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Risk, vulnerability, and pragmatic inevitability: the conflict–disaster nexus and urban governance in Johannesburg, South Africa

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This paper spotlights post-disaster relief provision in Johannesburg, South Africa, following the floods of 2016 in a bid to explore how local government and non-governmental actors in the country conceive of compounding vulnerability and conflict within urban disaster governance. It reveals the diverse strategies employed to navigate violent conflict during the cyclical occurrence of disaster and reconstruction that the predominantly migrant population experiences in the Setswetla informal settlement, adjacent to the Alexandra township in northern Johannesburg. Rendered visible in moments of disaster and recovery are the spatial politics and multidimensional nature of conflict. These phenomena unfold across various levels of urban governance and in the affected community and effectively construct a disaster citizenship that makes risk reduction and community cohesion impossible in the eyes of disaster managers. This research, based on a set of expert interviews, integrates conflict and disaster studies to shed light on how the conflict–disaster interface materialises, and is operationalised, in an urban setting.

Keywords: conflict–disaster nexus, disaster governance, flooding, Johannesburg, South Africa, urban conflict, vulnerability

Introduction

Flash floods in November 2016 washed away several dozen houses in the Setswetla¹ informal settlement, adjacent to the Alexandra township in northern Johannesburg, South Africa, on the edge of the Jukskei River. Within minutes, people lost everything. The response of the government reaffirmed the priority of providing emergency relief and temporary shelter to the victims, while also preventing residents from constructing structures close to the riverbank, as South African President Jacob Zuma underlined during his visit to the site (Kgosana, 2016). What seems like an innocuous statement in the aftermath of a momentary disaster points to the essence of a complex geography of vulnerability and multi-layered conflict. Two years after the disaster, despite the persistent risk of flooding posed annually, the settlement is larger than ever. Continuous construction on unsolidified landfill and illegal dumping in the catchment area of the Jukskei have heightened the possibility of flash flooding even further. The density and improvised, flimsy nature of construction, in part under electricity pylons, also increases the risk of fires, as witnessed as recently as March 2019, affecting more than 100 households (City of Johannesburg, 2019).

Disaster risk intersects with a history of violent conflict, ranging from past civil war² to current xenophobic and mob violence. Prevailing mistrust, chronic direct and structural violence, and the inability to access resources and justice indicate persistent levels of conflict within the community (Abrahams, 2010). Given the compounding effects of socio-spatial divides and vulnerabilities apropos of natural hazards, how do policymakers and disaster managers conceive of the conflict-disaster nexus? As this paper shows, a delicate mixture of formal and informal strategies of engagement and disengagement is based on a very distinct understanding of the scale, duration, and location of disaster, and conflicts.

Natural or environmental hazards do not occur in a vacuum; they are embedded in the history and political context of South Africa. The country's legal and policy framework for disaster management provides for a comprehensive structure to deal with the technicalities of coordinated disaster response. Structural conditions present a challenge to it, however. The apartheid legacy of complex socioeconomic inequalities, rapid urbanisation, and urban development in the absence of regulations on urban growth and mobility have produced additional layers of disaster vulnerability (*cf.* Williams et al., 2019, pp. 159f.; see also Turok, 2014). In this light, recurring urban disasters reveal persisting fault lines in disaster governance and the lack of effective disaster risk reduction (DRR) vis-à-vis post-apartheid urbanism. When disasters such as flash floods happen, policymakers and urban actors are confronted with the complexity of disaster response and recovery in a site of great structural vulnerability and chronic violence. Conceptually, this means investigating not only how power struggles and politics influence vulnerability and risk, but also how disaster response affects those struggles and politics within a geography of violence (Moser and McIlwaine, 2014; Springer and Le Billon, 2016). This approach highlights the 'processual and unfolding' nature of violence in which direct and structural violence interact and are co-constitutive within space (Springer and Le Billon, 2016, p. 2).

Despite growing attention being paid to the coincidence and correlation of violent, identity-based conflict and disasters triggered by natural hazards, research has thus far failed to capture the local dynamics of disaster and conflict management within such a geography of permanent vulnerability and recurring violence. This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of compounding vulnerabilities and divides in two ways. First, it suggests an explicit urban, place-based perspective on the conflict-disaster nexus to link the global systems of humanitarian assistance to local disaster governance. Setswetla is a 'grounded site of local-global articulation and interaction', a 'node . . . within relational fields' (Biersack and Greenberg, 2006, p. 16). The study of Setswetla as an urban site situates the collision of conflict and disaster in the city and, relatedly, applies greater sensitivity to informality and the material fabric of vulnerability (*cf.* Twigg and Mosel, 2018). Municipal and community-based actors, albeit key to managing disaster risk and divisive political dynamics, do not garner the attention within the humanitarian system and scholarship that they deserve (Brown et al., 2015). Furthermore, distinct from the focus of humanitarian studies on fragile contexts defined by weak government and

a dearth of resources, concentrating on an emerging/middle-income economy highlights the capacities and practices of national and local governments that are equally affected by conflict and disaster risk. An assessment of how local policymakers and institutions conceive of the conflict–disaster nexus in the urban setting is thus long overdue (Gaillard, 2018).

Second, this analysis considers event-based and chronic disasters together with direct and structural violence. Humanitarian studies have pointed to the challenges of providing assistance in a context of fragility, poverty, and conflict: the increased sense of competition among beneficiaries; the militarisation of aid and the prevailing logic of crowd control; the ‘free-rider problem’ and the diversion of supplies; and disaster entrepreneurship among humanitarian actors. Those issues have emerged as part of this research as well. Yet, looking solely at the short term crucially misses systemic confluences of conflict and disaster within urban governance. This paper consequently focuses on the chronic, small-scale yet frequent urban disaster, and on forms of lingering and repetitive violence beyond the narrow legal, event-based understanding of disaster and ‘armed conflict’ in international humanitarian law.

This research is grounded in an in-depth study of contemporary disaster recovery and risk reduction efforts in Johannesburg (see Figure 1). Setswetla’s experience in 2016 constitutes one localised event in a series of recurring floods, especially in underserved areas of the city (*cf.* McNamara, 2013). Emblematic of the localised accumulation of risk in the event of a natural hazard, the flash floods of 2016 serve as an entry point to questions concerning urban disaster risk, informality, and marginalisation. With an emphasis on post-disaster shelter provision and housing, this paper explores how local government and non-governmental actors conceive of conflict within disaster governance and what strategies they employ to navigate the possibility of violence in disaster response, recovery, and risk reduction. This group of city-based entities is most pertinent to shaping the temporal and spatial conception of disaster governance and significantly alters the accumulation of risk and vulnerability.

A close look at divides and competing interests in post-disaster housing permits the unpacking of the institutional landscape of recovery and risk reduction efforts and the multiple scales of conflict unfolding as local actors navigate between formal and informal policies and practices. Policymakers and humanitarians shape urban disaster governance in constructing the scale, temporality, and place of intervention. This approach not only allows them to engage with some forms of violence and to evade others, but also changes the terms—the paradigm and operationalisation—of disaster recovery and risk reduction. Ultimately, framing the immediate as the only feasible realm of disaster governance perpetuates long-term vulnerability and simmering identity-based politics. Hence, conflict and disaster compound precisely because the politics of reducing such two-fold vulnerability make local humanitarian and government actors shy away from interacting with them beyond the immediacy of disaster response. These observations suggest a rethink of conflict within the much-promulgated conflict–disaster nexus, especially with regard to recurring, smaller disasters such as flooding, which are often neglected by research and fail to make international headlines.³

Figure 1. Location of Setswetla in Gauteng province, South Africa



Source: adapted by the author from Htonl (under CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=15097488>, and CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=23620512>).

Disaster, conflict, and spatialised vulnerability

Traditional disaster studies have highlighted vulnerability, in addition to the existence of hazards and exposure, as a key factor in understanding and mitigating disaster (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Hewitt, 1983, 1997; Wisner et al., 2004). Vectors such as informality, poverty, and exclusion, and deficient urban planning and haphazard building practices, increase both ‘physical vulnerability’ (of material infrastructure) and ‘social vulnerability’ (of the economic, social, and political context of individuals and groups). They exist unevenly across different socioeconomic, ethnic, or spatial strata. Together, they decrease the ability of communities to lessen the impact of harm (Pelling, 2003, p. 5; see also Moser, 1998). Such predominantly technical and

apolitical framing has been challenged by scholarship acknowledging the politics and diversity of actors and institutions governing disaster management and risk reduction (Pelling and Dill, 2010). 'Disaster governance' (Tierney, 2012) refers to the often-simultaneous policy efforts and practices of disaster mitigation, management, response, recovery, and risk reduction, emphasising the long-term and interconnected nature of those domains. For the purpose of this paper, both the official strategies pursued by governmental and non-governmental humanitarian and community-based organisations and informal policies and practices, also referred to as the local politics of disaster management (*cf.* Murray, 2009; Hilhorst, 2013), were considered.

Novel anthropological and spatial research affords an opportunity for cross-disciplinary investigations of institutional and local politics in the face of armed conflict and disaster recovery (Siddiqi, 2018a), and may contribute to bridging the 'conflict-disaster divide' in theory and practice (King and Mutter, 2014, p. 1239; Peters, 2017). In response to ambiguous and unsatisfactory results emerging from correlations between disaster and war, more recent studies have sought to consider the complex and dynamic nature of 'disaster' and 'conflict' and account for the significant temporal and spatial lags in how climate change and conflict affect communities. Methodologically, the integration of ethnographic and mixed-methods approaches proposes to shift the focus to processes and actors engaged in disaster recovery efforts that impact on pre-existing social conflict dynamics and state governance (Haigh et al., 2016; Field, 2018; Walch, 2018; Siddiqi and Canuday, 2018). Such research reveals the challenge of disaster recovery and long-term risk reduction in the context of armed conflict and volatile governance structures, which is often neglected by prevailing approaches to disaster response (Wisner, 2017; Field, 2018; Walch, 2018), notably in housing reconstruction that might exacerbate previous conflicts (Haigh et al., 2016). Reconstituting relationships between the state and citizens, as well as across communities, rebuilding trust, and reassuring faith above and beyond in, or in tandem with, physical rebuilding are therefore of paramount importance. Such findings not only digress significantly from the predominant realist, state-focused political science paradigm, but also suggest a review of institutional, political, and post-colonial dynamics in the study of post-disaster and post-conflict violence.

Turning away from state-centred paradigms invites an exploration of the linkage between political and material space (Peluso and Watts, 2001; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, 2006; Nixon, 2011), beyond the narrow focus on armed conflict (civil war). Such a reading of conflict calls attention to the role of materials and spaces in understanding identity-based dynamics and violence. 'Spatial violence' frames not only the destruction inflicted on infrastructure and architecture, but also the very limitations, discriminations, and racism that the built environment imposes on individuals and groups (Graham, 2011; Björkdahl, 2013; Pullan and Baillie, 2013; Monk and Mundy, 2014; Buckley-Zistel and Björkdahl, 2016; Herscher and Siddiqi, 2017). These approaches echo calls for integrated, local, and community-led solutions for post-disaster and post-war recovery to achieve a state of greater resilience (Barakat, 2005; Vale and Campanella, 2005; Hobson, Bacon,

and Cameron, 2014). More importantly for this purpose, such a reading offers a means of galvanising a spatial understanding of vulnerability and urban conflict in disaster governance.

Considering these possibilities for convergence in an overall very fragmented theoretical discussion, this study aims to contribute to the following line of inquiry: how do post-disaster politics mould recovery efforts in a disaster-affected community, and how do disaster response and risk reduction efforts grapple with the complexity of accumulated conflict-disaster stress? Unlike the prevailing emphasis within the conflict-disaster literature on the nation state, this research brings into focus the urban realm where compounding stresses manifest most severely, while being cognisant of the national and global dynamics that shape the city.

Methodology

This research, grounded in an inductive approach, seeks to enrich the repertoire of case studies to advance a more nuanced way of thinking about the conflict-disaster interface. It utilised interviews and a thorough secondary data analysis to trace the framing of disaster management and to examine engagement with conflict through disaster recovery and risk reduction, entailing incompatible interests (potentially) inciting violence.

Nineteen semi-structured in-depth interviews (out of an initial sample of 40 requested interviews) were conducted between December 2018 and February 2019 with key informants involved in disaster response, resilience-building, and urban planning in Johannesburg. Specifically, interviews were held with current and former municipal and provincial government representatives across the main, relevant departments and with elected officials at the city and ward level (12), as well as with humanitarian aid workers and non-governmental organisation (NGO) personnel (7). The interviewees were identified through purposive snowball sampling as representing a variety of echelons of government, ranging from the local Ward 109, to Johannesburg's administrative Region E and municipal sectorial departments dealing with the city as a whole, to Gauteng province. Government interlocutors represented lead executives of the respective entities, as well as technical staff at the policy and implementation level with at least five, but usually significantly more, years of work experience. Non-governmental interlocutors represented the main humanitarian actors in South Africa, predominantly at the technical level, involved on the ground in Johannesburg and Setswetla. While this approach may lead to sampling bias, it constituted the most viable strategy to access relevant interlocutors in a very political setting. All informants provided written consent to the interview, and, at the request of the interviewees, their names and organisations were anonymised.

Taking the 2016 floods as the entry point to conversations meant that, owing to their relative recentness, the majority of policymakers and disaster response managers were still in office at the time of the fieldwork and could report on subsequent disaster

response and risk reduction efforts. The interviews also covered wider practices and experiences of disaster management in Johannesburg, DRR, and areas of tensions and competing or incompatible interests across different groups of actors and networks of collaboration. The interview material was analysed using descriptive and thematic coding to pinpoint common narratives of framing and understanding conflict and ways of dealing with it. Precisely, the interviews discussed those themes in the context of long-term planning for the community, housing, service access and migration, and disaster risk and humanitarian response.

In addition, the study relied on policy documents, including legal papers and government communications, as well as observations and photographic material obtained during site visits and through openly available satellite imagery. Together, they provide for a better contextual understanding of the policy and disaster response challenges. Nonetheless, this paper examines only a momentary and small part of the complex enterprise of disaster, humanitarian and civil society action in Johannesburg, which does not lend itself to systematic conclusions. Instead, it suggests an alternative perspective on local disaster governance, foregrounding considerations of conflict vis-à-vis compounding urban disaster vulnerability.

Compounded vulnerability in Setswetla

Since the end of the twentieth century, South African city dwellers have become increasingly exposed to a rapidly transforming urban environment, chronic violence, and mounting climatic variability, causing droughts and excessive rainfall—the latter, in turn, risk triggering infrastructural failure. Collectively, those hazards, paired with the exposure and particular vulnerability of Setswetla residents, put Johannesburg's urban governance to the test with regard to its ability to prepare for and respond to disaster and to support communities in their efforts to recover from the long-term socioeconomic impacts of flooding (Fatti and Patel, 2013; Culwick and Patel, 2017).

Setswetla residents comprise both rural migrants and immigrants from across the continent of Africa who have come to settle progressively along the Jukskei River in recent years (see Figure 2). Immigrants from distant places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Somalia, or Zimbabwe were primarily affected by the disaster of 2016. Given their lived experience of migration and informality, the residents confront socioeconomic and legal uncertainty and are subject to multiple place- and status-based vulnerabilities. They live not only in one of the most under-serviced and violent parts of Johannesburg, but also they occupy one of the most hazardous locations in and around Alexandra township.

Setswetla, located next to the Jukskei River, experiences a variety of locational environmental hazards. Industrial-scale illegal dumping narrows the riverbed and unequally elevates the riverbanks, diminishing the potential retention area on one side and diverting flood water to the lower side and into the settlement. The make-shift construction of small shacks and two-storey brick and mortar houses takes

Figure 2. Aerial image of Setswetla in 2013 (above) and 2018 (below)—to the left of the Jukskei River (indicating the growing settlement)



Source: Google, DigitalGlobe 2019.

place on landfill, a form of uncompacted rubble prone to landslides (see Figure 3). Owing to the lack of a sewer system, the city provided communal mobile toilets, but this turned out to be a contentious matter in the community: the toilets, on the one hand, are an improvement for the inhabitants, but, on the other, they are perceived to be a pull factor, attracting newcomers, and thus rendering the settlement even denser. In response to construction-driven demand, brick manufacturing plants operate along this river segment at the border of Setswetla, causing additional pollution. Further anthropogenic hazards are mining-related pollution and waste-related toxins. Many dwellers connect informally to the electricity grid and houses are built directly under the city-erected electricity pylons, both of which risk radiation exposure and severe fire. Just like other dense and informal settlements in rapidly urbanising parts of Johannesburg, shack fires occur often and with devastating impact, underlining the residents' marginality and insecurity (Murray, 2009).

Figure 3. Settlement along the Jukskei River around the pedestrian bridge south of Marlboro Drive—Setswetla (above); east bank (below)



Source: author.

The physical integrity of Setswetla residents is not only threatened by (infra)structural risks and toxicity, but also by chronic violence. In Alexandra, since 2008, and as recently as 2015, xenophobically-motivated mob violence has claimed the lives of several immigrants and displaced thousands of residents (Misago, 2016, pp. 76–79, 96–98). Although, relatively, Setswetla was spared the violence of 2008, it does not remain unaffected by the overall climate of xenophobia and ethnic division (Misago, 2011, pp. 93, 102–103). In addition, violent crime and a history of intercommunity tension, political violence, and distrust between state and citizens, leading to violent service protests and confrontations with security forces, shape urban governance and planning interventions in places such as Alexandra (*cf.* Abrahams, 2010; Misago and Landau, 2013). Intercommunity tensions and identity-based conflict surface also in the context of disaster relief, where questions of who belongs to Alexandra, who has the right to stay, and who is entitled to housing and material aid reinforce existing divides between long-term residents and newcomers, political party affiliations, and other ethnic or organisational attachments.

Against this backdrop, the severe rainfall from 9–10 November 2016 sparked what was later declared to be a national disaster. Major roads and the international airport were inundated, causing several fatalities. The accumulating masses of water led to flash floods, which burst the banks of the Jukskei River and washed away parts of Setswetla settlement. One child died and around 200 families lost their homes (*Alex News*, 2016; Pather, 2016; Tandwa, 2016). Johannesburg's Disaster Management Centre profiled almost 900 affected individuals, of whom less than 30 were South Africans.⁴ The immediate rescue operation by the city's Emergency Management Services launched the inflow of humanitarian aid, coordinated by the Disaster Management Centre. Other municipal departments, such as the Housing Department, subsequently provided assistance, including the allocation of emergency shelter and temporary accommodation, as the following section details.

Conflict management and post-disaster housing, tenure, and access to land

Despite a diversified menu of housing options for disaster victims, those that Setswetla residents can afford are limited. In the days after the floods of 2016, during the process to evacuate the community, temporary accommodation was primarily sought in the vicinity of the affected area. Municipal disaster managers are aware that emergency shelters, either in converted facilities such as church compounds, gymnasiums, or nursery schools, or newly constructed projects such as an NGO-built shelter in Setswetla, are likely to become permanent solutions—the latter has been accommodating around 70 households for several years. Indeed, disaster victims stay in the temporary accommodation owing to a lack of alternatives, which in some instances has generated new competing claims among different residents' groups, with adjacent resident communities, and between the state and the residents.⁵ The sense of

an overall shortage of housing and resources is a key determinant of humanitarian actors' framing of disaster governance.

Furthermore, complex informal tenure regimes and tenure insecurity, driven by clientelism and extortive local power structures, render disputes prone to violent escalation and threaten humanitarian response.⁶ Asked about the experience of navigating violence during daily operations at a site of disaster, Johannesburg's Acting Director of Disaster Management highlighted the necessity of his staff navigating different layers of conflict and potential violence:

When there are cases of threat, when actors are under any form of danger, we withdraw immediately. But sometimes you would find somewhere in those cases it is just domestic-related, sometimes it is group-related. There is group-related conflict. And in some cases . . . you would find that there are issues of mob justice that would take place and that would affect anybody in the proximity.⁷

Aware that disaster management might take place against a historical backdrop of prior conflict in the community, governmental and non-governmental relief providers employ a range of strategies to address emerging tensions and potential violent contestation, especially to ensure the safety of their humanitarian personnel. The provision of disaster aid features strategies such as the sequencing of aid, withdrawal, and abstention; recovery and risk reduction efforts echo such principles. The politics of shelter, housing, and long-term spatial planning for a community at risk, and the attempts to navigate, engage with, and evade identity-based community conflict, effectively sustain vulnerability and divisions in Setswetla.

Profiling, reconstruction, and self-recovery

The city of Johannesburg allocates shelter based on a needs assessment and the registration of disaster victims, which determine decisions about the type and quantity of relief and inform distribution strategies. Government of South Africa guidelines, in accordance with established humanitarian professional principles, such as the Sphere standards,⁸ are used in parallel with informal and ad hoc needs assessments. The latter rely on partnerships with local business or philanthropic contacts and community-affiliated volunteers, as well as consultation and delegation of decision-making power to local power structures, such as traditional leaders, community representatives, and ward councillors. While such practice facilitates the establishment of trust within the disaster-affected population, it also risks reinforcing pre-existing power structures, biases, and clientelism in the community.

Although humanitarian assistance and shelter are intended for all, irrespective of legal status,⁹ there are several challenges to disaster victims becoming beneficiaries of aid. The registration process itself risks exposing illegal immigrants and leads to arrest and expulsion, perceived as highly frustrating by Johannesburg's disaster managers as it jeopardises the humanitarian mission of creating safety for all.¹⁰ In addition,

policymakers confront backlash in communities when providing temporary accommodation indiscriminately. As one of Johannesburg's leading officials for public safety explained:

It comes from the local community. They would tell us: 'those are not South Africans, you cannot give them! You must give us first!'.¹¹

Around Setswetla and across the river in Extension 7, threats to burn down the houses of foreigners, rationalised by the alleged criminal activities of foreigners, such as identification (ID) fraud, are well-known to officials. Within the disaster-affected community, this division between residents translates into aggravated inequalities and a perpetuation of risk, as undocumented disaster victims—or those who lost their papers—are more likely to stay under the radar and not claim temporary emergency accommodation out of fear of violence or deportation.

Humanitarian profiling is extremely difficult in a setting characterised by widespread urban poverty. Disaster managers, therefore, bypass the dictate of a protocolled assessment of needs and identification of legitimate beneficiaries of aid. In a bid to mitigate intergroup tensions over competing needs and access to supplies, relief actors plan for a strategic oversupply of assistance; in other words, they provide more goods than a strict humanitarian evaluation would suggest. A representative of Johannesburg's Disaster Management Centre remarked:

Instead of rebuilding the 100 [houses] that were affected, you end up rebuilding 200 and the other 100 were not even affected, they are just new people making use of the opportunity.¹²

Humanitarian material oversupply aims to dissolve tensions momentarily, but it also suggests the perception that rent-seeking, legitimate or not, is validated by the planned oversupply.

Furthermore, disaster responders and urban safety managers are ambivalent as to the best strategy to pursue: relocation or in-situ housing reconstruction. Given the persisting risk, relocation is understood to be the better mitigation strategy overall, and reconstruction in-situ should thus be discouraged. Yet, disaster relief materials provided after a disaster can involve construction materials, encouraging rebuilding.¹³ Notably, such an approach seeks re-stabilisation, as the Head of the Gauteng Planning Division and Delivery Support Unit pointed out:

The first thing is: how do they recover? How do they ensure the continuity of their existence? The main thing is: you are living on the banks of the river, but what does government do to help you out? Here is the building material and rebuild your shack! What can we do? We don't have another short-term solution for you. People are happy to rebuild their shacks.¹⁴

On the one hand, this form of assisted self-response or shelter 'self-recovery' (Twigg and Mosel, 2018, p. 13f.) might promote the dignity and agency of the disaster-affected residents. On the other hand, it places a heavy burden on residents who are

physically and psychologically coping with the disaster and material and potentially human losses. What is more, it precludes any improved construction techniques, or more resistant materials, that would allow for a more disaster-resilient design. The latter, as the Acting Director of Disaster Management stated, is complicated further by the lack of land and property rights and insecure tenure, rendering any risk reduction measures infeasible:

*You want to do more, but at the same time, that land is illegally occupied. You want to relocate people, but you don't know where to. These are the challenges. Let's build back better, but how? Practically, it is not something that is done.*¹⁵

The alternative to reconstruction, relocation, is equally fraught with challenges. Demolition and eviction attempts are contentious, as a High Court judgement from 2016 demonstrates.¹⁶ Once a court order for eviction and demolition is obtained, the process of eviction, mitigating riots and navigating violence, and organising alternative forms of settlement and care-taking of residents, require further resources that are often, subject to local politics, not made available (*cf.* Chance, 2015a).

Among the community of residents, the prospect of rebuilding can evoke additional stresses, in conjunction with prevailing tenure insecurity. In the event of an emergency, people are less willing to leave the hazard zone out of fear of looting; similarly, they are pressed to return to the disaster zone to secure the tenure of their plots.¹⁷ The urgency to reclaim land in a post-disaster informal settlement not only raises potentially conflictual outcomes, but also incites risky behaviour and exposure to an imminent hazard. While some measures are taken to prevent the escalation of conflict over land plots, the risk of tension is very real. Notably, the handover of building materials is conditional on proof of residence, which is complicated in the aftermath of flooding. Not only might papers be lost, but the debris renders the recognition of former plots difficult. In the absence of formal, statutory documentation, a land claim within the disaster zone is verified in communal/informal ways, frequently involving the consent of neighbours and the community confirming prior residence at that site. Mediating neighbours' land claims and the resolution of disputes regarding plot demarcations is left to the community and a system of group-based validation of tenure process.

Migration, relocation, and the exposure to risk

The residents of Setswetla are commonly framed as a community in flux, without attachment to place. According to policymakers, language barriers, a constantly changing audience, and the lack of collective memory of danger jeopardise the effective communication of disaster risk—through community sensitisation and awareness-raising campaigns—and the community's ability to react and adapt to the threat of flooding. As highlighted in one interview, migration and informality are parameters that significantly alter the needs for effective DRR, especially given that the collective memory of past events is interrupted:

*Awareness that you bring in might be lost, because you got new tenants, new people. So, there ought to be a concerted effort to interact with the community all the time.*¹⁸

Time frames play a crucial role in structuring aid and in making sense of policy failure. DRR is mostly understood in terms of the removal of residents from below the flood line. On a few occasions over the past two decades, such as the floods of 2000, residents were resettled outside of the neighbourhood, in places as far as 25 kilometres away, such as Diepsloot. In another instance, some 60 households were moved inside Setswetla, into an NGO-sponsored temporary housing project within walking distance of the river. From the perspective of local policymakers, risk awareness contradicts the rationality of Setswetla residents, as ‘nobody wants to move’.¹⁹ For current residents, the settlement’s location in proximity to Alexandra and Sandton, to employment opportunities and basic services, is attractive. Despite the flood risk, Setswetla trumps distant alternatives. To prove the point, as Johannesburg officials repeatedly stressed, resettled residents were often to be found again in Setswetla weeks after their official relocation away from the hazard zone.

More generally, Setswetla residents are portrayed as distinct from the old-established Alexandra community. Their group identity is based not only on origin (urban versus rural/foreign), but also on the length of their stay in the city. These distinctions set up a spatial and identity-based dichotomy that enters the decision-making process of policymakers and relief actors on various levels during aid allocation. As an official from the municipal Housing Department elaborated, it is an uneasy response to relocate people from the flood zone, knowing that the residents of the adjacent established part of Alexandra have persevered in poor conditions for decades to be allocated better housing. In light of the persistent ‘jumping the line’ narrative, relocation would not only reward risky behaviour and create further incentives for imitators, but also would increase the sense of competition and create conflict with the neighbouring Alexandra community, as attested by negative commenting on social media and local radio.²⁰

Within the disaster management community, a frequent narrative suggests that the residents of Setswetla in part settle below the flood line, within the danger zone, in the expectation of aid.²¹ Government representatives predominantly see being at risk as a way of interacting with the government and receiving help—a presumption that was not evoked by non-governmental humanitarian actors. In view of South Africa’s complex housing allocation scheme within the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), government entities especially suspect migrants from rural South Africa of putting themselves ‘in harm’s way’ to precipitate access to government housing, to be ‘bumped up the list’ or to ‘jump the line’.²²

The narratives of risk exposure and competition for limited resources unfold against the backdrop of South Africa’s post-apartheid housing policy. As a former city official involved with the Alexandra Renewal Project explained based on experiences from the early 2000s:

*Traditionally, housing is allocated according to some formal, rational set of criteria. It might be a housing waiting list of some sort, or there is a sense that government has houses, and they allocate according to some set of rules. Of course, then, the demand for housing is huge and the systems of dealing with it can't meet expectations. What happens with disaster is that suddenly, you are forced to allocate resources to people that weren't at the top of any list, who are just parachuting from nowhere. This creates huge conflicts in communities. Sometimes, people even suspected that disasters were created in order to shorten, to jump queues. The communities themselves were sometimes very unsympathetic to disaster victims, simply because they felt it was a way in which they gained access to resources they couldn't get access to normally. That nexus between disaster and community conflict is ever present in that type of context.*²³

Disaster, as a vehicle to access services, bears potential for inter-community conflict, but also it shapes the relationship between service providers and the affected community. Humanitarian actors note a sense of entitlement, an expectation of aid, and adverse actions to obtain it, among the population they serve. Residents' sense of entitlement, as perceived by authorities, creates an 'enormous pressure for delivery' in the face of the prevalence of quickly escalating service delivery protests.²⁴ For instance, shack fires caused by arson, as the representative of a large humanitarian relief provider intimated,²⁵ might not only be the result of interpersonal conflict, but also instigated to alleviate an acute shortage of economic resources and in the expectation of relief materials. As was asserted in this interview, a yearly spike in fire incidents around Christmas might be 'deliberately caus[ed] because they know goods will come'.²⁶ As such, the fires point to patterns of violence in the community and to the employment of disaster as a politics (*cf.* Chance, 2015b, p. 405; see also Murray, 2009). Putting oneself 'in harm's way'²⁷ as a political tool to exert agency thus becomes a recurring motive from a municipal disaster governance perspective.

The Government of South Africa's potential surrender to such adverse logic, in providing disaster response in Setswetla, arguably deepens the divides between the newcomers and the traditional, old-established community of Alexandra, whose residents remain in the neighbourhood even over the holidays, because they have no home in the countryside.²⁸ Such framing reflects a dichotomy of new versus old residents; of foreign (rural, non-South African) versus urban, native residents; and of residents temporarily locating in a risk zone with no history and memory versus those settled in an established, functioning township with a long and proud anti-apartheid history. Indeed, settling in a risk zone is often understood as opportunity-driven behaviour: 'Setswetla is just the area where you park while you work in Sandton and then you go home. You have got a brick and mortar house in Giyani or somewhere in a rural area'.²⁹

What might increase the sense of competition further is the sense of Setswetla being, as policymakers note, the 'darling of the NGOs' and receiving most of the attention—more than when disasters happen in other parts of Alexandra.³⁰ In fact, beyond being the platform for humanitarian self-representation, political parties equally

stage political action, such as press conferences, in Setswetla. Its symbolism and political instrumentalisation, in part because its poverty is so perceptible in visual media broadcasting, may reinforce the hostility of the neighbouring community towards the settlement, disaster managers speculate.³¹ This observation echoes the focus on persistent political fractions, power interests, and party identity cleavages that provide a stronger explanation for inter-community conflict than the scarcity competition narrative alone (Misago, 2017).

In the absence of steady engagement geared towards DRR, the characterisation of Setswetla's residents as a constantly evolving group with no history and attachment of place reflects a logic of inevitable circularity, or, as has been suggested in a different context, a 'logic of convenience' (Carolini, 2021). A community in flux and the cyclical recurrence of natural hazards challenge the prevalent linear understanding of planning. They highlight the reiterative nature of planning for disaster, and the interrelatedness and complexity of this environment, since 'even if you solve one case successfully . . . as you resolve it, you open up the opportunity for another problem'.³²

Discussion: disaster response in the face of conflict

Constructing a risk community

Trading short-term stabilisation for long-term planning is a key element of disaster governance in informal settlements. Providing construction material to flood victims, left for self-recovery, encourages rebuilding below the flood line and leaves the community exposed to flash floods. With a steady influx of people, the rapidly densifying settlement is becoming more prone to accumulative stress and disaster. The spotlight on the prevention of violent conflict, stabilisation, and 'back to normal' precludes systemic spatial changes in the community. A phenomenon well studied in public policy, the sacrifice of long-term objectives for short-term gains and quick fixes constitutes the *modus operandi* of disaster governance, as performed by humanitarian and governmental actors.

In analysing changing paradigms of humanitarian practice, Hilhorst (2018) suggests the distinction between 'classical humanitarianism', based on an idea of exception and a focus on outside response, and the more recent 'resilience humanitarianism', based on the normalisation of a crisis and long-term, structural risk and the shifting focus to local communities as responders, rather than victims. Indeed, those paradigms may exist in parallel, are selective and imperfect, and yet fail to capture the realities of disaster governance emerging in Johannesburg. Post-disaster interventions occur within the classical paradigm of short-term interventionism and entail an awareness of the cyclical nature and permanency of the emergency that extends across the disaster-affected community and into adjacent communities. Nonetheless, as a study of disaster management in Johannesburg reveals, the involved humanitarian agencies and local actors 'place themselves outside of the complex institutional realities in the area of intervention', while of course being fundamentally embedded in,

and shaping, the landscape of aid delivery (Hilhorst, 2018, p. 8). This rhetorical distancing from Setswetla and the space of disaster allows governmental actors to construct an understanding of the relationship between state and residents, a 'disaster citizenship' based on the transactional reality of exposure to risk in exchange for care.

In line with a logic of inevitability and circularity, the different urban actors operating within the humanitarian space confine their action to their respective institutional mandates. This restraint leads to a 'siloing' of aid into defined temporalities of, on the one hand, emergency management and, on the other, long-term development approaches to DRR that are detached from emergency management. Short-term humanitarian priorities for disaster management and public safety officials connect only intermittently with the predominant urban development goals of the municipal Housing Department, the Johannesburg Development Agency, Johannesburg's infrastructure services, including City Power, Johannesburg Water, the Department of Transport, and Pikitup (the city's waste management service), or the Department of Social Development. A multitude of design proposals have come and gone, including the design of houses on stilts, river rectification, or flood line demarcation beacons. The absence of longer-term spatial planning reiterates the deeply embedded politics that challenge its practice. In addition, the segmentation of disaster governance complicates the mobilisation of disaster response funds. Infrastructural solutions require budgetary backing and multi-year planning, rendering them more difficult to pursue than the supply of ad hoc mobile aid interventions.

Vulnerability in Setswetla is nurtured by a paradigm of disaster governance that precludes effective disaster mitigation. The occupation of hazardous urban sites—owing to a lack of choice, to be sure—exacerbates spatial and social vulnerability and perpetuates disaster risk. In contrast to the conceptualisation of 'disaster citizenship' as a citizen–state relationship claimed and shaped by citizens (Remes, 2016, p. 20) or a realm of interaction (Siddiqi, 2018b; Siddiqi and Canuday, 2018), the Setswetla example suggests that the disaster citizen is produced by local authorities and disaster managers, and in part even by old-established residents of greater Alexandra. The disengagement from long-term planning shapes and validates a relationship between citizens and government that relies, in the eyes of disaster responders, on exposure to disaster risk in return for care. Contrary to predominant framing by public officials, one needs to question the presented logic of risk-seeking by residents. As some interviewees have equally underlined, living in Setswetla is the result of an evaluation of a variety of risks and the management of 'complex asset portfolios' (Moser, 1998, p. 1).

The flash floods, ostensibly a minor and recurring event of augmented vulnerability and stress in the life of an informal settlement's resident, embodies the very complexity of planning and DRR in the context of multi-scalar spatial politics. Settlements such as Setswetla have been portrayed as a 'battleground . . . pitting municipal authorities . . . against homeless squatters' (Murray, 2009, p. 175). Indeed, as the interviews revealed, the Government of South Africa frequently frames response efforts using a security paradigm in which criminality and violence obstruct the relief operation, necessitating, therefore, a partnership with the Johannesburg Metropolitan Police

Department. According to a senior public safety official, the latter is one of the most important collaborators during aid provision and the supervision of temporary emergency accommodation.³³ The often military connotation of disaster management, including ‘crowd control’, ‘retreat’, or ‘local allies’, not only reflects a reverberation of apartheid-era ‘civil protection’ (*cf.* Civil Protection Act, 1977), but also a perceived sense of mutual distrust between residents and humanitarian actors. In the context of prevailing intercommunity and xenophobic tensions in Alexandra (*cf.* Bonner and Nieftagodien, 2008, p. 417), disaster recovery and reconstruction efforts evolve on top of a complex history of struggle, violence, and migration. In relation to this awareness, local actors aim to prevent violent conflict in the moment of disaster, and, in so doing, neglect the long-term, systemic issues that perpetuate vulnerability.

The politics of disaster

The way in which policymakers and humanitarian actors engage with conflict—and seek to prevent violence—significantly alters the terms of disaster management: how relief is thought of, and aid is structured and delivered. In particular, the focus on short-term interventions and the oversupply of aid suggests that disaster managers eschew the politics of reducing the two-fold vulnerability of disaster and conflict. Not only are the identity conflicts between long-term residents and newcomers perhaps too political for humanitarian actors, but also the causes of vulnerability and hazard exposure themselves are political, too, and tightly related to the conflictual divides in the communities and society at large. In abstaining from the political questions, relief actors (knowingly) perpetuate drivers of conflict and disaster vulnerability.

The inquiry into the management of compounding vulnerability in the realm of disaster often evoked a paradoxical negation of the possibility of conflict paired with a plethora of preventive action to thwart their escalation. While increased violence as a direct outcome of disaster has only been reported to a limited extent by the interviewees, those individuals involved in disaster response and recovery are conscious of navigating a complicated set of competing interests during relief and recovery operations. Many of the interviewees referred to the marginalisation and poverty of those affected by disaster. In particular, a number of government representatives suggested that the victims’ overall precariousness and trauma would unite communities because of their shared experience of poverty. Alternatively, it was intimated by the Head of the Gauteng Planning Division and Delivery Support Unit that the communities would ‘not [be] in a fighting mood’ in the aftermath of a disaster owing to the chronic stress.³⁴ Others, including members of organisations providing disaster relief, reported tense situations during distribution, accusations of unfair treatment, jumping the line, and general xenophobia in and around Setswetla. The prospect and possibility of violent conflict become more important in shaping disaster governance than actual violence.

The everyday, and at times contradictory, politics of disaster management highlight the political construction of disaster, vulnerability, and risk that render DRR unattainable. Urban actors and institutions, and their differing tasks and mandates

across vertical and horizontal levels of government, significantly influence post-disaster shelter and emergency housing management. Their competing priorities and institutional mandates severely hamper long-term recovery and resilience. In this light, the study echoes Siddiqi's (2018a, p. S168) assertion that 'disasters in conflict areas are constructed, created, and sustained in the pursuit of *political* goals'. Self-recovery advocacy and the government's disengagement from long-term planning is motivated by a keen awareness of the very conflictual politics involved in recovery and risk reduction. Urban disaster institutions and actors are intricately interlinked in producing Setswetla as a site of recurring disaster. Put differently, the very nature of disaster management creates and perpetuates vulnerability and the risk of communal violence.

An urban studies perspective on the conflict–disaster nexus

The Setswetla settlement exemplifies the complexities of urbanism in South Africa's townships and the everyday politics of exclusion. A place-based approach in this study permitted attention to be paid to the typology of places exposed to disaster and conflict and its linkages to compounded vulnerability and informality. Both the 'flood line' and the 'informal settlement' become key terms that define and localise the compounding effects of conflict and disaster during the design and implementation of policies, and in disaster governance at large. They become paradigms for disaster governance and mould the relationship that disaster managers have with the community. In the face of communal divides and chronic violence, the momentariness claimed by the disaster event becomes a repetitive, cyclical challenge in the framework of vulnerability and spatial inequality. A Johannesburg city official highlighted the need to rethink planning paradigms in order to reduce the compounding of vulnerability due to informality:

*Even though, politically, in Johannesburg in particular, there is a sense that everything must become formal. As officials, we have that mindset, but probably it will take time. In fact, we see that informality is expanding. So, some answer to the problem is to consistently engage with the community—knowing that the community is at risk.*³⁵

Rendered visible in moments of disaster and recovery is the very multidimensional nature of spatial inequality, based on a history of marginalisation and structural violence, that materialises across various levels of urban governance and in the affected community. In comparison to the focus of humanitarian studies on disaster response in situations of armed conflict, manifestations of compounding socio-spatial vulnerability and violence have received significantly less attention in the field of disaster recovery and DRR (Peters and Peters, 2018, p. 2). The multiple forms of framing divides, as competing interests, historical group identities, and constructed stereotypes, as well as the strategies for dealing with violence in the urban context, require a rethink of the temporal constraints that have so far inhibited disaster studies to embrace fully the role of conflict, beyond the event-based 'war', in disaster governance.

The variety of conflicts on the urban scale suggests reconsidering the meaning of conflict-sensitive disaster recovery. The current practice of conflict-sensitive humanitarian aid is insufficient to address the complexity of an urban environment that necessitates a planning approach. Tackling those pushed-down-the-line community conflicts constitutes the most imminent challenge to effective urban disaster management and risk reduction policy and practice. Given the overall presence of multiple conflictive relationships, as well as competing mandates and politics in disaster governance, humanitarian and municipal institutions do engage hesitantly with conflict mediation, brushing off peacebuilding completely. Questions regarding entitlement to aid and protection, however, as this study shows, are at the core of disaster management in locations that are marked by complex settlement structures, informality, and migration. In view of accumulating risk and the community's vulnerability, disaster recovery ought to account for identity-based conflict and explore opportunities for conflict mediation and peacebuilding. This requires a longer-term scope for linking recovery to urban planning, and foregrounding questions of equity and distributive justice in aid. It also affirms the calls to rethink categories of 'informality', 'illegality', and 'humanitarianism' in the urban setting, and in conjunction with histories of identity-based and political conflict (*cf.* Tierney, 2012, pp. 346–349). If omitted, the disaster and subsequent recovery efforts might reinforce pre-existing conflictive divides and disempower marginalised communities even further, as is currently happening in Setswetla.

Conclusion

This research was motivated by the lack of consideration of how, in the face of coinciding histories of violent conflict and disaster, urban policymakers and disaster managers take into account and navigate the present complexity of diverging institutional mandates and local interests in a disaster-affected community. On the one hand, Setswetla's experience of flooding, despite the intensity of its compounding stresses, is emblematic of the intricate connection between spatial inequality and disaster risk across Johannesburg. On the other hand, taking a place-based approach, centring on a different set of actors, and questioning temporal constructs, suggests a context-specific paradigm of disaster governance for urban actors. The latter entails the navigation of communal and urban violence and conflicting interests in the context of disasters, which works well in the short term. Indeed, the study recommends that policymakers and humanitarian actors conceive of the conflict-disaster nexus as an inevitable outcome of the socio-spatial landscape of Johannesburg. While conflict is understood as a by-product of disaster and a driver of vulnerability, an escalation of conflict and violence, in contrast, can be prevented by carefully designing the temporal, spatial, and material parameters of disaster management. Designing those parameters, and pursuing disaster management, accordingly, constitutes the 'everyday politics' of disaster governance that create the very relationship between

disaster managers and affected communities, and render DRR a remote, if not unattainable, objective.

The local strategies of dealing with compounding vulnerability in the face of identity-based conflict, observed in this study, raise epistemological questions of the urban conflict–disaster nexus that have remained largely unaddressed. The study of Setswetla posits a critical inquiry into how scholarship frames the conflict–disaster nexus in theory and practice. It encourages complicating the linkage further to consider heterodox planning theory and global Southern urbanism. In view of growing recognition of similar challenges of rapid urbanisation, migration, informality, and violence across the Global South, and despite Johannesburg’s idiosyncratic apartheid history, insights into the current conditions of marginalised settlements and intra-community violence can resonate with disaster-prone urban areas more widely. Such a lens also acknowledges the very distinct practices and forms of framing of disaster and conflict, and thus a very peculiar ontology of the conflict–disaster nexus.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Endnotes

¹ Also transcribed as Sejwetla, Seswetla, and Setjwetla.

² Some might debate South Africa’s categorisation as a post-war country, yet it fits the criteria of having experienced civil war according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program. For more information, see <https://ucdp.uu.se/#country/560> (last accessed on 6 July 2021).

- ³ It is widely agreed that research and practice alike increasingly need to confront climate change-related impacts on cities and consequent disasters affecting the urban environment. Yet, contrary to prevailing attention to large-scale disasters, the majority of them, especially floods, are of small magnitude. Nonetheless, they cause disruption and constitute a threat to the life and well-being of urban communities. More importantly, floods happen more frequently in the same location, and they are more common but reported less (Pelling and Wisner, 2009, pp. 4, 32–34). To direct the focus to smaller, but more frequent events can yield insights into a type of policy challenge of binding resources and politics to the short run, which is likely to occur more regularly in the future, particularly in its compounding form when coinciding with histories of conflict.
- ⁴ Author interview, 16 January 2019.
- ⁵ Author interviews with a senior city official, 22 January 2019, and a local politician, 11 January 2019.
- ⁶ Author interviews with representatives of a humanitarian organisation, 15 January 2019, a local politician, 11 January 2019, and a senior disaster management official, 16 January 2019.
- ⁷ Author interview, 16 January 2019.
- ⁸ These provide a set of principles and minimum standards for humanitarian response, specifically with regard to food, healthcare, shelter and housing, and water, sanitation and hygiene. For more information, see <https://spherestandards.org/humanitarian-standards/> (last accessed on 7 July 2021).
- ⁹ While non-nationals can only access emergency housing, South Africans benefit from long-term housing aid through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP).
- ¹⁰ The challenges of providing disaster relief to undocumented immigrants has also been discussed in the context of the United States following the experience of Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy that hit urban centres with a large immigrant population in 2005 and 2012, respectively (Dawson, 2017, p. 249).
- ¹¹ Author interview, 31 January 2019.
- ¹² Author interview, 16 January 2019.
- ¹³ Author interviews with an international NGO representative, 28 January 2019, and a Region E city official, 30 January 2019.
- ¹⁴ Author interview, 8 January 2019.
- ¹⁵ Author interview, 16 January 2019.
- ¹⁶ Residents of Setswetla Informal Settlement vs. City of Johannesburg: Department Housing, Region E (Case No. 11079/2016), High Court of South Africa, Gauteng Local Division, Johannesburg.
- ¹⁷ Author interviews with a city official, 1 February 2019, and a member of the mayoral committee, 31 January 2019.
- ¹⁸ Author interview with a city official, 1 February 2019.
- ¹⁹ Author interview with a member of the mayoral committee, 31 January 2019.
- ²⁰ Author interviews with a local politician, 11 January 2019, and a thinktank representative, 11 January 2019.
- ²¹ Author interviews with a humanitarian NGO, 29 January 2019, and a city official, 30 January 2019.
- ²² Author interview with a senior city official, 22 January 2019.
- ²³ Author interview, 11 December 2018.
- ²⁴ Author interview with the Head of the Gauteng Planning Division and Delivery Support Unit, 8 January 2019.
- ²⁵ Author interview, 15 January 2019.
- ²⁶ Author interview, 15 January 2019.
- ²⁷ Author interview with a senior city official, 22 January 2019.
- ²⁸ Author interview with a local politician, 11 January 2019.
- ²⁹ Author interview with a local politician, 11 January 2019.
- ³⁰ Author interview with a local politician, 11 January 2019.
- ³¹ Author interview with a local politician, 11 January 2019.

³² Author interview with a senior disaster management official, 16 January 2019.

³³ Author interview, 31 January 2019.

³⁴ Author interview, 8 January 2019.

³⁵ Author interview, 1 February 2019.

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