Conflict and fragility increase the impact of natural disasters by increasing vulnerability to natural hazards. Conflict increases disaster risk by displacing people to areas more exposed to hazards, negatively affecting people's livelihoods, destroying assets and degrading coping mechanisms, and by undermining the capacity of governments to plan for and protect against natural hazards. In certain contexts, disasters can contribute to the risk of fragility and conflict by creating competition for scarce resources, exacerbating inequality through the unequal distribution of aid, and by changing power relations within and between communities as well as between communities and power holders. Disaster-related conflict risks also arise

from inappropriate or unsustainable national or international disaster assistance.

Coinciding disasters and conflicts intensify the risk of protracted or future crises and hamper crisis recovery efforts.¹⁹ This is due to the combined damage they bring upon people's lives, which further undermines individual, community and state coping capacities and increases vulnerability and poverty levels. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) and humanitarian activities that do not take account of conflict dynamics such as power relations between different groups – especially when some are recipients of support and others are not – can increase overall conflict risk in fragile contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From a policy perspective, there are clear opportunities to mitigate these risks by creating programmes and approaches that are more sensitive to the links between disasters and conflict.

- **Analysing compound risks:** Operating in a multi-risk environment with slow- and rapid-onset emergencies, violent conflict, climate change and economic shocks requires taking a whole-system approach to analysing and measuring compound risks. The disasters and fragility interface can be assessed by integrating four forecasting segments: greenhouse gas emissions; the climate system's response; the knock-on consequences on society, economy and politics, and the conflict and fragility risks that arise from them; and the impact of actions taken to mitigate those risks.
- **Programmatic approaches:** There is little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of integrated approaches to conflict prevention and DRR, despite numerous co-locations of natural disasters and conflict. Ensuring that current and future programmes 'do no harm', e.g. by inadvertently undermining communities' existing resilience to disasters or conflict, is a minimum requirement. Beyond this, there is a real need to adopt conflict-sensitive approaches that go above and beyond do no harm and actively contribute to wider conflict

transformation and peacebuilding. Ensuring that peacebuilding gains are not undermined by natural disasters and disaster risk management strategies, and seizing opportunities for change that can arise in post-disaster contexts can promote more equitable relations by enhancing appropriate structures, systems and capacity-building. These windows of opportunity are generally not organic and require proactive support to avoid falling back into historic patterns of inequality or violence.

- **Policy architecture:** Policy frameworks treat conflict prevention and DRR as largely separate and discrete issues, and therefore efforts to address risks resulting from natural disasters, conflict and fragility are operationalised separately. The 2015 negotiations on a new DRR framework and global climate agreement should be aligned to guard against this disconnect and ensure they are relevant to the intertwined challenges facing low-income and fragile states. Predictable, long-range funding for preparedness that accommodates early action and rapid responses to extreme events and a development strategy that prepares for shocks is needed. This strategy will be more effective if global information is translated for local use and local information is included in worldwide risk monitoring and assessment.

Endnotes

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