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# **WE DON'T NEED 10 IDEAS TO REDUCE DISASTER RISK IN CONFLICTS AND RECURRING CRISES**

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*Please note that this text is unedited. The discussion paper is designed to share emerging thinking quickly, even before polishing its presentation!*

*This discussion paper draws on five years of research through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) Programme, which has aimed to inform policies, practices and investments to better support the resilience of dryland communities in Africa and the Middle East.*

*It represents our emerging thoughts on the subject, not our final analysis. It is written to encourage the wider contributions of others into our thinking as a stepping stone to our more developed analysis.*

## **Introduction**

DRR has taken a back seat in last 15 years as other agencies have raced forward – resilience, climate change adaptation and, especially in conflicts and recurrent crises where the humanitarian sector is particularly dominant, anticipatory action. This paper does not propose to push back against those other fields of debate. It is time to go back to basics, though and to remember that these are not separate agendas. Each of them is about reducing people's risk of being caught up in crises or disasters.

That risk is particularly acute where the baseline situation is already one where many people live on the edge – in conflicts, protracted crises and places with recurrent crises. These are the same countries which receive the vast majority of humanitarian resources every year – but very few resources form DRR investments. This is partly because of a perception that it is not possible to invest in DRR in these most difficult places, or that the return on investment will be low. This paper, drawing on 6 years of SPARC research, makes the case that DRR is necessary, possible – indeed already happening without support – and offers 9 ways to do it.

## **The place of conflicts in the world of DRR**

Sixty percent of the 25 most climate-vulnerable countries are also affected by political fragility and conflict. In such places, natural hazards pose much greater threats to people. They are more likely to cause a crisis or to exacerbate existing protracted crises, because fragility and conflict often mean less government support for affected areas, less institutional capacity, and less likelihood that there are effective policies and plans in place to support people and society to manage these shocks.

However, the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the global agreement for reducing disaster risks, does not mention conflict or fragility as underlying drivers of vulnerability to disaster risk. For various reasons, there has been a greater tendency in conflicts and recurrent crises to offer assistance post-disaster, as opposed to proactively reducing risks and managing disasters – it has sometimes even been doubted whether DRR is relevant or appropriate in crisis-torn places. Recent progress, though, includes a more widespread recognition of the ways in which conflict amplifies vulnerability to natural hazards and the need to invest and deliver disaster risk reduction (DRR) in conflicts and recurring crises.

## **Is disaster risk reduction possible in conflicts and recurring crises?**

Despite the challenges, SPARC research clearly shows that DRR in conflict and recurring crises is both necessary and possible – it can be, and is being, done locally, even without support. Investments are being made by individuals and families, communities, businesses and local governments to reduce their future risk of crisis. Our research found:

- Climate change is not going unnoticed: e.g. in parts of the Horn of Africa, herders are investing in camels, which are more resistant to drought than cattle.
- People recognise that flooding is becoming more frequent. In Mali and in Somalia, communities or local authorities are creating funds for responding to flood warnings, and setting up social media groups to share warnings more quickly.
- Mutual support is in the culture of many communities. In Chad, their ability to help members in droughts is being expanded by setting up emergency community grain stores.
- In South Sudan, the risks of depending on livestock have increased so much, because of conflict and floods, that many are diversifying into previously unthinkable livelihoods such as fishing.
- In Uganda, local authorities have set up informal surveillance networks for livestock epidemics.
- In every country where we have researched, families are investing more in education for their children (including daughters), having recognised that all livelihoods which are possible without education are facing increasing threats.
- Across the drylands of Africa, pastoralists work to guard their mobility and freedom of movement as a way to manage risk, adapt to changing weather patterns and to seek the resources they need for their lives and livestock.

These few examples illustrate that the reactions to a perception of increased risk can be technical, social or institutional, and are happening without external support. They show, though, that the actions that people are taking for themselves do not always conform with how external actors think about risk reduction. Few of the examples would be immediately labelled as 'DRR' by many professionals – and yet, this is how people choose to reduce their risks from future disasters.

If people are working to reduce their own risks in conflicts and recurrent crises, is it even sensible to ask whether it is possible to support them to do so? Instead, the question to address is: from everything that we know about working in such places, what should support to DRR look like in those most difficult of situations?

## The links between conflict, state fragility and disaster risk reduction

Armed conflict, civil unrest and violence have recently been integrated as societal hazards in the UNDRR's Hazard Information Profiles. This was an important step, but research in conflicts and recurrent crises shows that fragility and conflict are not just hazard types: they are also the context in which other risks exist, and they affect lives and livelihoods in almost every possible way, often creating or increasing vulnerability to climate-related risks. Setting out the challenges posed by state fragility and conflict in an explicit way helps to see how support to DRR may need to be adapted to match the challenges.

- Fragility and conflict make it harder both to attract investment, including in DRR, and to use it well. There may be reasonable fears, for example, that any investments will be destroyed in conflict.
- Even without this risk, DRR may be deterred if narrow economic calculations are used for targeting resources. Where economic infrastructure and markets are under-developed, such as is common in conflicts and recurrent crises, rates of return may appear low in financial terms.
- There are also often high fiduciary risks, associated in part with a weak rule of law (especially where the state does not have a monopoly on the use of violence, a key test of its strength and stability).
- Implementation may be difficult because of insecurity and in crisis-prone countries the capacity of state and other institutions is often weak or contested.
- In these contexts there has often been a humanitarian focus, so that international support is focused on responding to crises, as opposed to investing in longer term development, risk reduction and resilience-building efforts. Unless humanitarian support is consciously designed and implemented to support longer-term benefits, it can undermine state structures, social institutions, and the sustainability of DRR and other development efforts.

However, these greater challenges are not arguments for DRR being optional or a nice-to-have in FCAS: they are an argument for making sure that efforts are appropriately designed for dealing with the challenges. Some attempts are being made to use humanitarian resources in ways that address future risks by responding to the forecasts or predictions of crises before they develop. Where such anticipatory action is funded through humanitarian channels, though, it is necessarily confined to short-term humanitarian timetables. SPARC research shows that this kind of support is not a substitute for DRR: more than that, it shows that investment in DRR is often a pre-requisite for effective anticipatory action to be possible.

## Nine recommendations for reducing disaster risk in conflicts and recurring crises

The following conclusions are not presented as an exhaustive list of how to think about DRR in conflicts and recurrent crises. They are the lessons that have emerged from specific research projects conducted by SPARC over the past five years. They are not offered as a set of rules to end a debate, but as SPARC's contribution to debates that will continue to advance over many years.

1. **If it helps people avoid or cope with disaster, then it's DRR.** The list presented above shows the wide variety of investments people are choosing for themselves. Because so many people are living on the edge in FCAS, every shock can create problems in many dimensions of their lives (e.g. health, safety, livelihood). All resilience building or risk informed development (RID) efforts can help people move back

from the edge, giving them more options and more agency, making them better able to cope with disasters. Preconceptions about what should be funded under a DRR label are not helpful in FCAS. Comments that are sometimes heard, such as ‘this isn’t really DRR, it’s a WASH intervention’ miss the point. If it helps reduce risks and build people’s capacity to avoid or cope with a disaster, then it is DRR.

2. **DRR can’t only be technical, because disasters are never natural or neutral.** DRR is always based on decisions that are political, e.g. where investments are made, which population groups, assets and resources are to be protected – and which not. This is much more pronounced in FCAS – if resource allocation was not so contested, then the country would be much less likely to be fragile and conflict affected. All support to DRR has to be informed by an understanding of the interplay between disasters and conflict and existing inequalities and power dynamics within society. This is not optional: DRR investments in one domain can be used to make claims over resources in another. For example, siting a borehole may appear to be a technical decision, but boreholes attract settlement and access to water is used to make claims over land. A new borehole may be a good DRR intervention, but only if it understood as a decision with a political dimension, based on an understanding of the conflict and social dynamics that it will inevitably set in motion.
3. **The paths from shocks to impact are webs, not chains – and they spread widely.** Crises in these difficult contexts are almost always the outcome of interacting factors. People living in the drylands, in particular, experience multiple and often intersecting threats from weather events, insecurity and/or economic shocks. These threats, like people affected by them, cross borders and regions. How they are managed in one place will influence what happens somewhere else. It is not enough for DRR to work by addressing risks that come from one simple chain. DRR has to be based on an understanding of the interactions of the risks, including those that come from across borders. Since some of the threads in the causal web are always political, that means that no DRR analysis can be entirely politics-free.
4. **Identifying agency and supporting people’s options.** The best place to start any efforts to help people is usually with what they are already doing – and what they are already trying to change. This is not always assessed or understood. Change in FCAS may be particularly quick, because previous livelihoods become impossible, old social structures break down, and because people are forced to move – discovering and carrying different ideas with them. Gender transformations are happening very fast in several of the countries we studied, as women found ways to challenge previous norms about what they could do. If the goal of DRR is thought of as increasing people’s agency in the face of risk and threats, then it can often harness this dynamism – and it should always seek to understand it.
5. **DRR needs local diversity, not national blue prints.** Homogenous and cohesive societies, with a strong and accepted policy direction set from the centre, are less likely to be in conflict. The risk landscape therefore tends to be more varied in FCAS, and the ways in which the state, society and communities function tend to be different. This means that the appropriate ways to support DRR are also more heterogeneous in FCAS. In Mali, we found that the local authorities worked in very different ways even in two neighbouring communes, leading to very different strategies for managing floods and droughts – each successful in their own way. The impact of disasters varies based on the social, economic, cultural, political and geographical context in which different people live, making national blueprints inappropriate. DRR efforts should embrace and prioritise diversity rather than centralised planning, and support institutions that understand the local context and different people’s needs and priorities.
6. **DRR efforts have to engage with informality.** People living in marginalised areas (such as the drylands and crisis affected areas) rely on informal systems and networks in so many ways: for resources, for support in times of crises, for information and for providing the norms and rules by which their local

societies function. Informal systems shape people's behaviour, social capital, livelihood decisions, and access to markets, all of which influence their capacity to manage shocks and their resilience. Informal institutions provide people with credit and protect – or threaten – their land rights, either as individuals, families or collectively. Most external assistance, whether from governments or international actors, focus their attention exclusively on what is called the formal realm. This makes it much less relevant to real life and is a major reason why so many development and DRR investments efforts have not lived up to expectations. DRR efforts must understand the informal rules and institutions that shape how people live, and should seek to work with and through these systems and networks just as much as the people they are trying to help work with and through them.

7. **Be realistic.** Too many development and DRR efforts are based on unrealistic visions of external interventions driving social transformation. The greater the ambition, the greater the need for a really strong theory about how change will unfold – and that means a theory that is plausible, backed by evidence and an understanding of how people in different societies are likely to behave. Too often, interventions replace this theory with a simple market-based theory, assuming that if profits can be made, then people will change their way of living to make them. conflict and state fragility make life uncertain: change can happen but people may also have little ability to take risks associated with some changes. Experience shows that transformation is best approached step by step. The closer an innovation remains to existing elements of people's lives, the more likely it is to be successful – and to be built on for making further changes.
8. **Trade-offs.** DRR does not come cost free. People always become aware of the costs that they have to bear – financially, in their time, in their dependency – and these costs can hamper the success of DRR efforts. This is always true, but much more of a challenge in FCAS, where people are closer to the limit and with fewer possible choices in their lives. If the trade-off between future risk and potential cost is addressed explicitly, people can be supported to make the informed choices for themselves. Because everyone is different, with different abilities, resources, status and risk appetite, people will make different decisions. People may find intermediate ways of compromising around the trade-offs. That should be encouraged, and not be seen as undermining DRR.
9. **Work differently.** Ultimately, reducing people's risks from disasters requires supporting the creation of societies that are stronger and better able to manage risks, and where vulnerability is reduced. This can be achieved by strengthening all kinds of social infrastructure – state institutions and state services, the private sector, civil society in all its forms, etc. International aid can deliver a set of DRR outputs matching a checklist, but this isn't the same as creating societies that are more resilient to disasters and crisis. There is always much talk of 'partnerships' and 'local ownership', but this doesn't always match reality. Yet DRR cannot be delivered from outside, it can only be built by societies themselves. The job of external partners of all kinds is to support this, managing the risks of all kinds – including relating to power, conflict and marginalisation – in what they do. This doesn't come naturally to all organisations that want to help. Unless and until everyone is open about admitting the challenges that this poses, change in this direction may be limited.

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