The paradox of addressing recurrent floods as Disasters

Floods negatively impact food insecure and economically poor people around the world on a recurrent basis, straining livelihoods and deteriorating health and nutrition. Despite this well-established reoccurrence, the consequences of floods are still often treated as out-of-the-normal events that require out-of-normal humanitarian response. However, people living in the areas, where recurrent floods impact, do not perceive the floods as out-of-the-normal. They are recurrent and part of life. This project analyses the paradox of how floods are addressed and categorised on the one hand, and perceived — by the people living in the areas affected by the floods — on the other.

While development actors work to help communities and people become more resilient and reduce vulnerabilities, humanitarian actors step in to save and protect lives, provide food, shelter etc., in disaster situations. At present, the two still often work independently of each other and within different frameworks. Development actors have long-term aims often framed around the United Nations’ development goals, while humanitarian actors work to alleviate suffering in the short term guided by the humanitarian principles. How these different aims translate into decisions on the type of aid provided is an area of interest to the project. We hope to provide inputs to bridging the humanitarian-development divide with the purpose of delivering needs based aid to help food insecure and economically poor people become better off.

This project looks at areas affected by recurrent hazards in Central America, with a focus on floods. We wish to understand how the reoccurrence of the events are reflected in response operations (whether they are offered by development, humanitarian, disaster risk reduction or dual mandate organisations) and why some of the ‘responding’ organisations treat recurrent, seasonal flood situations as out-of-the-normal events.

I do this by conducting semi-structured interviews with 1. People who work with UN agencies and NGOs that work in areas affected by recurrent floods in normal times, and 2. People who work with UN agencies and NGOs that have responded to the floods as disasters/emergencies, 3. National and regional emergency management agencies, and 4. By conducting focus groups in communities affected by recurrent floods.

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