



When Disaster Meets Conflict Think-Table

Summary Report

Nathaniel Rose, Humanitarian Advisory Group
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Overview

Responding to disasters in conflict settings raises a number of challenges for humanitarian practitioners. People impacted by disaster and conflict simultaneously add an extra layer of difficulty in an already fragile environment. **Recent flooding in Yemen demonstrates the issues around access and security that actors working in humanitarian context's face.**¹ To further unpack these complexities, the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Centre for Humanitarian Leadership (CHL) and Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) invited experienced humanitarian practitioners and researchers to build upon ISS's existing research into the intersection of disasters and conflict. The research undertaken by ISS builds on five years of studying low-medium-, high and post-conflict situations impacted by disasters, and how non-state, state and humanitarian actors respond in these environments.²

1 <https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/briefing/2020/8/5f3e7faf4/300000-people-lose-homes-incomes-food-supplies-belongings-due-catastrophic.html>

2 <https://www.iss.nl/en/research/research-projects/when-disaster-meets-conflict>

Think-Table Structure

The aim of the ‘Think-Table’ was to translate ISS’s research into actionable steps with real-world applicability for humanitarian actors. It was organised into three common themes: access, intervention design and safety and security. Within each theme, participants were asked to structure their thoughts around low-medium-, high- and post-conflict scenarios.

	Low-Medium Intensity Conflict	High Intensity Conflict	Post-Conflict
Access			
Intervention design			
Safety and Security			

After introductory comments by Thea Hilhorst from ISS and Stephen McDonald from CHL, Think-Table participants were shown four videos developed by ISS that explored these themes and scenarios through research conducted in South Sudan, Myanmar and Sierra Leone. Groups were then divided into breakout rooms where they explored these topics in depth, bringing their years of experience to the conversation. After a short break, participants then headed into different breakout rooms covering a different theme, before returning to the plenary for feedback, reflections and final thoughts.

Access

The inability to access people most in need of aid is a primary blocker in the humanitarian system. This can be due to government influence on aid and distribution, logistics or issues around safety in conflict areas. Below are some of the challenges and opportunities highlighted in the breakout groups:

Challenges:

- A lack of access is often an excuse for a low-quality response
- Lack of coordination between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the United Nations (UN), as different approaches and frameworks are often used
- “Access for whom?”
- Access does not necessarily always mean being physically present
- Access for communities, not just humanitarian workers.
- The importance of considering staff safety and security concerns, arguing that many humanitarian actors have a risk threshold that creates barriers regarding access
- A lack of clear guidelines for humanitarian actors to follow as well as language barriers between local and international actors also contributes to issues over access
- Local actors often have the contextual knowledge needed to access areas or communities, but this is often not recognised
- Responding remotely—not ‘on the ground’, but in a neighbouring country—means events in the country/area affected can’t be assessed properly.

Opportunities:

- Localisation—sharing knowledge and supporting programmes with local actors
- Fostering relationships and partnerships with local actors rather than subcontracting
- Access can be re-framed as access for the community, not just from the perspectives of the aid agencies.

Intervention Design

Developing contextually appropriate responses, political pressures over decision-making responsibilities and implementation are some of the issues relating to intervention design. Highlighted in this section are some of the challenges and opportunities that breakout groups discussed during the Think-Table.

Challenges:

- Lingering colonialism, supremacy and superiority of humanitarian actors
- Political and donor pressures, need to 'be seen' to be doing something
- Top-down hierarchical structures of national disaster agencies
- Measuring accountability of different actors on the ground
- Lack of data means inadequate design process. Different countries have better data than others, which influences the intervention
- Non-neutrality of governments, for example during the 2020 Pakistan floods.

Opportunities:

- Ability to work in an agile way with affected communities through listening and talking to their needs
- Enabling and engaging local businesses, who are often some of the first responders with the best infrastructure
- Long-term intervention is needed to break any cyclic recycling of knowledge
- Push for individual self-reflection, high-level discussions and institutionalising of the discussion
- Human resources can prioritise individuals who have previously worked in a local organisation when making hiring decisions.

Safety and Security

Humanitarian practitioners and local actors face a number of safety and security concerns in their operations or community. The Think-Table breakout groups highlighted a number of challenges and opportunities actors face when disaster and conflict collide.

Challenges:

- The multidimensional and intersection of security risks: mental and physical wellbeing, factors such as passport, skin colour, and gender identity influence a different scale of risks
- The potential for aid distribution to create risks for communities. For example, creating insecurity when accessing food
- Inertia—the more you institutionalise security within an organisation, the more difficult it is to unravel
- Complacency in post-conflict situations. Underlying risks may still be there even though the conflict is no longer visible
- Outsourcing of risk to local actors and ‘bunkerised’ approach of international actors
- Impartiality when working with or being escorted by military units.

Opportunities:

- Developing a framework to understand different types of conflicts and approaches depending on level of conflict intensity
- Engaging with local actors who are familiar with the context in-country, but maintaining vigilance not to tokenise
- Understanding the security concerns of the area by localising aid and building trust with the communities impacted
- Equal implementation of duty of care no matter the level of intensity of the conflict
- Build a framework that recognises the overlap of mental and physical wellbeing.

Final Reflections: Where to Next?

A key outcome of the Think-Table is the ongoing need for conversations and strategic organising within the humanitarian system. There is a feeling of inertia and an outsourcing of risk to local actors. This raises the question: How can humanitarian actors make tangible and collective actions?

Next Steps and Commitments:

- Push for systemic, policy and institutional change by amplifying marginalised voices
- Look at collective advocacy, research and funding activities
- Create a series of blogs to keep the conversation going
- “Data, evidence and reflection: Partnering with researchers can advance transformational change where disasters and conflicts meet.”
—Think-Table participant
- Listen and trust local voices and capacities.

Participant Reflections:

“The concept of inertia in the work that we do, whether it compels us to recycle the same solutions or go to the same explanations, has an impact across all the topics discussed. Inertia is safe. Who can argue with what we have always done, other than the fact that it hasn’t really worked.”

“We constantly need to keep our eye on the ball. Realising accountable protection of affected people through genuine, listening partnerships. Give the many problems we talked about, there are many places where we can make these contributions.”

“Inertia and complacency need to make way for deep understanding and inclusive change in order to transform the humanitarian system.”

“There is still much to do to shake down the system. But the complexities we see are also self-imposed in many cases, and also because all the humanitarian action is inherently political.”

“The old system is out of steam but changes often happen late and only out of necessity. The challenges ahead can only grow, so we need to keep pointing in the right direction hoping we can shape debates and influence both gradual changes and potentially more disruptive ones.”