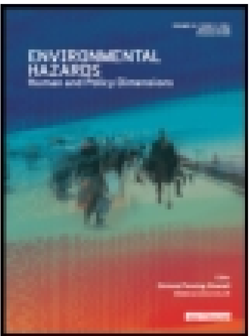

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The (im)possibilities of disaster risk reduction in the context of high-intensity conflict: the case of Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT
Conflict aggravates disaster risk and impact through increased vulnerability and weakened response capacities. Disaster risk reduction (DRR) and disaster governance are needed – but often deemed unfeasible – in conflict-affected areas. In Afghanistan, despite the high-intensity conflict (HIC), there is a growing body of practice on DRR. To provide insight on DRR in HIC contexts, this study used document analysis, stakeholder interviews, and participant observation to analyse the promotion, implementation, and challenges of DRR in Afghanistan. The findings show that DRR was promoted after international recognition of Afghanistan's high disaster risk, which coincided with expanding opportunities for development. Early Afghan DRR projects were hazard-oriented and focused on mitigation infrastructure, but some have shifted towards an integrated approach. DRR is challenging in HIC contexts because of complex logistical and funding needs required to overcome access and security issues. The Afghan experience shows that DRR is possible in HIC countries, provided that different levels of conflict are acknowledged, sufficient time and funding are available, and disaster governance arrangements are in place. Expectations regarding the possibilities for DRR in HIC areas should be tempered by the realities of limitations in terms of geographical coverage, real impact, and capacities to reduce vulnerability in an integrated way.

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Disaster risk reduction (DRR); high-intensity conflict settings; disaster governance; Afghanistan; resilience humanitarianism

1. Introduction

The distinction between human-induced disasters (e.g. conflict) and natural disasters has long been obsolete(Chmutina and von Meding, 2019; see Dynes and Quarantelli, 1971; Quarantelli and Dynes, 1977; Sorokin, 1943; Stallings, 1988). Recognising the social dimensions of disasters, academic and policy literature avoid the phrase 'natural disasters', as disasters come about through the interplay of socially produced vulnerability and natural hazards, which are largely determined by land use, water management, human-induced climate change, and social mitigation measures, among others (Cannon, 1994; Kelman, 2010; Kelman et al., 2015; O'Keefe et al., 1976). Nonetheless, the distinction lives on in policies that separate the domains of disaster and conflict. This is seen in traditional disaster

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governance models, which assume or promote the presence of functional national or local governmental structures that can frame, regulate, promote, and coordinate disaster-related actions (Ahrens and Rudolph, 2006; UNISDR, 2015). This is problematic because increasing evidence demonstrates that disasters and conflicts often co-occur (see Dynes and Quarantelli, 1971; Harris et al., 2013; Hilhorst et al., 2019; Nel and Righarts, 2008). Caso (2019) reported that, from 1960 to 2018, the average yearly percentage of countries affected by conflict that also faced a disaster was 67%. From 2009 to 2018, the average yearly co-occurrence of conflicts and disasters was 78%, meaning that the population of almost four out of every five countries affected by conflict in a given year also have to cope with at least one disaster in the same year. Most deaths caused by disasters occur in conflict-affected and fragile states (Peters, 2017), and the impact of a disaster on people's livelihoods is greater in conflict-affected and fragile contexts (Hilhorst, 2013a; Wisner, 2012).

The overwhelming co-occurrence of disaster and conflict raises the question of whether it is possible to include conflict-affected areas in disaster risk reduction (DRR) programmes. Despite the compelling idea that DRR is needed in these areas, initial explorations into this question have consistently concluded that this is not feasible because of operational and institutional limitations and risks of playing into the dynamics of conflict (ECHO, 2013; Feinstein International Center, 2013; UNDP, 2011; Wisner et al., 2003) The previous question about the feasibility of DRR is even larger in contexts affected by high-intensity conflict (HIC),[1] where work is usually very challenging because of violence, social and political instability, a lack of government control, and a generally unsafe environment (Twigg, 2015; Mena, 2018).

Nevertheless, there is a nascent trend to begin to explore possibilities for including HIC-affected areas in DRR strategies. Several actors have called for the introduction of DRR in conflict-affected places. The Chair's summary of the Global Platform for DRR in Geneva in 2019, for example, stated that

> The Global Platform underscored the security implications of climate change and disasters and encouraged more context-specific disaster risk reduction and resilience building strategies in conflict-affected countries and fragile contexts based on risk assessments that integrate disaster and climate risks. (GPDRR, 2019, 4)

Increasing numbers of DRR programmes are testing these waters, although this is still limited. The rationale for these emerging policies and programmes draws on the frequent occurrence of disasters in conflict-affected areas and finds additional support in the idea that DRR can present opportunities to reduce conflict and contribute to peacebuilding by addressing the root causes of violent conflicts, such as income and power disparities (Wisner, 2012). It has also been suggested that promoting DRR in conflict-affected areas has tactical value because DRR is 'generally perceived as "neutral" and non-threatening politically' (ECHO, 2013, 44), which could present opportunities for the implementation of projects in highly politicised environments.

The history of conflict in Afghanistan has largely overshadowed the country's experience with disasters, and it is little known that, for example, in 2018, the number of Afghan residents in need of acute humanitarian assistance because of slow- and sudden-onset disasters (four million people) was *three times* the number in need because of conflict (OCHA, 2018, 4). Afghanistan is one of the few HIC-affected contexts

where DRR projects are being developed and disaster governance is evolving. This study aimed to explore these developments in Afghanistan as a case, analysing the governance and implementation of DRR policies and programmes at national and local levels, as well as the experiences that have accumulated over the past 15 years. This paper addresses the questions of why and how DRR policies have been introduced, what disaster governance arrangements have evolved at the national level and in programme sites, and how DRR has been implemented in the country.

The experience in Afghanistan offers valuable insight for DRR programmes in HIC areas. This is important because, as Peters (2017, 10) asserted,

> very little exists, conceptually or programmatically, on how to effectively pursue DRR in FCAC [fragile and conflict-affected contexts]; approaches and concepts are not tailored to the specific conditions affecting FCAC, and there is no community of practice to document and share learning from these contexts.

The Afghan experience also gives some pause regarding the high expectations for the possibilities for DRR in conflict areas.

2. Disaster risk reduction and disaster governance in conflict-affected areas

Attempts to protect people's lives and assets from the vagaries of nature are as old as humankind and may be seen as built into the organisation and culture of every community and society. DRR as we know it today, however, has a fairly recent origin. It can be traced back to a paper entitled 'Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters' by O'Keefe, Westgate, and Wisner (1976). The paper, which was published in *Nature*, argued that disasters are a consequence more of socio-economic than of natural factors and, therefore, the focus should be on precautionary planning to reduce people's vulnerability (O'Keefe et al., 1976). The understanding of vulnerability as a co-producer of disaster, often expressed with the pseudo-formula of Risk = Hazards × Vulnerability, has become a core notion in disaster studies (Aboagye, 2012; Hewitt, 2013; Todd and Todd, 2011; Wisner, 2010; Wisner et al., 2003). This idea has led to enquiry on how *capacities* to reduce hazards and vulnerabilities can be fostered to mitigate the largely social production of disaster risk.

DRR evolved as a comprehensive approach to disasters (in contrast to the more traditional paradigms of disaster governance), strongly geared towards local-level impact. The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) (2017) defines DRR as

> the concept and practice of reducing disaster risks through systematic efforts to analyse and reduce the causal factors of disasters. Reducing exposure to hazards, lessening the vulnerability of people and property, wise management of land and the environment, and improving preparedness and early warning for adverse events are all examples of disaster risk reduction.

International commitment to DRR was systematized in the Hyogo (2005–2015) and Sendai (2015–2030) Frameworks for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2015), and the main United Nations (UN) organisation addressing disasters was recently renamed as the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). This way of thinking about DRR is still evolving, and the funding for DRR continues to be relatively low compared with funding for post-disaster response (Kellet and Sparks, 2012; Kellett and Caravani, 2013;

Watson et al., 2015), in contrast to the extent to which DRR resonates with global discourses and policies.

2.1. Disaster governance and resilience humanitarianism

Disaster governance is now also understood in increasingly broad terms, reflecting the fact that disaster-related processes are as much responsibility of societal actors and dynamics as of governmental and technical institutions and professionals on the topic (Cook et al., 2019; Tierney, 2012). Consideration of social dynamics, including conflict, and the specifics of contexts and places has therefore grown in the field (Hilhorst et al., 2019). The upsurge in attention to DRR has further expanded the concepts and organisation of disaster governance. Disaster response, which is understood as acting after a disaster, was traditionally organised in a highly top-down fashion relative to other administrative domains. As attention shifted to pre-disaster activities such as preparedness, mitigation, and DRR, disaster governance likewise broadened in a way that was similar to other public domains, with the term 'governance' denoting that collective purposes are no longer solely the domain of the state (Colebatch, 2009). Governance encompasses the roles of non-state actors in public endeavours, where the state may still coordinate and regulate but is no longer considered a sovereign actor with the exclusive ability to steer or regulate (Rhodes, 1996). Disaster governance, then, incorporates the responsibilities and management of DRR, disaster response, disaster knowledge production, and related policies and normative frameworks by multiple actors (e.g. government, civil society, and private actors) at different levels (e.g. national, regional, and local) in its social, economic, and political dimensions (Field and Kelman, 2018; Hilhorst et al., 2019; Tierney, 2012; UNISDR, 2017).

This broadened notion of disaster governance can be recognised in international policy frameworks (i.e. the Hyogo and Sendai Frameworks of 2005 and 2015). The Hyogo Framework emphasized the importance of inclusive forms of disaster governance, which was understood to be shaped by different actors, including governmental actors, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the private sector, and affected populations, with international organisations playing a supportive role. This framework called on states to form DRR platforms where different actors were represented. In 2015, 187 UN Member States signed the Sendai Framework ratifying previous commitments (UNDRR, 2015). However, questions of how disaster governance can be shaped in conflict areas remain largely unexplored, and the Hyogo and Sendai frameworks make no mention of how this can be done (Feinstein International Center, 2013).

The general acceptance of the idea of disaster governance does not say much about how disaster governance has evolved in practice or how the 'real governance' is shaped by ground-level implementation and practical norms, to use the terminology of de Herdt and Olivier de Sardan (2015). This is especially relevant in HIC scenarios, where the level of state fragility or weakness can be confused with a lack of governance, and focusing on 'real governance' encourages paying attention 'not only to state institutions but to the whole spectrum of formal and informal actors in the "field of power" around state institutions' (Titeca and de Herdt, 2011, 216). Understanding disaster governance from this perspective is primarily an empirical question, as the roles of and interactions between actors involved in DRR vary in different contexts and at different levels of implementation (Hilhorst et al., 2019).

Areas affected by conflict – and especially HIC, as in the case of Afghanistan – are usually the remit of humanitarian response rather than disaster governance. It is therefore interesting to note that similar changes are occurring in humanitarian governance, in parallel to the changes in disaster governance. This opens up new spaces for the integration of humanitarian governance and disaster governance, especially for DRR. The protracted nature of many crises has increasingly compelled long-term responses by governments and other organisations (Harmer and Macrae 2004). Humanitarianism was traditionally organised around international response capacities, short-term lifesaving, and relief, but we now see a shift towards emphasising the humanitarian–development nexus, a focus on national and local response capacities, and attempts to enable the resilience of communities in conflict rather than merely providing relief. This new approach has been termed 'resilience humanitarianism' (Hilhorst, 2018), and its models and premises are compatible with current ideas in DRR (ECHO, 2013; Hilhorst et al., 2019).

2.2. The everyday politics of disaster risk reduction

In HIC scenarios like Afghanistan, it is obvious that, as Wisner (2012, 71) argued, '[t]here are many ways in which violent conflict complicates, confuses and obstructs the efforts of DRR'. For two reasons, however, it would be a mistake to ascribe all complications in DRR in these cases to the conflict. First, conflicts are simultaneously shaped by local and overarching macro agendas that are interconnected by relationships between multiple actors at different levels (Kalyvas, 2003). How conflict is perceived and plays out at the community level may be related to dynamics beyond the conflict dynamics at regional or national level. Second, there are conflict risks in DRR in many situations, including in countries that are not 'in conflict'.

DRR comprises interventions related to natural resources, which are often a source of local conflict, leading to physical or other forms of violence. As in other places, violence related to land and water resources is common in Afghanistan (Gleick, 1993; Heijmans et al., 2009; Ide, 2015; UNEP, 2013). DRR programmes are a potential way of reducing the risk of conflict, but they can also become a new source of conflict or exacerbate pre-existing tensions (Feinstein International Center, 2013; Mena et al., 2019; Peters and Peters, 2018). For example, in Afghanistan, projects modifying the course of a river have been reported to create conflict between upstream and downstream communities (Heijmans, 2012; Mena et al., 2019; Mena and ARC, 2018b).

DRR also intervenes in the social organisation of a community by bringing in resources and working with community actors. This can be a source of collaboration, but it can also lead to social tension, especially where local governance is weakly developed. Conflict sensitivity should therefore be an important aspect of DRR projects everywhere, and especially in conflict-affected areas, where local institutions may be less equipped for the peaceful resolution of social conflicts (Mena et al., 2019).

In analysing the working of DRR in conflict areas, it is important to pay attention to the everyday politics of DRR – how ideas, people, and materialities are generated and allocated – and how these evolve through implementation in specific contexts (Hilhorst, 2013b). Questions of who profits from DRR interventions, what resistance these interventions face, and what impact DRR has should routinely be considered in both research and practice.

3. The case of Afghanistan

Afghanistan has been affected by recurring high levels of conflict for decades. The Soviet invasion of 1979 led to a 10-year war, and the 1990s witnessed a civil war between mujahidin factions, resulting in the Taliban taking power in 1996. Military intervention led by the United States in 2001 in response to the '9/11' attacks was followed by continuous fighting. At national level, the crisis continues to be marked by conflict between armed opposition groups (AOGs) and the Afghan government, and 40% to 70% of the country's territory is under the Taliban's influence (Jackson, 2018). As Donini has noted (2012), these conflicts have resulted in the continued presence of multiple humanitarian and development organisations and donors in the country, including UN agencies, international NGOs, and Afghan organisations.

Macro-national conflict between the Afghan government and AOGs manifests differently across localities and administrative levels, its dynamics intertwine with locally triggered conditions and tensions (Demmers, 2012; Kalyvas, 2003; Keen, 2008), and many localised tensions play out with no direct interaction with the larger conflicts. At the provincial (meso) level, a different set of conflicts result from corruption, a lack of resources, and the presence of AOG systems of governance, warlords, and governmental institutions. At the community (micro) level, multiple conflicts occur within and between communities, as well as between communities and actors at the provincial or national level. These conflicts may concern power relations and factional disputes or relate to natural resource management and access (Mena and ARC, 2018b; UNEP, 2013).

The war and social conflicts at all levels have led to high poverty and food insecurity, a fragile system of governance, and reduced socio-economic development (The Fund for Peace, 2018; The World Bank, 2018; The World Bank and GFDRR, 2017). Afghanistan's protracted conflict has eroded people's coping mechanisms, making them more prone to hazards, and 'nearly all of the country's 34 provinces have been affected by at least one natural disaster' over the last three decades (NEPA and UNEP, 2015, 34). This includes floods, flash floods, earthquakes, landslides, and droughts (ARC, 2016; The World Bank and GFDRR, 2017). These disasters have claimed more than 20,000 lives since 1980 and affected an average of over 200,000 people each year, and the economic damage from earthquakes, floods, and droughts in 2017 was estimated to be more than USD 400 million (OCHA, 2018; The World Bank and GFDRR, 2017). Consequently, Afghanistan ranks first in the world in terms of the impact of disasters on its population.

4. Research questions and methods

This article uses the lenses of disaster governance and everyday politics to explore how DRR interventions are promoted, initiated, and implemented in Afghanistan. We examine why, when, and how DRR was introduced and implemented, analysing the roles of and interactions between different actors – namely, international donors, international NGOs, the Afghan government, Afghan NGOs, and communities. To enable this analysis, qualitative case study research was conducted in two phases. After six months of document review and remote interviews (Phase 1), the first author conducted fieldwork in regions of Afghanistan with DRR projects from February to June 2017 (Phase 2).

4.1. Data collection and analysis

Fourteen policy-related documents and eight reports on DRR and disaster risk management and governance were analysed. The analysed policy documents were dated from 1991 to 2017 and written in Dari or English. Most of the reports were written by UN agencies, international NGOs, or international consultancies.

The fieldwork included 60 semi-structured interviews, observation of over 20 meetings, and seven visits to DRR projects (some of them part of the same DRR programme). The sample of interviewees was selected with the aim of balance in terms of gender, region, and the types of actors and organisations represented. This balance was only partially achieved because of security constraints, low female participation in the labour market, and disparity in the numbers of international versus local and national actors. Table 1 provides detailed information about the research participants.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse all collected information (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 96). The initial themes were theoretically informed to address the research objectives, and we incorporated flexibility in the study design, considering inductive themes if they proved relevant during the analysis. Four initial theoretical themes informed the analysis: (1) DRR history, promotion, and implementation; (2) disaster governance arrangement; (3) DRR adaptation to HIC/national/local contexts; and (4) DRR vis-à-vis national conflict. All individual and group interviews, and field notes were anonymized and transcribed. QSR NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software was used for the coding and thematic analysis.

4.2. Fieldwork considerations

For security reasons or on the request of individual interviewees, multiple interviews and meetings were not recorded, and in some cases it was not even possible to take handwritten notes. In these cases, with the consent of those involved, post-meeting notes were taken. Recording, taking pictures, or taking notes was also restricted during the participatory observations and field visits.

Table 1. Summary of research participants.

Type of actor	Interviews	Description
International and local staff of UN agencies	7	Programme managers of five different agencies
International NGOs	16	Managers, country directors, and staff members of 11 different organisations
Local and national NGOs	9	Managers, country directors, and staff members of five different organisations
National-level governmental actors	7	Minister, advisors, managers, and staff members of four different governmental institutions
Local government/authorities	3	Director and staff members of two different local governmental institutions
Recipients of aid/beneficiary communities	7	Three individual interviews with community leaders and four group interviews with community members and representatives
Donors	3	Two national donors and one intergovernmental donor
Academics researchers	5	Two Afghan researchers and three academics working on the topic and/or the country
Opposition party officials	2	Two commanders or leaders of one opposition party officials
Private sector actors	3	A provider of transportation services, a provider of telecommunication services, and a supplier of construction materials
Total	**60**	

Notes: NGO: nongovernmental organisation; UN: United Nations.

Several techniques were used to address these limitations, including memorising the information collected (e.g. by re-stating aloud the main ideas expressed by the respondent or establishing mnemonic patterns in the discourse), taking notes as soon as possible after an observation or interaction, and double-checking during a subsequent meeting that the ideas had been understood correctly. The presentation of the results in this article includes instances of paraphrasing individuals' words as accurately as possible.

Security (of the researcher, assistants, and informants) and weather-related constraints limited the number of projects visited. For projects that could not be visited, we used remote research techniques, including interviews by telephone and self-administered structured questionnaires considering of closed-ended questions sent by email to NGO representatives and UN staff members.

5. Findings

5.1. Disaster risk reduction in Afghanistan: how, why, and by who?

Although Afghanistan is considered a HIC country, the long years of 'neither peace nor war' in some regions, especially in Kabul and a number of the provincial capitals, have enabled 'normal' policy processes in many domains, including disasters. Multiple DRR and disaster risk management policies have been developed in recent years (ARC, 2016; UNEP, 2013, 2016), and the country has introduced laws and bodies to regulate and promote the development of DRR. The main relevant institutions are the Afghanistan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) and the National High Commission of Disaster Management. The key policy documents on this topic are the Afghanistan Disaster Risk Reduction National Strategy of 2018 (SMDM and ANDMA, 2018), the Afghanistan Law on Combating Disasters in the Republic of Afghanistan (1991), and the National Disaster Management Plan (2010).[2] Open questions related to these policies involve how they came to be developed and implemented in the country, considering its level of conflict, and to what extent and by whom the policies are translated into programmes and projects.

DRR and general disaster governance have become a policy focus in Afghanistan, chiefly because of recognition of the country's vulnerability to disasters and climate change. Both the document analysis and interviews with two managers from international NGOs located the starting point for DRR work in Afghanistan in the early 2000s. We identified six documents dating from 2004 – a year before the Hyogo Framework for Action – that mentioned Afghanistan as a country highly vulnerable to disasters and in need of DRR strategies and programmes. Interest grew rapidly after this. Significantly, Afghanistan signed the Hyogo Framework for Action, and multiple international stakeholders spoke of Afghanistan as the country most in need of DRR work. Multiple projects were then developed, and we were able to gather more than 200 reports and official documents from the UN and international NGOs about their relevant projects and initiatives in the country.

We observed a noticeable gap between approaches of international actors and those of Afghan government officials. The interviews brought out that central government bureaucrats had not entirely internalized the policies, which were drafted with the help of the international community, maintained a strong orientation towards disaster response and reconstruction. DRR discourses had strongly taken root among international actors,

especially international NGOs and UN agencies, which were the main actors behind DRR implementation in Afghanistan.

Our interviews explored how the early projects were developed, finding additional confirmation of the central role of international players in bringing in DRR as a development issue. The vast majority of research participants mentioned that most people managing or implementing DRR projects in the country were first exposed to the possibility of DRR when multiple experts and consultants started to visit Afghanistan to train NGOs in DRR on behalf of donors or international NGOs. An international NGO manager recounted this kind of experience: 'First, I didn't have any information about DRR, but then a specialist came here and offered a training for staff'. In other words, those who have been involved in humanitarian assistance or other programmes need training to comprehensively understand DRR, including risk-mapping, identifying vulnerability, and community-based DRR programming. Staff members, thus, knew little about DRR but were very experienced in working under conditions of social tension and conflict.

International development funding to Afghanistan increased beginning at the end of 2014, when Afghanistan elected a new president and the United States declared the end of their combat operations in the country. As an international NGO manager said, 'the money then came to rebuild the country – a lot, and this was allocated by the big players to the government and the NGOs. We had to do something with that money'. DRR was among the interests of some donors, and several international NGO interviewees indicated that the presence of extra funding motivated them to develop DRR projects. However, despite the available funds, DRR activities remained very limited in number and scope. In their 2013–2015 national progress report on the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action, Afghanistan reported that the main challenges were the 'lack of political will to integrate DRR into development, insufficient budget allocation for DRR, inadequate human and technical resources in the [disaster management] field, and limited donor's interest in funding DRR projects in Afghanistan' (ANDMA, 2015: 20).

Currently, the DRR landscape in Afghanistan is changing. There are even fewer DRR programmes – only five could be identified as active at the time of the research – but these programmes appeared to be stronger and more stable, compared with previous efforts, and some of the programmes were based on more integrated approaches to disaster risks. An example is the Strengthening the Resilience of Afghanistan's Vulnerable Communities against Natural Disasters project, which began in March 2015 and is managed by the Afghanistan Resilience Consortium (ARC).

When asked about their reasons for supporting DRR programmes in Afghanistan, most donors mentioned that these programmes and its projects align with international commitments such as the Hyogo and Sendai frameworks or the Paris Agreement on climate change. They also saw DRR as a kind of transitional field that enabled them 'to start working in development', in the words of one participant.

Afghan and international NGO participants judged DRR to be necessary for Afghanistan because of the country's vulnerability to hazards and disasters. Some noted that they had built up experience and expertise in DRR, and some said that they could not close their operations because that would mean unemployment for their staff. A business-continuity rationale was thus among the reasons given for why DRR continues to be implemented.

When the communities and recipients of DRR projects were asked why these projects were necessary, most people mentioned that the projects protected their families and

houses. However, when the question was asked comparatively – why DRR instead of other projects – the answer was that DRR was what they were offered. A group discussion with community leaders about the priority needs of the community identified electricity, health, and better road access to other areas. DRR was never mentioned as a priority need by community participants. These findings should not be interpreted as suggesting DRR projects are not needed, but this information does invite reflection on how to develop these projects in a way that is more integrated with people's everyday needs and vulnerabilities, especially in HIC settings, where dire needs for services and goods are usually not met.

Overall, these findings show that DRR was introduced in Afghanistan at the instigation of international actors because of the country's high vulnerability to disasters during a window of opportunity after the Hyogo Framework for Action, which coincided with growing space for development work. Over time, DRR approaches matured and became more specialised, creating demand for DRR projects among NGOs, in part because of 'business-continuity' considerations. Affected communities experienced the DRR projects as positive but as not responding to priority needs. Despite the compelling statistics on disasters, local communities have many immediate day-to-day needs to consider. A new generation of DRR projects (discussed in more detail in Section 5.4) is beginning to make advances in integrating DRR with these everyday needs.

5.2. Disaster risk reduction implementation and disaster governance in Afghanistan

Despite the policies in place and a basic institutional infrastructure at national and provincial levels, the Afghan government does not implement DRR programmes or projects on the ground. The existing programmes are both initiated and implemented by international donors, UN bodies, and international and Afghan NGOs. The work by national and international NGOs represents the body of practice studied in this paper. This includes DRR work financed by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, the United States Agency for International Development, the Dutch and German governments, and European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations office.[3]

A number of DRR projects have been implemented in Afghanistan over the last 15 years. The accounts of implementing NGOs describe overwhelming challenges. Among the multiple challenges, research participants found logistics the most daunting. Obtaining supplies and materials is difficult in some areas. Many roads are unsafe or are seasonally flooded or impassable because of snow. The topography of the country means that air travel to some cities must be by helicopter, which is very expensive. Insecurity in the country adds to inaccessibility in many areas. An NGO manager said, 'The government says "Don't go because it is unsafe", but the commander of the Taliban invited you to help their people. […] In other places, no one stops you, but if you go, they take your things or attack you'. Because many areas are thus inaccessible, a large number of people are excluded from assistance efforts.

Despite these challenges, a number of projects have been realized, but implementation difficulties have strongly restricted the scope of activities in several ways. First, and most obviously, the logistical challenges meant that the number of projects was restricted, with five ongoing DRR projects and others recently completed at the time of the research,

although some of these did not directly focus on DRR but included a DRR component or orientation.

Second, the projects developed were usually oriented towards the mitigation of a specific hazard, and they were infrastructural in nature. Although there were some variations and exceptions, a typical project developed a plan of activities after making a hazard map with the community. These plans usually focused on DRR's mitigation aspects. The projects were hazard-centred and mainly geared towards building small pieces of infrastructure, for instance a wall to hold back floods. These projects were supervised by Afghan NGOs who sent representatives to visit the communities at least once per month. After determining the location of the infrastructure to be built, funds (in amounts that varied by project type and location) were made available for construction. The analysis of the budgets of three programmes, led by three different organisations, showed that 60% to 75% of the programme budgets were allocated to direct costs (materials, equipment, general supplies, services, and labour by local people). The rest of the funds went to projects and programmes support costs (programme management salaries and transportation) and institutional overheads and operating costs (many times paid by the funding international NGO or UN organisation). The completion of the infrastructure construction was the end of the DRR project.

This second implementation restriction contradicts the comprehensive approach associated with DRR, which requires an integrated approach combining specific measures with fostering local resilience through institutional development (see e.g. Ahrens and Rudolph, 2006; Kelman et al., 2015; Twigg, 2015; Wisner et al., 2003). In many ways, the bias towards developing infrastructure was driven by the remoteness of the implementation areas from the capital, where the international NGOs and donors were based. International consultants could only occasionally visit the implementation areas, and donors needed evidence of projects for accountability purposes. A picture of a wall, for instance, would serve this purpose better than a report about a training or another 'soft' activity.

The third implementation restriction involved a pattern that developed whereby DRR was implemented in areas where organisations already had projects. Given the importance of social relations for overcoming multiple challenges common to HIC settings, like gaining access and acceptance, the NGOs had a strong tendency to stay where they had made the necessary investments and had a proven ability to work. In many cases, DRR activities were appended to other projects, such as poverty reduction efforts. This approach also allowed programming and reporting based on validated information that was already available about the population, their needs, and the socio-cultural context. Furthermore, implementing multiple projects in the same area was also a strategy for dealing with the short funding cycles. Although donors expect to receive follow-up requests and to provide additional funding, short funding cycles (common in HIC places) continue to present challenges that can be mitigated by repeat allocations. Thus, programmes were able to overcome the overwhelming challenges associated with DRR in HIC settings, and the strategy to continue working in a particular location was logical. However, a consequence of these path-dependent cycles is that DRR project implementation may not be based on an analysis of where disaster risks are most urgent. It also leads to pockets of development where projects are concentrated in the same area, leaving other areas without assistance.

As mentioned above, although DRR in Afghanistan is mainly initiated by the international community and policies are adopted by the government, the implementation is conducted largely by Afghan organisations or the Afghan staff of international NGOs. Afghan nationals' access to communities is perceived as more secure, and they find it easier to build trust with the communities and adapt the programmes to local needs. Most studied DRR projects did not have a specific approach for adapting their activities to account for local-level social tensions and conflicts. Programmes worked around conflicts (i.e. selecting locations that were removed from known macro conflict areas, chiefly between AOGs and the Afghan government). Within the studied communities, it was common to hear that the programmes relied on staff familiarity with the communities, using their experience and intuition to avoid doing harm. From the point of view of the NGO staff members, they needed flexibility to ensure that projects were adapted to local realities and that community members remained strongly engaged in the development of the projects. Programming was usually based on log frames, but in practice more flexibility was often allowed. International NGOs found it easy to renegotiate plans and budgets with their donors because, as one manager put it, 'we have good communication with them. I know them; we can get together and talk about it'. Afghan NGOs, in contrast, felt more restricted and found that donors did not afford them the same degree of flexibility, but they nonetheless sought the room for manoeuvre necessary to adapt projects on the ground. It may be recognised that the successes of the DRR projects in Afghanistan, notwithstanding their small scope and numbers, can be attributed to the commitment and experience of the Afghan staff.

5.3. How do disaster risk reduction projects and conflict affect each other?

The relationship between conflict and DRR differs for macro-national conflict (between AOGs and the government) versus micro- and meso-level social conflicts at the local and provincial levels. At national and provincial levels, the relationship is indirect: DRR programmes are implemented only in government-controlled parts of the country and are not drawn into the conflict dynamics, but many issues related to the weak and competitive institutional landscape cause bureaucratic difficulties and corruption, which were strongly hinted at by many participants, although none offered specific details. International NGO and UN staff working in Kabul spend much of their time negotiating access and organising logistics, and this situation causes many delays in implementation.

For most of the communities visited, despite, leaving in a general HIC setting, their main experience of conflict involved everyday conflict at the local (micro) level: with other communities, inside the same community, or with local or provincial authorities. Many micro-level conflicts concern control over natural resources. Because natural resources are often also implicated in disasters and are thus highly relevant for DRR strategies, there is a risk that DRR programmes will become politicised.

As an example of this, in the north-eastern provinces of the country, which are prone to river-related floods and flash floods, one DRR project visited in the province of Badakhshan had the aim of reducing the risk of floods by building retention walls and protection walls on river banks. In recent years, the river had overflowed its banks, destroying houses and injuring a number of people. In this example and others, internal disputes were observed between different groups concerning the location of the project work (mainly mitigation

infrastructure), who would be hired, who would benefit, and how the project might affect other communities. Questions regarding on whose land the flood-prevention walls will be constructed and who will be hired for the construction can create tensions.

Another example from northern Afghanistan is a reforestation DRR project that sought to reduce the flow of water from rain and snowmelt, thereby reducing the river flow and preventing floods. The reforestation project also aimed to reduce the risk of landslides in case of earthquakes. The project also included alternative ways of heating houses to avoid further deforestation and of developing new economic opportunities for those working in the timber industry. The project, however, was terminated because of conflicts associated with land use and ownership and because of tensions associated with the prospect of job opportunities.

Our findings revealed that Afghan staff working on DRR are usually highly experienced in dealing with local tensions and in preventing these tensions from turning into conflicts. In addition to having mediation skills, these staff members spend a significant amount of time working on the consultation process in the preparation stages. This means, however, that projects – even small ones – take a long time to deliver.

Regarding the question of whether DRR projects can help to prevent small-scale social conflict among communities, the findings are inconclusive. During DRR project implementation, collaborative efforts may indeed enhance social cohesion in communities. However, rather than asking whether DRR can prevent conflict, it may be more relevant to ask whether there is a long-term impact on the communities at all, given the limited scope of most DRR activities in this type of context, like HIC settings.

5.4. A new generation of disaster risk reduction projects

The above analysis mainly concerns projects that have been implemented in previous years. However, the nature of the five DRR programmes and some of their projects in development during the fieldwork indicate that a more mature approach to DRR may be evolving. These DRR projects, some of which are currently being implemented, are more integrated than the previous projects, simultaneously addressing hazards and vulnerabilities to disasters. Adopting an ecosystem-based DRR angle is an example of this integration, with projects working towards reforestation, supporting alternative agriculture practices, and/or including natural resource management strategies. The aim of such projects is an integrated focus on addressing hazards risk, mitigating communities' vulnerability, and reducing the general risk of disasters.

This new generation of DRR has also become more systematic in developing 'do-no-harm' or conflict-sensitive approaches, something seen as essential by many participants to be able to operate in HIC contexts. For example, the abovementioned ARC project began to train its staff members on conflict analysis tools after developing a manual (Mena and ARC, 2018a).[4] Likewise, the interviewed representatives of two Afghan NGOs and one international NGO provided examples of how conflict prevention or risk reduction has been included in their DRR projects. These efforts began in a somewhat unsystematic way, but organisations then worked towards developing more formal strategies and mechanisms, including this conflict-sensitive approach in their log-frames. Although a conflict-sensitive approach is not yet required by donors, they have also started to

promote such approaches in the DRR projects they fund because this will 'improve the sustainability' of the projects, as a donor manager mentioned in an interview.

These examples illustrate the evolving new generation of DRR programmes and projects, but this approach has not yet been integrated in the general disaster governance strategy and arrangement in Afghanistan, and it is important to realize that not every programme (or every project in the same programme) has adopted this approach. Comprehensive approaches are generally still seen as experimental by the implementing organisations, and the formal inclusion of these elements remains tentative. The main questions, again, concern the long-term impact of this new approach, how communities will value the approach, and whether and how the country will manage to advance through these efforts, including the development of a disaster governance that addresses DRR in a comprehensive way, both in discourse and in practice.

6. Discussion and conclusion

A disproportionately large share of disaster-related deaths occur in conflict-affected or fragile contexts. Nonetheless, DRR has traditionally not been considered feasible in these areas and has therefore not received systematic attention. The main international framework for DRR, the Sendai framework, does not mention conflict. Only in recent years has the discursive space to consider DRR in conflict-affected areas emerged, partly because of shifts in humanitarian aid to become locally oriented and geared towards fostering resilience and to link up with development instead of concentrating only on life-saving assistance. For HIC contexts, this discursive space for considering DRR is even more reduced than in other conflict affected scenarios. Nonetheless, there is a nascent practice of introducing DRR in conflict-affected areas, enabling this paper's focus on how, in the case of Afghanistan, DRR policy evolves and everyday politics of implementation develop.

Afghanistan is one of the few HIC-affected countries that has built up a body of practice on DRR, albeit with a scope and resources that are very minimal compared with the flows of classic humanitarian aid. This study analysed how DRR has become a serious issue in Afghanistan – evidenced by, for example, the 200 reports on DRR in the country identified in this study – and how DRR is implemented.

Our findings largely corroborated the expectations raised by previous authors that DRR projects are largely restricted by the conditions of conflict, especially in HIC contexts. DRR projects can only be carried out in areas with a certain level of stability or control by the internationally recognised government, but 40% to 70% of the territory of Afghanistan is not controlled or influenced by the government, but rather by AOGs (Jackson, 2018; Qazi and Ritzen, 2017). The conditions of conflict also create major challenges regarding the logistics of DRR projects, which results in these projects being small in number, hazard-oriented, and concentrated in geographical pockets where NGOs are already active. The DRR programmes and projects in our study were mainly geared towards the creation of small infrastructure (e.g. walls to protect against floods). DRR project implementation chiefly occurs in or around areas where organisations already have programme experience. This result aligns with more general previous findings that international NGOs tend to stay in the same areas to avoid the costs and time requirements associated with gaining access, overcoming insecurity, building legitimacy, and learning how to

navigate through bureaucratic processes (Koch, 2009; Koch et al., 2009). In a conflict-ridden country such as Afghanistan, these factors seem to be multiplied, creating pockets of development and a situation where the development of DRR projects is not based on an analysis of which areas are the most disaster-prone.

We found that DRR projects are appreciated at the community level, but it is difficult to make a general assessment of their impact in terms of their effects on protection against hazards and disasters, social tensions, and local conflicts. Community members seemed appreciative of the projects but did not see the traditional implementation of DRR (focusing only on mitigation infrastructure) as a priority need. Similar findings have been reported for DRR programmes elsewhere and suggested that, for DRR to be more successful, it must be tied into approaches that have an immediate impact on poverty reduction and livelihoods (Hilhorst et al., 2019).

One of the objectives of DRR is capacity development (CaDRI, 2011; UNDP, 2010), and on this aspect findings are mixed. Because of the time and resources needed to implement even small-scale DRR projects, projects have sometimes not gone beyond the pilot stage and have largely served as a learning ground for a select number of NGO staff members. The development of a small but growing pool of experts who work on DRR, initiate projects, and advocate its importance may be seen as a significant capacity development outcome of the brief history of DRR in Afghanistan. Another significant outcome involves the development of new approaches. At the time of the research, five DRR programmes with a more integrated approach to DRR and a more systematic approach to conflict sensitivity had been initiated.

The question of how conflict and DRR affect each other invites further debate. Our findings identified several instances where DRR projects became politicised and even had to be suspended. However, there were also many examples of experienced and dedicated staff succeeding in mediating social conflicts and fostering community-level collaboration. This suggests that expectations regarding the possible peace dividend of DRR are conditional upon careful strategies and experienced staff.

Beyond the project level, it can be concluded that disaster governance in conflict-affected areas risks to become disparate between international and national actors. In a context of weak government institutions, DRR was initiated by the international community, and donors and international NGOs continue to be the agenda-setters and main advisors on DRR. With international assistance, the Afghan government has developed policy, but the government does not allocate resources for DRR implementation, and does not seem to have internalized the broader concept, although new documents and policies may be slowly changing this situation. Implementation is carried out mainly by Afghan actors employed by international or Afghan NGOs. In the words of an interviewed international NGO manager, DRR policies and strategies in the country happen in 'two or more parallel worlds', explained by this manager as 'the world of policies and the world of implementation, with little connection between them'.

6.1. Implications

Our analysis of the Afghan experience shows that there is some space for DRR in HIC scenarios. Efforts over the past 15 years have resulted in a small and dedicated set of DRR initiatives in Afghanistan that is ready to advance the field when political conditions improve.

Nonetheless, the findings on Afghanistan raise some pertinent questions regarding the feasibility of DRR in high-intensity conflict areas. There are compelling arguments to advance DRR in conflict situations, yet our findings suggest that conflict resolution or reduction, and the development of effective national governance may seem to be pre-conditions for DRR to be fully developed, with functioning disaster governance arrangements and on a scale allowing DRR to become a meaningful endeavour with community-level impact.

It is especially challenging to introduce the kind of integrated approach that simultaneously addresses hazards and vulnerability, which has become a main strategy for successful DRR. While it seems imperative that DRR aligns with developmental efforts present in HIC contexts towards reducing general and everyday-life people's vulnerability, this reinforces the tendency to concentrate efforts in a small area, and contributing to creating pockets of development.

To a large extent, DRR projects in Afghanistan were seen to be subject to everyday politics of development that have been observed elsewhere. These include a tendency to be donor-driven, and full of inter-institutional competition and small-scale (political) rivalry. In a conflict-affected country, these everyday politics can have consequences for the likelihood of conflict. There has so far been very little attention paid to how DRR can be done in a conflict-sensitive way, and it will be important to develop such approaches and monitoring the implementation for their positive and negative consequences on the conflict dynamics. All in all, our conclusions should temper some of the expectations regarding the possibilities for DRR in conflict areas, especially considering the projects' limited geographical coverage (because of challenges linked to insecurity, logistics, and politics related to HIC contexts) and actual capacity to address people's vulnerabilities in an integrated manner.

Notes

1. As an analytical category, 'high-intensity conflict' refers to a conflict with more than 1000 casualties per year and high levels of population displacement. The provision of goods and basic services is irregular, and local authorities and governments have minimal or no effective control or influence over some regions of the country (Mena, 2018). High-intensity conflict is usually a phase within a longer history of conflict and is often concentrated in particular parts of a country.
2. Other relevant policy document includes: The 'Natural Disaster Mitigation Policy in Afghanistan' ANDMA (2018a), the 'Strategic Framework 2018–2028' ANDMA (2018b), the 'Afghanistan Strategic National Action Plan (SNAP) for Disaster Risk Reduction: towards peace and stable development' (ANDMA, 2011), and 'The Afghanistan National Disaster Plan'.
3. Formerly known as the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO).
4. The first author was involved in the development of this manual.

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