**Disasters in conflict areas: finding the politics**

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Despite some 50 years of research, relatively little is known about how disasters in conflict areas are created and discursively framed, and how information on them is publicly consumed. The emphasis in disaster studies has remained on establishing causal linkages, demonstrating the way in which natural hazard-related disasters result in deepening conflict, or ushering inpeace. Furthermore, it has been accepted that disaster risk reduction is the state’s responsibility. The strengths and limitations of these approaches are examined prior to a political reimagining of disasters in conflict areas. The absence of ‘politics’ from the wider debate on disasters in conflict areas is not just a benign oversight, but *is* in fact the politics of disasters in conflict areas. A politics that does not engage with the processes and outcomes of pursuing dominant agendas, such as neoliberal orthodoxy and state imperial control, in areas and communities vulnerable to natural hazards and political conflict needs to be recognised and challenged.

**Keywords:** conflict, disasters, dominant agendas, politics

**Introduction**

At the International Conference on Lake Chad in Abuja, Nigeria, on 26–28 February 2018, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General António Guterres referred to the fast disappearing lake[[1]](#footnote-1) as an ‘environmental tragedy [that] has had a deep impact on the area’s socioeconomic outlook and has led to increased insecurity in a region already affected by violent extremism’ (UN, 2018). His message was clear: the desertification disaster had played a significant role in exacerbating the violent Boko Haram insurgency that had been ravaging the Lake Chad Basin since 2009 (BBC, 2015). UN Security Council Resolution 2349 on the Lake Chad Basin, adopted on 31 March 2017, also identified ‘water and climate change’ as among the ‘root causes’ of violence in the region (van Oosterom, 2018). This regional ‘crisis’ has once again renewed international interest in the ways in which natural hazard-based disasters interact with violent conflict and the outcomes they produce. This is an issue that has been widely investigated since the 1970s (see, for example, Quarantelli and Dynes, 1976), yet despite ‘three generations of post-disaster conflict research’ (Streich and Mislan, 2014, p. 56) there is a relatively limited understanding of how disasters interact with, and unfold in, conflict-affected areas.

This introductory essay makes two key arguments before moving on to describe the contribution of the seven papers in this special issue of *Disasters*. The first is that in spite of decades of work on disasters in conflict areas, the subject remains an underdeveloped area of study and practice (CARE, 2009; UNDP, 2011; Mitra and Vivekananda, 2015), owing to the failure to take account of the ‘political’ in its analysis. This is partly because political work on disasters and conflict has looked to establish causal links between the two realms, rather than providing locally grounded and nuanced analysis of structural conditions that result in these complex outcomes. The second centres on the challenges present within a state-centred disaster risk reduction (DRR) paradigm, which constructs states as neutral or apolitical and gives them ‘primary responsibility’ to ‘prevent and reduce disaster risk’ (UNISDR, 2015). The paper contends that this ‘politics of disasters’ is not simply missing from the evolutionary journey of disaster studies, as suggested by some observers, such as Olson (2000), but also that this oversight *is* in fact the contemporary politics of disasters.

**The state of knowledge**

*Causal links*

It is strange to claim in the face of some 50 years of published work on the subject, that relatively little is still known about the ways in which disasters interact with conflict. This seemingly paradoxical position can be explained by an investigation of the wider debate on disasters in conflict areas, which is based around (i) research that examines disasters as ‘threat multipliers’ and (ii) disasters asharbingers of peace—‘disaster diplomacy’. This literature is dominated by a positivist international relations/conflict studies ontology, and methodologically is inclined to use ‘large-N’ studies that assess the correlation between instances of disaster and conflict worldwide.

These studies tend to utilise an international dataset of ‘country-year’ observations of disasters and conflict, comparing them with various economic and political indicators, using regression analysis. The hypothesis normally being tested is: ‘are disasters correlated with conflict?’, or ‘is a disaster a useful predictor for conflict?’ (Bhavnani, 2006; Nel and Righarts, 2008; Nelson, 2010; Berrebi and Ostwald, 2011; Omelicheva, 2011; King and Mutter, 2014; Xu et al., 2016). A number of different types of conflict have been studied: intrastate conflict (Nelson, 2010); political violence (Omelicheva, 2011); or acts of terrorism within a country (Berrebi and Ostwald, 2011). In addition, these questions have been viewed using a climate change lens, probing primarily the impacts of climatological and hydrological disasters, such as droughts, floods, heatwaves, and storms, on conflict in one or many countries (c.f. Buhaug, Gleditsch, and Theisen, 2008; Gleditsch, 2012; Slettebak, 2012; Ide and Scheffran, 2014; IPCC, 2014; Eastin, 2018). This body of work makes it possible to see that a relationship exists between disasters and conflict. At the same time, it is unable to provide much detail on the underlying political or social processes that result in this interaction, nor determine the outcome.

The study of whether disasters lead to peace—the disaster diplomacy hypothesis—follows a similar tradition. Typically it involves appraising country case studies to document instances of disasters and then comparing that information with peace agreements between warring parties signed during the same period (c.f. Le Billon and Waizenegger, 2007; Kreutz, 2012; Maciver, 2012). While there is no general consensus among scholars on whether natural hazard-related disasters increase the likelihood of conflict or peace, there is broad agreement that the occurrence of a disaster can lead to a temporary ceasefire, owing to the need for disaster relief, and the loss of infrastructure and military personnel. However, this is unlikely to be sustained or yield long-term peace (Kelman, 2012, 2016).

Many years of research on this subject has shown emphatically that natural hazard-based disasters unfold in situations of armed conflict and insecurity and interact with them. The political and social processes leading to such interaction and the way in which it plays out in people’s lives remains less well understood, though. Large-N studies focusing on correlations are unable to provide sufficient depth vis-à-vis the political and social dynamics that create or result in people living with disasters in conflict areas (Ide and Sheffran, 2014; Xu et al., 2016). While some conflict-related variables may have a strong correlation with natural hazard events in country X, often there is no such relation at all in country Y, despite it having very similar environmental and geographical characteristics. Effectively, then, while such causal linkages between conflict and environmental variables may be interesting signposts, they are unable to explain the processes that produce disasters in conflict areas.

A study that examined data on 187 ‘political units’ over a 50-year time frame, from 1950–2000, concluded that natural hazard-based disasters ‘significantly increase the risk of violent civil conflict’ (Nel and Righarts, 2008, p. 159). About five years later, different scholars published a much more comprehensive examination of ‘climate variables’ and ‘conflict outcomes’ over 12 millennia, across all regions of the world, using some 45 different conflict datasets. It revealed that ‘each 1-SD [(standard deviation)] change in climate . . . increases the frequency of interpersonal violence by 4% and intergroup conflict by 14%’ (Hsiang, Burke, and Miguel, 2013, p. 12). There was no further clarity, however, on structural factors or political outcomes in these conflict- and disaster-affected places. Consequently, refining these studies to include larger sample sizes, or different types of political proxy variables, to model whether disasters result in peace or conflict is of limited help in better understanding key drivers and issues. This illustrates that the continued expansion of such models takes scholarship down more pathways to establishing correlations or causal linkages, rather than producing more creative and nuanced engagement with what creates, sustains, and enables people to live with disasters in conflict areas.

The seven papers in this special issue seek to move beyond narratives of disasters resulting in *either peace or conflict*. Instead theypromote more radical and fundamentally political engagement with the space where the two interact.

This also requires a more critical debate on disaster policies that take nation states as the primary implementing actors, largely seeing all states as the same.

*State governmentality*

There is empirical evidence of the increased frequency and intensity of disasters in the most conflict-affected states (Ferris, 2010; Peters and Budimir, 2016; Peters, 2017). From drought in Somalia, to typhoons in the Philippines, to landslides in Colombia, natural hazard-based disasters and armed conflict have occurred simultaneously—that is, in the same communities at the same time. This is a far more common reality than that of disasters causing devastation in industrialised societies of the Global North. By definition, disasters are fairly likely to happen in all conflict-affected societies, where weakened social and political networks leave people vulnerable to natural hazards (Blaikie et al., 2014). Yet, disaster preparedness and response paradigms consistently refer to interventions that are to be rolled out by an ‘intrinsically benevolent’ state (see the paper by Colin Walch in this special issue), rather than recognising that ‘the state itself constitutes a “hazard”’ for most vulnerable communities living in precarity (Carrigan, 2015, p. 121). The discussion on disaster impact and response has barely scratched the surface regarding issues concerning predatory, extractive, or neoliberal states and the ways in which they are able to mobilise disasters for different kinds of political purposes.

*Political* work on disasters frequently refers to them as ‘catalysts’, ‘windows of opportunity’, or ‘tipping points’ for (often positive) social change (Pelling and Dill, 2006, 2010; Birkmann et al., 2010). It is believed that a crisis, such as a disaster, damages the social contract between citizens and states, causing both parties to rethink fundamentally their relationship (see the paper by Ayesha Siddiqi and Jose Jowel P. Canuday in this special issue). Scholars have therefore examined the responses of governments (Cohen and Walker, 2008; Taras, 2015) or even insurgent groups (Walch, 2014) to disasters, even via quantitative studies (Chang and Berdiev, 2015; Wood and Wright, 2016). Once again, though, this understanding of a state–citizen relationshiptends to employ ‘classical contractian ideas’ of a single social contract in a polity controlled by citizens ruled by a ‘legitimate government’ (Blackburn and Pelling, forthcoming). Local contexts in postcolonial states of the Global South are far more messy and complicated than those discussed by macro frameworks found in *political* work on disasters.

It has been argued that the neoliberal state has used the threat of possible natural hazards to relocate forcibly people and to displace communities, creating disasters in cities (Saracoglu and Demirtas-Milz, 2014). In addition, it has used physical and affective spaces of post-disaster memorialising to push nationalistic, right-wing, and exclusionary agendas that marginalise, inter alia, women and minorities (Simpson and Corbridge, 2006). The state’s vision for post-disaster planning thus needs to be evaluated critically, particularly as it risks reinforcing the marginalisation of the most vulnerable. As the papers in this special issue illustrate, the state addresses disasters (even) in conflict areas through the same processes of neoliberal marketisation, imperial expansion, and power and privilege that helped to create them in the first instance.

Unearthing and exploring the agendas around disasters utilised by these powerful actors requires far more sustained and critical engagement. However, political science questions about state action in the aftermath of a disaster have often been fairly apolitical. For instance, the politics of disaster response, and citizens’ acceptance of it, has been connected to variables such as government competence, capability, and analysis and then assessed across different cases (Olson and Gawronski, 2010). Or a singular case has been examined to show people’s penchant for authoritarian control following disasters (Carlin, Love, and Zechmeister, 2014). Although a limited body of literature on the politics of disasters has emphasised repeatedly the importance of understanding the ways in which local power and global agendas are constructed (Siddiqi, 2014; Venugopal and Yasir, 2017), as well as the political and social processes through which disasters challenge or reinforce them to create political conflict, little sustained effort has been made to engage with this dynamic.

Similarly, local context is important in comprehending how societies make sense of disasters, especially politically (Bankoff, 2004, 2007; Bankoff and Hilhorst, 2009). Yet, while ‘exceptional instances where violent conflict arises, and climate also varies in some way’, such as in Darfur (western Sudan) and Syria, have been overemphasised (Adams et al., 2018, p. 200), the local sociocultural dynamics in these societies have rarely been explored by disaster–conflict frameworks.

This special issue takes each of these challenges within the field of disaster studies seriously. It evolved from the papers presented at the United Kingdom Alliance for Disaster Research Annual Conference on 9–10 January 2017 and provides a first step towards thinking about a more political, locally grounded, and decolonial framework for understanding disasters, and the various ways in which they interact with conflict.

**The debate moving forward**

The seven papers in this special issue are loosely divided into two that engage with (and critique) the way in which the existing development agenda has helped to construct the securitisation discourse around disasters. A narrative that masks underlying structures of power and privilege, producing social and political conflict. The remaining five papers challenge current framings and approaches to theorising disasters in conflict areas, illustrating the ways in which existing agendas, from state-centred to resilience-based, do not engage critically with the political context or the cultural nuances resulting in their creation. Based on compelling evidence from different parts of the world, ranging from Timor-Leste to Uganda and from Mali to the Philippines, these papers demonstrate that disasters in conflict areas are deeply intertwined with neoliberal orthodoxy and imperial expansion. To begin to address the specific challenges and complexities this raises for people living in these regions, disaster studies needs to unpack how deeply political is the de-politicisation of this discourse. Leaving the *politics* out when studying disasters in conflict areas is the ‘politics of disasters’.

*When ‘securitisation’ helps de-politicise disasters*

The first two papers draw on the existing discourse and language of disasters significantly to illustrate the ways in which they are employed by those in power. In fact, using the language of disasters and catastrophe to push domination and control (Warner, 2013; Warner and Boas, 2017) is not a process unique to natural hazard-based disasters. Instead, as Charlie Whittaker et al.’s engagement with literature on health ‘disasters’ demonstrates, such ‘crises’ and ‘epidemics’ enabled European imperial expansion into the Americas, helped to maintain the United Kingdom’s highly unequal relations with its former colonies, and has been employed to assert the geopolitical hegemony of the United States. Health disasters even reveal that as a tool of imperial domination and control, the creation and use of this discourse is not unique to the state. Rather, it has given the World Health Organization (WHO) powers quite unlike those of any other supranational authority: it is in fact the only international organisation that the UN Security Council is unable to block. Once WHO issues directives on a health ‘crisis’ or an ‘epidemic’, national states too have to abide by them to deal with the ‘threat’. It is clear, therefore, that once a debate has been securitised, the underlying political structures can no longer be challenged or questioned (Hilhorst, 2013). Consequently, this paper suggests a new framework for viewing health disasters through a disaster diplomacy lens, examining their strengths and limitations in creating spaces for improving diplomatic relations at the local, national, or international level.

The securitisation discourse on natural hazards-based disasters is not just well-developed and powerful, but is repeatedly encountered during disasters. Academic, journalistic, and policy reports have directly linked the Syrian drought to the start of the civil war in 2012 (Selby et al., 2017). Extreme weather events in Sub-Saharan Africa have long been presented as a security threat, resulting in the migration of ‘violent’ African men, within or without their national borders (Hartmann, 2014). Nevertheless, there is limited analysis of the way in which international and national policy frameworks have employed disasters terminology and discourse to securitise the global agenda on climate change. The paper by Katie Peters is a first attempt to demonstrate the active use of ‘disasters’ to advance that agenda, particularly by the UN Security Council and the UK government. The latter has used the language of ‘disasters’ when speaking of climate change, actively reframing it as a security issue. The paper not only illustrates how ‘securitisation’ framing takes place at the global level, but also presents a nuanced framework that shows that securitisation itself encompasses a diverse range rather than just being an emphatic securitised (or not) process.

Together, these papers reveal convincingly the ways in which broader agendas of domination, control, and even marketisation are masked using the language of security.

*Dominant agendas create ‘disasters in conflict areas’*

The joint assault of capitalism and colonialism and its role in creating a highly unequal lived experience of citizenship is demonstrated in the paper by Siddiqi and Canuday. Their ethnographic examination of disasters in conflict areas of the Philippines highlights deep inequities in the postcolonial social contract based on landownership. The paper shows, too, that this inequality is a fundamental condition of the postcolonial contract defining the relationship between the state and the ethnic and indigenous minorities of the Philippines. The state–citizen relationship has remained resolute in the face of challenges such as disasters and conflict—in fact it has manifested with greater clarity. This research illustrates the ways in which imperial domination and control is exercised through ‘state policy’. Using disasters as the imperative (Hartmann, 2014) and mobilising its ideological cousin ‘security’, a lived reality is constructed that not only marginalises indigenous and landless peoples, but also leaves them profoundly more ‘insecure’ and vulnerable in the post-disaster moment. In this context, the state–citizen social contract is an effective framework through which this violence is sustained and perpetuated.

As Walch highlights, state-centred approaches to the implementation of disaster risk management (DRM) interventions (promoted by existing global frameworks) are deeply problematic in settings where the state is complicit in creating and sustaining insecurity. Similarly, in situations where rebel and non-state groups are able to provide ‘resilience’ and ‘adaptation’ interventions to vulnerable populations, engaging with these armed actors is a valuable exercise that must be undertaken. Walch’s evidence from the insurgencies in Philippines and Mali is useful in demonstrating that a distant and far-off central state (Shah, 2013) holds little meaning for populations living in rebel-controlled territories. If appropriate disaster preparedness and response measures have to be constructed and implemented in these areas, then sensible engagement with some type of non-state actor is crucial. De-colonising ‘the state’ as a category of analysis is necessary for a more grounded and political understanding of disasters and their interaction with conflict.

Beyond the state, Jessica Field’s paper shows how market forces have been ingrained in humanitarian agendas, resulting in significant issues for conflict-affected populations living in natural hazard-based disaster-prone states, such as the Philippines. *Divided* disasters, a conflict and natural hazard-based disaster occurring in different parts of the same state, demonstrate how the humanitarian effectiveness agenda’s reliance on the neoliberal principles of competition and efficiency results in conflict-affected populations being ignored in favour of those affected by disasters, who are believed to be more ‘deserving’ of assistance. In arguing for vulnerability to be examined as a product of not just the sites where the conflict or the disaster takes place, but also as a multi-sited experience, this paper draws attention to locations of competing crises and the resources being redirected towards ‘the good project’—a term that encapsulates the neoliberal values of ‘efficiency’, ‘value for money’, and ‘deservedness’ of beneficiaries as applied to humanitarian projects. Such a marketisation agenda embeds business principles in humanitarian projects and facilitates the creation of an ‘aid market’. Thus, money, resources, and staff are drawn away from conflicts and shifted towards disasters. Competition between an armed siege and a typhoon disaster in the Philippines worsened human security and created protection gaps for citizens on the ground. Seeing the *political* and the social within what are commonly considered to be apolitical forces of marketisation is increasingly important in disaster and conflict areas.

The dominance of Western discourse and language equally helps to construct what is deemed to be an apolitical ‘Anglo-Saxon understanding of resilience, in particular . . . as a neoliberal form of governmentality that places emphasis on individual adaptability’ (Joseph, 2013, p. 38). The paper by Jonathan Ensor, John Forrester, and Nilufar Matin counters that way of thinking by providing a simple and meaningful framework for contextualising and situating resilience within the deeply social and political roots that create lived vulnerability. Situating resilience within questions of power, privilege, and control will have the kind of transformative impact that addresses structural inequalities and social conflict before it becomes violent. This is particularly valuable in post-conflict societies, where such social differences exist and are entrenched within cultural, political, and social practices.

In fact, Adam Branch’s poetic paper on the drought in Uganda goes so far as to question the underlying framework of hazards and vulnerability that results in disasters, only made worse by climate change. He asks for disasters to be viewed as part of a longer history of violence within the sites where they are ‘situated’, a situated study of violence so to speak. Climate change is not a looming threat in the future affected by rising global greenhouse gases, but the devastation that has been caused by the joint assault of capitalism and colonialism on the most vulnerable. The drought in northern Uganda is part of the longer history of war and violence in the region and cannot be removed from that process. Instead of seeing the drought as social vulnerability + hazard, and attempting to theorise its relationship with conflict, Branch suggests that the drought is the war and the war is the drought, and that the two are intertwined in ways that make it meaningless to divorce one from the other for the sake of analysis. Adaptation, resilience, and preparedness threaten to lock in that violence rather than address the structural factors that lead to their materialisation, such as a neoliberal, militarised, and extractive state.

**Conclusion**

Together these seven papers highlight that disasters in conflict areas are constructed, created, and sustained in the pursuit of *political* goals. From the global dominance of neoliberal marketisation to state agendas concerning landownership and minority rights, disasters are mobilised and framed in different ways that spawn political and social conflict. Yet, any mention of armed conflict, insurgency, or foreign occupation has quite deliberately been left out of the global DRR framework, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 **[OK?]**. In leaving the *politics* out and making ‘the text even more technical’, delegates from Japan ensured that an agreement was successfully forged at the third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Sendai, Japan, on 14–18 March 2015 (Walch, 2015).

It is evident, therefore, that the use of established agendas pertaining to ‘resilience’, ‘adaptation’, and ‘securitisation’ to depoliticise disasters (van Uffelen, 2013; Warner, 2013), their making and unmaking, *is* the contemporary ‘politics of disasters’. Without unpacking the complexity of the sociopolitical processes involved in this exercise, any understanding of the ways in which natural hazard-based disasters interact with the dynamics of armed conflict and violence will remain superficial at best. This special issue of *Disasters* attempts not only to incorporate politics, but also to present a fundamentally political perspective on disasters in conflict areas.

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1. According to some estimates, only five per cent of Lake Chad remains with its northern areas especially affected by serious desertification. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)