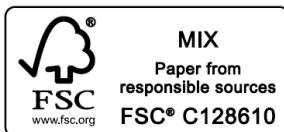


**Repression without Resistance:
Disaster Responses in Authoritarian
Low-intensity Conflict Settings**

Isabelle Desportes

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**Repression without Resistance:
Disaster Responses in Authoritarian
Low-intensity Conflict Settings**

**Repressie zonder tegenstand:
Omgaan met rampen in autoritaire settings
met een laag-intensief conflict**

Thesis

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Erasmus University Rotterdam
by command of the
Rector Magnificus

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The logo of Erasmus University Rotterdam, featuring the word "Erasmus" in a stylized, cursive script.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CBO: Community-based organisation
CCERR: Chin Committee for Emergency Response and Rehabilitation (Myanmar)
CIO: Central Intelligence Organisation (Zimbabwe)
CSO: Civil society organisation
DA: District Administrator (Zimbabwe)
EM-DAT: Emergency Events Database of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters
ENGO: Ethiopian non-governmental organisation
EPRDF: Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
GoE: Government of Ethiopia
GoZ: Government of Zimbabwe
HIIK: Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research
ICRC: International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP: Internally displaced person
INGO: International non-governmental organisation
IO: International organisation
LIC: Low-intensity conflict
LNGO: Local non-governmental organisation
MDC: Movement for Democratic Change (Zimbabwe)
MoU: Memorandum of Understanding
MSF: Médecins sans Frontières
PSNP: Public Safety Net Programme (Ethiopia)
PVO: Private Voluntary Organisation (Zimbabwe)
UN: United Nations
UNISDR: United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction
UN OCHA: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
VIDCO: Village Development Committee (Zimbabwe)
ZANU-PF: Zimbabwe Africa National Union – Patriotic Front
ZNGO: Zimbabwean non-governmental organisation
ZimVAC: Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee

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Permanently under embargo.

Abstract

Responding to disasters triggered by natural hazards is a deeply political process, but it is usually presented by practitioners, and sometimes even by scholars, as an apolitical endeavour. This is problematic, especially when the disaster unfolds in authoritarian low-intensity conflict (LIC) settings, which are marked by lower levels of physical violence but high levels of political and societal polarisation, structural and cultural violence, and humanitarianism–sovereignty tensions. Bringing together knowledge from disaster, humanitarian and conflict studies, this thesis confronts the uneasy relationship that disaster response actors have with politics, and contributes to an improved understanding of the conflict–disaster nexus. It asks:

When a disaster unfolds in authoritarian LIC settings, how do state, civil society and international humanitarian actors engage with the politics of disaster response, and with which implications?

Existing disaster–conflict research tends to comprise either single case studies, or studies of a variety of contexts that group all types of conflict together. This PhD study takes a middle-ground approach. It focuses on one specific type of conflict, authoritarian LIC, and analyses disaster response in three country contexts showing relevant commonalities: the 2016 drought response in Ethiopia, marked by protests and a State of Emergency; the 2015 response to cyclone Komen in Myanmar, characterised by explosive identity politics; and the 2016/2019 drought responses in Zimbabwe, in the context of deepening socio-economic and political crises. It draws on secondary sources and four months of qualitative fieldwork in each country, including formal exchanges with 271 actors engaged in organisations as diverse as community-based collectives, United Nations agencies and federal governments.

For each of the three disaster response processes, the study identifies how resources, legitimacy and power were distributed across actors in the humanitarian arena, the challenges non-state disaster responders faced and the strategies they developed to overcome these challenges, with which ethical and practical implications. Yet, different core dynamics are highlighted in each case. The thesis thus presents the case of the Ethiopian humanitarian theatre, with disaster response actors wearing, dropping or even forgetting their ‘masks’; the case of non-state

disaster responders socially navigating the sea of political, social and humanitarian transitions and tensions in Myanmar to get relief to ethnic and religious minorities; and the case of powerful actors strategically or routinely depoliticising disaster response in Zimbabwe, with less powerful actors rather coerced to do the same, and the least powerful—community members—bearing the impacts with their bodies and their minds.

The thesis concludes that in authoritarian LIC settings, disaster responders engage with the politics of disaster in four major ways. First, the state instrumentalises disaster response to further political goals in the interests of a few. Power and violence are primarily exerted in 'subtle' ways, involving bureaucratic restrictions, a monopoly on and political influencing of data collection and analysis processes, and the instilling of uncertainty and fear. Second, state and non-state disaster response actors fear the politics of disaster response, and are especially afraid of being framed as having ulterior political motives. They navigate a minefield of perceptions and accusations rather than a minefield of actual physical danger. This particularly applies to non-state actors. Third, it follows that non-state disaster response actors prefer to socially navigate around or conceal politically sensitive issues, rather than to openly confront them. The overwhelming majority self-censor in words, in actions and in 'knowing', i.e., reinterpreting their mandate or the humanitarian principles. Fourth, there are indications that non-state actors tend to 'internalise' a depoliticised approach. Depoliticisation efforts do not always come across as being strategically reflected upon.

Scholars have noted humanitarians' increasingly varied engagement with politics, most notably with the emergence of human rights-based humanitarianism that displays defiance towards those causing suffering, and solidarity with the marginalised. The thesis nuances this observation, arguing instead that authoritarian LIC settings present a homogenisation of political engagements, at both a discursive and operational level. Even non-state disaster responders with more confrontational mandates and approaches employ self-censorship, for three main reasons: (i) to strategically safeguard cordial actor relations, acceptance and humanitarian access; (ii) because they feel coerced to do so, fearing physical or legal repercussions, or the loss of international funding; (iii) because they routinely apply an overtly apolitical and technocratic disaster response paradigm.

This thesis identifies the potentially far-reaching implications of depoliticising disaster response, impacting people's physical and psychological well-being, social cohesion within and beyond communities, state–aid–society relations, and the way in which humanitarian operations can be carried out in the future. Systematically depoliticising disaster response has profound ethical and practical implications; it ultimately constitutes another engagement with politics. For instance, when politically sensitive issues such as the marginalisation of certain minority groups in the disaster response are not talked of, they cannot be taken care of. While the thesis highlights how ostensibly depoliticised disaster practices carry the danger of reinforcing power imbalances, it also acknowledges that not all actors have the mandate, or are able to take the risk of adopting more confrontational approaches, especially civil society actors.

By way of recommendations for policy and practice, this thesis stresses the importance of strategic and diverse engagements with the politics of disaster response, and of a division of labour between civil society and international humanitarian organisations. Donors have a crucial role to play in supporting this process, and disaster policy must refer to multiple conflict dynamics and multiple roles of the state. The thesis also reminds disaster scholars that the task of identifying and understanding power relations and processes of domination and marginalisation demands a constant and conscious effort, especially in authoritarian LIC settings. Conceptual tools such as the humanitarian arena, everyday politics and structural and cultural violence can open up the more 'subtle' and 'system-embedded' mechanisms of repression and exclusion that permeate disaster response.

Keywords: authoritarianism; conflict; disaster response; Ethiopia; governance; humanitarianism; Myanmar; politics; Zimbabwe.

Samenvatting

Het bestrijden van door natuurlijke bedreigingen veroorzaakte rampen is een door en door politiek proces, hoewel professionals, en soms zelfs wetenschappers, het voorstellen als een apolitieke onderneming. Dit is problematisch, vooral wanneer de ramp zich voordoet in autoritaire settings met een laag-intensief conflict (low-intensity conflict, of LIC). LIC situaties worden gekenmerkt door relatief weinig fysiek geweld, maar een hoge mate van politieke en maatschappelijke polarisatie, structureel en cultureel geweld, en spanningen op het gebied van humanitaire waarden en soevereiniteit. Dit proefschrift stoelt op en combineert kennis over rampen, humanitaire hulp en conflict. Het gaat over de ongemakkelijke relatie die rampenbestrijders hebben met de politieke aspecten van het omgaan met rampen, en levert een bijdrage aan een beter begrip van de samenhang tussen conflict en rampen. De onderzoeksvraag is:

Wanneer zich een ramp voordoet in een autoritaire LIC-situatie, hoe gaan de overheid, het maatschappelijk middenveld en internationale humanitaire hulpverleners dan om met de politiek van de respons, en wat zijn daarvan de implicaties?

Onderzoek naar rampen en conflict omvat meestal afzonderlijke casestudy's of studies in uiteenlopende contexten waarin geen onderscheid wordt gemaakt tussen verschillende soorten conflicten. In dit onderzoek is een middenweg gekozen. Het gaat over één specifiek type conflict: conflicten in autoritaire LIC-situaties. Daarbij ligt de focus op de respons op rampen in drie situaties die relevante overeenkomsten vertonen: de aanpak van de droogte in Ethiopië in 2016, waarbij sprake was van protesten en een noodtoestand; de reactie op de cycloon Komen in Myanmar in 2015, die gepaard ging met een explosieve identiteitspolitiek; en de aanpak van de droogte in Zimbabwe in 2016/2019, tegen de achtergrond van een verergerende sociaaleconomische en politieke crisis. Het onderzoek is gebaseerd op secundaire bronnen en vier maanden kwalitatief veldonderzoek in elk van de drie landen. Er zijn 271 actoren benaderd die werken in uiteenlopende organisaties zoals maatschappelijke organisaties, organisaties van de Verenigde Naties en federale regeringen.

In elk van de drie gevallen van rampenrespons is onderzocht hoe middelen, legitimiteiten en macht waren verdeeld over de actoren in de humanitaire arena, met welke uitdagingen rampenbestrijders die niet tot de overheid behoorden te maken kregen, welke strategieën zij ontwikkelden om deze uitdagingen het hoofd te bieden, en welke ethische en praktische implicaties dit had. Elke casus heeft een eigen basisdynamiek. Het proefschrift beschrijft hoe rampenbestrijders op het Ethiopische humanitaire toneel hun 'maskers' dragen, afdoen of zelfs vergeten; hoe niet-gouvernementele rampenbestrijders laveren tussen politieke, sociale en humanitaire overgangen en spanningen in Myanmar om noodhulp te bieden aan etnische en religieuze minderheden; en hoe machtige actoren strategisch of routinematig de rampenrespons in Zimbabwe depolitiseren, waarbij minder machtige actoren worden gedwongen om hetzelfde te doen, en de minst machtigen – de getroffen gemeenschappen – er de fysieke en mentale gevolgen van ondervinden.

De conclusie van het proefschrift is dat er vier belangrijke manieren zijn waarop rampenbestrijders in autoritaire LIC-situaties met de politiek van een ramp omgaan. In de eerste plaats gebruikt de overheid de rampen respons voor politieke doeleinden die het belang van slechts een kleine groep mensen dienen. Macht en geweld worden vooral op 'subtiele' manieren aangewend, in de vorm van bureaucratistische beperkingen, een monopolie op en politieke beïnvloeding van de verzameling en analyse van gegevens, en het zaaien van onzekerheid en angst. Ten tweede vrezen overheidsactoren en andere partijen die betrokken zijn bij de rampen respons de politiek. Ze zijn vooral bang om ervan verdacht te worden dat ze politieke bijbedoelingen hebben. Ze begeven zich in een mijnenveld van percepties en beschuldigingen in plaats van een mijnenveld van daadwerkelijk fysiek gevaar. Dit geldt vooral voor niet-gouvernementele actoren. Hieruit volgt het derde punt: niet-gouvernementele rampenbestrijders geven er de voorkeur aan om politiek gevoelige kwesties te omzeilen of te verbergen, in plaats van ze in alle openheid tegemoet te treden. De overgrote meerderheid pleegt zelfcensuur in woorden, daden en 'weten', d.w.z. door hun mandaat of de humanitaire uitgangspunten te herinterpreteren. Ten vierde zijn er aanwijzingen dat niet-gouvernementele actoren een gedepolitiseerde aanpak internaliseren. Pogingen tot depolitisering komen niet altijd voort uit een bewuste strategie.

Wetenschappers stellen vast dat de politieke opstelling van humanitaire hulpverleners steeds gevarieerder wordt. Zij wijzen vooral op de opkomst van een op mensenrechten gebaseerde humanitaire beweging die zich verzet tegen de veroorzakers van lijden en solidair is met de gemarginaliseerden. Deze constatering wordt in dit proefschrift genuanceerd, waarbij wordt betoogd dat de politieke opstelling in autoritaire LIC-situaties homogener wordt, zowel op discursief als operationeel niveau. Zelfs niet-gouvernementele rampenbestrijders met een confronterender mandaat en een conflicterendere aanpak maken gebruik van zelfcensuur. Hiervoor zijn drie belangrijke redenen: (i) om goede betrekkingen met actoren, acceptatie en toegang tot humanitaire hulp op strategische wijze te waarborgen; (ii) uit angst voor fysieke of juridische repercussies of het verlies van internationale financiering; (iii) omdat zij routinematig een openlijk apolitek en technocratisch rampenbestrijdingsparadigma hanteren.

In dit proefschrift worden de potentieel verstrekkende gevolgen van depolitisering van de rampen respons in kaart gebracht. Depolitisering heeft gevolgen voor het fysieke en psychische welbevinden van mensen, de sociale cohesie binnen en buiten gemeenschappen, de relaties tussen overheid, hulpverlening en samenleving, en de manier waarop humanitaire hulpacties in de toekomst kunnen worden uitgevoerd. Het systematisch depolitiseren van de rampen respons heeft ingrijpende ethische en praktische gevolgen. Het betekent uiteindelijk opnieuw een politieke opstelling. Als er bijvoorbeeld niet wordt gesproken over politiek gevoelige kwesties zoals de marginalisering van bepaalde minderheidsgroepen in de rampenbestrijding, kunnen deze niet worden aangepakt. Hoewel het proefschrift wijst op het gevaar van versterking van het machtsevenwicht bij een ogenschijnlijk gedepoliteerde rampen respons, wordt ook erkend dat niet alle actoren het mandaat hebben of het risico kunnen nemen om een confronterendere aanpak te kiezen. Dit geldt vooral voor actoren uit het maatschappelijk middenveld.

Dit proefschrift bevat verschillende aanbevelingen voor beleid en praktijk. Daarin ligt de nadruk op het belang van een strategische en gevarieerde opstelling in de politiek van de rampen respons, en van een taakverdeling tussen het maatschappelijk middenveld en de internationale humanitaire organisaties. Donoren spelen een cruciale rol in dit proces en in het rampenbestrijdingsbeleid moet rekening worden gehouden met de dynamiek van conflicten en de verschillende rollen van de overheid. Uit dit onderzoek blijkt ook dat het vaststellen en begrijpen van

machtsverhoudingen en processen van overheersing en marginalisering een constante en bewuste inspanning van wetenschappers vereist, vooral in autoritaire LIC-situaties. Begrippen als de humanitaire arena, alledaagse politiek en structureel en cultureel geweld kunnen worden gebruikt om de 'subtielere' en 'met het systeem verweven' mechanismen van onderdrukking en uitsluiting die in de rampen respons doorwerken open te breken.

Trefwoorden: autoritaire praktijken, conflict, rampen respons, Ethiopië, governance, humanitaire waarden, Myanmar, politiek, Zimbabwe

Chapter 1: Introduction

Should you want to interact with humanitarian practitioners in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, I recommend the Greek club on a Wednesday evening. Following one research participant's advice, I was there myself at the start of my fieldwork one dry season night of 2017, and telling a more senior scholar about the research topic which had brought me to the first of three PhD case study countries. In 2016, Ethiopia had to cope with what was commonly referred to as the largest drought in half a century (UN 2017a), and with the most intense and deadly political protests under the current regime, followed in October 2016 by the declaration of a State of Emergency (Abbink 2016). How had the two processes of large-scale drought response and socio-political conflict influenced each other? An initial review of humanitarian documents and news reporting had yielded a very meagre harvest. I found close to no mention of the protests and State of Emergency, and only one reference to the week-long internet black-out enforced by the government, and how that had hampered communication around the drought response (Jeffrey 2016). My companion, himself well-established in Addis and affiliated to a United States university, reacted quite dismissively: 'Oh, but there's not much to study on that. You know, drought response here in Ethiopia is a well-oiled machine where the logistics keep on running, protests or not. I doubt you'll find anything worthy of interest'.

During the fieldwork which I conducted for this PhD study on the politics of disaster response in authoritarian low-intensity conflict settings, in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe, I learned to carefully phrase my interest in the sensitive issues of conflict, protest and state repression. Yet, when I did talk more openly, such a reaction was quite common for Western staff members established within larger humanitarian organisations. Little did those making the dismissive comments know: they actually *did* indicate that I was onto something interesting, namely the uneasy relationship that disaster response actors, sometimes even scholars, appear to have with conflict and with politics.

1.1 The background: Politics and disasters in conflict areas

The largely technocratic nature of disaster studies has been challenged since the 1970s, with the introduction of the ‘vulnerability paradigm’ (Blaikie et al. 1994; Hewitt 1983; O’Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner 1976; Wisner et al. 2003). A disaster was increasingly viewed “in terms of the social and political nature of its causation and consequences” (Venugopal and Yasir 2017, 426), and disaster governance itself—the interplay of state, societal and humanitarian actors reducing or responding to disaster risks—as beset by politics. It is through political processes of inclusion and exclusion that disaster governance is shaped, resources are allocated, and certain issues and populations are prioritised over others (Hilhorst 2013a; Olson 2000). Disasters result from human choices (Kelman 2020). Over and over, scholars have emphasised how disasters come about because societies themselves cannot cope with changes triggered by a natural hazard, thus leading to the disruption of the society’s functioning, and to human, material and other forms of harm. To some extent, this was reflected in policy making and practice. Humanitarian organisations paid increased attention to issues of socio-economic vulnerabilities, coping capacities, resilience, and the nexus between humanitarian, development, and peace-building efforts (Hilhorst 2018b; Kuipers, Desportes, and Hordijk 2019; UN General Assembly 2016b).

Yet—and just as repeatedly, it seems—calls to “‘re-root’ disaster studies in the political realm” (Peters, Holloway, and Peters 2019, 1) and to pay attention to macro-but also micro-political processes, have grown louder these recent years (Gaillard 2019; Peters, Holloway, and Peters 2019; Siddiqi 2018; Venugopal and Yasir 2017). In 2000, Olson asked why it was “still so difficult to gain sustained, systematic attention to the political aspects of disasters” (Olson 2000, 265). Some academics even pointed out that the field of practice had ‘moved backwards’ on this front (Gaillard 2019; Heijmans 2012). Gaillard (2019) thus noted how the vulnerability had become overtly technocratic, with non-Western approaches still silenced. He likened the vulnerability paradigm to an “anti-politics machine”, stating that

in the vulnerability paradigm, the political agenda frequently has vanished. [...] The progressive political hollowing out of disaster studies has contributed to the ‘anti-politics machine’ that disaster risk reduction has

become (Ferguson, 1993). Technical fixes predominate because disasters continue to be seen as technocratic issues, as they were 40 years ago. (Gaillard 2019, S15)

A technocratic approach is particularly striking when applied for disasters unfolding in conflict settings (Peters, Holloway, and Peters 2019). In situations of conflict, the political causes and ramifications of a humanitarian crisis are rather obvious. Yet in those same settings, humanitarian actors responding to disasters triggered by natural hazards still largely view the disaster as ‘pure’ humanitarian problems requiring down-to-earth emergency operations only, as Zeccola (2011) observed for the tsunami response in 2004 in Aceh, Indonesia. It is notable that in the United Nations (UN) International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction, known as the Sendai Framework (UNISDR 2015), which sets the policy tone at global level, there is no mention of conflict, nor social justice, nor marginalisation of certain groups.

According to Siddiqi (2018), the blind spot for disaster politics in conflict areas is not a “benign oversight, but is in fact the politics of disasters in conflict areas”, and needs to be challenged (Siddiqi 2018, S161). Siddiqi’s argument resonates with one explanation that Olson (2000, 266) had advanced for the absence of a well-articulated politics of disasters: that disaster practitioners and policy makers have a negative understanding of what a politics of disasters would entail, and hold the normative view that such a politics ‘should not be’. This matters, because paradigms, i.e. the “convergence of a wide range of thinking upon a unified perspective”, are never neutral; the vulnerability paradigm itself, in its present ‘technocratic form’, says something about and produces the contemporary social order (Hewitt 1983, 4). In that regard, and taking inspiration from Hewitt (1983, 4), I ask: what is it that a technocratic disaster response paradigm aims to stifle in conflict settings? Why does it emerge, and how?

1.2 The puzzle: An apolitical approach to disaster response in authoritarian low-intensity conflict settings?

The disaster politics puzzle is particularly intriguing for disaster response unfolding in authoritarian low-intensity conflict (LIC) settings. This is for four major reasons, relating to (i) the conflict–disaster nexus, (ii) the ‘subtle’ forms of violence exerted in

such settings, (iii) the simultaneous saturation and hiding of politics in such settings, and (iv) the role of the state in disaster response.

First, an improved understanding of political dynamics in authoritarian LIC settings contributes to the overall understanding of the disaster–conflict nexus, and sheds light on a type of conflict which is prevalent, yet relatively under-studied (Demmers 2012; HIIK 2019). Over the last decades, the frequency of disasters triggered by natural hazards has been steadily increasing, affecting a record number of 564.4 million people in 2016 (Guha-Sapir et al. 2017; International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent 2016b). This has placed disaster risk reduction and response high on the policy and research agenda (UNISDR 2013, 2015). One crucial factor, however, is not yet sufficiently covered in disaster policy making and research: societies themselves face increasing levels of change and instability, in terms of, for instance, urbanisation and population growth, but also conflict (Crutzen 2006; Skillington 2015). Conflict is likely to have major consequences on societies’ ability to respond to disasters, weakening institutional response capacity (Wisner 2012) and hampering the provision of aid (Healy and Tiller 2014; Le Billon 2000). Of the worst disasters occurring in 1995–2004, 30% coincided with conflict (Spiegel et al. 2007), and most deaths caused by disasters occur in fragile or conflict-affected states (Peters 2017). Yet, an in-depth, nuanced understanding of processes taking place in the disaster–conflict nexus is still lacking (Hilhorst et al. 2019; E. King and Mutter 2014; Peters, Holloway, and Peters 2019; Siddiqi 2018). Policy and practice wise, the disaster–conflict topic has only started to draw policy attention. The international community and humanitarian actors struggle to develop strategies aligned with the institutional complexities of conflict settings, as noted in a report by the INGO Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) (Healy and Tiller 2014).

Settings such as Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe do not immediately spring to mind when one thinks of conflict. The term rather evokes Yemen, Afghanistan and other war-torn places. Yet, LICs make up about 80% of conflict events, and are globally on the rise (HIIK 2019; Human Security Report Project 2016; Peace Research Institute of Oslo and Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2019). In LIC settings, violence most readily expresses itself in other ways than direct physical harm, although largely unpredictable riots, violent clashes, targeted attacks, widespread repression and killings of and by state security forces do occur. Conflict think tanks traditionally set the minimum casualty number at 25 for a clash over government and/or territory

to be treated as conflict, and the threshold between low- and high-intensity conflict at 1,000 casualties (Human Security Report Project 2016; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019). They highlight that most LICs are intra-state, and triggered by incompatibilities regarding government (HIIK 2019; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019).¹ Providing more nuance than simple casualty thresholds, scholars highlight accusatory rhetoric, discriminatory policies, lingering threats and other forms of structural and cultural violence which fuel tensions within and across state and societal groups (Azar 1990; Demmers 2012; Galtung 1996).

Second, as conceptualised in this thesis—and critically discussed in greater detail, including the more controversial historical origins of the term, in section 2.3—studying LIC settings directs our attention towards more ‘subtle’ types of violence than armed combat, bombs and heavy artillery. In doing so, it resonates with forms of violence which can be found across most societies, resulting in the marginalisation of parts of the population based on socio-economic status, race, religion or gender.

Third, in authoritarian LIC settings, conflict and politics are a particularly awkward or even ‘taboo’ topic. As illustrated on Figure 1.1, on the one hand, authoritarian LIC settings are saturated with political tensions, contestation movements, state repression and structural and cultural violence towards particular groups (Azar 1990; Galtung 1996). The violence takes root in what Azar (1990) has termed ‘state–society disarticulation’. According to his definition, in societies with protracted conflicts, the institutional state is dominated by a single communal group or coalition of a few groups which is perceived as unjust and unresponsive to the needs of other groups in society. On the other hand, in those same settings, state functioning is opaque (Debiel and Klein 2002), and politics are routinely backgrounded. A state whose legitimacy is already debated is not keen on additional domestic contestation nor international negative publicity, and wants to further assert its sovereignty (Ghani and Lockhart 2009). Authoritarian practices prevent open political debates from occurring and instil a climate of distrust and fear (Glasius 2018).

¹ According to the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK) (2016, 31) the three major causes for LIC are (i) fights for a different ideological order, (ii) control of land and (iii) aspiring to state power.

Research has shown that disasters constitute accountability and agenda control crises for state authorities (Olson 2000), and political opportunities for those who contest the state (Pelling and Dill 2006; van Arkel 2000; Venugopal and Yasir 2017). International humanitarian actors coming in to assist in the disaster response can furthermore be perceived as a threat, leading to sovereignty–humanitarianism tensions (Kahn and Cunningham 2013). Unsurprisingly, one might say, the coming together of all these inherently political processes heightens the political stakes.

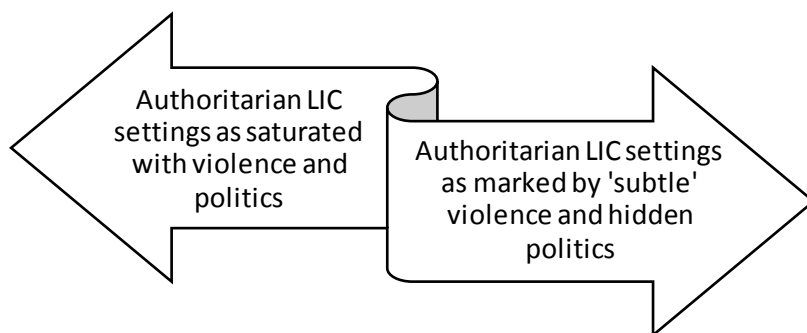


Figure 1.1. The saturation and hiding of politics as two sides of the same coin in authoritarian LIC settings.

Fourth, focusing on settings where the state engages in violence and repression allows us to better understand the interactions between non-state disaster responders and ‘non-benevolent state actors’, which have been obscured for so long (Siddiqi 2018). While authoritarian practices consist of “patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice”, illiberal practices typical for LIC settings refer to “patterned and organized infringements of individual autonomy and dignity” and are linked to human rights issues (Glasius 2018, 517). Yet, in protracted LIC setting opposing the state and parts of society, authoritarian and illiberal practices often go hand in hand; such long-term trends have also been observed in Ethiopia (Markakis 2011), Myanmar (Matelski 2016b), and Zimbabwe (McGregor 2013).

Understanding humanitarianism–state interactions in settings where the state is engaged in violence and repression towards (parts of) its population is especially important as current disaster policy, including the Sendai Framework, identifies the state as the primary disaster response actor, and prime interlocutor for civil society

and international humanitarian actors (Harvey 2013). The authors calling for a stronger political lens assert that not only disaster responders' capacities, but also their goodwill must be critically assessed, including the goodwill of the state (Siddiqi 2018). Yet to this date, there have been few in-depth studies of disaster cases in which the state constitutes a 'hazard' for precarious communities (Carrigan 2015, 121; del Valle and Healy 2013).

1.3 The focus: Research rationale and research questions

In this thesis, I wish to confront, with due academic grounding and nuance, the uneasy relationship that disaster response actors have with politics. I aim to answer the following main research question:

When a disaster unfolds in authoritarian LIC settings, how do state, civil society and international humanitarian actors engage with the politics of disaster response, and with which implications?

In answering this question, my PhD study brings together knowledge from disaster, humanitarian and conflict studies. It speaks to broader issues of humanitarian governance, in particular the tensions and implications of shaping disaster response as an apolitical multi-actor endeavour within mostly control-oriented and politically contested authoritarian LIC settings.

In line with the above insights on the inherently political nature of disasters, I approach disaster response as a practice which "re-orders socio-ecological coordinates and patterns" and "reconfigures uneven socio-ecological relations" for better or for worse, taking inspiration from Swyngedouw's definition of a political act (2013, 7). While rather apolitical approaches might identify individual vulnerabilities as starting problems and the need to increase coping capacities as a solution, seemingly via win-win situations, analyses with a more political lens highlight the collective and contested dynamics of power and privilege through which disasters are co-created and addressed (Guggenheim 2014, 2). States and the social groups which contest them have long recognised the political stakes involved in disaster response, leading some actors to lose, and others to win. Exemplary or faulty involvement in the response can make or break reputations, and in turn

legitimacies and political support (Pelling and Dill, 2006; Venugopal and Yasir, 2017, p. 426).

I advance that in authoritarian LIC settings, disaster response can be a conduit for violence, such as marginalising ethnic minorities. It can be a conduit to further a specific agenda, such as asserting state control. But potentially, disaster response can also be a conduit for resistance and solidarity. I draw on the concepts of humanitarian governance and the humanitarian arena (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010) to further highlight how disaster response is shaped through the interaction of state, societal and international humanitarian actors with various sources of power and interests. In these interactions, framing and everyday political processes (such as the granting or withholding of authorisations) are key. They determine the allocation of resources, and the legitimacy of aid providers and receivers, and thus re-shape power balances. Power balances may not only be re-shaped between more obvious parties to the conflict, such as the state and a grassroots organisation standing for minority rights, but also across and within the international humanitarian sphere (ranging from an INGO to a donor organisation) and civil society (ranging from local faith-based groups to more established NGOs receiving international funding).

Yet, I take a step back to not only study the political disaster response processes unfolding in the authoritarian LIC–disaster nexus, but also the way in which disaster response actors engage with these political processes, and the implications of such an engagement. As illustrated in Figure 1.2, authoritarian LIC dynamics and disaster response can be approached in similar ways; both are intrinsically political, yet both can be approached as if they were not. There is a striking gap between scholars' calls to treat disasters as inherently political processes, and the largely technocratic way in which disaster responders still seem to view disasters in politically saturated authoritarian LIC settings. It is precisely this gap, its emergence, its mechanisms, its implications for people affected by disaster and conflict, that I wish to analyse in this PhD thesis. My interest in the implications of such engagement stems from Hewitt's (1983, 4) discussion of paradigms and what they "aim to stifle", but also from del Valle and Healy's (2013, S188) warning that operational humanitarian choices have to be judged "against ethical principles and the overall impact of an intervention". Applied to humanitarian action, the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality are important to guide decisions. Yet, the core question is

whether these operational decisions and compromises help prevent and relieve the suffering of those impacted by disaster, as enshrined in the principle of humanity (Barnett 2013; Gordon and Donini 2015). On these questions, civil society and community perspectives have been sorely lacking (Cunningham 2018; Siddiqi 2018). This is why I take the varied perspectives of civil society and community members on board, in addition to those of international humanitarian actors ranging from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to UN bodies.

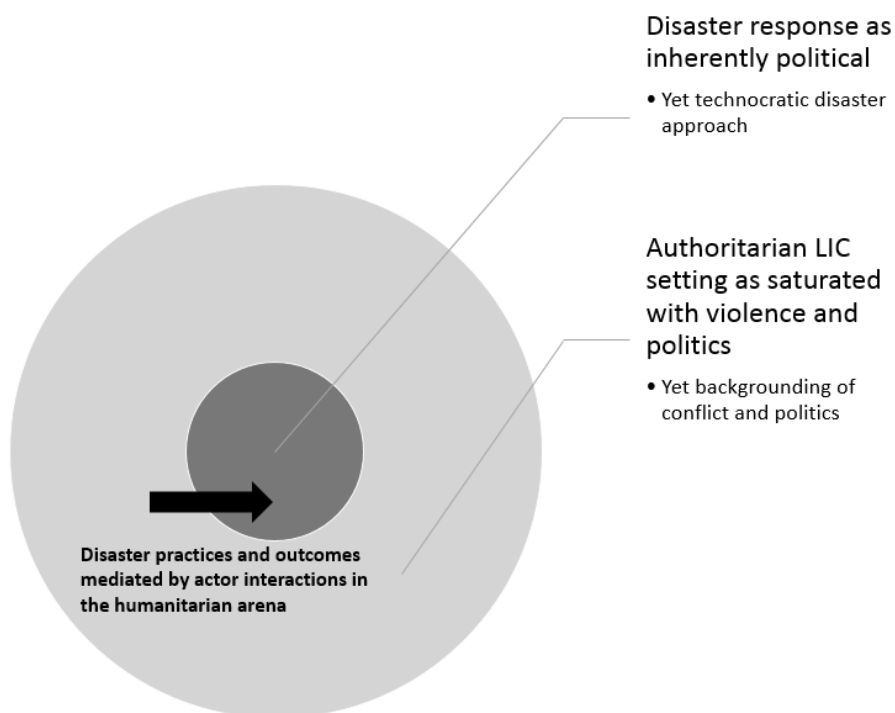


Figure 1.2. Authoritarian LIC settings and disaster response as saturated yet approached as ‘devoid’ of politics.

My reasoning and data collection are further articulated via four sub-questions. They relate to each other as illustrated on Figure 1.3:

1. What are the core tenets of the humanitarian arena in authoritarian LIC settings, in terms of distribution of resources, legitimacy and power?

2. Which challenges are disaster responders confronted with in authoritarian LIC settings, especially as linked to political stakes?
3. How do non-state disaster responders aim to overcome these challenges and navigate the (everyday) politics of disaster response in authoritarian LIC settings?
4. What are the practical and ethical implications of shaping disaster response in this way?

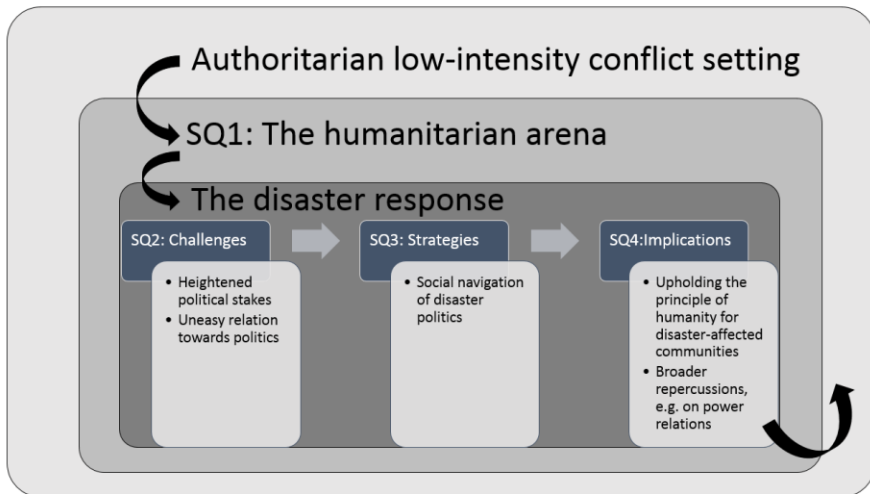


Figure 1.3. Sub-questions and how they relate to each other.

The reader will note that no sub-question focuses on authoritarian and LIC dynamics per se. Beyond the humanitarian arena, LIC and authoritarian practices shape the even broader context within which humanitarian governance and disaster response unfold. Capturing all LIC and authoritarian dynamics, i.e. conflict parties, violent acts and processes at play in a conflict area, is not an objective of this study. Still, acknowledging the social co-construction of environmental risks (Cannon and Müller-Mahn 2010; Renn 2008; Wisner et al. 2003) and disaster response as a broader-than-technocratic endeavour which stretches into all phases of the disaster cycle (Blaikie et al. 1994; UNISDR 2007) ultimately makes for a wide fishing net even if one wants to focus on ‘disaster response’ only. Conflict and disaster drivers tend to blend with each other as both are the outcome of unequally distributed social vulnerabilities (Hilhorst 2013b, 2), and both are politically and socially mediated

(Buchanan-Smith and Christoplos 2004; Drury and Olson 1998; Pelling and Dill 2010; Werner 2013; Wisner et al. 2003).

Moreover, it is important to situate and understand the studied phenomenon of disaster response in its historical, socio-economic and political context. Whenever possible, I endeavour to follow Said's (2003, 6) advice: we can "speak about issues of injustice and suffering", but we "need to do so always within a context that is amply situated in history, culture, and socio-economic reality". A balance is to be struck between detailed description of core disaster response processes, and of the broader currents within which they take place.

1.4 Methodology: A small-N scenario-based approach to the disaster–conflict nexus

As it aims to contribute to an improved understanding of disaster practitioners' engagement with politics in authoritarian LIC settings, this PhD thesis is firmly grounded in a body of work scrutinising disaster–conflict dynamics. It forms part of the 'When Disaster Meets Conflict' research programme which consists in a series of small-N scenario studies covering high-intensity, low-intensity and post-conflict settings (Hilhorst et al. 2019).²

The relatively shallow understanding of the disaster–conflict nexus is not to be linked back to a complete absence of academic attention for the topic, but to the nature of most existing disaster–conflict research produced over the last three decades (Peters, Holloway, and Peters 2019; Siddiqi 2018; van Voorst and Hilhorst 2017). One dominant strand of existing literature details single case studies, where the description of specific path dependencies and processes limit theoretical understanding of broader institutional processes at play (e.g., Alwis, Hedman, and International Centre for Ethnic Studies 2009; Le Billon and Waizenegger 2007; Selth 2008; Venugopal and Yasir 2017; Zeccola 2011). The other dominant strand of literature grounds its claims on large-N studies, which group together dozens of 'conflict' country cases (e.g., Brancati 2007; Nel and Righarts 2008). This type of study has focused on establishing macro-level causal linkages between disasters,

² Additional information is available at the website: <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/when-disaster-meets-conflict>.

peace and conflict, without in-depth understanding of processes, outcomes and implications for people's lives. Concerning both single case and large-N research, it can be stated that treating 'conflict' as an entirely context-specific or as an indistinct category is of little help for either academics or practitioners (van Voorst and Hilhorst 2017).

This PhD study takes an intermediate approach, analysing three disaster response cases taking place in one specific type of conflict, one conflict 'scenario', drawing on the methodologies of scenario-building and small-N qualitative research. The small-N case study approach aims to reach an "orderly, cumulative development of knowledge and theory" (George and Bennett 2005, 70). Drawing inspiration from the structured focused comparison approach (George and Bennett 2005, 67), the selected methodology combines the standardisation of (i) a common set of questions to identify contrasts and similarities across the case findings with (ii) sufficient flexibility to allow for country contextualisation and increasingly focused country case designs on the basis of findings from the previous cases. The details, benefits and limitations of the chosen methodological approach are further discussed in chapter three. I aim to reach a deeper understanding of LIC-disaster response dynamics, while at the same time taking into account more than one country context.

The scenario-building exercise is largely conceptual, and as such "concerned as much with creating usable 'mental models' as it is with reflecting reality" (Wood and Flinders 2014, 153). The aim is analytical generalisation concerning core disaster processes in a specific type of conflict. In order to single out the core features which characterise authoritarian LIC settings, and to uncover which implications they have for disaster response, I gloss over complexity and diversity to some extent. As inspired by comparative work recently developed by urban scholars, I turn the 'comparative gesture' on its head, seeking commonalities in processes and outcomes rather than aiming to identify differences (Robinson 2016). Imaginatively working with ideal-typical scenarios helps guide theoretical exploration along core disaster response dynamics, which emerge from one comparable case to the next. In several ways, the cases were thus analytically constructed (Ragin 1992). But scenario-based thinking and learning are also valued by practitioners, as found in a recent 'Global

Learning Needs' survey conducted with more than 100 humanitarian organisations by the Humanitarian Leadership Academy (van Voorst 2020).

In this thesis, the three 'comparable cases' in question are the 2016 drought response in Ethiopia, the 2015 cyclone Komen response in Myanmar, and the 2016/2019 drought responses in Zimbabwe. The three cases were selected for (i) their most similar context (Gerring 2016, 41) in terms of key conflict and authoritarian dynamics, but also because (ii) they promised, upon initial review of secondary sources and probing with country contacts, to yield interesting insights on the particular issues I wanted to follow up on, and because (iii) fieldwork there was feasible.

2016 Ethiopia, 2015 Myanmar and 2016/2019 Zimbabwe share crucial similarities, in particular the presence of authoritarian practices and LIC resting on deep-seated dissatisfaction with the regime in power (Beardsworth, Cheeseman, and Tinhu 2019; Farzana 2015; Markakis 2011; Matelski 2016b; S. Mpofu 2016). While structural and cultural violence towards certain groups is pervasive, deadly protests and repression (re-)occurred following a specific trigger. In 2016 in Ethiopia, the trigger was the intention of having an integrated urban master plan of Addis Ababa encroaching on the surrounding Oromia Zone. In 2015 in Myanmar, it was the increasingly anti-Muslim rhetoric following the 2012 deadly inter-communal violence in Rakhine and the passing of the discriminatory Race and Religion laws in 2015. In Zimbabwe, the increasing political rivalries and socio-economic decay led to protests in 2016 (triggered by the cash crisis and corruption scandals) and in 2019 (following the tripling of fuel prices). Ethnic politics played a role in all cases, with members of the Tigray (in Ethiopia), Bamar (in Myanmar) and Shona (in Zimbabwe) ethnic groups accused of imposing their hegemony on other religious, ethnic and/or socio-economic minorities.

While all cases were impacted by a disaster necessitating the interplay of state, civil society organisations (CSOs) and international humanitarian actors, the type of disaster (slow vs. quick onset) and many country-context aspects widely differed. This is not necessarily a drawback; when "common causes or social processes can be found in spite of these contrasts", even stronger theories can be built on the findings (Höglund and Öberg 2011, 117).

Four months of fieldwork were conducted in each country. I engaged with research participants based on the interpretive assumption that there are “multiple perceived and/or experienced social ‘realities’ concerning what happened, rather than a singular ‘truth’” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 4). Especially in authoritarian LIC settings, perspectives will greatly vary depending on participants’ positionality. In this thesis, I adopt a constructive form of interpretivism, and take an actor-oriented approach whereby actors “construct the social world, both through their interpretations of it and through the actions based on those interpretations” (Hammersley 2002, 67).

I follow an iterative sense-making process, basing my reasoning on field observations, but also engaging in a “continuous juxtaposition of conceptual formulations with field realities”, balancing phases of data generation and analysis, getting puzzled by gaps between what I observe, hear and read (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 56). As I will succinctly explain in the last sub-section of this introduction, this iterative research process took place at various research stages: prior to the first case study based on a review on existing literature, during fieldwork itself, during bigger ‘analysis and design pauses’ between country case fieldwork involving renewed rounds of literature review, analysis and discussions with the research programme team, and in a final analysis phase building on the findings of all three cases.

1.5 Three country case studies and what to expect from this thesis

This PhD thesis is divided into eight chapters: one introduction, one chapter each for laying out the theoretical and the methodological groundwork, three empirical country cases, one empirical chapter tying insights from all three cases together into the ‘LIC scenario findings’, and the conclusions. As chapter seven in effect answers the sub-questions, the thesis conclusions in chapter eight provide an answer to my main research question, as well as reflections on theoretical and societal implications of my findings, limitations of my study, and areas for future research. In each empirical country chapter, I deepen my understanding of the LIC–disaster nexus by engaging with country-specific research gaps and increasingly focused theoretical

and societal debates, and by bringing in new conceptual tools. Case-specific context and methodology are also presented in each country chapter.

Here, I wish to sketch the overall progress across and beyond the three cases. Selecting, designing, analysing and writing up my empirical case findings, I aimed to give growing substance to the core dynamics of the disaster-struck LIC scenario from one country case to the next. Figure 1.4 illustrates the theoretical concepts which were brought in for each empirical country case: the concept of ‘the humanitarian theatre’ for the Ethiopian case, of ‘social navigation’ for Myanmar, and of ‘depoliticisation and its implications’ for Zimbabwe.



Figure 1.4. Deepening my understanding of core processes in the disaster–LIC nexus.

First in Ethiopia, the case of the response to the worst drought in 50 years overlapping in 2016 with widespread deadly protests followed by the declaration of a State of Emergency laid the groundwork to make sense of key institutions, discourses, practices and ‘friction points’ between actors responding to a disaster in authoritarian LIC settings. But the Ethiopian case, and Goffman’s (1959) distinction between frontstage and backstage behaviour, facilitated an understanding of how state, civil society and international humanitarian actors play their parts on the frontstage of the humanitarian theatre, as apolitical actors seemingly unaware of authoritarian and LIC dynamics and power imbalances. In Ethiopia, where conflict

and politics are routinely backgrounded, the way in which actors involved in disaster response framed other disaster responders, LIC and drought impacts formed my primary focus. I examined how disaster response actors shaped frontstage artefacts such as Humanitarian Requirement Documents and drought hotspot classification maps. Furthermore, I described how disaster responders' 'masks' were worn, forgotten or laid aside during multi-actor meetings, informal humanitarian gatherings, but also during exchanges with myself as a researcher. This allowed me to confront broader questions on the implications of LIC and a restricted civil society space on the humanitarian space, and how actors frame and enact humanitarian principles.

Second, based on this improved understanding of disaster–LIC dynamics and challenges, I wondered how non-state actors could operate notwithstanding the many restrictions imposed on them in authoritarian LIC settings. The Myanmar case study therefore was more focused on humanitarian operations. In this second case study, I aimed to capture the strategies which non-state disaster responders develop to reach a politically sensitive goal within a restricted and uncertain space for manoeuvre. This meant exploring how, following the 2015 cyclone Komen, civil society and international actors strived to get relief to ethnic and religious minorities whose marginalisation is contested in Myanmar generally, and during the cyclone response in particular. This second time, I specifically detailed how actors navigate around obstacles to reach minorities, all while keeping the physical integrity of their staff and the reputation of their organisation intact. To do so, I relied on the concept of 'social navigation'. This refers to how actors, often those with a lesser power position, "disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move towards better positions", all within an environment which is itself constantly evolving (Vigh 2009, 419).

Third, in Zimbabwe, I focused on the implications of shaping disaster response in a specific way. Myanmar research participants had relayed the many dilemmas they confronted when navigating authoritarian LIC obstacles. Important compromises were involved, and I wished to consider these compromises "against ethical principles and the overall impact of the [humanitarian] intervention", following del Valle and Healy (2013, S188). In Zimbabwe, ethical and practical implications of shaping disaster response as seemingly fit for authoritarian LIC settings thus formed

my primary line of inquiry. Again, the major tenets of the broader humanitarian governance system, challenges and strategies were captured, but this time from the conceptual angle of depoliticisation (Beveridge 2017; Flinders and Buller 2006; Mouffe 1995; Swyngedouw 2013; Wood and Flinders 2014). The drought-ridden Zimbabwe of 2016–2019 presented the specific puzzle of a politically saturated context, with very tense actor relations and a plethora of notoriously inflammable subjects, including politically biased food aid distribution. Within such a context, the manner in which actors ostensibly depoliticised their very identity, motivations and actions was particularly salient. So were the implications of disaster responders' depoliticisation choices. In a methodological sense, data collection was more grounded in disaster victims' realities, including their individual private spheres, than in the previous two cases. In Zimbabwe, it is one specific drought-affected community, with its internal nuances, which captured my attention.

Each empirical country chapter thus covered all four research sub-questions, yet with shifting weight and focus. In this first phase of analysis, I coaxed out the uniqueness of each individual case, even though the shaping and analysis of case two and case three were also influenced by past case findings. In a second analytical phase, and at a higher level of abstraction, the different country contexts were brought "together and into the same analytical frame", allowing me to "think with insights from elsewhere" (Robinson 2016, 193–194). At this second stage, with findings presented in chapter seven, I aimed to bring all three cases into conversation with each other (Jacobs 2012). I sought contrasts and similarities between them to advance the conceptualisation of disaster–conflict dynamics in authoritarian LIC areas.

All four empirical chapters derive from academic articles which have either been published, or accepted for publication, or are under review with journals:

- Chapter four on Ethiopia is a minor revision of an article published by the *Journal of Modern African Studies*, together with Ethiopian research partner Hone Mandefro and thesis supervisor Dorothea Hilhorst (Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst 2019).
- Chapter five on Myanmar is a minor revision of an article published by the *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* (Desportes 2019c).

- Chapter six on Zimbabwe is a minor revision of an article under review by the journal *Disasters*, submitted together with Zimbabwean research partner Ntombizakhe Moyo-Nyoni.
- Chapter seven, tying together insights from Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe, consists of an extended version of an article accepted for publication in *Politics and Governance*, together with thesis supervisor Dorothea Hilhorst.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Foundations

Temporarily under embargo.

Chapter 3: Methodological and Ethical Considerations

Temporarily under embargo.

Chapter 4: The Humanitarian Theatre: Drought response during Ethiopia's low-intensity conflict of 2016³

Abstract

This chapter details the case of Ethiopia in 2016, when a 50-year drought coincided with a wave of protests and a State of Emergency. During four months of qualitative fieldwork in 2017, state, civil society, and international humanitarian actors were approached—from humanitarian headquarters to communities in the Amhara, Oromiya and Somali regions. Research participants conveyed stark discrepancies between the humanitarian theatre's 'frontstage', where disaster response actors showcase an exemplary response, and its 'backstage', where they remove their frontstage masks, reflect and (in limited cases) act on the information and decision-making monopoly of the state and the invasion of conflict dynamics into the humanitarian response. In humanitarian research and in policy, a collective conversation is necessary on where to draw the line between respect for governments' sovereignty and the intrusion of humanitarian principles.



Figure 4.1. Key locations in Ethiopia (Author 2020 based on Intergovernmental Authority on Development Geoportal 2014).

³ This chapter is a minor revision of the published article: Desportes, Mandefro and Hillhorst (2019).

4.1 Introduction

Ethiopia used to be a textbook case of the intermingling of politics and (international) humanitarianism. Drought response examples from the 1970s and 1980s, involving forced displacements or the downfall of regimes, abound. De Waal (2018, 140) characterised the drought of 1984 a “second-degree famine crime”, as the controlling Dergue military regime “created and sustained the famine as part of its counter-insurgency”. De Waal detailed how the Ethiopian army looted villages and livestock, blocked roads and bombed markets, and requisitioned World Food Programme supplies to feed the militia. In multiple regions, international aid was instrumentalised to lure the population into ‘protected’ villages (Hagmann and Korf 2012).

However, analyses of the politics of foreign aid flows are thinner regarding humanitarian issues concerning Ethiopian nationals, the less peripheral regions of the country and more recent events. A few exceptions are human rights reports (Human Rights Watch 2010) and academic literature focusing on the politics of development issues (Bishop and Hilhorst 2010; Cochrane and Tamiru 2016), refugee care (Corbet et al. 2017) or the more openly conflict-ridden Somali region (Binet 2011; Carruth 2016; Hagmann and Korf 2012).

This chapter aims to rekindle the debate on the politics of humanitarianism in contemporary Ethiopia, in both practice-oriented and scholarly circles. Relief in Ethiopia is mainly geared towards disasters triggered by natural hazards. The country experienced major flooding in 2006 and droughts in 2002–2003, 2011 and 2015–2017. In 2016, 10.2 million people required international assistance (UN 2017b). Responding to disasters is the remit of national government, with international humanitarian agencies playing an auxiliary role. Together, they face the resource shortages and logistical difficulties associated with supporting millions of food-insecure people across various agro-ecological zones within an overstressed and competitive global humanitarian landscape. Efforts to address these challenges have involved improved disaster risk profiling, early warning systems, drought-resistant farming practices and smoother aid procurement chains and cross-sectoral collaboration. The technocratic language of these interventions may give the impression that they are implemented in “ahistorical, apolitical and tabula rasa

environments”, as Cochrane and Tamiru (2016, 652) observed for Ethiopian development programmes. In reality, power relations, questions of legitimacy and authority games always play a role, although this is less obvious than in the previous century. Today, the political is increasingly hidden in the mundane routines of everyday practice of relief programmes (Hilhorst 2013a; Kerkvliet 2009, 232) but can nonetheless have major implications for disaster-affected populations.

This is particularly true during accelerated political turmoil, as occurred in 2016 in Ethiopia, when the response to the worst drought in half a century (De Waal 2018, 136) coincided with a violent protest phase, the extrajudicial jailing of tens of thousands and the killing of hundreds, followed by the declaration of a State of Emergency in October 2016 (Abbink 2016; Amnesty International 2017). Focusing on a year of both hydro-meteorological and socio-political stress provides a much-needed reflection on the dynamics through which humanitarian response and political conflict interact (E. King and Mutter 2014). Moreover, although most conflict-related literature focuses on high-intensity conflicts, it is important to explore the much more frequently observed LICs (HIIK 2016; Human Security Report Project 2016), such as the 2015–2016 turmoil in Ethiopia.

This political turmoil occurred in the larger context of a restricted space for civil society, the implications of which are only starting to be problematised in the development and human rights literature (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016). Possible repercussions for humanitarian response in terms of how organisations frame and enact humanitarian principles are still largely unknown. The study of the everyday politics of aid in Ethiopia, with its strong if not authoritarian government, is particularly interesting in light of the current global resurgence of state sovereignty affirmations (Cooley 2015), which result in a widening gap with the concurrently evolving understanding of international humanitarian mandates (Kahn and Cunningham 2013).

Keeping these broader implications in mind, this chapter examines how the relations between aid, state and societal actors affected the response to the 2016 drought in Ethiopia and which strategies actors developed to support disaster victims, given the context of protests and the declaration of a State of Emergency. While its main focus is on the providers of aid, including Ethiopian non-governmental organisations

(NGOs), the chapter also draws on insights of community members about these processes. A major finding of this case study is how role-playing and discursive games influenced the opening and closing of the humanitarian space where disaster response took place. To analyse our findings, we draw on Erving Goffman's (1959) distinction between 'frontstage' and 'backstage' behaviour. We begin by presenting the theoretical and methodological foundations of our analysis and describing the Ethiopian context.

4.2 Disasters in times of political turmoil

As O'Keefe et al. (1976) and many others (Blaikie et al. 1994; Cannon and Müller-Mahn 2010; Füssel 2007) have argued, disasters are not external natural events; rather, they are societally endogenous political processes. Who will be the most vulnerable to a natural hazard is socially shaped, as is who benefits from disaster response. Outcomes depend on who has the power to define and give meaning to the disaster event, to decide on pre- and post-disaster policy and effects, and to determine which resources will be allocated to which recovery and reconstruction efforts (Olson 2000).

The concept of the humanitarian arena (Hilhorst and Jansen 2010) provides a lens through which to capture these dynamics, asserting that aid is shaped by 'aid-society relations' in the sense that the actors along multiple aid chains, from "donor representatives, headquarters, state agents, local institutions, aid workers, [and] aid recipients [...] [to] surrounding actors", are intrinsically embedded in the society where they operate (Hilhorst 2016, 5). As Hilhorst (2016) further stresses, aid actors do not form a separate layer, but rather add to the complexity of governance, which is made up of government and a range of societal actors. All these actors are subject to multi-level power relations, with aid practices and their results remaining the outcome of "the messy interaction of social actors struggling, negotiating and at times guessing to further their own interests" (Bakewell 2000, 108–109).

As major disruptive events, disasters are likely to serve as catalysts, cracking open tensions looming close to the surface (Hutchison 2014). Drury and Olson (1998) and Pelling and Dill (2010, 34) highlighted the porosity of the conflict-disaster nexus, asserting that "disaster shocks open political space for the contestation or

concentration of political power and the underlying distributions of rights between citizens and citizens and the state". Disaster response then becomes one of the venues through which political issues play out, diminishing or increasing actors' resources, legitimacy and, in effect, power. The apparent apolitical dimensions of disasters can provide a useful façade behind which to conceal the political manoeuvring processes of state, societal and humanitarian actors around aid flows. Still, a balanced view must be reached. Aid and disaster response are partly (hidden) politics, with the goal of furthering one's interests (or those of the funder), but they are not only a game of the 'bigger forces'. Aid dynamics are complex, as aid acts as a "conduit between places and people, facilitating relief and reconstruction assistance as well as political legitimacy and, hence, the political and economic stability of a place" (Kleinfeld 2007, 170).

4.2.1 Disaster response in low-intensity conflicts

The ever-present politics of disaster becomes especially poignant in cases of conflict. That includes LIC settings, which are associated with relatively low numbers of casualties. LICs make up the largest share of conflict events and are globally on the rise (HIIK 2016; Human Security Report Project 2016). Ethiopia, where cycles of protests and state repression with linked sporadic outbursts of violence existed prior to the 2016 drought, can be considered a case of LIC. As noted by political historian Markakis (2011), 20th century Ethiopia went through a continuous struggle towards imperial then military then federal state-building, marked by violence, dissent, and bloodbaths. At the start of the 21st century still, "past wars have not resolved border disputes, and politically motivated insurgencies remain endemic" (Markakis 2011, 16). He moreover notes the presence of clashes concerning scarce resources, and inter-ethnic feuds which can take near-genocidal dimensions. These feuds were mentioned during my fieldwork also, alongside accusations of state forces fuelling or even being present on one or the other side of the ethnic conflict.

Azar's (1990) conceptualisation of protracted social conflict helps to grasp the source of these tensions: a disarticulation of state and society, whereby the institutional state is dominated by a single group or coalition perceived as unresponsive to the needs of other groups in society. Next to Myanmar and Iran, Ethiopia is cited as an exemplary case where the nation, and state, is associated with one dominant core cultural group imposing its hegemony on other groups in the periphery (Young 1982,

p. 175 cited in Markakis 2011, 14). The Amhara, descendants of the Abyssinian empire builders, form the cultural elite. Yet, they have been kept out of power by the Tigray people since the Tigray People's Liberation Front (later in coalition with other parties under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) fought, and ultimately won, an "ethno-regional liberation war" from 1975 to 1991 (Abbink 2006, 389). Overall and as presented by Markakis (2011), Ethiopia is marked by a centre-periphery divide between those highland areas which are inhabited by the Amhara and Tigray people, and the periphery of the lowlands, which also include the Oromo and the Somali. Both the Oromo and Somali have contested the central state in legal and less legal ways. Ethnic political parties and liberation fronts, activist cultural performances, armed struggles, pamphlets on dispossession from one's own land and resources, and calls for secession were all part of the repertoires of resistance (Abbink 2006; Markakis 2011).

'Integration' of diverse groups under one nation can be perceived as 'domination', especially when the process is not associated with power sharing and reforms concerning decision making over key resources such as land and water (Markakis 2011). In Ethiopia, ethnic federalism was introduced in 1991 as a solution to the "widespread, prolonged and violent political conflict that had brought the state to the brink of collapse". However, its opponents, and Markakis (2011, 304), argue that even though structures and the elite have partially changed, the new system "preserves the hegemony of the centre". The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party dominated the federal state and accorded "ethno-cultural communities" the right to "self-determination and self-rule" in the 1991 ethno-federalist Constitution (Maru 2010, 39). In practice, the federal state became "stronger than any previous Ethiopian state", "developed structures of central control and top-down rule" and neglected "political liberties, respect for human rights and economic equality"—with identity and ethnic group tensions, democratic deficit and conflict as corollaries (Aalen 2006; Abbink 2011, 596). The Ethiopian police, military and security organs are cited as "most developed state institutions" and "key instruments of violence" (Markakis 2011, 14). In 2011 still, Markakis (2011, 14–15) wrote that "one of the last frontiers Ethiopian rules have to cross is to redress the imbalance of power that marginalises the majority of its people and is the cause of endless strife". Failure to do this "makes it impossible to forge a system of government based on consensus and legitimacy" (Markakis 2011, 14–15).

In LIC settings marked by heightened (ethnic) polarisation, where “sometimes unrecognized or poorly understood forces can suddenly and often unexpectedly come into play” (Karl, 2005 cited in Kingsbury 2014, 352), disasters are especially likely to disrupt daily life and affect institutional change (Pelling and Dill, 2010). Although we would expect large-scale disaster events to lead to an immediate plea for international aid, governments involved in LIC settings may have the opposite reaction, minimising the need for aid to keep “foreign influences” out (Kinross 2004). Indeed, as the legitimacy of the state is already internally under threat (Ghani and Lockhart 2009), humanitarian actors’ access may be fraught by contradictions between a national government claiming sovereign control over the response and the desire of international agencies to safeguard a neutral and independent space for humanitarian action. Carving out an independent humanitarian space is even more difficult when the authoritarian state doubles as a developmental state, which derives its legitimacy from increasing capacities and achieving (economic) results (Mkandawire 2001). This applies to Ethiopia, where double-digit growth and infrastructure mega projects are pursued to reinforce the performance legitimacy of the government, rather than “political” considerations such as democracy (Abbink 2011, 598). In disaster response terms, the developmental state translates into (the depiction of) an effective state-led system supporting all disaster victims, which makes it difficult for humanitarian actors to justify their “presence, access, and [independent] operational space” beyond the channelling of funding (del Valle and Healy 2013, S189).

This last statement hints at the importance of framing and role-playing for actors to negotiate legitimacy and the power to decide and act. In a context where state and society are disarticulated, inadequate disaster response can quickly (further) delegitimise authorities as responsible or capable in the eyes of the population or the international community. Conversely, non-state actors such as political opposition parties can increase their legitimacy and, in turn, political support by criticising the state or even offering better aid provision (Flanigan 2008). Lacking the ‘naturalised authority’ and coercive power which states can rely on to allocate resources or restrict other actors (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, 982), international agencies rather depend on soft power, financial means and persuasion to deliver their services (Beetham 2013, 270). The processes of persuasion, crediting and

discrediting depend on successfully framing the disaster response as efficient and fair. A particular issue in LIC settings concerns the attention paid to minorities who may fall outside the scope of government care.

Given the importance of making a good impression, the politicisation of aid flows is largely hidden from sight in LIC settings. Actors' room for manoeuvre is restricted not only by overt political actions, but also through everyday politics—the “quiet, mundane, and subtle expressions and acts that are rarely organized and direct” (Kerkvliet 2009, 232). Spatial and bureaucratic restrictions are more likely to obstruct access than the physical boundaries or violent actions that present barriers in high-intensity conflict settings (Corbet et al. 2017; Matelski 2016b). Aid agencies often find themselves seeking compromise with the authorities, and have to highlight their technical expertise (del Valle and Healy 2013, 5189).

4.2.2 The two spaces of the humanitarian theatre

Erving Goffman (1959) introduced his dramaturgic perspective on organisations to bring out the performative behaviour of people and teams in interaction. This theory recalls the famous opening of William Shakespeare's 'As you like it': “All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players”. Goffman distinguishes the frontstage from the backstage. Frontstage, the team seeks to impress the audience with a total performance, where the décor, props, lights and spoken words all convey confirmative facts supporting the chosen image. Backstage, the actors remove the frontstage masks, following their various goals but also gossiping and strategising about their next performance.

The frontstage/backstage perspective has obvious analytical shortcomings in the study of aid. Unlike the idea of actors staging a play before an audience, impressions come about through interaction, and the audiences play an active role and likewise strategise—attributing images to the actors that are hard to reverse (Hilhorst, Weijers, and van Wessel 2012). Moreover, the boundary between front- and backstage is porous; in the backstage, actors may likewise perform with the aim to change social reality. Especially with the Internet and social media, the backstage is not only visible, but often turns into another performative platform. Goffman noted that his use of these concepts was more rhetorical than analytical, adding that the “claim that all the world's a stage is sufficiently commonplace for readers to be

familiar with its limitations and tolerant of its presentation, knowing that at any time they will be able to demonstrate to themselves that it is not to be taken too seriously” (Goffman 1959, 246). The dramaturgic perspective is nonetheless useful to highlight the discursive games and role-playing that are so central to the LIC scenario, and politics more widely (Hajer 2005).

Tying together the concepts introduced above, the analysis is organised around two stages of the humanitarian theatre:

1. The frontstage, where actors showcase their disaster response and dutifully play their roles of performing and coordinating aid with informed professionalism, using powerful maps, impressive websites and other props to confirm this image;
2. The backstage, where actors share their perceptions of how disaster response is actually shaped and carried out. Here, reflections on observed challenges and power relations come more easily to the fore. The same applies to actors’ hidden agendas—pushing for change that aligns with actors’ interests or the interests of those they represent, beyond strict humanitarian assistance.

While the front- and the backstage can be considered different worlds, they also influence each other. Actors may choose to bring backstage observations frontstage via advocacy, or otherwise use their insights to navigate restrictions. Here, Hilhorst’s (2018a) concept of ‘ignorancy’ comes into play. Ignorancy recognises the naivety that aid actors sometimes display in the field as an expression of agency—a deliberate feigning of ignorance as a tactic to smoothen relations or appease certain political audiences. In some cases, displaying a lack of knowledge of the political is a pragmatic and conscious choice to gain the trust of authorities and access to certain areas. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in the questions of whether and how actors strategise to act upon their backstage observations. A closer look at the interface between the front- and backstage spaces is thus integral to our analysis.

4.3 Methodology

I conducted four months of qualitative fieldwork (February–July 2017), of which ten days of community fieldwork together with research partner Hone Mandefro. He carried out ten days of additional research in July 2017. In Ethiopia, the data collection involved a total of 190 study participants, 118 of whom participated in semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions focusing on disaster response, especially how decision-making was shaped among different actors, as well as general and 2016-specific challenges and strategies.

Four periods of research outside of the capital provided in-depth insights (see Figure 4.1 for an overview, sometimes intentionally approximate, of fieldwork locations). A first visit was made to a district of the Amhara region impacted by the 2016 drought but only peripherally affected by the political unrest. This enabled us to capture disaster response dynamics first, and to test fieldwork questions in a politically less sensitive area. Two subsequent episodes of two-week fieldwork are particularly central here; they were conducted in the Oromiya and Amhara regions, in areas where drought and primarily anti-government motivated unrest coincided in 2016. Finally, one additional trip was made to Jijiga, capital of the Somali region, accompanying donors visiting 2017 drought response sites. This trip allowed for direct observation of interactions between all actors of the aid chain, but did not illuminate 2016 LIC–drought relations per se—if only because the conflict dynamics which mark the Somali region differ markedly from what was observed in 2016 during the Oromiya and Amhara protests.

To preserve the participants’ confidentiality and safety in 2016 protest hotspots, community-level focus group discussions were held only during the first visit. Additional data were collected through observation and exchanges at community level, as well as during formal and informal meetings of NGO and international organisation (IO) staff members. Further, secondary sources including official humanitarian reports, press clippings and the transcripts of four interviews relating to humanitarian aid constraints conducted in 2015 by Corbet et al. (2017) were analysed. All collected material was stored and analysed using NVIVO.

Table 4.1 gives an overview of the semi-structured interview participants by actor type. We included government officials from the lowest governance level, called the *kebele*, to the federal level. In line with interpretivism (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow

2012), we acknowledge that all statements relate back to the participants’ subjective framing of the disaster and of the LIC, the dynamics of which varied greatly by location, and their own motives in ‘performing’ in the PhD study. Far from seeking to present the ‘truth’, hard facts and broad generalisations, we see divergences and diverse interpretations as integral to our findings.

Discussing the sensitive topics of protests, the State of Emergency and even some effects of drought (e.g. cholera outbreaks) was not without risk for the research participants. We addressed this by applying strict confidentiality rules (Chakravarty 2012; Matelski 2014). The confidentiality of individuals, institutions and localities was guaranteed, and local officials’ authorisation to conduct fieldwork in a particular location was always obtained. As much as possible, we maintained strict ethics of transparency, although we did, for instance, de-emphasise our interest in the political unrest in interviews with authorities.

Table 4.1. Overview of research participants per actor type in Ethiopia.

Actor category	In-depth interview and focus group discussion participants*
Community members	38
Ethiopian government officials from <i>kebele</i> , <i>woreda</i> , zonal, regional and federal levels	22
Ethiopian non-governmental organisation staff	14
International non-governmental organisation staff	31
International organisation staff including UN agencies	9
Donors/foreign government officials	6
Research institution members, Ethiopian or foreign	2
Total	122

* Participant numbers refer to individual in-depth interviews, except for community members who in some instances participated in focus groups instead of individual interviews. The INGO staff interviews include four interviews conducted by Corbet et al. (2017).

In our interactions with community members and humanitarian actors, indicating interest in and knowledge of the political in a context where it is systematically backgrounded could increase trust and openness. However, it was necessary not to

go too far, and we adapted our approach depending on the situation. Non-engaging questions on drought impacts, especially when beginning to discuss displacement and deaths, helped to gauge whether the researchers and participants were willing to move backstage or would continue to provide the 'correct' frontstage answers to ostensibly apolitical questions on disaster governance.⁴ The humanitarian theatre concept thus served not only as an analytical device, but also as a methodological tool. The interviewee's and interviewer's positions in the theatre also varied across research settings. During the first days of local fieldwork, *kebele* officials liked to select the community participants themselves, with interviews often conducted adjacent to government compounds. Only after trust was established and the researchers were granted freedom of movement and selection did the community participants volunteer more critical reflections.

4.4 Context

"If it is a choice between making this public and not receiving aid, then we can do without the aid" (Sheperd, 1985 cited in Keller 1992, 610). This statement, made by an Ethiopian empire official to a UN representative during the 1973 famine, encapsulates the politicisation of disaster response in a country marked by cycles of drought and civil unrest spanning three governance regimes. Following the imperial government's initial efforts to cover up the 1973 famine, the military regime (1974–1987) "seemed more interested in pursuing a political agenda of statist control rather than a strategy designed to achieve food security" (Keller 1992, 623). The military regime also instrumentalised humanitarian aid for its 1980s resettlement programme. The rebels, managing the drought response in areas they held in the northern part of the country, were accused of misusing humanitarian aid for war purposes (Gill 2010). Ultimately, the failure to quickly recognise and respond to the 1973 and 1984 droughts contributed to the demise of both the imperial and the military regimes. In the 21st century, instances of interlinked mobility and food security considerations (Hammond 2011) and politically motivated food aid beneficiary selection⁵ (Cochrane and Tamiru 2016) are still reported under the rule

⁴ Cochrane and Tamiru (2016, 653) similarly identified Ethiopian Public Safety Net Programme (PSNP) beneficiaries who preferred to stick to the correct/official answers in interviews because of fear of retaliation and the absence of direct reward.

⁵ This specifically refers to the selection of pro-government community members as PSNP beneficiaries.

of a government coalition headed by the EPRDF, which defeated the military regime in 1991.

The EPRDF government came to power promising democratisation. As it submitted itself to democratic vote for the third time in 2005, it appeared the opposition had won more seats than the ruling party expected. That same election night, the prime minister banned demonstrations and public meetings in urban areas, and the post-election demonstrations and violence left 193 civilians dead (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009; Rakner, Menocal, and Fritz 2007). The 2005 national elections marked a turning point in terms of democratisation and space for civil society, with many important repercussions for Ethiopian politics today. The 2010 national election, in which the EPRDF won all but two seats, was rated as “short of standards of a free and fair election” (European Union Election Observation Mission 2010) and has been characterised as “re-establishing the one party state” (Tronvoll 2011). The government has been regularly blamed for repressing human rights and persecuting journalists and political opposition leaders (Amnesty International 2012; Human Rights Watch 2010, 2013). Government control extends to grassroots level, with a local ‘development armies’ network linked to the ruling party, monitoring the population with a ratio of one party observer to five residents. Aalen and Tronvoll (2009, 195) concluded that “the excessive clampdown on the political opposition and civil society, coupled with the launch of new and repressive laws and the expansion of local structures of control and coercion, all demonstrated that the outcome of the 2005 elections was not more democracy, but more authoritarianism”.

The restricted civil society space affected humanitarian actors’ work. Agencies working on disaster response are no longer under the supervision of the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission, which manages all response processes, but of the administrative Charities and Societies Agency. A 2009 declaration of this Agency and follow-up amendments constrain the involvement of foreign-funded NGOs in human rights advocacy and restrict NGOs’ administrative expenses to a maximum of 30% of total budget, with vague interpretations of both what human rights advocacy is and what constitutes an administrative expense (International Centre for Non-Profit Law 2012). Moreover, reliance on international funding is restricted, leading many NGOs to struggle for their survival in “intensive care units” (i.e. operating in ‘emergency mode’, geared towards their own survival) instead of

challenging the status quo (ENGO #29, 12.06.2017).⁶ International humanitarian institutions are not exempted from this situation, as international humanitarian resources such as health support (Carruth 2016) and refugee care (Corbet et al. 2017) are increasingly funnelled through governmental institutions and staff. Corbet et al. (2017) detail how this is closely related to practical restrictions (e.g. scarce business visas, suspicious and hierarchical working culture with threats of expulsion, government monitoring oriented around numbers and output), sub-quality operations and conformism.

The increasing restrictions on aid have not impeded the steady growth of the volume of aid directed towards Ethiopia, “confirming it as one of the largest [Official Development Assistance] beneficiaries worldwide” (Fantini and Puddu 2016, 91). In 2016, Ethiopia received 5.8% of global aid flows, of which 46.5% came from the United States, in a world ridden by disasters, conflict, and foreign aid shortages (UN OCHA 2017a). This places Ethiopia as fifth largest humanitarian beneficiary country, after the war-torn countries of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and South Sudan. Reviewing existing literature regarding the fact that large amounts of development assistance supposedly linked to conditions of good governance and democracy are channelled towards a not so democratic country, Fantini and Puddu (2016) point towards the negotiation skills of ‘aid speak’-savvy Ethiopian elites, as well as overarching economic and geopolitical drivers such as the global ‘war on terror’. They note how development donors “invoke [...] the emergence of exceptional conditions—typically droughts, famines or displacement—to bypass conventional standards of democracy, accountability and transparency” in Ethiopia (Fantini and Puddu 2016, 100). One of our research participants, a highly placed humanitarian diplomat (IO#6, 22.3.2017) also highlighted the importance for the United States especially to keep investments and presence in the one “relatively stable country” amidst a very unstable region. With regards to this objective, democratic concerns would only be secondary.

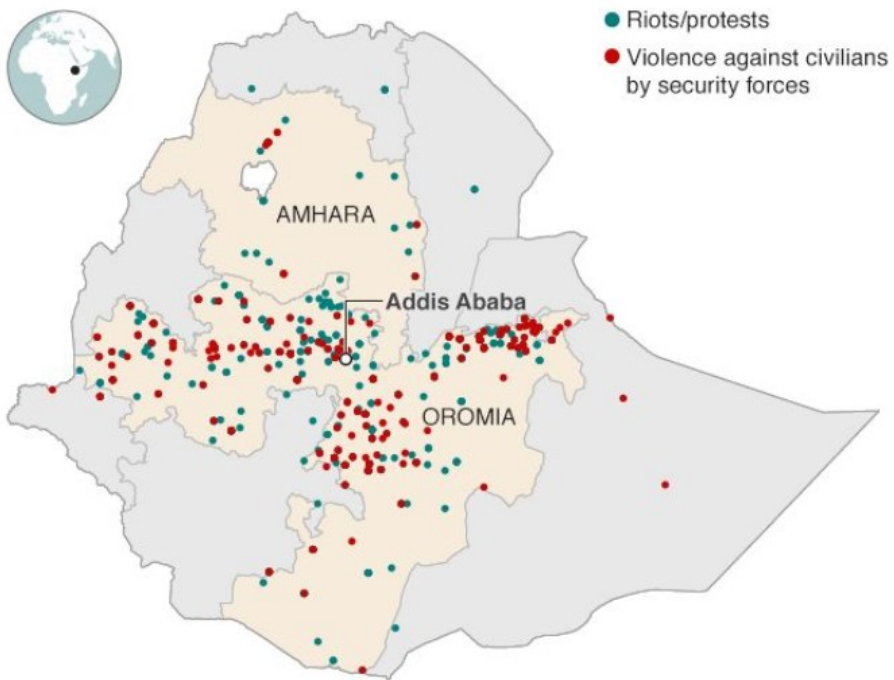
Limiting space for civil society and political opposition reduces regime criticism and dissent, but it can also lead to particularly violent repression when resistance does occur. The 2015/2016 drought overlapped with the longest sustained and

⁶ Statements drawn from interviews or focus group discussions are presented with information on the type of actor and date. Here, the statement originates from ENGO member #29 during a phone call held on 12 June 2017.

geographically most widespread protests since the start of the current regime. The protests were triggered by the intention of having an integrated urban master plan of Addis Ababa encroaching on the surrounding Oromia Zone, but were built on deep-seated dissatisfaction with the current political arrangement (Abbink 2016). The Oromo form the largest population group, yet have consistently been excluded from power, at least until the 2018 political reforms. Particularly large and brutally repressed riots occurred in Oromiya at the end of 2015, and in Oromiya (again most intensively) and Amhara in summer 2016. The pressure from market forces and foreign investors is particularly high on Oromo land (Markakis 2011, 356), and has led to Oromo farmers being dispossessed (Abbink 2016). It comes as little surprise that during the 2016 protests, Dutch-owned flower farms were amongst the first attacked. Although they form part of the cultural elite, the Amhara also have been side-lined from power under the EPRDF regime. Abbink (2016) recounts how, emboldened by the Oromiya protests and facing their own land dispute issues, Amhara protesters took to the street, attacking “administration offices, police stations and army troops”, in July 2016.

The protests were stifled by the declaration of a ten-month State of Emergency in October 2016, restricting the rights to assembly and information. Tens of thousands were jailed without formal legal proceedings, and hundreds were killed by security forces (Abbink 2016; Amnesty International 2017; Human Rights Watch 2016). Figures 4.2 and 4.3 show that, geographically, the areas of political unrest and the food insecurity that guided humanitarian action were largely overlapping. This does not signify a causal relation, but it did further test relations between aid, societal and government actors.

Figure 4.2. Protests and violence in 2015–2016 Ethiopia, as compiled based on internet and radio claims by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (British Broadcasting Corporation 2016).



Source: Aclad

BBC

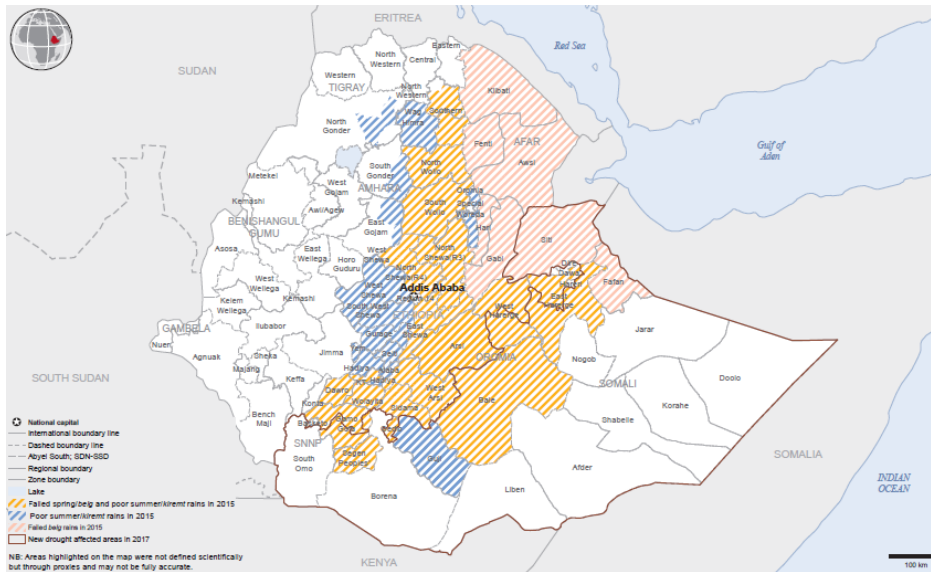


Figure 4.3. Areas affected by the 2015–2016 El Niño-induced droughts (dashed areas) (UN OCHA 2017b).

4.5 Findings: Disaster response performances and experiences in the humanitarian theatre

This section analyses how roles and power relations evolved in the governance of the humanitarian response to the 2016 drought, and how this was affected by political events, according to different actors.

4.5.1 Frontstage

We start our analysis with the frontstage, where the spotlights shine bright and humanitarian response comes across as especially well organised. The core tenet of the ‘Ethiopian humanitarian fairy-tale’ is efficient collaboration between diverse humanitarians and a proactively and financially highly engaged Ethiopian government, which reportedly contributed at least USD 735 million to the 2015–2016 drought response (UN OCHA and GoE 2016). Different actors recount the story using similar words, as shown by the following interview quotes from highly placed members of the GoE and an IO, and a statement made by an INGO member during a regional multi-actor meeting including government officials:

So what was the magic behind having 10 million people impacted, but no crisis? [...] [we have] a joint UN, government and INGO forum. All speak the same language! You might not see that in other countries. (Federal government official #1, 9.6.2017)

How do we decide who gets to be on the decision-making bodies? All country representatives of all humanitarian agencies are there; whoever is not present is not present, but that does not really happen here. Because of the nature of Ethiopia [...] Our approach, understanding of what coordination means, is to lead people to consensus [...] It is about providing the evidence, having trust to ensure that people feel comfortable and confident. (IO #1, 2.3.2017)

We are not hiding. We are not fighting, competing, but work together to have water for the community. (INGO #7, 9.3.2017)

According to these statements, the humanitarian model is not only efficient because of a high level of understanding between the actors, but also thanks to its clockwork-like organisation. As can be expected in a performance-oriented developmental state setting showcasing high capacities, processes are technical and systematised. This came through in interviews via the frequent naming of acronyms, institutionalised meeting platforms (e.g. the Strategic Multi-Agency Coordination Meeting and sector meetings co-chaired by a line ministry and associated UN organ), performance targets reached (dispatched trucks and quintals, number of beneficiaries listed in the bi-annual Humanitarian Requirements Documents, e.g. UN OCHA and GoE 2016) and codified processes. Concerning such processes, a key date on the humanitarian calendar is the *belg* assessment; around 200 staff members from the GoE, UN agencies, NGOs and donors are deployed throughout the country each June to assess the previous rainy season's (*belg*) performance. An intricate list of indicators (e.g. harvest expectations, market prices) then leads to the classification of districts, called *woredas*, according to three prioritisation levels that are neatly pictured in different tones of yellow to red on GoE/UN OCHA co-printed maps. Many participants described this assessment process as technical and inclusive to all interested parties. The codification of processes can also be found at the local level. An ENGO staff member (#24, 17.5.2017) started his interview with a

detailed 14-step description of the disaster response process, from the “analysis by local NGO, *woreda* and zonal government staff” to “the official launch when our NGO project gets the green light, together with the donor and line offices”.

All these processes add up to an intricately institutionalised response to food insecurity. The response follows a techno-logistic script; no negotiations are needed beyond settling logistical glitches, such as firing corrupt *kebele* government officials accused by higher-placed officials of causing gaps in the response (*woreda* government official #24, 8.6.2017; *woreda* government official #27, 9.6.2017). Moreover, there are few blind spots, as INGOs are presented as “hav[ing] eyes on the ground everywhere, wherever they have presence they can provide ground truth data” (IO #1, 2.3.2017).

Strikingly, the script largely centres on IOs, the national government and funders. There is little space for community initiatives or most ENGOs, with the exception of ENGOs politically, administratively and financially affiliated to ruling parties. We approached one such ENGO in Amhara. It manages all governmental aid storage facilities in the region, and continued doing so throughout the protests (ENGO #45, 8.6.2017; ENGO #46, 17.6.2017). ENGOs were never named as drought responders without prompting. Following prompting, ENGOs were described as important, embedded and trusted by the communities, but their capacity was seen as too low to be part of the efficient system. An Oromiya zonal government official (#2, 15.5.2017) described community members as not doing anything without government command.

Although all participants referred to consensus-based decision making, Ethiopian government officials usually described a government-centred system rather than a co-governed situation. A regional official, for instance, described the role of UN OCHA as “the secretaries at the forum [...] they take the minutes” (#1, 5.4.2017). An INGO member who had recently arrived in the country to manage emergency response operations (#29, 25.3.2017) reflected on one of the official meetings she attended at regional level:

On one hand, strong government is good; they should own it. But as an INGO I feel we are being directed by government, and the UN as well. An [Ethiopian government official] said in one of the meetings where I was, ‘the

UN is government'. So he does not see the difference. And in his opinion the NGOs are there to be told where to go, what to do.

Although this hierarchy is recognised by most non-state actors as well, it is not openly challenged. The central role of the government is considered legitimate, especially given the size and diversity of the country. A strong and engaged government prevents replication and makes it possible to feed over 20 million drought-impacted people.⁷

Protests and the State of Emergency

Our participants mentioned the impact of the protests and State of Emergency lightly, if at all. Strikingly, the protests were not mentioned in any of the UN OCHA's weekly one-page Humanitarian Bulletin updates released during the most intense protest phase (June–September 2016). A first mention of the protests was made on 10 October, when the Bulletin directly cited the Federal Office's Attorney General in relation to the State of Emergency (UN OCHA 2016a):

The rule of emergency was declared to restore order, ensure safety of the public and stability of the state. [According to the Attorney General,] '[t]he nature of recent violent demonstrations and conflicts that led to the loss of lives and destruction of properties make the State of Emergency crucial'.

On 24 October (UN OCHA 2016b), the Bulletin made another mention of the State of Emergency, stressing that humanitarian partners who continued to assist the government sought clarity on their role:

the Humanitarian Country Team seeks formal clarity on how the humanitarian response can continue amid restrictions stipulated in the State of Emergency on restriction of movement, designated 'red zones' and restricted freedom of assembly.

The subject was subsequently dropped again. According to all non-state participants, possible impacts of the protests and State of Emergency were very rarely discussed

⁷ This includes PSNP beneficiaries, who are most the vulnerable and do receive annual food aid but are not officially part of the 'humanitarian aid beneficiaries' statistics.

in official meetings where government officials were present. At most, specific incidents such as attacked warehouses and trucks were mentioned, and these were not described as politically motivated or more taxing than the usual logistical difficulties: “There were reports of food not being dispatched quickly enough from warehouses. Does it happen every year? Yes it does [...] It is a complicated operation” (IO #1, 1.3.2017). As shown by the second Bulletin quote, the topic was raised only insofar as the protests and State of Emergency would interfere with the technological script of the drought response.

4.5.2 Backstage

Moving behind the curtain, the contrast between the frontstage performance and the backstage governance of the drought response and the impacts of political turmoil, as described by the research participants, is striking.

Backstage, non-state participants emphasised government control rather than inclusive collaboration. Here, the “government-led response, with a quasi-Weberian iron cage of bureaucracy” (IO #8, 28.4.2017) was mentioned in more negative terms. Bureaucratic regulations combined with a lack of clarity make the GoE the major decision maker concerning, among other things, the timing and scale of the response (a GoE appeal to the international community is necessary) and the selection of activities, areas (permits must be granted) and beneficiaries.

Backstage, the effective capacity of the government, usually praised frontstage, was sometimes put in a different perspective. Community members in all visited areas, including the less LIC-affected Amhara *woreda*, mentioned widespread targeting ‘errors’ resulting in the exclusion of people lacking basic means from the aid distribution, or in the flat distribution of food aid, regardless of family size. Because of the seeming disorganisation of government officials in charge of distribution, we witnessed villagers waiting for days in the town to collect their (sometimes already spoiled) monthly aid supplies. An Amhara ENGO member (#45, 8.6.2017) reported that disabled people, the elderly and lactating mothers had to pay helpers to bring them the food from the warehouse, as they could not go themselves.

Beyond mentioning these deviations from the ‘faultless’ techno-logistic script, backstage stories explicitly focused on the politicisation of the drought response.

Rather than merely following the techno-logic, food aid quotas are up- or down-sized at different governance levels for political reasons, and corruption and people's political affiliations reportedly come into play in local officials' screening of beneficiaries. One highly placed IO official noted that "our local staff is under a lot of government pressure", ultimately reaching the conclusion that "targeting is an illusion invented by [the agency] and the government to please the donors" (IO #7, 27.4.2017).

These accounts contradict the technical, efficient and needs-based frontstage depictions of screening and distribution. Representatives of NGOs, community members and some IOs further lamented the lack of independence, on-the-ground monitoring and complaint mechanisms—in short, a disconnect between disaster response actors and the communities they want to help. The following quotes further highlight the limited independence of disaster response actors, which was also noticed by GoE officials and community members:

Ideally, the NGOs should bring up ground experiences to high levels [...] Here, NGOs can at most become contractors to do the work the government wants them to do. They are not really seen as partners or innovators; their potential is not used. (Donor #2, 17.3.2017)

If INGOs had the chance to get direct contact with the community—that is my wish. Now the government is the one communicating and deciding. So there is a big chance in using that for other purposes. (Oromiya *woreda* government official #2, 12.5.2017)

Donors should participate in the activities we prefer. The contact to us should be direct. Without any interference. Now it is not direct contact. (Oromiya community member #1, 11.5.2017)

Linked to this issue of limited independence, the main challenge identified by participants in the backstage area was not logistics but information—the lack of it, but especially its distortion and its political use. An INGO member's (#44, 25.5.2017) summary exemplified the statements of many: "Here, you can't give numbers

without the government blessing. Information sharing is such a sensitive issue in Ethiopia. What you state should always be linked to a government source”.

Citing government sources is a difficult feat when numbers are hard to come by or to trust. For the 2015–2016 drought, “it took a long time for the government to really become transparent about [the] volume, size, and extent of the problem” (donor #2, 17.3.2017). The historical taboos surrounding drought-induced death, displacement and outbreaks of diseases such as cholera also make obtaining information or programme authorisations difficult. Some agencies have to work for a drought impact to be recognised before starting to take action on it, or grapple with alternative terms, such as “acute watery diarrhoea” for cholera. The associated challenges are numerous, impacting, among other things, fundraising, planning, and importing drugs that require special authorisation. The controversy around information was apparent in many interviews, where the frontstage and backstage of the drought response fused into frequently contradictory statements, such as in an interview with an Oromiya-based INGO official (#38, 10.5.2017). Early on in the interview, in response to a question of whether his INGO conducted its own assessments, he replied, “We do not do our own. We support them, the government. It is better for us if we participate with them. The information from them is real”. He then contradicted himself 30 minutes later, when asked to elaborate on the ideal shape of disaster response: “It would be better if [INGOs] did assessments. We receive reports only. Reading and seeing is a different thing. Also we should participate in monitoring. As it is now, we have too limited access”.

Protests and the State of Emergency

The protests and State of Emergency impacted the drought response much more than the frontstage performance suggests. A number of incidents occurred, such as attacks on aid transports, warehouses and government facilities, as well as government officials raiding NGO cars and preventing access. In Oromiya, where unrest would “happen every day in a new place, without possibilities to predict”, the situation was “very challenging” (IO #9, 30.5.2017), to the extent that some INGOs called their field staff back to Addis for a few days. One IO member also reported (IO #9, 30.5.2017) that his agency had started planning with regional GoE authorities, keeping federal instances in the dark, for ways of dispatching aid other than via the

government system (i.e. relying on more locally accepted ENGOs or civil society) in case the civil servants were kicked out and the people took control.

Our field visits further confirmed that the protests and State of Emergency impacted drought response. In a protest-ridden district of the Amhara region, food distribution was suspended for one month (ENGO #45, 8.6.2017). Stories of aid trucks set on fire and aid storage robbery attempts were reported in several *woredas* (ENGO #46, 17.6.2017). In the visited Oromiya *kebele*, which was described as a conflict hotspot, drought response activities of the government (e.g. health posts, school feeding programmes) and NGOs (e.g. food aid distribution) halted as violence increased from both the population and the government. An INGO member described the summer months as “our hibernation” (#38, 10.5.2017), imposed first because of security and then official access restrictions.

Many Oromiya participants considered the State of Emergency to have reduced violence and saved lives. However, although the State of Emergency was considered to have enabled the drought response by increasing safety, it was also seen as having impeded the response. Information flows were interrupted by week-long Internet outages and regular phone network outages (Jeffrey 2016). Access to certain areas, visas, work permits and information became more difficult. According to one foreign embassy official (donor #9, 21.4.2017) this happened because “there was some fear of people with a political mandate coming in on wake of humanitarian aid workers. That was basically seen as worse than having [a] big number of people helping the population”.

The interviews brought out that the impact of the protests and State of Emergency were much more profound and political than mere logistical challenges. INGO representatives felt that they were inadvertently placed in the conflict. For example, when rioters burnt down a government grain storage facility, a neighbouring storage facility, managed by an INGO, was attacked and had grain stolen, although it was not burnt down. The government then assigned soldiers to protect the still-standing INGO warehouse. The INGO official telling this story (#28, 23.3.2017) recalled, “We did not like that, because it would look like we were siding with the government. But at same time, we cannot take the soldiers off, because there is unrest and we must keep a good relationship”.

The direct involvement of NGOs was limited, and NGOs (without much debate) avoided acting on behalf of victims of political violence, mainly because these groups saw human rights issues as outside their mandate. Only one interviewed staff member and one driver at the same ENGO reported seeing it as their (personal) duty to assist wounded conflict victims. NGOs nonetheless became part of the politics. Some local participants expressed that the NGOs do “not need to come if they do not help fight the government” (Oromiya community member #9, 15.5.2017). Government officials sometimes accused NGOs of supporting protesters. The aforementioned driver told me animatedly how he was even hit by a government representative while assisting a wounded woman.

The interviews also brought to light how the drought response was instrumentalised to stop the protests. Areas and protesters were removed from beneficiary lists, and people were rewarded for not protesting or for informing on fellow community members, according to a *woreda* GoE official (#2, 12.5.2017), reporting the words of a colleague: “If you calm down, we will support you again, even if you did something wrong to the government”.

There were also hints that the State of Emergency more largely affected civil society’s capacities to deal with the drought. A community member with a higher position in the indigenous *Gada* Oromo governance system reported additional impacts on civil society (#12, 15.5.2017):

When the unrest happened, we organised more. To support each other, amongst the tribe clans, the *Gada* system. Finding homes for the displaced, re-distributing food [...] but the *Gada*, after the declaration of the State of Emergency, we had to stop, as we could not have meetings of more people.

4.5.3 Front- and backstage interfaces

The two sections above have highlighted the gaps between the frontstage stories and backstage experiences and narratives, which are summarised in Table 4.2.

In this section, I describe how non-state actors dealt with the contradictions between the frontstage and the backstage. The section only deals with non-state participants,

because contradictions were extremely rarely acknowledged by Ethiopian state officials, and were accompanied by the regret that there was nothing they could do about this (beyond ‘hidden strike’ levels of going about daily tasks, as mentioned by zonal government official #1, 22.5.2017). One of the aspects Goffman associated with the backstage is strategising to influence the frontstage performance.

Table 4.2. Main frontstage/backstage discrepancies in Ethiopia.

Topic	Frontstage	Backstage
Overarching governance mode	Hierarchical co-governance among diverse state and aid actors	Tight government control
Challenges to the drought response	Few, except for understandable logistical difficulties or corruption of lower government officials	- Monopoly of the state on information and decision making - Politicisation of aid
Protests and State of Emergency impacts	Negligible	- Protests affecting the effectiveness of drought response - State of Emergency worsening the situation in some areas (e.g. weakening local drought response mechanisms, aid as punishment or reward)

Limited room for manoeuvre

Many interviewees had no answer to the question of how they would deal with the concerns they articulated backstage. Interviewed community members all expressed powerlessness in that regard. The few possibilities aid actors mentioned consisted of dealing with the system without openly discussing concerns or challenging the government. For example, they carefully selecting the ethnicity of staff to be based in a field office or to accompany field visits, they maintained parallel information databases to have a more accurate picture of the humanitarian situation; they tried fighting GoE bureaucracy with evidence, numbers, and detailed memoranda of

understanding and donor guidelines. Highlighting such donor guidelines could for instance help them argue that they were simply not allowed to operate via government structures in a specific region. Agencies widely resorted to negotiating with the government within the dominant technical discourse, stressing supposedly objective facts and figures to adjust certain needs analyses and emphasising the common interest in helping communities. INGOs, for example, stressed that they could advocate for certain issues and excluded populations as long as they remained technical about it. Using indirect and non-confrontational tactics to play the system required context-specific knowledge, negotiation skills and trusted contacts ranging from federal bureaucrats to *kebele* officials. Only one participant reported an example of a large donor that—behind the scenes—wrote a confidential protest letter to the government in relation to the blockage of aid during the State of Emergency (INGO #38, 10.5.2017).

Although silent diplomacy skills were important, independent action was constrained by many factors. Of paramount importance was information. Agencies usually had a limited presence on the ground and often lacked the whole picture. There were few venues to address issues apart from raising them with the government, even when the government was the source of concern. An Oromiya ENGO member (#24, 17.5.2017) related how he had reported biased beneficiary screening to government line offices, although the bias came from government officials. According to him, “that is the only route; we can’t jump”.

Three forms of self-censorship

Although a number of factors limited the room for manoeuvre and independent humanitarian action, it became clear that agencies also played a role in these limitations through self-censorship. Self-censoring emerged as one of the only self-preservation strategies, taking three forms: self-censoring of words, actions and knowledge.

Speaking out openly for an independent humanitarian space was presented as impossible and too dangerous, especially for ENGOs. Self-censoring also took place as organisations framed problems as logistical even when they were “obviously” political (INGO #6, 6.3.2017): “We cannot mention that the *woreda* government is not cooperative, but we can say that roads are bad”. Instead of openly raising an

issue, actors would mention 2016 conflict issues via less locally vulnerable actors, as was reported by an IO official (#9, 30.5.2017):

We could not release a statement here; it would jeopardise the situation. We had to send it to New York. If tried here, the anger and concern of the federal government... they would have said, let's shut down [the agency]. We had no choice. [...] [A higher official] raised the issue with the prime minister when he visited. So we have windows.

Self-censoring also happened in action and was often linked to actively suppressing knowledge. When I joined an NGO consortium on a monitoring field visit, they purposefully refrained from visiting a water pump site in a conflict area, "because then the government would know that we know" (INGO #7, 1.3.2017). 'Ignorancy' (Hilhorst 2018a) is also seen in the re-framing of humanitarian principles and mandates. Human rights issues especially are excluded from the mandate, despite the fact that this hampered the effectiveness and impartiality of the humanitarian response in 2016. An INGO director (#44, 25.5.2017) gave a surprising interpretation of the principle of neutrality, re-framed as 'avoiding conflict areas' in its programme. One ENGO member (#16, 12.4.2017), when asked about drought-related mortality, stated that "death is none of my business". We do not interpret this as actual ignorance about humanitarian principles. Rather, actors deliberately chose to narrow their scope and present themselves as innocent and ignorant enactors of the techno-logistic disaster response script, hence relying on 'ignorancy' as a strategic device.

Humanitarian attitudes towards independence

A final major finding from our interviews concerns the diverging attitudes of humanitarian participants regarding what should be done about the lack of independence of humanitarian aid. There was a common backstage acknowledgement of this situation: "The understanding of the humanitarian principles is smaller here [in Ethiopia]. Humanitarians here work on filling government gaps" (ENGO #23, 10.5.2017). Our participants recounted three narratives about whether this situation was problematic.

One group of participants, predominantly headquarter-based non-Ethiopian staff of the large and longer-established IOs and INGOs, stayed closely within the remit of

the frontstage narrative. As one IO representative said, “disaster response here is an enormous logistical challenge, but not necessarily one where adherence to humanitarian principles is strictly necessary” (IO #8, 28.4.2017). These humanitarians were convinced that the GoE is basically doing a good job under difficult (landscape-dictated) circumstances, especially compared with the huge famines of the past and with neighbouring countries. They considered Ethiopia to be effectively operating and posing few challenges to humanitarian organisations; they viewed Ethiopia as an easy post, and did not seem bothered by the government’s near-monopoly on information.

Another group of participants, working in both international and Ethiopian structures, acknowledged that there were problematic aspects to the drought response, but took a pragmatic view. They chose to balance the need for immediate response to the drought with the importance of good long-term relations with the government. They aimed to maximise room for manoeuvre by ‘playing the game’, as elaborated above. To them, keeping up the frontstage performance was part of a considered strategy of ‘ignorancy’.

A third group of participants, usually members of ENGOs or of the globally more advocacy-oriented INGOs, but also IO/INGO international staff members who had only recently arrived in the country, was very critical of the lack of humanitarian independence, especially in view of the State of Emergency:

Overall, humanitarian space is limited. And we partly limit it ourselves. It is usually the UN’s role to push for the humanitarian space; they have that privilege. But in Ethiopia, it has developed to a situation that all think the government is more powerful, that you can’t push, can’t discuss. I felt last year, with the State of Emergency and all, it would clearly have been the moment to take a stronger position. (IO #11, 12.6.2017)

These participants accused larger INGOs, IOs and donors of giving up on humanitarian principles and only being concerned with maintaining good relations and “running their big machines” in their oligarchic “country-club way of functioning” (INGO #45, 26.4.2017). According to these participants, financial and geopolitical incentives, such as the ‘war on terror’, silenced the humanitarian

community, and long-time humanitarian leaders had slipped into a comfortable routine and lost their critical edge.

4.6 Conclusions

This analysis, detailing humanitarian performances and experiences in the humanitarian theatre's two spaces and interfaces in Ethiopia, shines a light on stark discrepancies between the frontstage, where state and aid actors showcase the response, and the backstage, where they reflect on challenges and strategies. On the frontstage, all actors agreed on the (hierarchical) co-governance of the drought response, largely ignoring the impacts of the political turmoil, whereas backstage, they were often concerned with the information and decision-making monopoly of the state, the inability to go the 'last mile' and interact directly with communities, the politicisation of aid, and the consequences of the unrest and State of Emergency. In 2016, the effectiveness and impartiality of the response to a 50-year drought was especially hampered. Although this cannot be generalised to Ethiopia overall and the GoE's (financial) efforts and leadership were largely successful, participants of all backgrounds reported a lack of transparency and accountability, as well as cases of biased response and aid being instrumentalised to reward or punish drought victims.

Even more striking is how non-state actors behaved following their own observations of the frontstage/backstage gap. For all actors, although especially civil society members including ENGOs, room for manoeuvre is extremely limited. The frontstage remains quiet, as disaster response actors dismiss open discussion or advocacy, choosing instead to rely on self-censorship and ignorancy. They follow a narrowly defined mandate and adhere to the techno-logistic script to keep helping drought victims. But even backstage, silence abounds. With a few exceptions internal to some organisations, it seems there is no collective conversation on where to draw the line between respecting the sovereignty of the government and the intrusion of humanitarian principles after conflict dynamics invade the humanitarian response.

Our analysis shows how the restricted space available to Ethiopian civil society impacted the humanitarian space, where humanitarians find the discretion to decide what needs to be addressed. Although it is common that the line between sovereignty and humanitarian space is hard to define and negotiate in practice, it

was found that decisions touching upon these themes were rarely debated within or between agencies, and hence remained outside the scope of reflection and evaluation.

The plea made at the beginning of this chapter, to rekindle the discussion of the politics of aid in LIC settings, extends to scholarly work. It remains important to study what happens in Ethiopia, where violent and diverse conflict dynamics, including intra-ethnic conflict, unfold. There, over 1.8 million displaced people are in need of humanitarian assistance, notwithstanding the 2018 political reforms (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2020). But more research on this will also be relevant for the increasingly numerous authoritarian and LIC settings around the world.

Chapter 5: Getting Relief to Marginalised Minorities: The Response to Cyclone Komen in 2015 in Myanmar⁸

Abstract

Based on four months of qualitative fieldwork in Myanmar in 2017–2018, this chapter explores whether and how civil society organisations, international non-governmental organisations, international organisations, and donor agencies socially navigated the LIC context to try to provide relief to marginalised minorities in the ethnic states of Chin and Rakhine following cyclone Komen in 2015. The study findings detail how civil society actors mobilised parallel minority and Christian networks and lobbied international actors to support disaster victims of Chin ethnicity. In Rakhine State, it was overwhelmingly international humanitarian organisations that were able and willing to support Muslims, including the Rohingya. This increased tensions among community groups and between Myanmar and the international community. Particularly in the context of rising identity politics, humanitarian governance encompasses the governance of perceptions. Trade-offs between long-term acceptance and following humanitarian principles in aid allocation are largely unavoidable and must be carefully considered.



⁸ This chapter is a minor revision of the published article: Desportes (2019c).

Figure 5.1. Key locations in Myanmar (Author 2020 based on Myanmar Information Management Unit 2019).

5.1 Introduction

When massive floods hit Myanmar's⁹ Rakhine State in summer 2015, members of the Muslim Rohingya minority fled their homes to seek refuge in government shelters. However, unlike their Buddhist neighbours, the Rohingya were turned away. They could have stayed at the shelters if they had signed documents identifying themselves as Bengalis, but they were very unlikely to do this. For decades, the Rohingya have battled to gain the official recognition as an ethnic group necessary to obtain Myanmar citizenship, which the Myanmar constitution ties to belonging to a recognised "national race" (Cheesman 2017; Parnini 2013).

The above events were reported by *The Burma Times* (2015), an exile diaspora newspaper. They may have actually occurred, but the story may also simply be one bullet in the discursive battle surrounding the treatment of Myanmar's multiple ethnic and religious minorities.¹⁰ In Myanmar, nationalist discourses 'othering' those who are not Buddhist or ethnically Bamar have permeated the societal, political and law-making spheres (Farzana 2015, 297–298; Lee 2016; Renshaw 2013; Wade 2017). Regardless of its veracity, the story calls for a closer look at the marginalisation minority groups faced in the 2015 disaster response after flooding and landslides were triggered by a heavy monsoon season and compounded by cyclone Komen throughout Myanmar. Most importantly, the story raises questions regarding how members of Myanmar's vibrant civil society and international humanitarians navigated a context where conflict and identity politics played out during the response. Although challenges confronting civil society and humanitarian actors in authoritarian and conflict-affected contexts have been explored (e.g., Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst 2019; Harvey 2013; Kahn and Cunningham 2013; del Valle and Healy 2013), little academic research has investigated the practices developed to overcome them.

⁹ In this chapter, I use the term 'Myanmar', mirroring the usage of most of the research participants. The use of the term does not reflect partiality in a context where the political opposition rejected the term 'Myanmar', which was unilaterally imposed by military rulers in 1989.

¹⁰ Roughly 70% of the Myanmar population are of Bamar ethnicity according to the 1983 Census (Desaine 2011, 28), and 78.9% are Buddhists according to the 2014 Census (Myanmar Ministry of Information 2014). For decades, the government has aimed to "homogenise the multifaceted ethnic and cultural mosaic [that is Myanmar] into a national, unified, Bamar entity" (Desaine 2011, 12). The government recognises 135 different ethnic groups, excluding the Rohingya, as belonging to the nation (Myanmar Ministry of Information 2018).

Based on four months of qualitative fieldwork, this chapter aims to describe the challenges and navigation strategies associated with supporting minority groups, as perceived and recounted by representatives of CSOs, INGOs and IOs that were part of the 2015 disaster response in Chin and Rakhine States (see Figure 5.1). These states were chosen as the two ethnic regional states most impacted by the disasters, presenting different minority tension dynamics, and offering fieldwork possibilities.

Thus presenting not one but two case studies on minority support following the 2015 disasters, this chapter informs two broader debates. The first concerns the understudied disaster–conflict nexus (E. King and Mutter 2014). How conflict and disaster dynamics interact is particularly poorly understood in settings of LIC, which are predominantly caused by intra-state political and social tensions (HIIK 2016). Worldwide, most current conflicts are LICs (HIIK 2016; Human Security Report Project 2016). Focusing on how disaster response is shaped towards minorities—groups collectively identifying around characteristics such as ethnic origin, religion, culture, or language (Azar 1990)—places a magnifying glass on core LIC–disaster dynamics. This is especially true in a context of rising identity politics, where certain groups are marginalised in the politicised response, creating difficulties for humanitarian actors who remain political players despite their actions being driven by moral rather than political norms (Kahn and Cunningham 2013; del Valle and Healy 2013).

The second debate involves minorities as a core friction point in discussions on humanitarian organisations’ interference in national state affairs (humanitarianism–sovereignty tensions). Kahn and Cunningham (2013, S139) note that, in recent decades, a “fundamental gap has developed between states and international humanitarian actors in terms of describing what sovereignty entails and how it is expressed”, and that how these tensions can be managed, especially by humanitarian actors, needs to be better understood. The well-being of people caught up in crises constitutes “the contested ground on which states and humanitarian actors clash” (Kahn and Cunningham 2013, S139). Often, especially in authoritarian LIC settings and certainly in Myanmar (Décobert 2016; Matelski 2016b; Smith 2010), contestation over minorities’ welfare and rights is particularly intense.

5.2 Challenges and social navigation practices to support minorities in authoritarian low-intensity conflict settings

As politically and socially shaped events, disaster response processes reveal the dynamics criss-crossing society, state and aid relations (Hutchison, 2014; Pelling and Dill, 2010). This is particularly true in conflict-affected countries, although it is important to differentiate among conflict types (van Voorst and Hilhorst 2017). LICs are marked by fewer violent events and deaths compared with high-intensity conflicts, but they show high levels of volatility and structural violence, such as the marginalisation of minority groups by the state (Azar 1990). Disaster response can then be the very conduit through which the LIC is played out, further sidelining minorities, harming political opponents or increasing political support (see Flanigan (2008) [Lebanon and Sri Lanka]; Jacoby and Özerdem (2008) [Turkey]; Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst (2019) [Ethiopia]). When a disaster unfolds in a LIC setting, state and societal actors are likely to contest each other's legitimacy, capacity and will to protect disaster victims—for instance, by accusing government authorities of not letting members of an ethnic minority into flood shelters.

Authoritarian LIC settings present specific challenges for civil society and international disaster responders. Authoritarian practices, defined as “patterns of action that sabotage accountability to people over whom a political actor exerts control, or their representatives, by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice” (Glasius 2018, 517), translate into restrictions on information, right to expression and to assembly. MSF has reported state restrictions on “geographic access, programmatic options, and modalities of work” in the authoritarian contexts of Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Myanmar (del Valle and Healy 2013, S198). In Ethiopia, civil society and international actors have described their inability to freely shape aid provision because of the governmental “iron cage of bureaucracy” and restricted civil society space (Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst 2019, 19). Humanitarian independence is put to the test when LIC dynamics enter into the disaster response process and question the impartiality of aid delivery, but this cannot be openly discussed under strict state control (Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst 2019). For instance in Myanmar, for decades following the 1960s, and also more recently during the Rohingya crisis, organisations, journalists, researchers and

activists who wrote critically about the regime were blacklisted, banned or imprisoned (Selth 2018).

Focusing on the practicalities of doing academic fieldwork in authoritarian contexts, Glasius et al. (2018) highlight the sense of uncertainty prevalent under authoritarian regimes. The uncertainty applies to both sides: the state is unsure about the extent of popular legitimacy and regime robustness; society is bewildered by many, contradictory and not always consistently applied laws (Glasius et al. 2018, 9). Glasius et al. (2018) stress the arbitrariness of state decisions and the context-specific 'fluid lines' that make what is permissible ambiguous. This certainly applies to humanitarian action. In addition to the 'big politics' that may clearly restrict access or operations, seemingly softer 'everyday politics' unfold (Kerkvliet 2009, 232), and the quiet, mundane practices of state bureaucracy can restrict aid permissions in more duplicitous ways. A travel authorisation being held up by 'bureaucratic delays' would be more difficult to contest on humanitarian grounds than would a clear refusal to grant access to an area. The functioning of mostly opaque state institutions (Debiel and Klein 2002) adds uncertainty, as do LIC dynamics. High tensions between ethnic, religious and/or societal groups and the state increase the risk of arbitrary 'snap decisions' and unpredictable eruptions of violence (Azar 1990; Galtung 1996; Kalyvas 2003). Non-governmental actors thus do not only adapt operations because of state-imposed limitations; the same actors also internalise self-censorship practices because of fear of over-stepping the fluid lines or escalating tensions (Desportes, Mandefro, and Hilhorst 2019).

Whether actors choose to self-censor or to act and speak out depends partially on their "actor pedigree" (Douma and Hilhorst 2006; Schennink et al. 2006). For example, denouncing a breach of humanitarian principles better fits the institutional model, mandate and habitus of the privately funded and testimony-oriented INGO MSF¹¹ than that of the domestic National Red Cross Red Crescent Society, which is legally auxiliary to the state. Which risks can be taken also depends on actors' capacity to "disentangle themselves from confining structures, plot their escape and move towards better positions" (Vigh 2009, 419). Detailing what he refers to as social navigation processes, Vigh (2009) draws a parallel with Jackson's (1998) concept of

¹¹ MSF has come to be associated with the figure of the humanitarian who witnesses and denounces human suffering, in line with a human rights based humanitarian approach (Décobert 2016, 21; Fassin 2007).

'manoeuvring', the striving for balance and control. Social navigation directs the analytical gaze not towards structures and boundaries actors face, or how they act in their social environment, but rather towards how actors "interact with their social environment and adjust their lives to the constant influence [...] of social forces and change" (Vigh 2009, 433). As such, social navigation is a good fit for understanding the daily practices of actors seeking to reach a specific goal (here, minority support), in a context of restrictive and uncertain space to manoeuvre.

5.2.1 Civil society actors

Previous studies show civil society actors to be particularly skilled social navigators. In Myanmar, the phrase 'civil society' is generally used to denote "any group or initiative that is not directly piloted by the government" and aims to advance common interests (Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies 2009, 6; Desaine 2011, 12–13). CSOs can be divided into community-based organisations (CBOs), primarily linked to a specific ethnic or religious group, and the more Western-oriented, officially registered local non-governmental organisations (LNGOs). Civil society actors are deeply embedded in and knowledgeable about the dynamics of the area where they operate. CSOs in Myanmar have accumulated decades of experience responding to "conflict, oppressive structures, and [...] disaster through self-organisation, self-protection, and covert resistance" (Matelski 2016b, 24).

In Myanmar, "ethnic identity [...] is complex, politically charged and highly determinant of people's personal and political identities and associations/affiliations" (Drew 2016, 8). Ethnicity and religion moreover constitute prime fault lines of civil society (Matelski 2016b). In situations of conflict and repression, minority group boundaries generally become more salient, reinforcing within-group loyalty and altruism (Flanigan, Asal, and Brown 2015, 1793). Local embeddedness also generates the ties of trust with communities necessary for aid operations' "access, cover and legitimacy" (Wallis and Jacquet 2011). However, CSOs being caught in their own web of "ethnic proximity, socio-political affiliation or local pressure" can also impede the impartial delivery of aid (Zyck and Krebs 2015, 3).

Desaine (2011, 8) explains the prevalence of CSOs in Myanmar's ethnic States and among minority religions, noting that they are "most likely to find operational space in marginal areas, where the Bamar prevailing state and its symbols have less

presence". Based on existing literature, it seems that Myanmar CSOs rely upon two major social navigation strategies. The first is the long-term decision making that shapes an organisation's pedigree, operating from outside or inside the country, and more or less formally (Desaine 2011). Some organisations balance formalisation's advantages (e.g. ability to receive international funding as a registered LINGO) and disadvantages (e.g. obligation to submit programmes and budgets to government scrutiny) by engaging in partnerships. For example, CSOs not registered as LINGOs can retain independence and flexibility while also accessing a legal status and (Western) funds via participation in larger national or international umbrella organisations (Wallis and Jacquet 2011). Second, on a case-by-case basis, civil society actors adapt "their terminology, their visibility, and sometimes their actual activities to the limitations posed by central and local authorities" (Matelski 2016b, 178–179). How this is done depends on the "the context of the moment, connections with/protection from the government, location and degree of sensitivity of the work" (Desaine 2011, 19). Civil society actors are well versed in the 'politics of silence', influencing decisions not through direct confrontation, but by "remaining low profile" (Desaine 2011, 7).

5.2.2 International humanitarian actors

International humanitarian actors add to the complexity of governance. In Myanmar, the "decade-long conflict over the legitimacy of competing socio-political and armed actors" intermingles with "the evolving agendas and priorities of international players" through "politics, money, and power" (Décobert 2016, 6). These factors play out, for instance, when authoritarian states refuse international assistance, as initially occurred when cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar in 2008 (Alles 2012; Selth 2008). Paik (2011) details how authoritarian regimes balance political need and risk regarding accepting foreign aid and, if accepted, the degree of government control exerted over the movement of foreign aid workers and resources. In the Nargis response, foreign aid was eventually allowed "selectively and reluctantly" and was mostly distributed via government channels; Western rescue and medical staff and many vessels carrying relief goods were turned away at Myanmar's border (Paik 2011, 450, 455).

International actors ranging from the UN to INGOs have long been reticent to take a stand on governments' treatment of minorities (Gaay Fortman 2006, 35). Taking

such a stand in regimes that perceive cultural heterogeneity as a threat to political unity and stability would be especially likely to raise tensions (Koenig and Guchteneire 2007). The move towards a multicultural understanding of the nation-state and the emergence of an international human rights regime led to new repertoires of contention and claim making, enabling humanitarian actors and other governments to legitimately challenge national governments (Koenig and Guchteneire 2007). Still, engaging on minority issues can be a double-edged sword. Referring to Myanmar, Taylor (1982, 7) argues that “ethnic politics is the obverse of the politics of national unity” when conflicts around socio-economic issues are increasingly framed as ethnic.

The new repertoires of contention and claim making regarding minorities have hardly permeated disaster-related policy and practice. Disaster practitioners still portray themselves as apolitical and technical—partly to facilitate access and operations (Peters 2017). Harvey (2013) asserts that, although humanitarians often take cover behind humanitarian principles to avoid engaging with states in conflict settings, an increasing number of frameworks and guidelines highlight the primary responsibility of the state to protect its citizens from and following disasters, and supportive role of international actors in the process. Disaster policy documents mention a need to focus on the most vulnerable or marginalised and indigenous populations.¹² However, demands such as the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in disaster risk reduction and response programmes are mostly apolitical, based on a romanticised depiction of indigenous peoples as interwoven with nature (Hilhorst et al. 2015). Issues such as exploitation or rights violations, which can contribute to disaster vulnerability and marginalisation during the response, are largely neglected.

It is uncertain how similar social navigation options are for international humanitarians and civil society actors. In the authoritarian contexts of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, del Valle and Healy (2013, 189) concluded that, for MSF, “successful access negotiations hinged heavily on demonstrating added value (medical relevance) while simultaneously building relationships with authorities [...] and hoping that such measures could promote a level of acceptance or trust needed to operate”. One would expect international humanitarians’ navigation routes to be

¹² For example, in the Sendai UN Disaster Risk Reduction Framework for Action (UNISDR 2015) and the UN agenda on indigenous peoples and disasters (UNISDR 2008).

more limited, given the ability of authorities to control ‘external agents’ through visas, travel authorisations and other procedures. The steady trend towards the rationalisation and coordination of humanitarian action since the 1990s can also limit options (Duffield 1997). Today, standards and blueprint institutional structures are largely applied across countries. Aiming to increase transparency and accountability, the standardisation “largely reflect[s] the concerns, priorities and values of technical professionals in Northern agencies”; this leaves little room for co-shaping programmes with in-country humanitarian partners or adapting to complex humanitarian situations (Dufour et al. 2004, 124). Although INGOs often choose to fit into this ‘standardised’ humanitarian system, many remain more flexible regarding funding and decision making (Davey, Borton, and Foley 2013; Lyons 2014).

In Myanmar, prior to the democratisation process starting in 2011, international actors were known for a fixed, polarised stance in an “internationalised battle of legitimacies” (Décobert 2016, 8), either judging it more effective to engage constructively with the government or preferring to operate cross-border, informally and/or via CSOs (Décobert 2016; Duffield 2008). Desaine (2011) argues that international actors perceived LINGOs as systematically opposed to the (semi-)military regime and always on the side of good. This chapter will examine how these dynamics had evolved by 2015.

5.3 Methodology

This chapter is based on primary data collected during a four-month period (September 2017–February 2018) in Yangon and Chin State. During the fieldwork, restrictions and intense violence described by the UN as “very likely” ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya (Trihartono 2018; UN 2018, 8) made access to Rakhine State impossible and increased distrust towards outsiders interested in humanitarian issues. This also hampered access to some Yangon-based organisations deeply involved in the crisis, especially those I suspected of relying on more ‘informal’ methods. However, disaster response processes could be reconstructed through conversations with approachable Yangon-based practitioners who had been directly involved in the 2015 cyclone response in Rakhine and/or Chin State, as decision makers based in offices or on the ground. A 10-day trip to Hakha, the landslide-impacted capital of Chin State, allowed direct observation and interaction with

actors in a minority area. The trip was largely spent with Hakha community members who had been displaced since 2015, CBO and LNGO employees, and INGO staff members who were involved in the 2015 response from their Asian regional headquarters.

The data collection involved documented exchanges with a total of 71 participants, 47 of whom participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions. Interview participants were selected from key organisations involved in the 2015 response, as determined based on grey literature and referral sampling. The data collection focused on perceived minority marginalisation, challenges and social navigation strategies developed during the 2015 Komen response in Chin and Rakhine States, specifically in the strongly disaster-impacted townships of Hakha (the Chin State capital) and north of Sittwe (the Rakhine State capital) (outlined in blue in Figure 5.2). Although some depth is lost by detailing processes in two areas instead of one, the comparison highlights the diversity of LIC and minority dynamics within a single-country context and enables a differentiated and layered account of social navigation strategies.

Table 5.1. Overview of research participants per actor type in Myanmar.

Actor type		Number of participants*
Civil society actors	Community-based organisations	4
	Local non-governmental organisations	7
International humanitarian actors	International non-governmental organisations	9
	International organisations such as UN agencies	7
	Humanitarian donors	4
	Independent international humanitarian consultant	1
Other	Chin State government official	1
	Research institutions, local and foreign	4
	Residents displaced by the 2015 Hakha landslide	10
Total		47

* Participant numbers refer to in-depth individual interviews, except for displaced residents, who were focus group participants.

As shown in Table 5.1, I aimed to engage with a large variety of non-governmental actors. For instance, for civil society actors, I approached members of more and less formalised organisations (LNGOs vs. CBOs), including those positioned closer to either international or ethnic/religious networks and those claiming to have a bridging role. During the Yangon-based interviews, trust and deeper insight were attained as participants first discussed less sensitive Chin State dynamics and then contrasted these with those in Rakhine. Additional data were collected from secondary sources (press clippings, humanitarian and CSO reports used for lobbying), through everyday observation and from casual conversations (e.g. during formal CSO meetings in Hakha and informal dinner discussions with humanitarian actors in Yangon). All data were stored using NVIVO and analysed using both pre-determined codes and codes derived through a thematic analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2006).

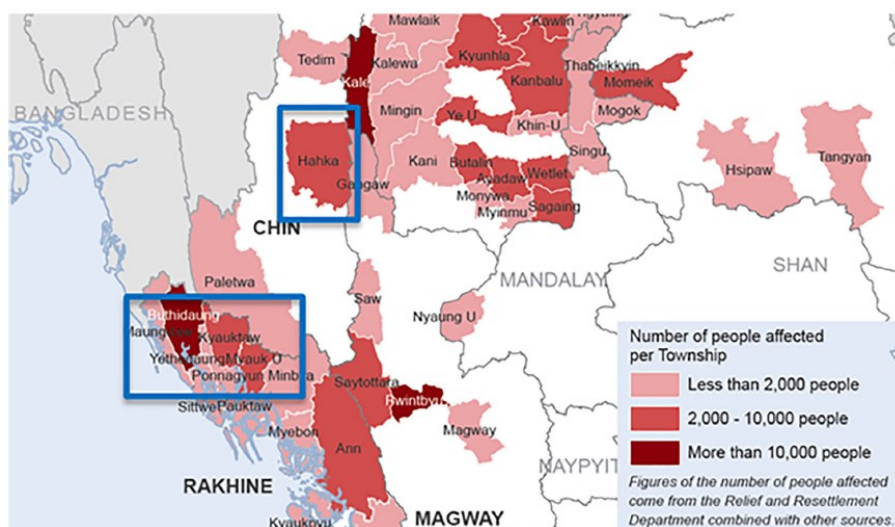


Figure 5.2. Case study areas and 2015 flood-affected townships. Case study areas (framed in blue) and flood-affected areas (in red) compiled based on government and humanitarian sources on 3 August 2015 (Author 2020 modified based on UN OCHA 2015a).

Several fieldwork limitations affected the conclusions that could be drawn. The 2017 escalation of tensions and violence among community groups and between humanitarian actors and the government may have influenced participants' recollection of 2015 dynamics. The one interview with a government representative, who mostly recited government policies and questioned the rationale of my PhD

study and presence in Myanmar, indicated that minorities and even humanitarian support were topics too sensitive to discuss with such officials. Furthermore, the data certainly reflect participants' personal trajectories. For example, statements on marginalisation must be treated with caution in a context where memories of human rights violations are still fresh. Acknowledgement of relief coming from the government or military was rarely unprompted and often given grudgingly, as reflected in a statement made by a Hakha resident during a focus group discussion (#8, 22.11.2017): "Yes, the army provided tar for the road reconstruction. But I leave the military out of it. I don't even want their money". The subjectivity of framings and divergences among them are part of my findings and reflective of the broader LIC dynamics at play (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012).

5.4 Context

In 2015, Myanmar experienced heavy monsoon rains, and cyclone Komen triggered landslides and the most widespread flooding in decades, leaving 125 dead and 1,676,086 temporarily displaced (UN OCHA 2015a, 2015b). Cyclone Komen made landfall at a time of heightened Myanmar identity politics—a few months after four discriminatory 'Race and Religion' laws were passed and a few months before the tense November 2015 elections.

In the broader context, a triple transition increased volatility and uncertainty for minorities, CSOs and international humanitarian actors. First, anti-minority and especially anti-Muslim attitudes rose to a level of explosive hatred and vengeance, not least on social media (Kipgen 2013; Wade 2017). Second, the partial democratic transition multiplied the institutional entry points among military and civilian institutions, both of which are present from the highest governance level, the Union government, to the township level (Sifton 2014). Third, the Myanmar aid system was overhauled. Myanmar jumped from lowest international aid beneficiary per capita in the region, with almost no aid going through the government, to 'donor darling' status with the establishment of UN sectors, clusters, and permanent donor and INGO headquarters (Décobert 2016, 63). For the first time, the Myanmar Union government officially appealed for international cyclone support on 4 August 2015. The government then worked with staff dispatched from the United States' Federal

Emergency Management Agency in the newly operational Crisis Management Unit in Myanmar's capital of Nay Pyi Taw.

Not all local structures benefitted from the exponential increase in international donor interest following Nargis and the 2011 political liberalisation process. Civil society actors had gained legitimacy following their mobilisation as sometimes sole responders to cyclone Nargis in 2008 (Desaine 2011; Selth 2008; South et al. 2011). Thousands of informal CSOs emerged, some officially registering as LNGOs when the process was facilitated in 2014 (LNGO #13, 22.01.2018). Matelski (2016a, 117) highlights how Western funding has mostly reached state actors and the limited LNGOs considered sufficiently 'professional' and supportive of Western interests.

Chin and Rakhine were the only two ethnic States declared disaster-affected zones by the Myanmar Union government because floods and landslides surpassed local response capacities (Zaw and Lim 2017, 2). Disaster impacts, LIC/minority tensions and humanitarian dynamics varied greatly between the two States.

5.4.1 Chin State

Bordering Rakhine State to the east and India to the north, Chin State was strongly hit by the 2015 floods but especially the landslides, which swept away fields, roads and bridges in mountainous areas. The Myanmar National Natural Disaster Management Committee (2015a) identified Hakha township as one of the five most affected townships nationwide. In Hakha town, entire neighbourhoods were wiped out, affecting 6,535 and displacing more than 4,254, according to an assessment by the CBO Chin Committee for Emergency Response and Rehabilitation (CCERR 2015, 11).

The Chin are a predominantly Christian religious group and have faced persecution in Myanmar. In Chin State, "the military has been accused of the destruction of churches and Christian symbols, of forced conversion to Buddhism, and of killing several Christian leaders" (Sakhong 2007 cited in Matelski 2016b, 65). Today, Chin State is considered the poorest and most remote State in Myanmar (UN Development Programme 2011).¹³ The "state-subject relationship between the

¹³ According to the Household Living Conditions Assessment survey conducted by the UN Development Programme (2011), approximately 73% of the Chin State population lives below the poverty line. Rakhine State has the second highest poverty rate in Myanmar, at 44%.

Chins and the Bamar state” has historically been distant (Mark 2016, 142). At the 2013 Chin National Conference, Chin political and civil society actors called for a stronger role for state government, involvement and consent of indigenous/ethnic minority groups, transparency and accountability, and more Chin political representation at Union level (Mark 2016, 153).

There is division among more than 50 different Chin ethnic sub-groups belonging to different Christian church denominations and in rarer cases also subscribing to Animism (Desaine 2011, 36). The limited presence of IOs and INGOs in this remote area is partly offset by extensive, mostly Christian, diaspora networks spanning the globe. Linkages among Chin communities and international Christian churches, Western advocacy groups and INGOs are strong, building on a tradition of British missionary and educational work and the colonial British preference to work with Christian organisations (Desaine 2011; Matelski 2016a, 95). In Myanmar, Christian organisations appear more visible compared with Buddhist organisations (Desaine 2011, 13), and Christians are generally over-represented in CSOs (Heidel 2006).

5.4.2 Rakhine State

On the most western edge of Myanmar, the coastal Rakhine State was the first to be hit when cyclone Komen made landfall on 31 July 2015. Strong winds and rains caused landslides and extensive flooding in eight townships, with 125,151 houses damaged and 217,246 acres of arable land destroyed. As of 2 September 2015, 96,165 inhabitants of Rakhine State were still displaced (Myanmar National Natural Disaster Management Committee 2015b).

The five townships situated north of the State capital of Sittwe were also the theatre of the 2012 intercommunal violence that killed hundreds and displaced 140,000. Detailing the historical and politico-military context of the Rakhine border with Bangladesh, Farzana (2015, 296) refers to the area as in “continual disorder” since the 1784 local rebellion against Burmese invasion.¹⁴ In 2015, tensions were high among diverse ethnic and religious groups: Buddhists of sometimes Bamar but predominantly Rakhine ethnicity; socio-economically weaker Muslims, historically

¹⁴ The policies enforced by subsequent regimes, from the British colonial ‘divide-and-rule’ to Myanmar government policies of exclusion and ethnicisation, have reinforced ethnic boundaries around the numerous and diverse population groups (Farzana 2015).

deprived of economic opportunities and of “political rights and opportunity of service in the government, ministries, directorates, departments, corporations, judiciary, education and local administrative councils” (Parnini 2013, 286); and other minorities lacking political representation. The last group includes a few thousand Rakhine residents of Chin ethnicity (CCERR 2015). The approximately one million Rakhine-based Rohingya are among the most marginalised minorities in Southeast Asia. They have faced intense human rights violations at the hands of the population and the Myanmar military (Farzana 2015; Kipgen 2013). When cyclone Komen struck, 140,000 Rohingya were still housed in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2015).

Together with conflict-ridden Kachin, northern Rakhine State has the highest presence of international humanitarian actors outside of Yangon. A few international organisations have carried out cross-border operations since the 1980s, but not without challenges. MSF France decided to withdraw from the region and country in 2004, as changing regulations hampered organisations’ freedom of movement and work. That same year, the ICRC was forced to suspend activities (Currie 2012, 26; International Crisis Group 2006, 8). An international Rakhine humanitarian cluster was established in Sittwe after violence flared up in 2012, also impacting the Western staff of international humanitarian organisations. Many aid organisations chose to call their Western staff back from Rakhine to minimise safety risks or were forced to leave by the government, as was the case for MSF Holland (Matelski 2016b, 243). The Organisation for Islamic Cooperation was never authorised to provide post-2012 support in Myanmar—a decision backed by Buddhist demonstrators (British Broadcasting Corporation 2012). Accusations of bias from residents of Rakhine ethnicity towards ‘Western organisations’ were not unfounded. The CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2009, 10) highlight how the Rohingya were “considerably more likely” to receive support from INGOs and IOs, whereas Buddhist ethnic Rakhines were more likely to receive support from the government. This report thus concluded that foreign aid played into the local conflict dynamics. Concerning civil society actors, Desaine (2011, 38) mentions a void of LNGOs in northern Rakhine and an increasing presence of LNGOs “based on Buddhist charitable pillars” in southern Rakhine.

5.5 Findings: Socially navigating towards minorities

For both States, this section details) how participants perceived minorities to be marginalised in the government response and the disaster response of civil society and international actors, including the challenges they faced. Social navigation strategies are also presented for the actor group most instrumental in providing relief to minorities in that State.

5.5.1 Chin State

A marginalising government response?

Community participants and civil society actors approached in Hakha and Yangon accused the Union government of neglect, both in interviews and official publications. One report issued by a CBO (CCERR 2015) argued that, although Chin State is the poorest in Myanmar and among the hardest hit by the 2015 floods and landslides, only 4% of Myanmar Union flood relief funding went to the state. Additionally, the state government's coordination efforts, which were described as corrupt, following the whims of the Union capital and mostly employing non-Chins, were deemed late and disappointing. In Hakha, government relief reportedly reached only 2000–3000 people; there was a “difference in thousands” between the counts of people impacted provided by the General Administration Department and by CBOs and LNGOs (LNGO #2, 23.11.2017). One CBO participant (#2, 17.01.2018) stressed that government control is only problematic when the response deviates from the “moral contract” of fair and transparent aid distribution. In Hakha, poorer households, for instance, did not qualify for governmental disaster support because they did not live in formally registered housing. Furthermore, Union government relief shipped to government warehouses was not distributed to victims (LNGO #2, 23.11.2017; CBO #3, 23.11.2017). In September 2018, a CBO statement publicly denounced the wasting of aid and the General Administration Department for keeping the remaining disaster relief funds (CCERR 2018).

Research participants debated whether the discrepancy between actual needs and what the government provided was caused only by logistical difficulties of getting aid to the remote Chin mountains, where there was no airport and roads had been destroyed by the storm—as advanced by several humanitarian actors and the

government official (#1, 23.11.2017)—or whether this discrepancy was also a manifestation of the ‘double C curse’, reflecting marginalisation for being Chin and Christian. The latter explanation was supported by all Chin participants and by Myanmar non-Chin INGO representatives. According to a Chin-based LNGO representative (#14, 19.01.2018), “some say there was discrimination [and] that government response was limited because we are Christians. The government said in the news [that] they were giving out bags of rice, but that was only in the news”.

A thin international response

The above accusations of marginalisation were dismissed by a few foreign participants, including one who had worked for a Chin LNGO (#2, 25.10.2017). Yangon-based humanitarians operating country-wide emphasised that responding in Chin State was not the highest priority and was very difficult logistically (IO #3, 7.11.2017). Only actors with a permanent presence in Hakha (a few larger IOs and one INGO) provided direct support, mainly in government-regulated IDP camps. Their support through hygiene, education and non-food items was welcomed by Chin-based LNGOs, CBOs and residents. A representative of a Christian INGO that channelled funds through like-minded faith-based LNGOs recounted difficulties in obtaining travel authorisations from the Union government for monitoring visits (INGO #2, 20.11.2017).

An overwhelmingly civil society response for minorities

Especially CBOs, but also a few internationally funded Christian LNGOs, were the primary responders in Hakha township. One LNGO director (#2, 23.11.2017) reported channelling some of their funding to a CBO because they had “lots of connections and cooperate with civil society”. There were rumours that funds sourced through the Chin diaspora and Christian networks surpassed the government’s relief budget, but it proved difficult to obtain exact numbers.

However substantial, the civil society response should not be romanticised. Several CSO participants accused major Hakha-based CBO networks of lacking accountability and channelling resources to their own ethnic sub-groups, churches or geographical areas. This was stated in two independent focus group discussions with displaced Hakha residents. Among many examples, residents recounted how a Hakha-based Christian association used donations to buy buses for their own use (resident #6,

22.11. 2017). They were particularly disappointed with a locally established committee founded to coordinate the civil society response in Hakha, which had, they felt, mismanaged the process:

They only gave materials later, when they were rotten. Decaying. We only got one-third of the donated materials. [...] They only recently publicised how much money they collected, but it was not clear where that went, and we could not ask any questions. (Resident #3, 22.11.2017)

Few strict governmental restrictions seemed to apply to CBOs: many had not registered as organisations until months after the initial relief phase. Still, CSOs faced three main challenges: everyday delays; blockages in mobilising international aid funds; and the risk of increasing tensions over aid distribution decisions.

Concerning the first challenge, civil society actors accused the government of hampering their initiatives. CBOs not fulfilling specific criteria were initially excluded from emergency meetings coordinated by the state government, until it became clear how much funding civil society could contribute (LNGO #2, 23.11.2017). Additional examples illustrate authorities' power to block, delay or raise the costs of relief activities for Chin State. Aid supplies from the Royal Thai Air Force were diverted to a Bamar-dominated area outside of Chin State by the Union government (CBO #2, 17.01.2018). Additionally, as relief goods collected by the Chin diaspora transited through Yangon airport, the Union government levied high taxes, searched the goods and kept them in customs for two weeks (LNGO #14, 19.01.2018).

Second, CBOs and LNGOs without ties to Christian INGOs reported difficulty mobilising funding through the newly 'rationalised' humanitarian system. CSOs previously had privileged relations with their "own traditional donors, INGOs which [they] worked closely with", but they now had to "rely more and more on institutional donors" with intensive procedures and requirements. This was described by all LNGOs and even international aid actors with longer experience in the country as hampering responses that were, in the words of one LNGO representative, "quick, flexible" and sometimes also "conflict-sensitive" (#6, 10.01.2018). According to a CBO representative (#2, 21.11.2017), the UN agencies they hoped to engage with judged them as too blunt on the topic of minority

marginalisation: “The [IO] once told us [...], do not talk so critical [or else] people will hate you and you will not succeed. Try to be positive. But a CSO’s role is to make noise”. The CBO wished to advocate for more minority support, but that was perceived as biased by the humanitarian organisations.

Third, distributing relief without raising tensions among the more than 50 different sub-ethnic and religious groups was considered challenging. An LNGO director (#14, 19.01.2018) often had to counter accusations of ethnic bias because her organisation was named after her area of origin. A CBO representative (#2, 17.01.2018) accused faith-based groups of using the distribution of Chin diaspora funds for evangelisation, especially in southern Chin, where Christian, Buddhist and Animist groups coexist.

Civil society actors’ navigation strategies

Civil society actors chose from or combined two main routes to navigate the above challenges: activating minority networks and trying to play the government and the internationally led relief system.

Civil society strategy 1: Activating minority networks

Large amounts of funding and supplies came from neighbouring areas with similar minority backgrounds, far from Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon, the power centres of the Union government and the international humanitarian system. Cars transporting relief goods donated by the predominantly Christian Indian state of Mizoram and the Kachin ‘brothers and sisters’ who share a similar ethnic background are not ‘illegal’ per se, but lie within a grey zone of informal practice. As put by a Hakha resident, they “tasted Indian rice first”, before supplies from Nay Pyi Taw reached them, if they ever did (#4, 22.11.2017). To minimise tensions among the different Chin ethnic sub-groups, the Kachin group channelling resources asked for those resources to be divided equally among all Chin townships. A CBO actor (#2, 23.11.2017) criticised this practice, claiming it was unfair to the most affected townships.

Charismatic individuals and their personal networks were instrumental in mobilising funds outside the formal humanitarian system. For instance, one donor (#4, 1.02.2018) reported how a CBO bypassed his organisation to receive funding directly from his government’s national treasury, using existing ties between a respected

Chin individual and a parliamentarian in that foreign country. Less attached to regulations and conditions, this funding could quickly reach Chin communities. Another case involved a Chin LNGO leader (#14, 19.01.2018) who used a trip to attend a wedding in the United States for fundraising in churches and Chin diaspora communities, raising thousands of US dollars. Civil society actors also lobbied and tried to mobilise support via the diaspora press, deemed more independent than the in-country press (LNGO #2, 23.11.2017).

Civil society strategy 2: Playing the humanitarian system

Chin actors generated their own evidence to question the validity of the government and humanitarian disaster response. A Chin-based CBO (#2, 17.01.2018) collected data on disaster impacts and response, co-forming an extensive network of data-collection partners across communities. The results of this community impact assessment were presented at Yangon press conferences and a Nay Pyi Taw Humanitarian Country Team meeting. This demonstrates the extent of time and energy devoted to lobbying humanitarian decision makers, who control growing amounts of aid funding. These decision makers can also ‘validate’ and ‘legitimate’ minorities’ plight by directing funds to them. International actors seemed to notice these efforts; several humanitarians referred to Chin CSOs as “vocal” and “mobilised in complaining” (e.g. IO #3, 7.11.2017).

Whom to approach with what information and how to do this were carefully considered. Sometimes, the follow-up moves of approached actors were predicted in a chess-like manner. The question of why the above Chin-based CBO did not directly lobby Nay Pyi Taw authorities with their own needs assessment report yielded an intricate answer:

The government makes the decision but especially the UN provides them with information and support [through] resources. We cannot approach the government so much, so we go via the UN. In the end, the government decides. So we constantly observe the government—what they do, what happens. The UN can influence the government [...] They took our data. We showed them our community data and the government data, and the difference between both. (CBO #2, 17.01.2018)

The above-mentioned report included detailed comparative tables, graphs and “lots of footnotes for the donors” (academic #1, who edited the report, 6.11.2017). Speaking the language of the humanitarian system was a strategy for playing this system. CSOs strategically self-branded and adapted their discourse to suit their targets. For example, one CBO (#2, 17.01.2018) spelled out the ‘C’ in their organisational acronym as ‘Chin’ or ‘Community’, depending on whether they were engaging with the Chin diaspora or the UN. Taking self-framing to the individual level, an INGO official (#9, 5.01. 2018) of Chin ethnicity but with a Bamar-sounding name reported disclosing her ethnic origin only when it was advantageous.

CBOs strategically appealed to allies who could help them reach international audiences, such as the US academic who helped compile the Chin community data report or the “good influential UN guy” who could be “grab[bed]” to lobby in high-level humanitarian meetings (CBO #2, 17.01.2018). I met several ‘free-floating’ foreigners who brokered linkages between civil society and international actors.

5.5.2 Rakhine State

A marginalising government response

Similar to the situation in Chin State, the 14.7% of Union relief funds allocated to Rakhine State was deemed insufficient given the large-scale coastal devastation (CBO #2, 17.01.2018). Statements made in interviews and in print (CCERR 2015; European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2015) identified additional intra-state marginalisation in the government response. First, locally powerful people such as township administrators channelled aid towards their own non-minority community groups (CBO #2, 17.01.2018; donor #3, 29.01.2018). Second, relief modalities that might have been unproblematic in less divided settings further marginalised minorities. For instance, relief cash grants ended up in the hands of the local market owners, government regulations forbade Muslim contractors from participating in public infrastructure reconstruction, and government and sometimes IO relief was distributed from monasteries, limiting non-Buddhists’ access (donor #4, 1.02.2018; CBO #2, 17.02. 2018). Third, isolated cases of severe minority marginalisation were reported. For example, an IO official (#5, 11.01.2018) mentioned that the relocation of Muslim flood victims in “military vehicles” was “not always done voluntarily”.

A thin civil society response for the most marginalised minorities

Another layer of marginalisation was the obstruction of self-help and local relief initiatives for minorities. Marginalised and vulnerable minorities had less capacity to cope and self-organise because of their lower economic and social position and limited rights. Rohingya disaster victims in government IDP camps denied freedom of movement are an extreme example (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2015). Concerning CBO and LNGO support to Muslim groups, and especially to the Rohingya, organisations with Muslim ties were not allowed to operate. I could find only one Muslim faith-based organisation, which was operating in an IDP camp without a formal memorandum of understanding (MoU). The government would not provide a MoU, but the group felt that operating under such conditions yielded certain advantages: flexibility, reactivity, the ability to spend funds received from mostly Muslim (sometimes diaspora) philanthropists worldwide in a timely way, and less scrutiny—as long as their privileged relationship with the local authorities continued and the government saw benefit in having a “token Muslim organisation” operating (INGO# 1, 10.10.2017).

CSOs without Muslim ties were largely unwilling to assist Muslims. Several INGOs, IOs and donors who would have liked to dispatch aid via local implementing partners described Rakhine-based CBOs and LNGOs as “not principled”. One INGO representative (#17, 23.01.2017) stated, “I prefer a localised response, but this context really needs the international hand to make sure the vulnerable people are targeted”. Indeed, of all the CSOs I approached, only one staff member of a Chin-based CBO primarily supporting Rakhine residents of Chin ethnicity said that she personally would have liked to also support Muslims including the Rohingya, but that it was too risky for her organisation:

We speak on behalf of other minority groups. But with Muslims it is tricky on the ground [...] even if I personally also feel for the Rohingya. But if you are in a dangerous situation [...] between the tiger and the snake, you have to be careful. Limits exist even for [our organisation]. (CBO #2, 17.11.2017)

An overwhelmingly international response for the most marginalised minorities

Assistance for Muslim groups, the most marginalised minorities in Rakhine, was generally international. International humanitarian actors faced four broad

challenges: stigmatisation and security risks, government control, uncertainty and manipulation.

At organisational and individual staff levels, disaster responders feared stigmatisation and security repercussions of supporting Rakhine Muslims after the 2015 disasters, as an IO representative mentioned: “In Rakhine, everyone is poor. It is true the Muslims are often worse off, but working only for them is a suicide mission” (IO #10, 30.01.2018). One INGO representative (#17, 23.01.2018) described how the movement of every aid convoy passing through host communities and any effort to resettle Rohingya groups somewhere with better facilities were scrutinised, including by non-Rohingya Muslim communities. Agencies providing relief to Muslims were criticised in public demonstrations and on social media, sometimes including the names and photos of staff members, who were themselves labelled ‘terrorists’ for helping ‘Muslim terrorists’. In this context, the figure of the ‘inpat’ emerged: Burmese INGO or IO staff members who had outsider status and faced stigmatisation from their own community for supporting an ethnic or religious group other than their own in a LIC-divided society.

Concerning engagement with government structures, several participants mentioned government restrictions or conditions they had to satisfy, such as the impossibility of working with ‘non-citizen’ Rohingya disaster volunteers or staff (INGO #16, 21.01.2018), and limited access to Rohingya IDP camps (INGO #1, 10.10.2017). International humanitarian actors depend on various government authorities for permits, MoUs for programme activities and travel authorisations. Humanitarians deemed it dangerous to denounce their lack of independence. An INGO official (#17, 22.01.2018) admitted that “our organisation is usually a loud organisation [...] but here we never participate in a shout”.

Uncertainty about navigating complex government structures also emerged. Many foreign aid workers described feeling “overwhelmed” by shifting governance structures and mandates. Some regulations continued to apply, such as getting authorisation from the village tract authorities, which are part of the military-led General Administration Department. However, with the political transition, entry points multiplied, calling for “lots of negotiations, all the time, with a lot of different dynamics” (IO#2, 10.10.2018). Authorities under central civilian and military leadership and parallel ethnic State and Union structures operate at different

governance levels, often without communicating with each other—for instance about authorisations granted to humanitarian actors. Government authorities operate informally and unpredictably, failing to record agreements (donor #4, 1.02.2018) and switching travel authorisations on and off, thus hampering planning (INGO #4, 18.10.2017). Organisations' assessments of how the political transition impacted their room for manoeuvre differed and, as illustrated by the following quotation from a Burmese staff member of an INGO with a broader mandate, they criticised organisations with different approaches: "Some humanitarian actors here act as if nothing has changed. They still think the military is in control. They hide some of their activities. They lie. We are honest. We have nothing to hide, and it works" (#11, 10.01.2018).

Finally, several participants described the government's 'double game'. Officially, government authorities were not receptive to demands for more minority support. The Rohingya's very identity was negated in government discourse, where their name is never mentioned. However, behind the scenes, authorities pushed IOs and INGOs to cater to Muslims only. An IO official characterised this as a political manipulation tactic:

So often the government says 'No, no, we will be giving to the Rakhine community. And you do it for the Muslim community'. That was the big issue from the beginning. We are then perceived as the bad [...] Nobody in this country is interested in [being well perceived] by the Rohingya. They do not count. It is not an audience [anyone is] interested in. They are interested in communicating the message that they take care of the Rakhine, and mostly the Bamar [...] So it is a political manipulation. (IO #3, 7.11.2017).

Manipulating international humanitarian actors to help only Muslims dates back at least to the 2012 inter-communal violence. After organisations asked to help both Buddhist and Muslim victims, "the government said ok to both, but granted authorisation for helping the Muslims first, and the other [authorisation] never came" (donor #4, 1.02.2018).

International actors' navigation strategies

The strategies of two outlier disaster response actors channelling relief to minorities in Rakhine (the CBO channelling relief mainly towards Chins through ethnic and

religious networks and the Muslim INGO operating without a MoU) were detailed above. Otherwise, international humanitarians described four main strategies for navigating Rakhine-specific challenges: targeting choices, perception management, approaching and distancing themselves from other actors, and financial incentives to involve CSOs.

These strategies derived from monitoring, as closely as possible, the situation on the ground, other humanitarian actors' operations, and wider social and political trends in Myanmar society (for instance concerning the discourse surrounding the Rohingya). Inter-communal and humanitarian dynamics across neighbouring Buddhist, Muslim and Muslim-IDP communities are highly complex even within a single Rakhine township, as visible on the drawings (see Figures 5.3) made by an INGO official (#17, 22.1.2017) and CBO member (#2, 17.1.2017) as they were explaining the rationale behind their targeting strategies to me.

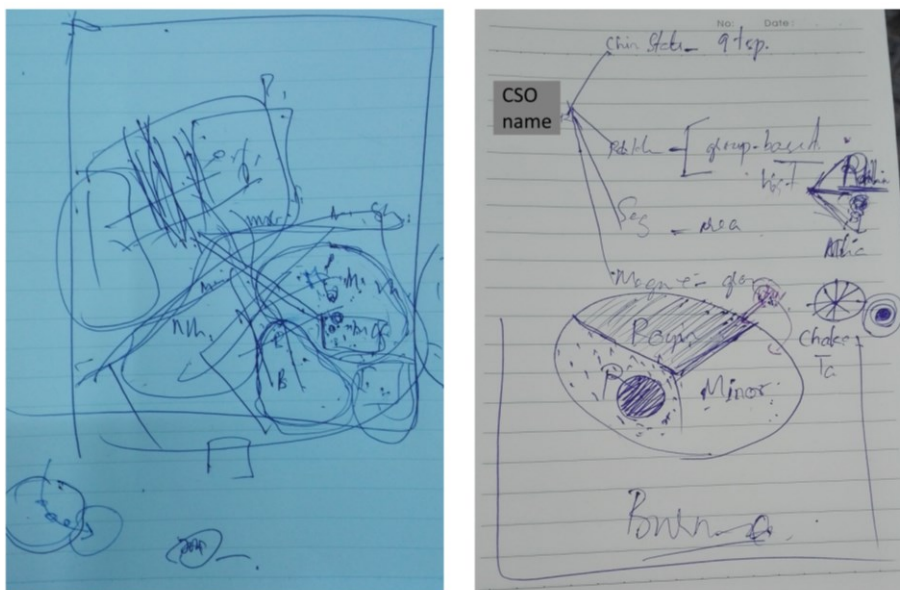


Figure 5.3. Inter-communal dynamics in a Rakhine township as drawn by an INGO member (#17, 22.01.2018) and by a CBO member (#2, 17.01.2017, right-hand side).

International strategy 1: Setting a course via targeting

In the LIC setting of Rakhine, selecting disaster victims to help (i.e. targeting) was presented as key to humanitarians' acceptance by host communities and the wider public, although the choice is not the organisation's alone, as the above statements concerning government manipulation highlighted. Two opposing logics stood out and are here referred to using the terminology commonly used by the participants: '50/50' vs. 'needs-based'.

Each participant framed her/his organisation's targeting strategy as the most conflict-sensitive. Often, the strategy also fit the organisation's pedigree. The '50/50' strategy meant providing exactly the same amount of the same goods to antagonistic community groups, regardless of need. This was considered the only viable solution to limit tensions by many participants, but was dismissed as "the 50/50 trap" (e.g. IO #10, 30.01.2018) by others. Likewise, the 'needs-based approach', which refers to the humanitarian principle of impartiality, was defended by some participants and discarded as "utterly naïve" in the tense context by others.

International strategy 2: Hoisting the right flags

It is not only important what an actor does (e.g. their targeting strategy), but also how their actions are perceived by various antagonistic audiences: "It is about [perception] balances. Of course, at the next level, tensions are also manipulated" (INGO #17, 22.01.2018). A few participants criticised perception management sometimes taking precedence over intrinsic activity rationales: "Some do activities to gain acceptance. Ok, let's get acceptance. What can we do?" (IO #10, 30.01.2018).

All participants closely monitored the views circulating about their organisation and relief activities. That was especially the case on social media, where stories can rapidly be distorted and go viral. One such story was the 'mosque story': An IO (#10, 30.01.2018) discovered that it was being harshly criticised online for "funding mosques" in Rakhine as part of the response. The IO immediately dispatched field staff, finding that

village elders had asked each cash grant beneficiary to give 10% [of their grant] for the mosque reconstruction. We went back and explained to them that this is not [how the funds should be used] [...] [To prevent such

situations], you have to be proactive concerning rumours and allegations [...] It can quickly turn against you.

In addition to close monitoring, actors dedicated significant effort to self-framing and communicating about their relief work in the field, in print and online. One IO¹⁵ asked for its logo to be removed from the UN multi-actor flood relief overview map, as it did not want to be associated with the domestically unpopular UN. A donor (#4, 1.02.2018), despite agreeing overall that it was disadvantageous to be visible in northern Rakhine, thought it would benefit his organisation to foreground precisely their 'neutral' flood relief activities through a one-page report, local media and a press release. Larger INGOs and IOs all have visibility guidelines,¹⁶ and two important donors (#3, 24.01.2018; #4, 1.02.2018) highlighted perception management as a core discussion point with the agencies they funded.

Concerning the Rohingya, organisations learned to mirror the language of authorities, sometimes compromising on their own principles, such as here supporting the "right to self-identification":

In 2015, we did not use the term 'Rohingya' [...] If you want to have a conversation at all, you should use the same terms as the government, ['Muslims' or 'Bengalis'] [...] We consistently support the right of self-identification, but in terms of relationship[s] with authorities [...], if you actually want to achieve something, do not say 'Rohingya'. (donor #4, 1.02.2018)

Myanmar staff members were considered better versed at adapting their behaviour and discourse. An IO staff member thus reported that, to negotiate with authorities, they "usually send the Myanmar staff; they know how to deal with authorities, with the strong state" (IO #10, 30.01.2018).

International strategy 3: Navigating the actor networks

Organisations with broader mandates including development or policy work presented their organisational pedigree as beneficial to relief operations. Long-term

¹⁵ To maintain confidentiality, the participant identification number is not disclosed here.

¹⁶ For example, no photos where aid workers' faces are recognisable and no pre-election expressions of political affiliation are allowed.

engagement with members of parliament (INGO #11, 10.11.2017) or with Rakhine fishers (donor #4, 1.02.2018) resulted in networks and knowledge that were valuable for crisis moments. Pure humanitarian actors also strategically reached out to authorities who were “not essential” to their relief work, such as monastery leaders, to increase their acceptance (IO #10, 30.01.2018).

Closed gatherings of humanitarian actors, such as the Rakhine cluster, where all operating INGOs and IOs met weekly in Sittwe, and the country-wide Humanitarian Country Team and INGO forum in Yangon, were presented as important for exchanging information, lobbying and advocating in a context where openly doing so alone is ineffective and possibly dangerous. The INGO representative (#5, 11.01.2018) who mentioned cases of involuntary, military-assisted relocation of disaster-impacted Muslims in Rakhine was asked whether his organisation had spoken out on this issue; he responded, “we deal with this with the Humanitarian Country Team. We are not so stupid as to do it alone”. However, group advocacy seemed to focus mostly on technical issues, such as a disaster law or relaxing customs requirements for imported relief goods.

International strategy 4: Fishing for civil society actors with financial incentives

As CSOs were reluctant to assist Muslim groups in Rakhine, one large INGO reported negotiating ‘overhead costs’ with LNGOs. This approach tied funding to the condition of providing help to the most marginalised groups, although, it seems, never explicitly to minorities. An INGO staff member (#11, 10.01.2018) referred to extra “incentive” payments for LNGOs that would otherwise not have worked as their flood-response implementing partners in sensitive areas such as northern Rakhine. Later in the interview, however, this staff member denied using that term.

These financial incentives did not always convince LNGOs. The director of a larger LNGO unaffiliated with any minority (#15, 24.01.2018) explained that his organisation only applied for this conditional funding if the amount was large. Otherwise, “there is a common understanding of our focus: hardest hit, women, [the] elderly [and] children. Marginalised and discriminated groups [are] not a part of it. We do not even know who that is”.

5.6 Conclusions

The findings for both States revealed minority marginalisation practices by the Myanmar Union government, with especially severe cases in Rakhine State. To support disaster victims of Chin ethnicity, parallel minority and diaspora networks were mobilised. Relief, which was not always distributed in a transparent or unbiased manner, was channelled from ethnically and religiously affiliated groups within and outside of Myanmar. Strong civil society structures and ties between Christian LINGOs and INGOs also increased support, or at least attention, from the international humanitarian system. Navigating an aid system that is itself adjusting to the recent political and humanitarian developments in Myanmar, proactive Chin individuals carefully selected their lobbying strategies, targets and allies. Some selectively foregrounded or backgrounded their ethnic identity depending on whether their interlocutor would be receptive to a more political minority discourse.

For the most marginalised disaster victims in Rakhine State, however, the Muslim and especially the Rohingya minority identity led to a dead end rather than to parallel civil society support channels. Civil society and diaspora actors were unwilling or unable to support Muslims, leaving the task to international humanitarians. Deeming it too risky to advocate openly, international humanitarian actors devoted significant effort to navigating the governmental barriers and the social and political tensions inherent in supporting highly stigmatised minorities. This included closely monitoring authorities' and different societal groups' perceptions of their organisations and activities and reaching out to Buddhist communities, religious institutions and governmental actors to increase acceptance. For many, '50/50' became the new targeting standard, openly departing from the principle of impartiality for the sake of minimising tensions. Ultimately, in a context where perceptions and even strategic decisions such as targeting are manipulated, the humanitarians largely ended up being played by the government system, which wanted humanitarians to be seen as targeting only Muslims.

This chapter has mostly examined the perceptions of Chin civil society and international humanitarian actors. It has not dealt with the private sector (which is increasingly involved in providing and/or channelling resources following disasters in Myanmar), insurgent militarised actors, regional actors such as the Association of

Southeast Asian Nations, and policy makers at global humanitarian headquarters. A few Yangon-based I/NGOs, one of them criticised by other participants as involved in 'outdated under the radar' activities, did not react to my requests to meet. Additional research considering these actors' realities would likely uncover a larger variety of state interactions and navigation strategies, involving informal aid delivery and hidden diplomacy practices.

Two major points can be drawn from the present findings. First, it is striking that a parallel system set up specifically to support marginalised groups—whether led by civil society, as was the case for the Chin, or by international actors, as was seen for Muslims in Rakhine—can be considered the only viable short-term solution. In the long term, such parallel systems may increase feelings of exclusion and deepen the divide between antagonistic societal groups and between the Myanmar government and the international community.

Second, especially in the context of rising identity politics, humanitarian governance encompasses the governance of perceptions. Navigating the multiple and rapidly evolving LIC realities is difficult even within a single country, especially for aid organisations with country-wide mandates. As seen in the 2015 Komen response, satisfying the expectations of multiple audiences is close to impossible, leading to the question: should organisations risk compromising government authorisations, or community acceptance and associated security, or the principle of impartiality and, possibly, international funding? This conundrum makes one think of a Bermuda Triangle: between satisfying heterogeneous government, community and international audiences, something will get lost. Trying to balance between governing differing perceptions and allocating aid resources according to humanitarian principles involves largely unavoidable trade-offs that must be carefully evaluated by practitioners and policy makers.

Harvey (2013) states that, even in conflict settings where governments fail to fulfil their responsibilities, humanitarians should engage governments at the policy, technical and practical levels through the framework of humanitarian principles, despite the dilemmas this involves. Although I agree with this point, it is not only a humanitarian agenda that "attempts to ring-fence an ever-shrinking isolationist humanitarian space" (Harvey 2013, S167) that can be problematic. Disaster

responders choosing to 'water down' the humanitarian space to safeguard good relations with the state or one community group risk becoming trapped in an increasingly restricted space, achieving little more than staying afloat. This can set precedents for state-humanitarian interaction and further tip the power balance in favour of the state. One telling example is that, by the time of the 2018 Rohingya crisis response in Myanmar, it had reportedly become "standard" for a key IO to dispatch their relief "without expats" and always accompanied by government officials (IO# 10, 30.01.2018). In authoritarian LIC settings, assessing in which cases confrontation might be needed remains a major challenge. Because high-level declarations are less adapted to these settings, negotiations at the operational level are key.

Chapter 6: Depoliticising Disaster Response in a Politically Saturated Context: The case of the 2016/2019 Droughts in Zimbabwe¹⁷

Temporarily under embargo.

¹⁷ This Chapter is a slightly revised, and extended, version of an article by Desportes and Moyo-Nyoni, under review by the journal *Disasters*.

Chapter 7: Disaster Governance in Conflict-affected Authoritarian Contexts: The cases of Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe¹⁸

Temporarily under embargo.

¹⁸ This chapter is an extended version, including additional sub-sections, of an article to be published within a Special Issue on the Politics of Disaster Governance in the journal *Politics and Governance*: Desportes and Hilhorst (2020).

Chapter 8: Conclusions

Temporarily under embargo.

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Annex 1: Semi-structured Interview Questions

– adapted per case, context and participant

IMPACT	What was the impact of the disaster in your area Check as appropriate: cattle and human death, displacement/IDPs...	
WHY	Why did the disaster happen?	
ACTIVITIES	What did you do in relation to disaster, where and when?	
DECISION TO RESPOND	Why did you decide to act? Prompt: government declaration, own field observations...	
RESPONSE governance		
Which actors did you interact with more or less closely while planning and implementing the response (in community x)? Coax out details: why, how		
ORGANISATION/ COORDINATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engagement with state authorities? Degree of independence or rather control, uncertainty, manipulation? - Engagement with other humanitarian groups? Support, inspiration, common initiatives? - Engagement with donors? Support, limitations? - Engagement with LNGOs? Why? Which roles see for them? What were barriers in that engagement? - Engagement with community groups, beneficiaries/community members? Why? Which roles see for them? Which were barriers in that engagement? <p>Free space, own decision making? Concerning area selection, beneficiaries etc.?</p> <p>Prompt later: does gov control a lot? Change in that the last years?</p> <p>Do you organise with other actors within forums or exchange in other forms? For which purposes, and is that useful?</p>	
INFORMATION COLLECTION	Do you collect your own information, needs assessments? What do you do with that information (ex. internal or public use)? Why do you need to collect information, if the state provides information also?	
	WHICH CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE IN THE RESPONSE Prompt the below categories if needed	SOLUTION (cf. below, check here for coverage of all challenges)
INFORMATION		
FUNDING		
TIMELINESS	Early signs / early warning / state of disaster declaration / response?	
BUREAUCRACY		

ACCESS, SECURITY, POLITICAL SENSITIVITIES	Do you have unhindered access to communities? Which impact does that have?	
ABOVE CONCERNING SPECIFIC TENSIONS (e.g. protests)		
OTHER CHALLENGES?		
OVERALL	To what extent are these external circumstances hindering you in your mandate? Are there factors which make your organisation different, which help you in overcoming? Would you say the humanitarian principles apply (independence, neutrality)? Are they useful, for instance in gaining access?	
OPPORTUNITIES		
Unforeseen or surprising opportunities for you – ex. further mandate, engage in human rights issues..?	Have others been trying to take advantage of the disaster situation?	
OVERCOMING CHALLENGES		
KEY ACTOR TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES	Can you voice your concerns (reports/meetings)? Rely on somebody else to voice your concerns? Who? Who is more vocal/has more chances leading to change? With what effect?	
ROLE UN	What is their role? What should it be? Do you see a different traction power between UN here and UN in New York/Geneva?	
ROLE GOV	What is their role? What should it be?	
NGOs vs. INGOs	How is work distributed between them? Why like that? Where do you see the comparative advantage of NGO/INGO? What should their role be?	
ROLE OF COMMUNITY	Did they play a role, organize at community level?	
OTHER ACTORS?	Donors?	
COMING TOWARDS THE END		
IDEAL SCENARIO	What would be the ideal way to respond in this context? Ideally, what would you need to do your work?	
OTHER?	Incl other contacts, access to meetings	

About the Author



Isabelle Desportes holds a B.Sc. in Geography (2011) from the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany, and a M.Sc. in International Development Studies (2013) from the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Her M.Sc. thesis was conducted whilst part of a research team at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, and focused on multi-stakeholder collaboration to increase resilience to flood risk in informal settlements. This led to Isabelle's first publications, conference presentations, and a sustained interest in the political dynamics surrounding natural hazards related disasters. Isabelle has since worked on climate change and disaster governance for local municipalities, universities, civil society and international organisations, including the United Nations Development Programme in Bratislava, Slovakia, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and the International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent in Geneva, Switzerland. Forming part of the 'When Disaster Meets Conflict' research programme, her PhD research at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS) at Erasmus University Rotterdam focuses on the politics of disaster response in authoritarian low-intensity conflict settings. Her broader research interests encompass civil society mobilisation, and violence that is exerted in 'subtle' ways. While pursuing her PhD, Isabelle strived to collaborate with civil society groups and scholars in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Zimbabwe. She was moreover involved in research dissemination and uptake activities for the 'When Disaster Meets Conflict' research programme, guest lectures at the ISS, Research Master thesis supervision at the University of Amsterdam, and reviews for journals including *Development and Change* and the *International Journal for Disaster Risk Reduction*. Outside of academia, she engaged in consultancy work for the Dutch 'Partners for Resilience' alliance, and in climate activism.

Selected professional publications

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