

Advancing “no natural disasters” with care: risks and strategies to address disasters as political phenomena in conflict zones

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Abstract

Purpose – The notion that disasters are not natural is longstanding, leading to a growing number of campaigns aimed at countering the use of the term “natural disaster.” Whilst these efforts are crucial, critical perspectives regarding the potential risks associated with this process are lacking, particularly in places affected by violent conflict. This paper aims to present a critical analysis of these efforts, highlighting the need to approach them with care.

Design/methodology/approach – The author draws upon insights and discussions accumulated over a decade of research into the relationship between disasters and conflict. The article includes a critical literature review on the disaster–conflict relationship and literature specifically addressing the idea that disasters are not natural. The analysis of field notes led to a second literature review covering topics such as (de) politicisation, instrumentalisation, disaster diplomacy, ethics, humanitarian principles, disaster risk reduction, peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity.

Findings – This analysis underscores the importance of advocating that disasters are not natural, especially in conflict-affected areas. However, an uncritical approach could lead to unintended consequences, such as exacerbating social conflicts or obstructing disaster-related actions. The article also presents alternatives to advance the understanding that disasters are not natural whilst mitigating risks, such as embracing a “do-no-harm” approach or conflict-sensitive analyses.

Originality/value – The author offers an innovative critical approach to advancing the understanding that disasters are not natural but socio-political. This perspective is advocated, especially in conflict-affected contexts, to address the root causes of both disasters and conflicts. The author also invites their peers and practitioners to prioritise reflective scholarship and practices, aiming to prevent the unintentional exacerbation of suffering whilst working towards its reduction.

Keywords Ethics, Care, Conflict disaster nexus, Politicisation, No natural disasters

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The understanding that disasters are not natural but rather shaped by a complex interplay of socio-political factors has existed for more than a century (Dynes, 2000; Kelman, 2020), and it has been at the core of disaster studies as a field since its beginnings (Bell, 1975; Blaikie *et al.*, 1994; Dynes and Quarantelli, 1971; O’Keefe *et al.*, 1976). As a result, and whilst the concept



“natural disaster” is growingly recognised as a misnomer (Chmutina and von Meding, 2019), it is still the main term in the public discourse to refer to these phenomena.

Whilst the understanding that disasters are not natural has significant social benefits (revised in more detail below), and there has been a growing body of academic literature dedicated to this notion (Chmutina *et al.*, 2017; e.g. Chmutina and von Meding, 2019; Kelman, 2020; Lizarralde, 2021), there is a lack of critical perspectives on the process of des-naturalised disasters (or in better words, of preventing the use of the misnomer by advancing the understanding that disasters are socio-political phenomena). The unreflected promotion that disasters are not natural can generate multiple unintended and even negative impacts, especially in violent conflict-affected settings, including the possibility of exacerbating social conflicts.

It is crucial to cover the impact of disasters and disaster-related processes in conflict-affected areas due to disasters recurring nature and high impact in those settings. Recent research indicates that up to 81% of countries affected by violent conflicts also face or have faced natural hazards and disasters during the conflict (Caso, Hilhorst, Mena and Papyrakis, 2023). Furthermore, over half of all disaster-related deaths in recent decades occurred in conflict-affected nations (Caso, Hilhorst and Mena, 2023).

In this article, drawing on insights and discussions from a decade of research on the interrelationship between disasters and conflict and a critical literature review, I analyse the significance of advancing *with care* the understanding that disasters are not natural, especially in areas affected by violent conflict. The approach included a literature review of publications directly addressing the idea that disasters are socio-political rather than purely natural events and a review of the literature concerning the disaster-conflict relationship. Subsequently, I examined my field notes documenting the process of advancing, explaining and disseminating the concept that disasters are not natural during research conducted in conflict-affected areas. This review identified challenges and associated risks for multiple actors. The analysis of the systematisation of these notes yielded essential elements for this reflective exercise, including the (de)politicisation and instrumentalisation of disasters, the potential role of humanitarian principles in the process and perspectives on conflict sensitivity and “do no harm.” A literature review on these elements further informed the reflective exercise systematised in this article.

2. Disasters are not natural

The idea that disasters are not natural events posits that environmental factors do not solely determine the impact and severity of disasters but are also significantly influenced by social, economic, political, demographic and cultural elements (Cannon, 1994, 2008; Gaillard *et al.*, 2007; García Acosta, 2005; Kelman, 2020). Whilst the movement of tectonic plates, rain, storms, or droughts are natural phenomena, for them to result in events with disastrous effects, their occurrence needs to intersect with people or human assets vulnerable to them. For example, an earthquake of 6.8 magnitude in Chile has different impacts than the same earthquake (assuming the same intensity, depth and other factors) in Haiti. Whilst the so-called natural phenomenon is the same, there are notable differences between the two societies: one is better prepared, some individuals within these societies are more vulnerable and certain groups face a higher level of exposure to the earthquake’s impact. This relates to politics, social-economic decisions, such as building codes and investments and governance to regulate the implementation of those regulations. Cultural history, corruption, people’s preparedness and exposure to certain natural events might place some people more at risk of disaster than others (Wisner *et al.*, 2012). And all these social phenomena behind disasters are more important than the natural event itself in explaining a disaster’s occurrence. In Chile, an earthquake might be perceived as a minor tremor, whilst it can lead to a humanitarian crisis in Haiti.

Scholars and researchers have increasingly studied disasters in these terms, as phenomena deeply embedded in complex socio-political systems (Bankoff and Hihorst, 2022;

Wisner *et al.*, 2012). They argue that disasters are not isolated events but rather reflect existing vulnerabilities, inequalities and governance failures within societies, as exemplified before (Ahrens and Rudolph, 2006; Djalante and Lassa, 2019; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2019; Mena, 2018; Raju and da Costa, 2018; Sandoval and Voss, 2016; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). This understanding extends to main bodies of practice too, with the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) defining disaster as a “serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts” (UNDRR, 2022, online).

The “disasters are not natural” approach underscores the importance of understanding how human actions, including urbanisation, land-use changes and resource management, contribute to disaster risks (Knowles, 2013; Lizarralde, 2021; Sandoval and Sarmiento, 2020). Additionally, it draws attention to the role of political decisions, such as inadequate disaster preparedness and response, in exacerbating the impact of disasters on vulnerable populations (Gaillard *et al.*, 2015; Raju and Ayeb-Karlsson, 2020).

The notion that disasters are not natural, whilst centennial (see Dynes, 2000), has been invigorated and receiving extra attention in recent years. There is a Twitter campaign and website dedicated to this idea (see [#NoNaturalDisasters campaign, 2023](#)) and even featured in events like the UNDRR Global Platform 2019 in Geneva, with many organisations joining the call, including UNDRR with its own public statement via a blog post by Mami Mizutori, its Secretary-General (Mizutori, 2020). Moreover, a “No Natural Disaster Conference” was organised in 2022 and a body of literature is growing on the topic, as noted earlier.

Despite this long-term understanding that disasters are not natural, both conceptually and practically, disasters continue to be named and seen as natural phenomena. News outlets around the world, books and even humanitarian and disaster-related organisations persist in using the misnomer “natural disaster,” thus reinforcing the idea that disasters are situations that merely occur to us, without acknowledging the social and political responsibilities behind their existence.

Furthermore, my work on the relationship between disasters and conflicts has exposed me to the challenge of addressing the idea that disasters are not natural in conflict-affected areas. This requires careful consideration and reflection. Not only is the relationship between disaster and conflict still not well recognised, but their interactions also make the “no natural disasters” idea sensitive in places where these two processes co-occur. In fact, disasters and conflicts not only often co-occur, but their interaction needs to be problematised and explored in much detail.

3. Why problematise disasters in conflict-affected settings?

Whilst the idea that disasters are not natural is important, it has led to active campaigns, and many actors are seeking to discourage or eliminate the use of the concept of natural disasters, this process in areas affected by violent or armed conflict can be delicate, needing to be critically examined and treated with care. The reason and importance of this lie in two main ideas: (1) The co-occurrence of disasters and violent conflicts is significant in terms of absolute numbers and their impact and (2) their relationship entails key elements to understand the importance of being critical when de-naturalising disasters in places affected by violent conflicts.

As introduced earlier, the co-occurrence of disasters and violent conflicts reveals that up to 8 out of 10 areas affected by armed conflict are also commonly affected by disasters, resulting in significant impacts, including higher casualty rates compared to less conflict-ridden regions. These staggering statistics emphasise the close interplay between these two phenomena and underscore the imperative to understand the intricate relationship between

disasters and conflicts. Whilst the extent of this article does not allow a comprehensive sharing of the current knowledge of the disaster-conflict relationships, let me briefly present in the following sections key points on how disasters can influence conflict dynamics and how conflict, in turn, can impact the occurrence and management of disasters.

To start with, hazards (and the possible resulting disaster) possess the potential to indirectly amplify existing violent conflicts or ignite new ones by intensifying underlying grievances and vulnerabilities (Caso, Hilhorst, Mena and Papyrakis, 2023; Ide, 2023; Mena, 2018; Peters, 2022). In the aftermath of a disaster, the disruption of essential services, the scarcity of resources and the displacement of populations can all contribute to social and economic strains, leading to heightened competition and conflicts over limited resources (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Nel and Righarts, 2008).

Moreover, disasters can further erode trust in institutions and governance structures, weakening the social fabric and creating an environment conducive to conflict escalation. The destruction of critical infrastructure, communication networks and essential services can undermine the capacity of governments and institutions to respond effectively, leaving communities more susceptible to the influence of armed groups or opportunistic actors seeking to exploit the chaos for their gain (Drury and Olson, 1998; Eastin, 2016; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2019; Ide, 2023).

Disaster can also play a positive role in places affected by conflict. Humanitarian and disaster actors can capitalise on opportunities for disaster diplomacy, which refers to the potential for disasters to create windows of cooperation and dialogue between conflicting parties (Kelman, 2006, 2012). When communities grapple with shared challenges and vulnerabilities in the aftermath of a disaster, there may be opportunities for building trust and collaboration (Ide, 2023). Leveraging disaster diplomacy can open channels for communication and cooperation that may not have been possible under normal circumstances, offering a pathway towards addressing the underlying political dimensions of both disasters and conflicts but also strengthening the social and transformational role that disaster carries (Gaillard *et al.*, 2008; Peters and Kelman, 2020). Moreover, whilst recognising its limitations (Kelman, 2016; Kelman *et al.*, 2018), disaster diplomacy could theoretically offer a strategic approach for actors to handle disasters in conflict-affected regions without exacerbating tensions (Gaillard *et al.*, 2008; Ganapati *et al.*, 2010).

Conversely, *violent conflict* can significantly shape the occurrence and impact of disasters (Caso, Hilhorst and Mena, 2023). Violent conflicts have the potential to directly contribute to the intensification or emergence of hazards, thereby increasing the likelihood and severity of disasters (Mena and Hilhorst, 2020; Wisner, 2012). The indiscriminate use of weapons, landmines and explosive remnants of war can affect the environment and transform it into a hazard-prone landscape (Reuveny *et al.*, 2010; UNEP, 2016). Environmental degradation resulting from conflict, such as deforestation, pollution and the disruption of ecosystems, can also contribute to the occurrence and magnitude of disasters related to floods, landslides and droughts.

Conflict-induced displacement and population movements can further compound the vulnerability of affected communities to disasters (Adhikari, 2013; Jayawardana *et al.*, 2019). Displaced populations often face precarious living conditions and limited access to essential services, rendering them more susceptible to the impacts of natural hazards (Thalheimer *et al.*, 2020; UNHCR, 2019). The destruction or dysfunction of critical infrastructure and essential services, including healthcare facilities and water and sanitation systems in violent conflict-affected areas can severely impede disaster preparedness, response and recovery efforts, exacerbating the impacts of disasters on affected populations (Buckle, 2012; Marktanner *et al.*, 2015).

Furthermore, conflicts can impede the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance and international cooperation in disaster response (Marktanner *et al.*, 2015; Mena, 2018).

Restrictions on the movement of humanitarian personnel, the politicisation of aid and the diversion of resources for military purposes hinder the timely and efficient provision of relief assistance (Desportes, 2019; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2019). These challenges underscore the complex relationship between conflict and disasters, emphasising the need for coordinated and integrated approaches that address immediate humanitarian needs and the underlying causes of conflict and vulnerability (Mena *et al.*, 2022; Mena and Hilhorst, 2022a).

By acknowledging the indirect nature of the relationship between disasters and conflict, we gain a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play (Caso, Hilhorst and Mena, 2023; Caso, Hilhorst, Mena and Papyrakis, 2023; Ide, 2023; Peters and Kelman, 2020). Recognising the impacts of disasters on conflict and the influence of conflict on the occurrence and management of disasters underscores the importance of adopting holistic approaches that integrate disaster risk reduction and conflict prevention strategies.

4. The collision of political systems and the risk of politicising disaster in conflict

As seen before, disasters are extremely political phenomena, with multiple social, economic, cultural and historical variables intertwined and rooted in their occurrence. The same occurs with violent social conflict, a profoundly political process characterised by power struggles, competing interests and the fragmentation of societies (Demmers, 2012). As a result, in contexts where disasters and conflicts co-occur, we witness the collision and interaction of two massive political phenomena. And when both disasters and conflict intersect, we find ourselves navigating a highly complex system in which multiple political forces come together (Bankoff and Hihorst, 2022; Hilhorst, 2013; Tierney, 2019).

In such scenarios, different actors, including governments, armed groups, humanitarian organisations and local communities, may have divergent political agendas and interests (Hilhorst *et al.*, 2019; Ide, 2023; Mena, 2018). Moreover, these actors can operate within their own political frameworks, failing at time to communicate or collaborate effectively. As a result, the politics of conflict and the politics of disaster response become intertwined, reinforcing each other and maybe even becoming autopoietic as one complex system, constantly interacting with their environment and capable of reproducing and sustaining itself through its internal processes (see Maturana and Varela, 1980).

Given the highly politicised nature of places affected by disasters and conflicts, it becomes essential for humanitarian and disaster-related actors to find ways to navigate these complex political scenarios. One of the main approaches that humanitarian actors employ is depoliticising their actions, as an effort to remove or minimise political influences and considerations from the delivery of humanitarian assistance (Alles, 2012; Desportes, 2019; Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni, 2022). The humanitarian principles (see OCHA, 2012), particularly neutrality and impartiality, serve as an umbrella framework for mitigating the influence of politics in humanitarian operations (Slim, 1997; Slim and Bradley, 2013). Conversely, asserting that disasters are not natural can be perceived as a way of politicising disasters. This process brings forth numerous challenges and risks that, without adequate measures and strategies, possess the potential to worsen existing harm and suffering rather than alleviate them.

4.1 Depoliticising actions: the role of humanitarian principles

Depoliticising humanitarian actions allows humanitarian organisations and actors to preserve their autonomy, neutrality and impartiality, ensuring they can reach and support vulnerable populations. This approach seeks that assistance is provided based on genuine needs, without being influenced by political affiliations, beliefs, or backgrounds and with it tries to prevent humanitarian crises from being exploited or instrumentalised for political purposes (Leader, 2000; Slim and Bradley, 2013; Weiss, 1999).

Neutrality proposes that humanitarian actors remain neutral and unaligned amidst conflicting parties, focussing solely on addressing the needs of affected populations without being influenced by political or military considerations. Impartiality, on the other hand, emphasises the commitment to provide assistance based solely on need, irrespective of political affiliations or characteristics of the affected individuals. Both principles underscore the dedication to prioritising assistance based on the severity of people’s needs and to uphold a non-partisan approach in humanitarian endeavours (OCHA, 2012)[1].

By adhering to these principles, humanitarian actors aim to minimise or conceal the politics and politicisation of their actions and prioritise the well-being of affected populations (Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni, 2022; Hilhorst *et al.*, 2019). These principles, along with the general depoliticisation strategy, seek to establish a secure environment for delivering assistance, navigating complex political landscapes and facilitating access to vulnerable communities (Labbe, 2015; Weiss, 1999). This is particularly crucial for non-state disaster responders, enhancing both their safety and legitimacy, as noted by Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni (2022).

Whilst depoliticisation through humanitarian principles provides a framework for action, it is important to recognise its inherent challenges and limitations (Desportes, 2019). Whilst these principles are fundamental for humanitarian action, their exclusive focus could inadvertently disregard underlying structural factors that perpetuate crises and contribute to disasters. These principles might, paradoxically, reinforce prevailing power dynamics by insufficiently addressing inherent political and economic inequalities (Slim, 2015). Furthermore, strict adherence to neutrality and impartiality may inadvertently narrow the scope of humanitarian action, overlooking the agency and perspectives of crisis-affected communities—essential components for comprehensive disaster and conflict risk reduction and effective mitigation strategies. The depoliticised system can, therefore, be seen as a trap, especially in relation to the use of the principles (see Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni, 2022).

In the context of disaster depoliticisation in conflict scenarios, Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni (2022) identified strategic, coerced and routine managerial strategies for depoliticisation. This approach serves as a means to mitigate the political complexities associated with aid distribution and disaster responses. It allows for addressing coercive practices in conflict-affected settings whilst fostering trust and creating secure operational spaces. Furthermore, it can evolve into an everyday managerial routine.

Therefore, conflict and disaster contexts require a nuanced understanding of the political dynamics at play. Striking the right balance between depoliticisation and recognising the political dimensions of the crisis is essential to ensure that interventions effectively address the root causes of vulnerability and contribute to sustainable peacebuilding efforts (Peters and Kelman, 2020).

4.2 Politicising disasters in conflict: risks of advancing that disaster are not natural without care

Whilst depoliticisation of actions is one of the approaches to operate in places affected by conflict, other actions that engage with the politics of conflict are recognised as highly sensitive. Examples of such actions are human rights-based approaches and peacebuilding initiatives. Human rights-based approaches prioritise protecting rights and promoting dignity, but they require navigating challenges related to empowerment, justice, accountability and cultural sensitivity (Leebaw, 2007). Peacebuilding initiatives aim to foster peace, reconciliation and inclusivity, but face risks related to representation, spoiler dynamics, reconciliation and timing (Lange and Quinn, 2003; Pedersen, 2016).

Both human rights-based approaches and peacebuilding initiatives in conflict-affected areas are susceptible to various risks, largely influenced by the politicisation of actions

(Lange and Quinn, 2003). Security risks emerge when engaging in peacebuilding or human rights work, as armed groups or hostile actors might perceive such efforts as challenging their political interests and resort to violence. Inadequate resources or funding can also result from political agendas, diverting necessary support away from initiatives aiming to address the root causes of conflict. Mediation challenges arise due to political interference, wherein conflicting parties may exploit the process for their political gains, hindering impartiality and cooperation (Briscoe, 2013). Moreover, opposition from political actors seeking to maintain power can obstruct peacebuilding and human rights work, perpetuating conflicts and impeding positive change. Understanding and navigating the political landscape is crucial to mitigating these risks and fostering effective peacebuilding and human rights efforts in complex conflict environments (Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni, 2022; Lange and Quinn, 2003).

The above illustrates the need to be careful when engaging with and addressing political factors in places affected by violent conflict. In the case of this article, the idea that disasters are not natural can also be considered as a way to bring the politics of disaster to the forefront. Therefore, when applied in conflict-affected areas, caution must be exercised. Recognising the political underpinnings of disasters in these contexts is imperative for multiple reasons, but the risks associated with doing so should also be acknowledged.

Recognising the political nature of disaster can bring several benefits in places of violent conflict. Firstly, it allows for a comprehensive analysis of the root causes behind such disasters. By recognising the political dimensions, policymakers and humanitarian organisations can devise more targeted and effective strategies to prevent and mitigate disasters, addressing the underlying issues fuelling these events.

Secondly, acknowledging the political aspects of disasters enables the development of conflict-sensitive responses (Mena and ARC, 2018a). Humanitarian actors can tailor their interventions to the complex conflict dynamics, ensuring assistance reaches vulnerable populations without inadvertently exacerbating tensions or contributing to further conflicts. By taking into account the political context, humanitarian efforts can align with broader peacebuilding and development initiatives. This promotes coordination amongst various actors to create sustainable solutions for communities grappling with both disasters and violent conflict (Peters, 2022). The holistic approach additionally fosters resilience and enhances the overall impact of interventions in conflict-affected areas.

Without resting importance on the need to recognise disasters' political nature, we also need to observe the risk of their politicisation in places affected by conflict. Not doing so may hinder the ability to do this (recognise their political nature) properly and effectively. In my own experience researching and working in places affected by conflict, such as Afghanistan, Colombia, South Sudan, or Yemen, two primary risks emerge concerning the advancement of the understanding that disasters are not natural.

First, it can create more conflict. Mismanagement of the messaging could inadvertently trigger finger-pointing and exacerbate conflicts. I vividly remember having a conversation in South Sudan with people internally displaced by floods and conflict (see Mena and Hilhorst, 2022b). I was in an area with acute levels of food insecurity and malnutrition. Many of those I spoke with identified floods as a significant cause of food shortages, crop destruction and the impossibility of trucks and other vehicles to bring supplies. Conflict was another reason, as it rendered many roads unsafe for travel, destroyed markets and caused inflation, making access to food impossible for most. When I prompted them to discuss the roles of conflict and disasters in the crisis, many individuals expressed the sentiment that "at least floods are natural and no one's responsibility," or they stated that "those in power are responsible for the conflict and the crisis we are facing." Reflecting on this case, I wondered what might have happened if I had shared that disasters are not entirely natural and that those engaged in the conflict, especially those with more power, could also have a role in the occurrence of the disasters?

Upon further reflection with a local colleague, it became evident that explaining why disasters are not natural could potentially stoke anger and worsen tensions within conflict-affected communities. Introducing the concept that human actions, including conflict-related activities like environmental degradation or infrastructure disruptions, can influence or exacerbate disasters might lead to new blame and resentment towards specific actors. In the case of South Sudan, where conflict already brings significant hardship, attributing the impact of disasters to the actions of conflicting parties could intensify discontent and heighten tensions.

Moreover, introducing the political dimension of disasters may inadvertently exacerbate existing grievances, complicating efforts to foster peace and reconciliation. Attribution of responsibility for disasters to certain actors may not only heighten emotions and fuel resentment, but also hinder trust-building and dialogue amongst conflicting parties necessary for peacebuilding or conflict resolution. Additionally, challenging established narratives or pursuing accountability for disaster-related impacts may complicate post-conflict reconciliation.

Another dimension in which advocating the idea of disasters as non-natural phenomena can lead to tensions is their potential instrumentalisation. In my personal experience, I have encountered several situations that highlight the dilemma of harnessing disasters as a political phenomenon. For example, using the term “natural disaster” can play a significant role within cultural and religious organisations. It frequently serves as a way to emphasise the idea that disasters and crises are manifestations of divine actions or messages. Consequently, this terminology can be instrumentalised to advance specific agendas or to motivate particular courses of action. Removing their attribution as natural events, and in some cases, even as divine acts, could lead to disagreement or resistance from religious, political and other influential actors who use disaster and its related narratives to serve their interests. This intricate aspect demands careful consideration, given the crucial role of instrumentalising disasters and their responses during moments of conflict. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic offers a compelling example of such dynamics (see [Hilhorst and Mena, 2021](#)).

Second, it can impact funding and support for projects. This is a tricky issue. On the one hand, funders and funding streams should recognise that unless we highlight the unnaturalness of disasters and the political nature of hazards evolving into disasters, it will be difficult to rebuild, recover and mitigate the risk of disasters in a manner that acknowledges their true underlying causes. Instead, there is a risk of perpetuating technocratic or short-term solutions. On the other hand, it is necessary to recognise that the concept of “natural disasters” serves a purpose. As some humanitarian actors have explained to me, framing disasters as apolitical events can often facilitate securing funding and investments. For example, in previous research projects focussed on disaster risk reduction in conflict-affected areas, many stakeholders expressed the idea that it is feasible because “disasters are neutral.” They “impact everyone equally.” Consequently, even in places influenced by conflict, these projects are perceived as impartial and non-political ([Mena and Hilhorst, 2020, 2022a](#)). In fact, for many donors in Afghanistan, the ability to fund these projects hinges on the capability of frontline humanitarian actors to avoid being perceived as part of the conflict and to navigate political differences ([Mena *et al.*, 2019](#)). This dilemma underscores the need for discussions regarding the non-natural nature of disasters and the significance of this understanding for sustainable responses and risk reduction, especially at the level of donors and policymakers.

Moreover, practitioners have also acknowledged the advantage of presenting disasters as neutral (see [Mena and ARC, 2018b](#)). They highlighted how this perception enabled their projects to gain support from donors who sought to contribute without being seen taking part of the conflict or taking sides in political disputes. Emphasising the “apolitical” nature of disasters was viewed as a strategic approach to garnering resources and implementing

interventions without exacerbating tensions or perceptions of bias. In line with this, humanitarian actors mentioned that the principles of neutrality and impartiality have been essential in advancing disaster risk reduction in conflict-affected areas (Mena and Hillhorst, 2020).

5. The need for “no natural disasters” with care and strategies to do so

As seen before, the intricate relationship between disasters and conflict means that each can influence the occurrence of the other. Furthermore, when both disasters and conflict are viewed as political phenomena, it adds a layer of complexity that must be carefully considered when conveying the message that disasters are not natural. Addressing the complex relationship between disasters and conflict, therefore, necessitates a thoughtful and conscientious approach.

Whilst challenging the notion of “natural disasters” is crucial, it is equally essential to remain mindful of the potential risks and unintended consequences of actions taken for this. Embracing a “do no harm” approach, conducting conflict-sensitive analyses, identifying and addressing vulnerabilities within stakeholder groups and capitalising on opportunities for disaster diplomacy are amongst the strategies that can be employed to navigate these intricate terrains.

By adopting a “do no harm” approach (as seen in Anderson, 1999), humanitarian and disaster actors can strengthen their commitment to understanding disasters as not natural. This commitment cannot be just good intentions and should involve thoroughly assessing potential risks and unintended consequences of their actions. As presented below, a conflict-sensitive analysis is one strategy to do so and the benefits are multi-folded. By being aware of the political dimensions of disasters and their interaction with conflict dynamics, actors can ensure that their actions do not inadvertently exacerbate tensions or fuel existing conflicts. Implementing a “do no harm” approach assists actors in striking a balance between offering essential assistance and acknowledging the broader context in which disasters unfold. This, in turn, minimises the risk of unintentional harm to communities whilst fostering disaster response and recovery that is attuned to political complexities.

However, properly implementing a “do no harm” approach necessitates reflection on our actions and the discourses we employ. Altering the perception of disasters as inherently natural phenomena facilitates more sustainable, long-term actions. Conversely, persistently labelling them as “natural disasters” also entails implications that require careful consideration.

Adopting a “do no harm” approach should also consider not undermining the potential of disasters to contribute to peace, even if it happens under the misleading guise of “natural disasters.” As previously discussed, the occurrence of disasters, along with disaster diplomacy and actions related to disasters, can contribute to peace, peacebuilding, or, at the very least, the adoption of a conflict-sensitive approach. A “do no harm” approach should likewise entail the responsibility of taking care and, when feasible, actively facilitating or nurturing these processes. Doing so facilitates the opportunity to address the underlying causes of compound crises, such as when disaster and conflict co-occur.

In this vein, with a “do no harm” approach, humanitarian and disaster actors can navigate the complexities of working in conflict-affected areas whilst promoting the idea that disasters are not natural. By understanding and addressing the interplay between disasters and political factors, actors contribute to a more nuanced understanding of disasters, enabling them to promote resilience, peace and recovery in these challenging environments. Disaster diplomacy and disaster-related opportunities for peace are good examples of these possibilities (see Gaillard *et al.*, 2008; Peters, 2022; Peters and Kelman, 2020). Whilst limited, as the literature shows, this approach can reinforce the notion that disasters are not natural and simultaneously promote or explore the possibilities for peacebuilding and reconciliation in areas affected by conflict.

Conducting conflict-sensitive analyses is a good strategy that supports the understanding of disasters as not natural whilst preventing conflict exacerbation. It also enables the “do no harm’ approach. By engaging in comprehensive assessments, humanitarian and disaster actors gain insights into the root causes and drivers of conflicts, as well as the intricate interplay between disasters and conflict dynamics. This approach enables them to tailor their responses to the specific context of conflict-affected areas, ensuring interventions do not inadvertently reinforce divisions or create additional vulnerabilities within communities.

As part of a previous project, some colleagues and I developed the “Manual on Conflict Analysis Tools: Preventing, mitigating and reducing the risk of social conflict in Civil DRR Projects” (Mena and ARC, 2018a) to foster conflict-sensitive analyses. This process brought important lessons on advancing “no natural disasters.” During a workshop in Kabul, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that utilised the Manual expressed how essential this tool was in recognising and operationalising the political dimensions of disasters. It also helped in designing ad-hoc and appropriate strategies to address both the immediate needs arising from disasters and the underlying political drivers of vulnerability and risk. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of disasters and conflicts, these actors demonstrated their ability to design interventions that navigate the complexities of disasters in conflict-affected environments without exacerbating political tensions.

These approaches underscore the significance of grasping the political dimensions of disasters and conflicts, aiming for responsible and sensitive interventions that foster peace, resilience and inclusivity. However, it is essential to implement these strategies thoughtfully, considering the specificities of each context. Whilst these strategies might be unfeasible in some places or for some organisations, they provide valuable examples for consideration.

Another important point to consider is that sharing the idea that disasters are not natural in places affected by conflict might take time and require patience. When discussing why disasters are not natural with policymakers and governmental officials of Afghanistan and Yemen, respectively, it was indicated by them that even though they understand the logic behind avoiding the word “natural” for disasters, it would be challenging due to various reasons, such as language and to distinguish between disasters related to natural hazards versus those caused by conflict in their countries. Both types of disasters are seen as equally critical, and when applying for funds, they need to focus on getting financial support, which many times implies “sell the problem” as feasible to be addressed, with the concept natural disaster facilitating that, in their terms and as seen before.

Moreover, engaging the broader community in discussions surrounding the concept of “no natural disasters” and its careful implementation is vital. By fostering dialogue, sharing experiences and exploring alternative approaches, it is possible to advance the aim of reducing suffering and addressing the root causes of disasters in conflict-affected regions.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the interplay between disasters and conflict necessitates comprehensive analysis and nuanced responses. Whilst disasters and conflicts often co-occur, it is essential to recognise the transformative effects of conflicts on the perception and experience of disasters. As we engage in the discourse surrounding the promotion that disasters are not natural, we must exercise caution and acknowledge the political complexities within conflict-affected areas. Striving for a careful and inclusive approach that accounts for the multifaceted nature of disasters in such contexts is paramount.

Advancing the understanding that disasters are not solely natural but socio-political phenomena, along with its associated campaigns and actions, aims to provide a deeper understanding of disaster occurrence and prevention to alleviate suffering. It is crucial to approach these good intentions critically to ensure they achieve their original goal without

inadvertently causing more harm whilst attempting to reduce it. Embracing the idea that disasters are not natural is essential for effectively addressing them, especially in conflict-prone areas, and to tackle the complex relationship between both phenomena. However, this process is intricate. Whilst I have discussed the risks of advancing “no natural disasters” in conflict-affected areas unthinkingly and shared strategies for addressing it with care, there is still much research and lessons to be gleaned on this journey.

Note

1. However, in another research piece (see [Mena and Hilhorst, 2022b](#)), the author unpacks how these ideas do not always hold true, and, in reality, the provision of aid is highly politicised. In conflict-affected areas, it often falls into processes of path dependency, where assistance can be prioritised towards places where it can be distributed more easily (or has been politically negotiated) rather than where it is needed most.

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