**Abstract**

In recent years, the Pakistani state has made significant advances in formalising and universalising citizenship through the digitisation of citizenship numbers. The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) is at the forefront of this initiative that has seen coverage to reach out to 96% of Pakistan’s 180 million citizens[[1]](#endnote-1). The state successfully used this digitisation of citizenship to reach out to its citizens in the aftermath of a large-scale flooding disaster in 2010 and 2011. The universal cash transfer programme instituted for disaster affected households used citizenship numbers to identify and then provide ATM cards to those domiciled in the worst affected regions. This paper draws upon my fieldwork done in 2012-2013 in Lower Sindh and argues that while still in its infancy, a new form of ‘disaster citizenship’ is visible in southern Pakistan which is driven partially by this digitisation of citizenship in the country. It explores the post-disaster political space where state actors and citizens came to interact with each other and argues that these informal and unplanned interactions overlapped with formal policy to result in a new and emerging form of ‘disaster citizenship’ in the region.

This paper offers intimate insight into the state-citizen relationship, and how it evolves, in the aftermath of large-scale disasters. Using the case of Pakistan, and based on empirical evidence from the province of Sindh in the south of the country, it argues that contrary to received wisdom, a large scale flooding disaster in the region did not result in a damaged ‘social contract’ between the state and the citizen (Pelling and Dill, 2010). Rather, it demonstrates that the political space that opened in the aftermath of the disaster enabled a more progressive ‘disaster citizenship’ to emerge. The role of Pakistan’s social registry system and a formalised identity (ID) regime played a critical role in pushing this relationship along.

The ‘social contract’ in this paper refers to a tangible relationship between the state its people consisting of two basic conditions: (i) a state that sees its citizens as its responsibility (ii) citizens that demand state action not as passive recipients looking for favours but as an active right of citizenship. Citizenship is increasingly being understood as constitutive of both formal-legal rights and also of informal claims. Jayal’s work tells us that the former, legal-official recognition of citizenship, has been interpreted as an ‘affective notion’ of belonging and identity, or as entirely ‘instrumental’ to enable access to social goods depending, or even something completely different depending on the subject position of those seeking the formal recognition (Jayal, 2013). Hence if even the thinnest description of citizenship holds such diverse meaning in different social groups and contexts, identifying and constructing informal citizenship is especially complex. Substantiated through social relations and a range of demands on state authorities, using intermediaries and a variety of moral positions, these ‘substantive’ conditions of citizenship create new kinds of rights. They are based on “exigencies of lived experience, outside of the normative and institutional definitions of the state and its legal codes’ (Holston 1998, 52). The ways in which an unfolding climatic disaster impacts this substantive citizenship is the unique contribution of this paper.

In the summer of 2010 and 2011, Pakistan was devastated by large scale flooding of the Indus River. The floods of 2010 affected the entire country and in August of that year the UN declared that one-fifth of Pakistan’s entire landmass was under water (Masood and Drew 2010). In terms of people affected, the UN also estimated that it was the ‘greatest humanitarian crisis in recent history’. At over twenty million affected, the number of victims of this disaster was more than the Asian tsunami (2004), Kashmir earthquake (2005) and Haiti earthquake (2010) put together (Tweedie 2010). The floods the following year were limited in their geographical scope and primarily affected the province of Sindh. The scale of the disaster was still enormous and it affected over 5 million people. Based on empirical evidence from the ground, in the two years following these floods, this research demonstrates that the formal and informal processes implemented after a large-scale disaster, resulted in a new and unique experience of citizenship in Pakistan.

The flooding disaster in 2010 and 2011 was considerably more serious than previous climatic disasters, it was however not just the number of people affected by the devastation that made this a particularly interesting moment to study state-citizen relations. Rather, in a significant departure from previous ad hoc and sporadic state interventions, the Pakistani state provided universal disaster relief to its citizens through a cash transfer made out to all households domiciled in the disaster affected region. This was made possible in large part due to an up-to-date social registry maintained by the National Database Registration Authority (NARDA) in Pakistan. This relatively new intervention implemented through new processes made this an exciting time to study the changing social contract and evolving citizenship and how people in a country like Pakistan were interpreting it.

Geographers working on natural disasters highlight the ‘transformative political space’ opened in the aftermath of a disaster. They illustrate that a disaster is able to serve as a ‘tipping point’, creating a moment for political change (Pelling and Dill 2010, 3). Others argue that in politically turbulent parts of the world, disasters are “more frequently followed by political unrest than peace” (LeBillion and Waizenegger 2007). While writing after Hurricane Katrina, an American scholar analyses the disaster as a moment when the state failed its citizens in the US. He argues that ‘when the levees broke, the contract of American citizenship failed’ and hundreds of thousands suffered in New Orleans (Ignatieff, 2005). Disasters are therefore typically seen to be disruptive of the social contract (Warner 2013). After the large scale flooding disaster that affected Pakistan in 2010 and 2011, international media outlets were reporting a similar story. They stated that the state had failed its citizens – not once but twice - in the aftermath of the disaster (BBC online, 2011) ‘damaging’ the country’s ‘fragile democracy’ (The Guardian online, 2010).

I however argue in this paper that the disaster unleashed forces for “transformative” change by opening political space for the post-disaster state and its citizens to interact with one another. I explain how and why the state reached out universally to all its citizens in affected areas, using disaster relief that it provided through a cash transfer distributed to all households using digitised identity cards. The widespread coverage of NADRA issued Identity (ID) cards has been an important instrument in this new phase in state-citizen relations. I demonstrate that both actors, the state and its citizens, interacted along official and unofficial lines after the flooding disaster to create an outcome that was able to push a more progressive form of ‘disaster citizenship’ along. In particular, this paper shows how an unprecedented state led disaster intervention drive, interacted with an enabling political context to induce demands and encouraged citizens to demand more from their social contract. Substantively, this resulted in disaster relief being understood as an aspect of citizenship, or an informal right, in southern Pakistan.

***‘Disaster citizenship’: A Conceptual Framework***

Social scientists have repeatedly emphasised that what turns ‘natural’ *hazards* into *disasters* is peoples’ risk of exposure and vulnerability to environmental shocks (Wisner et al 2004). Disasters therefore are ‘social phenomena that have roots in the social structure itself’ (Perry 2007, 11). People facing underlying social conditions of marginalisation and exclusion, are more vulnerable to climatic events. How disasters unfold then, is a function of relations between different social and political actors. Given that citizenship in the twentieth century has evolved primarily “as a relation between the individual and the state” (Jayal 2013, 2), it is especially surprising that no serious attempt has been made to study the ways in which disasters impact this relationship, in the postcolonial world.

The “idea of citizenship” is known to find expression in the ways states choose to engage with their citizens (ibid). ID documents for example do not just *confer* formal-legal citizenship onto individuals, rather as Gordillo (2006) illustrates having “documentos” enabled citizenship behaviours of marginalised indigenous groups in Argentina. The Toba and Wichi felt able to “denounce” injustice in ways that they did not feel they were empowered to do before they received ID papers from the state in the 1960s. Besides enabling behaviour, ID documents have further been used to establish formal-legal citizenship as well. In post-Partition India (and Pakistan) the relationship between ID documents and citizenship has known to be “inverted” with the former having been regularly used to acquire the latter. As Jayal (2013) points out immigrants in India regularly showed ration cards and Voter ID Cards to acquire formal-legal citizenship until the state became more sceptical of this method in the 1980s. Hence it is all the more necessary to understand the ways in which disaster relief cash transfers, distributed through ATM cards directly linked to citizens ID documents and citizenship number on the NADRA social registry, had in enabling substantive citizenship behaviours in Pakistan after the flooding disaster.

Equally, it is also generally acknowledged that limited attention has been paid to the ‘political’ in previous works on disasters, with scholars emphasising that it has “been difficult to gain sustained, systematic attention to the political aspects of disasters” (Olson 2000, 265). Literature on political space in the aftermath of disasters has tended to look primarily at political regimes rather than at people, as citizens. This is evidenced by studies in political economy that show disasters as a variable affecting electability of local leaders (Abney and Hill 1966, Drury and Olson 1998, Olson and Gawronski 2010, Downs 1956 & Fiorina 1981) or in studies showing disasters to have no impact on re-election of candidates at all (Potluka & Slavikova 2010). Yet others illustrate that beyond simply affecting election results, natural disasters affect democratic legitimacy with citizens looking for order through military and non-democratic means (Carlin et al 2014). This body of work does not seek to address the ways in which disasters affect the question of citizenship, nor its lived or substantive experience, in the aftermath of disasters.

This understanding is critical because disasters are able to open ‘transformative’ political space for citizenship to evolve. While “ordinary people” may appear relatively frequently in news and media reports they are usually seen to be passive victims of a political drama that they have no control or influence over. This ‘subject position’ changes, as the disaster-affected individual exercises his claim on citizenship and expresses his political right. The disaster is able to open space for these ordinary people to criticise those in power, corporations, governments and institutions whom they are rarely able to hold to account as individuals. Such a systemic critique of ‘complex social processes’, ‘makes citizens out of victims even if such empowerment comes at a heavy price’ (Panti and Wahl-Jorgensen’s 2011,118). As this paper will show, disaster-affected people in Pakistan expressed a demand for greater rights to access disaster relief from the state and hold the administration to account.

People affected by the flooding disaster were not simply ‘passive recipients of assistance’ but rather demonstrated ‘active agency’ in making demands of a state that oft times made promises it did not deliver (Semple 2011, 95). My previous work also concludes that in the aftermath of the flooding disaster in Sindh, people wanted an ‘interaction with a state that delivers aid and institutes policy solutions. Traditional views on a kinship- or patronage-based social contract[[2]](#endnote-2) were almost drowned out with the rising tide of the Indus River’ because people wanted to be addressed directly as citizens, not as clients of powerful patrons doling out favours to those who needed help (Siddiqi 2013, 100). This heightened political environment in the aftermath of the flooding disaster made it possible for citizens in Lower Sindh to engage with issues of disaster relief, as an informal right or as substantive elements of citizenship, in a way that Panti and Wahl-Jorgensen (2011) have stated, such an interaction normally lies outside the bounds of acceptable public narrative. This ‘critical juncture’ revised the terms of the state-citizenship relationship (Pelling and Dill 2010) and resulted in a new and emerging form of ‘disaster citizenship’ in the region. The following empirical evidence illustrates that while this emerging citizenship may not have been legally instituted, it was lived and experienced by citizens in southern Pakistan.

It is also understood that postcolonial citizenship did not emerge from social and political processes that took place in Western Europe during the Enlightenment period in the late 17th Century (Chaterjee 2012) and therefore does not completely resemble its’ Western counterpart. An exploration into post-disaster political space in postcolonial Mozambique, for example, concludes that a flooding disaster in Maputo city in 2001 created a political moment, where ‘hitherto illegal squatters were reconfigured as legitimate citizens’ (Nielsen 2010) by creatively parcelling out resettlement land. This moment however was not defined by the state simply conferring and expanding housing rights to strengthen citizenship in the region. Instead, it was constituted by complex interactions of formal-legal and substantive experiences of flood-affected citizens who were allocated limited resettlement land by the municipal state (Nielsen 2010).

This approach to citizenship recognises that ‘official’ and ‘informal’ aspects of the state-citizen relationship interact to produce ‘unintended’ outcomes. The paper demonstrates that while progressive, the outcomes of Pakistan’s disaster response policy for the lived experience of citizenship in the country were not planned or intended. In 2010, Parliament passed Pakistan’s first National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) protected by law. The NDMA placed some responsibility of providing relief on the state but was considerably conservative in scope and carefully shied away from declaring disaster relief to be a right of citizenship.[[3]](#endnote-3) In the aftermath of the large-scale Indus River floods in 2010 and 2011 however, disaster relief was directly distributed by the state based on citizenship numbers of heads of households domiciled in the flood-affected areas. Citizens automatically received an ATM card that was connected to their digital number issued by NADRA on their ID card. This unprecedented intervention by the state was a universal and direct transfer and no household was required to prove their worthiness, or show the extent of their damage to access this money made people believe that simple because they were citizens, they were entitled to this disaster relief from the state. On the ground therefore, it was common to see an understanding emerge amongst citizens that these cash transfers were a ‘responsibility’ of the state to be provided to everyone who had legal entitlement, a NADRA ID card, to citizenship. The policy which was drafted in strictly legal and bureaucratic terms in the capital Islamabad, was lived and interpreted on the ground in creative ways that resulted in an unforeseen outcome for substantive citizenship in the region. The use of citizenship numbers and NADRA issued ID cards, to distribute post-disaster cash transfers known as the Citizens Disaster Compensation Programme (CDCP) in 2010, resulted in people interpreting this cash transfer to be an informal right of citizenship.

This experience of ‘disaster citizenship’, emerging in part as a result of state intervention through the CDCP, takes the discussion on disaster relief and citizenship into a bold new direction. Previous work has rightfully been critical of the state framing disaster relief as a ‘moral obligation’ not as a ‘legal entitlement’ for all citizens (Chhotray, 2014). The post-disaster context of Pakistan however illustrated that even when the state had not instituted disaster relief as a right – it was still discursively being constructed as such by citizens. Further in universally implementing the programme to reach all households in the disaster affected region, the state in Pakistan also addressed other relevant concerns around targeted interventions requiring citizens to prove “deservedness” resulting in less cohesive societies (Jensen & SaInt-Martin, 2003). Similarly the technocratic and ID based intervention system removed the possibility of leakages through bribes and incentive payments to government functionaries. Disaster relief through the CDCP interestingly did not just “echo(es) the injustice of social citizenship’ (Chhotray 2014, 223) but rather as my empirical evidence will show induced greater citizenship demands from people enabling “disaster citizenship” to emerge.

***Methodology***

This paper is based on primary research done in three districts in the province of Sindh in southern Pakistan. I spent seven months between May 2012 and March 2013 doing ethnographic fieldwork in the districts of Thatta, Badin and Tharparkar in southern Sindh, known locally as Lower Sindh or *Laar*. These three districts were amongst the worst affected by the flooding disaster in Pakistan. The district of Thatta had been affected by the floods of 2010 known locally as the ‘*daryaee sailaab* (river flood)’, while Badin and Tharparkar districts had been affected by the floods of 2011 colloquially called the ‘*barsaati sailaab* (rain floods)’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

This research is based on formal semi-structured interviews with state and NGO representatives and local politicians in the region. In addition to 118 semi-structured interviews I also conducted participant observation in the villages that made up my study site. As Beckerleg and Hundt (2004) point out, relationships built on trust and obligation are central to ethnographic research and practice. I was therefore careful to spend as much time as possible with my informants and participate in all events I was invited to.

The first district where I made contacts and started research was Badin. Here the help of a grassroots civil society organisation was invaluable in introducing me to local communities. I was however keen to be seen as ‘independent’ from this local NGO and once I had met enough people to have my own network of informants, I was able to work on my own without needing support from the local organisation I was also accompanied by a male native, Sindhi-speaking chaperone and a native Balochi (commonly spoken in Sindh) speaking driver. Besides providing translation and language support in the early days, my chaperones were very valuable resources in my interactions with people throughout this research because they were able to ensure I followed social etiquette and custom.

Finally, because I introduced myself as a resident of Karachi studying in the UK, my position of privilege, as relative to my informants, was obvious. This inadvertently meant they believed I could help them access aid, or find employment; hence their answers to certain questions were at times biased by these assumptions. In most cases however, it was quite easy to tell when people were uncomfortable talking about a certain subject, which I would then avoid. Equally I could understand when they were saying something because they believed I could help. Wherever possible, I have tried to be reflective of the limitations of these biases on my data.

***Context of Pakistan***

“Pakistan is not a welfare state” and has historically had a weak formal social protection mechanism (Loureiro 2015), with an emphasis on religiously based social transfers, such as *Zakat*[[5]](#endnote-5), or the ad-hoc and politically driven *Bait-ul-Maal*[[6]](#endnote-6). In fact, until relatively recently, there was general agreement amongst scholars that “Pakistan fared badly in international comparisons in terms of the scope, outreach, financing and organisation of its social protection system” (Gazdar 2014, 150) with people relying primarily on family, kinship and religious groups for informal protection (see for instance Kabeer et al 2010 and Loureiro 2015). Kabeer et al (2010) have also emphasised that social relationships between kinship groups, castes and faiths in Pakistan are deeply hierarchical and exclusionary. It would be more adequate to describe these informal networks as the “dark side” of social capital that often hold some groups back at the expense of others, rather than assuming that they are supportive and harmonious “communities” that always provide safety nets to their members.

Despite the inadequacy of these social systems the state has had limited reach or desire in addressing citizen concerns with social transfers, as was evident in the aftermath of the Kashmir earthquake (2005). Even when the state tried to assist earthquake-affected people through cash transfers, the absence of a policy and implementation infrastructure for formal social transfers was a serious impediment. Disaster relief payments were made through banks transfers that required beneficiaries to open, or have access to, bank accounts. People were asked to register for the programme and a new database was created, their details were then crosschecked against the NADRA held social registry, which was both tedious and ineffective and replication of resources was common. Targeting most vulnerable households in the earthquake-affected regions was therefore difficult and also open to political abuse as ‘local authorities decided to select beneficiaries’ (World Bank Good Practice Notes, 2008), from those who had registered for the programme. Before the flooding disasters in 2010 and 2011, the state in Pakistan had not reached out to its citizens through a universal platform, to address them simply as citizens and not as members of a kinship group, organised faith or clients. The flooding disaster however occurred at a time when the political mood was changing and the state was becoming more receptive towards large-scale social transfers in Pakistan as will be explained in the next section.

*Pakistan’s recent reform of social protection*

It is important to state that the CDCP and the disbursement of the Pakistan Cards in the aftermath of the flooding disaster in 2010 and 2011, were not isolated social protection interventions pulled out of a hat. Using social protection for nation building was an explicit goal of a report prepared for the government by the Planning Commission just months before the first floods in 2010 (Siddiqi, 2013). These state led disaster interventions were part of a wider shift towards a more progressive and universal social protection agenda that began with the introduction of the federal government’s flagship cash transfer programme the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), only two years earlier, in 2008. The programme makes unconditional bi-monthly cash transfers to the female heads of the poorest households in the country. Eligibility is determined through a census or a poverty scorecard, and, over time, the mode of disbursement has purposefully shifted from postal order to smart cards, purportedly for reducing leakages and corruption in delivery (Gazdar 2014, Gazdar 2011, Siddiqi 2012). Lessons learnt from the programme were critical in the design and implementation of the post disaster CDCP and Pakistan Card disbursement.

International development partners also played an important role, in driving and supporting social protection reform in Pakistan. In fact this reform was a key discussion point in the negotiations between the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Government of Pakistan, for the country to secure an economic stabilisation programme in 2008 (Gazdar 2014)**. Writing that same year, Barientos and Hulme (2008) recognise the swift ascendency of social protection amongst development priorities of countries in the Global South. In fact they state that this ‘quiet revolution’ would not have been possible only a short while ago. International agencies and governments would not have supported such initiatives seeing them as ‘creating a nation of welfare dependents’. Or alternatively, the argument that ‘handouts would be stolen by corrupt officials and politicians’ would be used to block such transfers. The changed global trend,** particularly the post Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) push to increase social spending and encourage countries in the Global South to meet minimum spending floors **put pressure on the state in Pakistan to reform social protection and implement a more progressive agenda. The CDCP and the disbursement of the Pakistan cards were post-disaster interventions that emerged as part of this reform and in step with global trends.**

*Political trends in the region*

The internal context within Pakistan, especially Sindh, was also reflecting more enabling ground realities when the flooding disaster of 2010 and 2011 occurred. The centre-left government of Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) had just been elected into office in 2008, in the first democratic elections to be held in the country, after nine years of military rule (Nelson 2009). The PPP leadership, the Bhutto family, is Sindhi and also seen to be particularly sympathetic to the interests of its working class and rural vote bank (Gazdar 2008). Further, the region in southern Sindh, where I did fieldwork, is traditionally PPP political heartland though the disaster response was not simply targeted to PPP supporters.

Thus the political environment in the country, when the banks of the Indus River were first breached by flood waters, was one where large scale social interventions were being implemented to address poverty and vulnerability amongst the most marginalised and excluded populations (Gazdar 2011). In fact, Gazdar’s argument that Pakistan’s social protection policy was in midst of a ‘paradigm shift’ in the post-2008 years with the PPP in power carries significant weight. Along with these new political priorities, the NADRA digital ID database that was significantly strengthened during the decade of military rule (Khan 2012), was also fast being mobilised to help the state directly reach its citizens, eliminating brokers, intermediaries and leakages ushering a new era of state-citizen relations.

In the words of one of my informants, a middle-aged man from Thatta who I called *chachajee[[7]](#endnote-7)*, this connection between increased social transfers and the PPP being in office was evident. He said:

“It was in the first 3-4 years of Mr Bhutto’s government[[8]](#endnote-8) that the poor people were able to breathe a sigh of relief, after that it is only now during Mr Zardari’s tenure[[9]](#endnote-9) that the poor people have been provided assistance. Something or the other is being done to help the poor, whether it is in the form of Watan card, Pakistan card or the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP)[[10]](#endnote-10). We were never aware of such programmes in the past, we had never even heard of them. The people in our village had never even seen an ATM. They did not know what an ATM card was.” (Personal interview, May 2012)

What *Chachajee* does not say but also became evident over my time in the field is that these modes of delivery, the use of ATM cards and smart cards were only possible because of the NADRA digital database. As discussed later, the increasing coverage of Pakistan’s ID regime, while rooted in the security imperatives of the previous military regime, had much to do with this how these interventions were designed and implemented.

***Emerging ‘disaster citizenship’***

*State-led initiatives*

In the aftermath of the flooding disaster in 2010 and 2011, cash transfers through the CDCP were universally allocated to all households domiciled in flood-affected regions. This was a particularly progressive move in a country that until recently did not have a disaster management policy.

Until 2007, Pakistan did not have one integrated and overarching framework for disaster management. Different agencies within government were responsible for a number of overlapping roles and had disjointed chains of command (Ahmed 2013). Two factors however made the Government of Pakistan rethink its ad-hoc and ineffective disaster management plans. Firstly, in 2007 Pakistan became a signatory to the Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA) an international commitment that required it to take disaster planning far more seriously. Secondly, the limitations of the country’s existing approach had become painfully evident during the devastation caused by the Kashmir Earthquake of 2005, and as a result an integrated disaster management policy was formulated. This National Disaster Risk Management Framework (NDRMF) however had no legal or institutional standing. It was the floods of 2010 that provided the impetus for the state in Pakistan to review and revise its national framework for disaster risk management. As a result, in December 2010, the National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) was passed as an Act of Parliament, instituted by law (Mustafa 2013).

This NDMA has been critiqued on a few different accounts. It has been referred to as ‘reactive’ in its approach (Ahmed 2013) and ‘inadequate’ to deal with the scale of disasters experienced by Pakistan in recent years (Mustafa 2013). Perhaps most importantly though, the Act refers to disaster relief as ‘*ex-gratia* assistance’ from the state to affected individuals.[[11]](#endnote-11) Given that the word *ex-gracia* is Latin for ‘by favour’, Chhotray (2014) in her work calls such ‘gratuitous’ relief a ‘voluntary act of kindness’ (219) that the state indulges the affected citizen in, but it is not a right or an entitlement and cannot be demanded by the citizens off the state. It thereby fails at establishing disaster relief as a binding responsibility on the part of the state.

It is however necessary to contextualise and analyse the Act and its critique. The NDMA goes some way in declaring ‘guidelines for minimum standards for relief’ and anyone who ‘obstructs’ this relief from getting to affected individuals is committing an offence punishable by imprisonment or fine, or both. So while the Act falls short of declaring disaster relief a ‘right’, it does go some way in acknowledging that a basic minimum in disaster relief can be expected by citizens, even as it leaves unclear whether this ‘minimum’ is a duty, or responsibility, or only a favour, in the text. It is useful here to highlight what Fuller and Harris (2001) have called the ‘indigenisation’ of the democratic political process in South Asia. They emphasise that while the institutional functioning of the state apparatus in India might demonstrate its colonial legacy, ‘the masses’ have bought into the local democratic process and have made it their own (Fuller and Harris 2001). Expecting therefore that people or even state functionaries will take their cue from a codified Act is perhaps, too simple a way of looking at complex interactions on the ground in the aftermath of the disaster. While the state might have shied away from declaring disaster relief of a ‘minimum standard’ as being a right or an aspect of being a citizen, it was soon being understood and interpreted as an informal part of citizenship in Lower Sindh in the aftermath of the floods of 2010 and 2011.

The state at a federal level implemented a disaster response cash transfer programme in the disaster-affected areas of Pakistan that was linked to the ID Cards of its citizens. After the 2010 floods, ATM cards called the Watan[[12]](#endnote-12) cards were for the first time dispersed to all residents domiciled in a flood-affected region, specifically for the purposes of providing a disaster relief cash transfer. Interestingly, the Watan card programme was even drafted and instituted using the language of citizenship. The official title of the programme was the Citizen’s Disaster Compensation Programme (CDCP). Similarly after the 2011 floods, cash cards called the Pakistan card were dispersed to people whose residences were registered as being in the flood-affected region. Pakistan has one of the largest populations registered on its NADRA digital database, the figure for 2012 indicated 96% of the total population was registered and had a computerised ID card (Khan 2012). The cash transfers made to flood affected families were made through these Watan and later the Pakistan cards that were linked to this NADRA registration system. Payments were made to heads of households through citizenship numbers or Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC). While there were initial indications that five instalments would be released through the Watan Card, and two instalments through the Pakistan Card, both cards eventually provided beneficiaries with a one-off payment of Pak Rs 20,000 and Pak Rs 10,000 respectively. It was also an unprecedented universal programme and no targeting of any kind was enforced. It was therefore discursively and in reality extremely difficult to divorce this form of disaster response from what people saw as an aspect of being a citizen and having the legal right to a citizenship number and an ID card.

One of my informants, Aziz *bhai[[13]](#endnote-13)*, was a community level activist and political worker for the PPP in Badin District. In our conversations he was at pains to tell me how he tried to ensure everyone in his area went to claim their money, even those who were wealthy and didn’t need it. In fact, Aziz *bhai* had gone so far as to organise a group of young volunteers to make announcements to this effect in relatively well-off neighbourhoods.

When people say to me, ‘the damage I have incurred (as a result of the floods) is in *crores[[14]](#endnote-14)* (tens of millions) why should I take ten thousand rupees (value of the Pakistan card cash transfer)?’ I always tell them this is money owed to you by the state, take it, it is rightfully yours. Give it away to some one less fortunate than you but you should still take it. (Personal interview, August 2012)

Aziz *bhai* had taken it upon himself, almost as a duty, to ensure that people were claiming their money and in so doing making the state pay up what it ‘owes’ them.

By people here I am not only referring to the flood affected citizens of Thatta, Badin and Tharparkar who were beginning to interpret this form of disaster relief as a right but also in fact politicians and people in positions of power. I interviewed a Member of Provincial Assembly (MPA) from Badin[[15]](#endnote-15) in July 2012 who had been on the ground managing disaster response operations in his constituency. I asked him directly why the media and many flood-affected individuals were scathing of the government’s response to the disaster. His reply was:

To do a ‘hundred percent’ of what people were expecting was not possible, we could not do it, ‘that’s true’, that ‘fact’ is there but to whatever extent was possible we tried. We never left out any ‘area’ any village or any community. We adopted an ‘overall approach’, it may be possible that some individuals were left out (in the distribution of relief and aid goods), ‘quite possible’. After all it is ‘humanly impossible’ to satisfy a man (who has been the victim of such a disaster), you can help him out but to meet his all his ‘expectation(s)’ (is not possible). (The floods) destroyed his house; his livestock is either dead, drowned or very sick; the fields he had cultivated are now ravaged by floods waters, so ‘they are expecting many things’ and during such a time it is ‘impossible’ or ‘next to impossible’ to fulfil his expectations. So the government made a policy that ‘*every individual, every individual, who is a citizen of Pakistan and of this (flood-affected) area, he is having a national identity card, he should be provided with ten thousand Rupees as a (Pakistan) card*’. If you ask all your interviewees, ok you got nothing from the government but did you get a card? ‘They will say’, yes we got a card.[[16]](#endnote-16) (Personal interview July 2012)

There are two key points in the MPA’s message. Firstly, the overall approach is a direct reference to the universal nature of the cash transfer programme through the Watan and Pakistan cards. Despite being acutely aware of administrative limitations and problems around elite capture in distribution of disaster relief goods, when it came to the cash transfer programmes he is adamant that they are universal and for every individual. Second he takes it a step further and links it to citizenship by stating that it was not just every individual but rather every individual who is a citizen of Pakistan and conferred this right of citizenship by being granted a ‘national identity card’.

This emerging ‘disaster citizenship’, one that frames a certain kind of state guaranteed disaster relief as an informal right, lies somewhere between an intentional and accidental change resulting out of the ‘transformative political space’ produced in the aftermath of the disaster. While the state did implement a disaster response strategy that was universal and inclusive and linked directly to citizen cards, the fact that most people, even those in positions of political power, were beginning to interpret it as an element or a part of citizenship was not something that was planned or anticipated. Rather this understanding and interpretation of disaster policy emerged out of the informal spaces where actors, institutions, behaviours and discourse came to interact with each other in the post disaster context.

As the previous section illustrates, the flooding disaster of 2010 and 2011 took place at a time when a political momentum for strengthening and deepening a certain kind of social citizenship had been created in Pakistan. Yet, the federal state in Islamabad was not entirely aware of the extent to which there was buy in for the Watan and Pakistan cards at the local level. State functionaries and community leaders in Sindh often made it their mission to ensure that their constituents were able to access this cash transfer. While doing fieldwork, I often encountered the familiar narrative from someone who had received some kind of a formal education that he helped a particular group of vulnerable people in relief camps access their ‘own’ money. The protagonist in this narrative, be it a school teacher, an NGO worker, or just a local community leader always emphasised that he was helping vulnerable disaster affected people access what was rightfully theirs, by which he meant the Watan or Pakistan card cash transfer.

A microcosm of this activism for, what was widely been seen as, the ‘right’ of disaster affected vulnerable people to receive their cash transfers, but from within the state apparatus, played out in front of me as I was sitting in the office of the District Coordination Officer (DCO)[[17]](#endnote-17) of Thatta district in August 2012. A team of young men dressed in Western official attire from the NADRA office in the capital Islamabad came to speak to the local Sindhi DCO. They explained to the DCO that NADRA had improved the Watan card money disbursement system and so any subsequent payment would be more organised and less complicated with fewer chances of error. Much of what this bureaucrat from the capital had said implied that the state was trying to make minor changes to the existing disbursement system to enable better inclusiveness and ensure universalism of the programme. The DCO however was frustrated by the speed of the programme and the infrastructural limitations of not having ATM machines in villages, which meant that people had to travel long distances and stand in queues for a long time before being able to access what was ‘rightfully theirs’. He ended his tirade by saying ‘this is their “*haq*” (right), you should not hassle them in this way’.

Once again I repeatedly heard, this time from a government employee and one who had considerable influence in Thatta, the narrative of giving vulnerable disaster affected people what the state has ‘promised’ and ‘owes’ them. This encounter demonstrated that state disaster response policy implemented through NADRA was attempting to make the Watan and Pakistan cards more efficient and accessible to people in Sindh. Yet, it was the local DCO who took the discourse further to include the rights of people and responsibility of the state. If citizenship is understood as a two-way encounter between the state and the citizen, functionaries of the state, particularly on the ground were interpreting this disaster response intervention as a right of disaster affected people that is owed to them by the state.

My ethnographic evidence therefore illustrated that the interpretation of disaster response interventions by those in positions of power in the districts of Thatta, Badin and Tharparkar was not necessarily consistent with the way the NDMA and subsequent policy making was framed. The state for its part instituted a policy that was designed to be universal and inclusive, with limited scope for elite capture and leakages, but did not go so far as to declare such disaster response a ‘right’ of all affected households. At the same time the state connected the most fundamental aspect of citizenship, people’s citizenship numbers to these cash transfers. Rather accidentally then, the lived experience of individuals interacting with these institutions resulted in an outcome that pushed a new and emerging understanding of substantive citizenship along. In so doing the ‘political space’ opened in the aftermath of this flooding disaster in 2010 and 2011 was able to significantly ‘transform’ informal citizenship in the region.

Additionally, in mobilising the digital ID card regime in a direct and unprecedented manner to deliver disaster relief to flood affected citizens, the state also created certain expectations amongst its citizens. While there maybe no institutional guarantees to this effect, there is a general sense that if future governments did not respond in a similar fashion after future disasters there would be citizen outcries and protest.

The cash transfer intervention through the Watan and Pakistan card did face some administrative hurdles. People who were not literate or did not know how to use a bank account found it more challenging to access the money then others who were more aware of these services. Similarly people who did not have ID cards or had not registered the death of the head of their household with NADRA, this was especially true in female headed households, also had to first go to NADRA offices to make these changes and could only later access their money. Despite these limited technical problems the cash transfers were designed to be a universal intervention and through an effective delivery system, i.e the cash cards, were successful in reaching almost all affected citizens. The amount of leakage and the number of households who fell through the cracks is also reportedly very small; according to the World Bank impact assessment studies, 95% of registered people received the money (The World Bank Group website, 2013).

Despite some administrative problems and limitations with regards to the number of payments beneficiaries received before the Watan and Pakistan cards funding dried up because all the aid that was pledged to Pakistan in the aftermath of the flooding disaster did not come through. There is still little doubt that a programme such as the CDCP, and the Pakistan Card resulted in a new and emergent local construction of citizenship in Lower Sindh. One where the state ‘owes’ is citizens a minimum amount of disaster relief and while this emerging ‘disaster citizenship’ might not have been entirely intended, it would be fair to say it was but only a partially accidental outcome of a universal disaster response policy linked to citizenship numbers.

*Further inducing citizenship demands*

‘Citizenship’ is an elusive concept in Pakistan. So slippery in fact that in both Urdu[[18]](#endnote-18) and Sindhi[[19]](#endnote-19) there is no word that adequately describes the concept of a ‘citizen’. Colloquially it is the word ‘*sheri*’, closer to ‘resident’ is used in conversation when speaking of being a citizen of the state. This linguistic limitation has often been seen as representative of a bigger structural issue. In development literature this has repeatedly been emphasised as the lack of any kind of state-citizen relationship in Pakistan. While some authors have referred to the complete ‘absence’ of the state in Pakistan (Kabeer et al 2010), others have emphasised that a large ‘gap’ exists between the state and its people (Lall 2012). It has also been argued that patronage and kinship networks perform the functions of a state, a phenomena referred to by Lieven (2011) as ‘weak state, strong societies’ (12).

In studying the ‘transformative political space’ that emerged in the aftermath of the flooding disaster in 2010 and 2011, my research illustrates that the CDCP and the Pakistan Cards were critical in making vulnerable people demand more of the state or ‘induce’ demand. There was in fact evidence of a new kind of emerging ‘disaster citizenship’ in the region that was pushed by state action and subsequent citizen demands. In the many months I spent in Thatta, Badin and Tharparkar, perhaps the only question to which I received a near universal response was when I asked my informants who they believed should have had helped them in the face of this ‘natural calamity’[[20]](#endnote-20), every single individual (barring two) said the state or the government. In reaching out to citizens in this universal and direct way the state in Pakistan inevitably accepted responsibility for disaster rescue and relief in the aftermath of a large-scale disaster.

Some of my informants were also incredulous and surprised at me for asking them the obvious. I asked one of my informants, a young man who was the resident of a small village in Badin district, why he believed it was the government’s job to provide him disaster rescue and relief in the aftermath of the floods. He said in a noticeably irritated tone:

This is Pakistan right? So obviously it is the government of Pakistan that is *responsible* for our well-being, not the Indians or Americans (Personal interview, Jan 2013)

This informant’s words illustrate that he was not even considering any other intermediaries between himself and the state, he understood disaster response to not only be a state-oriented activity and also believed that as a citizen, it was the government’s responsibility to provide that to him. This informant did not use the words for ‘rights’ or ‘entitlements’. but it was evident in the various conversations that I had with him that he believed that because in the 2008 parliamentary elections he had cast his vote (in fact for the incumbent party in power) he saw disaster response as part of the wider set of entitlements. It would be difficult to argue that this demand was not induced, because in a way the state accepted disaster relief as a responsibility that it must provide to all disaster affected households through the cash transfers. He too directly linked this right to being a vote casting citizen of the state, emphasising ‘Because we voted for them. Where are they in our time of need?’. This was the citizenship guarantee that Ignatieff (2005) says are citizenship ties not bound by charity, but by a right to claim resources from the government at a time when the citizen simply cannot help himself/herself. Raco (2005) too makes a similar point in stating that the very definition of citizenship is a means of allocating state resources to those who live within its borders. The flooding disaster in Lower Sindh in 2010 and 2011 was an unprecedented moment in Pakistan when such demands were being exercised, in part as a result of state intervention in direct disaster relief.

Rawls (2009) in his work on the justification of civil disobedience and dissent makes an important contribution by linking it to the ‘derivation’ of the principles of justice in the social contract. His suggests that civil disobedience is in fact a political act attempting to achieve those established principles of justice. Legally too, the refusal to comply or withhold assent to unjust requirements is ‘implicit in a proper understanding of the ideal of the rule of law’ (Allan 1996). Given that civil disobedience is a recognised prerogative of a citizen in the face of injustice, it was very significant that citizens from a small town in Thatta district repeatedly blocked their main highway in protest, because they had not received their Watan cards. Some sort of administrative error had resulted in people from an area close to the town of Sajawal from being left out of the initial allocation of Watan cards. In the four months between May 2012 and September 2012, I found it a challenge while doing fieldwork to cross this part of the highway because these residents would regularly emerge onto the Sajawal road and block vehicular access. Their chanting and sloganeering again illustrated the demand that the state owes them a disaster-relief cash transfer, and as citizens they were claiming that right. With time it became clear that much like the DCO and the MPA and other government functionaries, citizens too interpreted this form of disaster relief not as a ‘favour’ but as owed to them by the state. They expected this for no reason other than because they were citizens, as confirmed by their NADRA ID cards, who had been affected by the flooding disaster. The protests and civil disobedience to access their Watan cards was their legitimate right as citizens. Along with illustrating people’s understanding of Watan cards as a right worth fighting for, such performance of political rights is transformative in its own right, transforming a passive to an active citizenry.

Even though ‘citizenship rights’ was a difficult phrase to employ in a language that does not have a word for citizen, when my informants spoke of the Watan or the Pakistan cards, their understanding and wider construction of citizenship clearly included a rights-based discourse directly connected to modern ‘citizenship rights’ (Kofman, 2003). Munir[[21]](#endnote-21) was a young man in his early thirties who lived in a small village between Tharparkar and Badin. His village and two adjacent villages had no access to water through a pipeline, hence water, especially drinking water had to be sourced from miles away causing these residents serious inconvenience and worry. Munir eventually became an activist fighting for access to water, filing petitions in the courts, orchestrating small-scale sit-ins and roadblock with his neighbours and friends. In our many meetings Munir commonly used the word for ‘fundamental right’ (*bunyadi haq)* when referring to access to drinking water, he was aware that his fight was one for a basic ‘fundamental right’. Even when those who had been left out of the Watan card allocation[[22]](#endnote-22) were not using the word for fundamental right but still utilising the same instruments to fight for what they believed was their right; petitions in the courts (Mujahid 2011), civil disobedience in the form of road blocks and sit-ins. Even where disaster response was not being called a ‘citizenship right’, it was still evident that even without using the words, people’s understanding and construction of cash transfers in the aftermath of a disaster, was very closely resembling their understanding of drinking water as a ‘fundamental right’. This highlighted again that a certain minimal disaster response is emerging as an important part of substantive citizenship in Lower Sindh.

My research in the field revealed that citizens affected by the disaster in Lower Sindh repeatedly exercised agency and demanded more from state functionaries who they had voted into office. While at a narrative level people often articulated thoughts such as ‘I am a poor man what can I do?’ but they would subsequently explain how they went to see the local politician, or walked into the DCO’s office, demanding disaster relief provisions. Often my informants had bought into the narrative of their own disenfranchisement at a discursive level but they rarely if ever, acted as ‘passive victims’. Rather they behaved as ‘active agents’ who were exercising this newly emerging right of a minimum amount of disaster response built into their claim to citizenship.

**Conclusion: The emergence of ‘disaster citizenship’**

This paper has illustrated a new and emerging understanding of disaster relief as a part or informal right of citizenship, in the aftermath of a flooding disaster and in response to the state initiating a certain kind of disaster relief in Pakistan. It emphasises that while the official state policy was fairly conservative in its ambit referring to disaster relief as ‘*ex-gratia*’ (by favour). At the same time, it also contained the idea of a ‘minimum standard(s) of relief’, even if that minimum is not explicitly stated in the text of the NDMA. It also however declares any individual hampering such relief efforts as liable for criminal offence. It therefore acknowledges that the state has to provide this minimum relief and take responsibility in the aftermath of a disaster. In refraining from passing legislation on minimum disaster relief however, the state does not institutionally grant disaster relief the status of a ‘right’ of citizenship. In fact it can be argued that the Pakistani state too, was careful in framing the policy is a way that made disaster relief from the state a ‘moral obligation’ and not a ‘legal entitlement’ (Chhotray 2014) of its citizens.

Yet the state formalised a disaster response policy in the Watan and Pakistan cards that was linked directly to what people understand as a defining feature of citizenship, their NADRA issued ID card. This was a unique and progressive move that has limited parallels in others parts of the developing world. The cash transfers were also based on progressive principles. It included universality, direct connection to citizenship number and card, minimum scope for elite capture and leakages, all of which helped people and state officials to construct this disaster response discursively as an aspect or right of citizenship. Additionally, the wider political climate in Lower Sindh enabled a greater amount of citizen activism and mobilisation, resulting in people demanding more of the newly democratic state as well. The flooding disaster in 2010 and 2011 opened up a ‘transformative political space’ where the state reached out to its people in an unprecedented way, to address them as citizens, who were owed disaster relief. At the same time people too were demanding disaster response as a ‘*haq*’ (right) of citizenship. The paper this highlights is a new phase in state-citizen relations in a country that has historically done little to foster the bonds of citizenship amongst its people.

This emerging ‘disaster citizenship’ framework begins the complex task of mapping the way state-led initiatives induced citizen demands and recognises the contextual factors that enabled a post-disaster shift in informal and substantive constructions of citizenship. It also illustrates that a shift towards a more rights based citizenship, particularly a right to disaster relief that is not officially declared a formal-legal right, was possible in large part due to widespread coverage of citizenship numbers through ID documents. In linking disaster relief to an established ID regime that limits the precarity of postcolonial citizenship, ‘disaster citizenship’ may be a powerful framework for extending rights beyond Pakistan and the disaster area to other temporal and spatial scales.

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1. Dawn (2012, August 18); “96 pc adults registered in Pakistan: Nadra”. *Dawn online*, <http://www.dawn.com/news/743082/96pc-adults-registered-in-pakistan-nadra-2>. I. Ghauri (2012, September 2); “Over 35,000 Buddhists, Baha’is call Pakistan home”. *Express Tribune* https://tribune.com.pk/story/430059/over-35000-buddhists-bahais-call-pakistan-home/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The fact that social structures such as kinship, have resulted in a “dark-side of social capital” that has held citizenship back in many parts of Pakistan is well documented in literature. See for example Kabeer et al (2010) and Mohmand & Gazdar (2007) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Doing so was in no way expected since disaster relief is not a formal right of citizenship in other comparable contexts in the region, like India [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This lived experience and vernacular understanding of the floods in Lower Sindh is considerably different to the explanation by meteorologists. See for instance: Lau.W.K.M & Kim. K (2012); “The 2010 Pakistan Flood and Russian Heat Wave: Teleconnection of Hydrometerological Extremes”. *Journal of Hydrometeorology* Vol 13, Issue 1 (392-403) [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. A programme that used the fund created by the re-distributive tax Zakat but only Muslim citizens could receive this money. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. While this cash transfer was not reserved for Muslim citizens it was known to be very limited in scope and ad hoc in payments. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Chacha in Urdu is paternal uncle, however colloquially is it now used to address any elder male respectfully [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was founder of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and Prime Minister of Pakistan 1973-1977. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Asif Ali Zardari was the PPP President of Pakistan from 2008 to 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Pakistan’s flagship social protection programme that in 2012 reached 8% of all households. (Gazdar 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. National Disaster Management Act of Pakistan (2010) Chapter II, Article 11 (c) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The word *watan* means ‘country’ in Urdu [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Urdu word for ‘brother’, is used to refer to an older male with respect. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. 1 crore = 10 million [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Dr Sikander Mandhro, PPP Member of Provincial Assembly of Sindh for Badin II (constituency PS-58) [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. As is common amongst Urdu speakers, educated in the English language, Dr Mandhro and I had this conversation in a mixture of Urdu and English. All the single quotes represent the parts of the conversation that were in English. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The DCO is the highest level government official at the district level and is able to exercise a considerable level of influence at this local level, even though in terms of powers he is limited in geographical scope and has to take many of the orders from the provincial and federal governments. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. National language [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Vernacular language in fieldwork area [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. In Urdu there is no word for disaster, the words I was therefore using were “*qudrati aafaat*”, (natural calamity). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of my interviewee [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. As with any large-scale social intervention targeting millions of people there is no doubt that there were some errors in the system and also in distribution, albeit proportionally very small, that remained unresolved to the end. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)