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Conflicts as Disasters

Translations of Violent Conflict in Post-apartheid South Africa?

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Introduction

Throughout the 1980s and until the early 1990s, thousands of Mozambicans fled the civil war raging in their country for South Africa. The apartheid regime of South Africa reacted by forcefully and violently repatriating the Mozambican refugees as ‘illegal aliens’ (Wa Kabwe-Segatti 2002). This militarised and politicised response to the population displacement that resulted from violent conflict was symptomatic of the politics of state violence under apartheid. Fifteen years later, in May 2008, when xenophobic violence was ignited throughout South Africa, the post-apartheid government provided humanitarian assistance and set up temporary refugee camps to offer some protection to the thousands of displaced victims (Igglesten, Polzer, and Monson 2009). In brief, it came to manage a ‘disaster’, instead of responding with ‘arms’ to this violent conflict. As a new democracy, South Africa had experienced a range of institutional transformations over the preceding few years, but this did not necessarily entail institutions involved in such emergency situations. The nature of conflict had also changed: from civil strife to daily violence and social protest (Harris 2003), rooted in a contention about the politics of the state and continuous inequality and exclusion (Alexander 2010). The emergence of violent conflict on a large scale thus posed a serious challenge to government and society in the new South Africa: who should deal with such situations, and what should be done?

This chapter seeks to examine why the government managed this 2008 crisis as a disaster, in particular by using tools and techniques of disaster management, which came to be the institution employed to protect the population against disruptive events. It is puzzling that disaster management, which was developed under apartheid to protect white South Africans from black ‘threats’, would turn into a mechanism – though limited in many ways – to protect black foreigners against the high level of xenophobia and racism in South Africa

¹ The author wishes to thank the French Institute of South Africa for its financial, logistical and intellectual support.

(Wa Kabwe-Segatti 2008). Moreover disaster management is today mainly concerned with providing relief and taking preventive measures against floods, fires, and major accidents. In this chapter I suggest that the transformation of both the institution and the situation it seeks to address took place in the context of a democratic transition, such that social disruption eventually came to be seen as disaster. A double translation is at stake here: one in the institutions dealing with the protection of civilians that led to the establishment of 'disaster management', and another translation in the object of this protection. This is from a large-scale social conflict to a disaster, which raises questions about the social and political implications of this translation.

In this regard, approaching disaster management as a 'travelling model' is helpful for two reasons. On the one hand, disaster management is a global model, promoted by various international organisations, institutionalised and internationalised under the aegis of the United Nations since the 1990s. Since then it has been supported and circulated widely within various networks of expertise and state agencies (Revet 2009). This model mainly consists in the rationalisation of the management of disasters within a policy framework, as well as their prevention through the reduction of risks and vulnerabilities (Revet 2010). The new South African state adopted this model in the course of its democratisation process, which ultimately led to a redefinition of what constitutes a disaster and how disasters should be dealt with. This poses an initial question: how were institutions of disaster management in South Africa, originally designed to respond to internal conflict under apartheid politics, transformed in the course of redefining disaster in the semantics of democratisation processes, and by reshaping the notion of 'protection of individuals from social disruption' in respect to a global shift in conceptualising disasters?

Looking at disaster management as a travelling model enables us to move beyond a critique of the global governance of disasters as a terrain for the expression of Western power (Duffield 2001). Instead the attention shifts to an assessment of transformations on the ground, the global design of policies, and how the translation of these policies into local institutions may alter the understanding of concrete social conflicts. Following this theoretical stance, I will argue that the redefinition of the disaster policy led to a translation of conflict into disaster that paradoxically made it impossible to actually address the conflict that is the political contention of the social disruption produced by the violence and the displacement of population.

The chapter has two parts – the first considers how, in an attempt to depart from the apartheid notion of conflict, disaster management was designed as a new form of population protection after 1994; the second part looks at how

conflict came to be seen as disaster in the case of xenophobic violence. The chapter also examines the consequences of this social reordering: what does it mean to frame such a complex situation as a disaster? What is made visible or invisible by introducing a new frame? And what are the political consequences?

From Conflict to Disaster: Transforming the Protection of Civilians from Disruption

Under apartheid, the protection of civilians was a distinct political instrument of the state, mainly orientated towards the defence of the 'white' population. The democratic transition implied a transformation of this institution to include the entire population and to change its scope from security in times of conflict, to the protection of the public. The remaking of the policy happened in parallel with a global shift that institutionalised and internationalised 'disaster (risk) reduction' policies, which promoted an understanding of disasters as a preventable situation of disruption. In this respect this section seeks to situate the modalities and the implications of the circulation of disaster (risk) management models in relation with the policy changes in South Africa.

Before 1994, the protection of civilians from major events was the responsibility of Civil Defence, a civilian body under control of the military, located at the local level.² Although its origins can be traced back to the Second World War, it was revitalised in 1977 with the Civil Protection Act as a response to the intensification of conflict after the 1976 Soweto uprising. It sought to ensure the coordination of local emergency services, such as ambulance, police and army, and relied upon the mobilisation of 'Civil Defence Organisations', commando-like groups of volunteers. Its development during the 1980s was characterised by militarisation as it was part of the 'National Security Management System' that controlled the whole country (Seegers 1991). Most members came from the security sector and it was mainly led by the military. A related feature was the politicisation of civil defence, as it was more concerned with fighting 'terrorism' (activities by organisations involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, such as the African National Congress) than assisting victims of any sort of disaster, which was provided by humanitarian organisations. One of the 'old

2 Historical sources include Andre De Villiers Smit, "South African Civil Defence Organisations and Administration with particular reference to the Cape Peninsula," master's thesis in Public Administration, University of Cape Town, 1991; Jacob Van der Westhuizen, *Management Course in Civil Defence*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1996.

guys' – that is a former member of the security sector – when asked about disasters in the townships, explained that “it was their problem, they were on their own. We didn't deal with all those squatters.” Protection and the understanding of disasters were thus deeply embedded in armed defence, conflict, and security issues in times of war. This brief historical account of civil defence shows how this function of the apartheid state developed in close relation with a political conflict which required the state to extend the protection of its citizens, and relied on a short-sighted vision of disaster as resulting from violent attacks. Yet, an unintended consequence of this development was the professionalisation of civil defence and the growth of a state agency specialised in handling disruptive situations.

In 1990, as times changed, the organisation was renamed 'Civil Protection' in an initial attempt to move away from the military associations. Beyond the state, several actors saw the necessity of rethinking disasters and extending the protection of individuals under a possible democratic regime. As a severe drought hit Southern Africa between 1992 and 1993 bringing millions to the verge of a famine, the necessity of transforming civil defence to include natural disasters became apparent; particularly where they might have been preventable had a policy been in place to assess the risks. This rethinking would include moving from the focus on security issues linked to conflict towards a more developmental approach, taking into account the root causes of disasters and the vulnerability of people (Vogel 1998). This reorientation in conceptualising disasters was made possible by forums and associations that were set up in the early 1990s to help govern the country in the interregnum between the previous government that was losing its legitimacy and the new democratic government that was not yet in place. In particular, it enabled political activists from the party that would lead the future government, the African National Congress (ANC), to become acquainted with disaster management experts and scientists.

Designing Disaster Management

In this section, I offer an analysis of the process of translating disaster management into the South African context, by asking how this specific knowledge was introduced, and reshaped understandings of 'disaster'. What did it mean to introduce disaster management in the South African political institutions, and in particular what kind of shift did it bring about in the management of disasters? The travel of the model of disaster management captures the shaping as part of a policy mobility process, as Peck and Theodore argue (2010).

In this respect, disaster management constitutes a field made up of 'adaptive connections' between policy actors, experts, scientists and international organisations, within which devices, norms, guidelines and knowledge circulate that ultimately make up policies (Revet 2009). Drawing on these elaborations, this section will examine the interactions and the connections between the democratic transition in South Africa and the global transformation that promotes disaster prevention through the management of risks and vulnerabilities.

The Disaster Connection: Experts and Intermediary Political Actors

As Behrends, Park and Rottenburg underline in the introductory chapters, brokers play an important role in the translation of models as they facilitate the introduction of new ideas in a local context, while at the same time facilitating their local anchoring. In the field of disaster management, the main brokers are experts and intermediary political actors who are at the core of the legislative process. The connection between these two worlds is precisely what enabled the progressive transformation of civil protection and explains the orientation towards disaster management. Looking at the trajectory of these actors also gives an insight to the embodiment of disaster management: what does disaster mean and for whom?

The entire legislative process was strongly influenced by the presence of disaster experts and scientists who collaborated in putting together teams and advisory panels. These experts were present from the first negotiations to provide ideas, state-of-the-art theories and international best practices. All of them were both local and global experts; that is they participated in global networks of knowledge and at the same were strongly rooted in the South African context. For example, two out of three people in the team drafting the White Paper were local academics and the third was a government expert in agriculture. They had in common a geographical and technical background, including some international experience. International disaster expert **AB** is an exemplary case (Interview A). She was trained in refugee health, with extensive experience in international organisations, and came to South Africa as a Red Cross adviser during the 1992 drought. She was representative for what Haas terms 'epistemic community' in the realm of disaster management (Haas 1992). She had participated at the launch of the UN's 'International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction' and migrated from crisis to crisis with her global expertise in the field. She then settled in South Africa and founded a disaster management programme at a leading university. She thus brought important expertise and experiences with standardised practices, and at the same time developed disaster knowledge specific to South Africa. **AB**'s itinerary reveals

expert A. as indicated in the list of interviews at the end of the chapter (and NOT AB)

A.

how the diffusion of global norms relies on their translation and local adaptation, in particular by local experts who play a central role in bringing abstract knowledge down to earth (Cooper and Packard 1998), but also how the production of localised systems of knowledge participate in the making of these global norms (Shaffer et al. 2009). This conjunction worked partly because the expertise mobilised was anchored in a social science perspective that advocated a developmental approach to disasters that converged with the political ambitions of the reformers.

Yet, this expertise was only able to penetrate political institutions by being mediated by political actors. That is by entrepreneurial reformers who are able to translate progressive expertise into the ANC programme – disaster management favoured the protection of ‘the most vulnerable from the risks of disasters’ and likened this group with ‘poor blacks’ in the South African context. These political actors also provided the tools to reform and reorient the old apartheid state. In this political brokerage, a particularly important person was ~~CF~~, a highly influential member of the ANC, who led the process from 1993 until 1999, and had become acquainted with disaster management issues during the drought through her acquaintance with the aforementioned expert. Consequently, ~~CF~~ was a key intermediary capable of understanding and transferring disaster management knowledge, using her political skills to negotiate with the former administration and to mobilise experts during the legislative process. Nonetheless, as a high-profile politician, she also became aware of the necessity of the former ANC rebels acquiring legitimacy in the eyes of the international community by aligning policies with global standards, which also facilitated the dismissal of internal opposition from the apartheid defenders (Interview B).

A. B.

These examples of ~~AB~~ and ~~CF~~ should give an idea of the very small interlocked network that formed the core of the legislative process in the institutionalisation of the Southern Africa Disaster Reduction Agency. This forum provided a neutral space to gather a variety of ‘stakeholders’ in the democratisation process, who were also aiming at promoting the relevance of disaster management for South Africa. Its committees comprised selected government members, NGOs, community members, ‘civics’,³ academics, professionals (technical experts in disaster management) who all shared progressive values or at least a willingness to change. This forum facilitated the explanation of the model through numerous workshops and its legitimating and diffusion across different political spheres.

3 Civics were township residents’ associations very much involved in the struggle against apartheid in the 1980s.

indicated B. in the list of interview

B.

Shaping the Law: Adapting a Global Model of Disaster Management

With the establishment of this network of actors, the development of disaster management knowledge in South Africa, which in turn profoundly shaped the South African legislation, was deeply enmeshed with global processes. In particular, disaster management consists of a body of knowledge which originates in a heterogeneous field of research developed in the 1970s, focusing on the human causes of disasters and its risks. Social scientists were crucial in promoting this research and were central in shifting global policies from an overly technical approach and a narrow definition of natural disasters (Revet 2011). This body of research emphasised better prevention of disasters, not only by enhancing its management, but more importantly by preventing its effects through the development and the reduction of risks and vulnerabilities. This form of disaster management was institutionalised during the 1990s within the UN International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters, putting disasters on the global agenda and pushing for global policy changes. The creation the UN organisation International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR) in 1999 was the starting point of a new trend in disaster management across international organisations through competitive imitation and the circulation of experts (Revet 2009). Today, most international organisations have adopted disaster management programmes, including the United Nations Environment Programme, the United Nations Development Programme, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, UN-Habitat, the World Bank, and organisations such as the Davos Economic Forum and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Three characteristics stand out in the travel of the disaster management model. It promotes a shift from short-sighted reactions to long-term prevention, which correlates with a new focus on prevention by reducing risks and vulnerabilities. Its intellectual apparatus, based on science and ‘proper’ research is coupled with an important set of disaster management techniques and tools, such as early warning systems, which circulate easily and are moreover adopted without difficulty by states. These models and techniques carry a new conception of security, focused on the ‘human’ element as opposed to state security (Revet 2010). Nonetheless it is hard to identify a single model and it is subject to different interpretations – some focusing on the techniques, others more rooted in social sciences and countries of the South – which stress vulnerability as a prime factor and thus advance the respective policies.

In 1994, when the ANC came into power, the disaster management agenda was ready to be launched. The reform was initiated by the Department of Constitutional Development Reform, which led first to a review of existing mechanisms and some preliminary propositions (the Green Paper of 1998).

Then, after a broad consultation process leading to a legislative proposal (the White Paper of 1999) developed later to the promulgation of the Disaster Management Act in 2003. An implementation phase followed, consisting of the establishment of disaster management centres at the provincial and local levels and the creation of guidelines, frameworks, and risk analysis. This model, bringing together institutional reforms in democratisation processes and a small epistemic disaster management community, produced a striking similarity between national legislation and international vocabulary, as Table 1 shows.

Redefining Disasters?

Following the international trend, promoters of disaster management in South Africa argued for a 'paradigm shift'. This model based on the canonical 'disaster management cycle' used the technical and apparently neutral re-conceptualisation (managing disaster risks rather than responding to disasters) to promote a change within governments which was actually of a political nature: recognising the role of societal institutions in producing disasters was in 1994 a highly political act as it implicitly underlined the role of the apartheid government in engineering a 'disastrous situation' in black communities. This politicisation explains that the developmental turn of disaster management was perceived as a 'lackadaisical approach'⁴ by the Civil Protection Association in 1994. Therefore, the design of the new institutions required a transformation that was broader than just a disaster management plan, it meant dealing with 'vulnerabilities', 'mitigating risks' and being part of a developmental state.

What did it entail from the point of view of the state? Three main issues may be underlined here. First of all, promoters of disaster management argued for a shift from response towards prevention meaning that policies had to aim at preventing disasters by preparing for them and reducing their possible occurrence. This was to be done by the introduction of risk and vulnerability assessment, mitigation, and preparation policies. Second, it led to re-orientating the focus towards 'real' disasters – those faced daily by the most vulnerable, such as fire and floods (Murray 2009) – and more generally to prepare for any kind of threat. Finally, and somewhat more difficult, this change had to be put into practice, which was a real challenge given the fact that members of the previous administration – trained in civil defence – remained in their positions as the transition agreement required a continuity in institutions. A lengthy and chaotic reorganisation of local government took place, which included a shift from civil defence to disaster management centres accompanied by training former and new disaster managers. Nonetheless, this transition was

⁴ SADRA archive, UNISA.

TABLE 1 *Definitions in disaster management language across borders.*

	South African Legislation	UN Vocabulary
Disaster	A progressive or sudden, <i>widespread</i> or localised, natural or human-caused occurrence which: causes or threatens to cause disease, or damage to <i>property, infrastructure</i> or the <i>environment</i> , or a disruption of the life of a <i>community</i> ; and is of a magnitude that <i>exceeds the ability of those affected by the disaster to cope with its effects using only their own resources.</i>	A <i>serious disruption</i> of the functioning of a <i>community</i> or a society causing <i>widespread human, material, economic or environmental</i> losses which <i>exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources.</i>
Disaster Management	A <i>continuous and integrated multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary process</i> of planning and implementation of measures aimed at (a) <i>preventing or reducing the risk of disasters</i> ; (b) <i>mitigating</i> the severity or consequences of disasters; (c) <i>emergency preparedness</i> ; (d) a rapid and effective <i>response</i> to disasters; and (e) post-disaster <i>recovery</i> and rehabilitation.	<i>Disaster risk management</i> : systematic process of using administrative directives, organisations, and operational skills and capacities to implement strategies, policies and improved coping capacities in order to <i>lessen the adverse impacts of hazards and the possibility of disaster.</i> <i>Emergency management</i> : The organisation and management of resources and responsibilities for addressing all aspects of <i>emergencies</i> , in particular <i>preparedness, response</i> and initial <i>recovery</i> steps.
Vulnerability	'Vulnerability' means the degree to which an individual, a household, a <i>community</i> or an area may be <i>adversely affected by a disaster.</i>	The conditions determined by physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes, which <i>increase the susceptibility of a community to the impact of hazards.</i>

Sources: Disaster Management Act, 2002 and UNISDR terminology; <http://www.unisdr.or>.

incomplete, because of limited resources, reluctance on the part of members of the old security apparatus, and a range of organisational difficulties associated with the weak position of disaster management within overall government structures. The translation of disaster management models into practices is thus still far from being achieved.

Conflict as Disaster: The 2008 Xenophobic Violence

Having shown how disaster management sought to depart from previous understandings of social disruption and how it attempted to depart from the security perspective on conflict, the following case study describes the translation of conflict into disaster. The 2008 xenophobic violence constitutes a remarkable incident ~~as there was no reason to call this violence a disaster~~. It was not only the worst episode of collective violence since 1994, but was also a polemical conflict in the South African context because of the 'xenophobic' discourse which highlighted the contradictions of the 'rainbow nation' and the reluctance of the government to address the problems faced by migrants (Landau 2012). In the midst of the chaotic outburst of xenophobic violence, it was unclear how this conflict would be understood and dealt with. And more importantly, how the most serious eruption of violence since the end of apartheid came to be defined as a disaster rather than an emergency or purely a security issue. After considering how this issue was seen prior to 2008, I will look at how the xenophobic violence came to be framed as a disaster, and the consequences of this translation on the perception and the management of the conflict.

this edited phrase is highly problematic, it is a mis-understanding of the situation and the paper. It cannot be said that there was no reason to call the situation a disaster. the original phrase stated : "as there was nothing obvious in calling this situation a disaster." obvious underlines the difficulties of the definition, and insists on the framing process, but does not dismiss the 40 deads and 200 000 displaced as "no reason to call the situation a disaster"

Are Civil Unrest and Refugees Objects of Disasters?

Although the initial focus of disaster management at the global level was on natural disasters, what constitutes a disaster remains an open question. The answer depends on local interpretations. The contested definition of disaster is reflected in debates about the specificities of the African continent in relation to the UN's International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). Some experts in disaster management regretted that the African continent was not more central during the early discussions of the IDNDR and noted that in the final draft document the word natural was put in brackets and thus allowing some flexibility. The results of violence, they argued, must be considered a major concern in disaster management in South Africa and must therefore

remain on the agenda.⁵ The conceptualisation in terms of natural disasters had taken over in the 1980s because of the dominance of natural science expertise. However, from the mid-1990s, the insistence on the social nature of risks enabled an extension of its scope towards an inclusion of everyday disasters. For example, prominent academics have argued that in 'Africa' most risks are to be found in urban settings and range from floods and fires, to road accidents, epidemics, and civil strife.⁶ These generic definitions actually include any kind of disruptive event to be understood as a disaster. Consequently, the meaning of disaster management is highly dependent upon local institutions and their interpretation.

In South Africa, the disaster management model was first introduced in the mid-1990s, when episodes of terrible violence and social conflict were still common. The initial training courses on disaster management held in South Africa drawn from the UN Disaster Management Training Programme notably included an exercise on 'ethnic conflict' management and population displacement, which was still foremost in everybody's minds. In a context of violence, civil unrest, bombings and refugee displacement were all identified as possible disasters in a Green Paper. However, they were mainly seen as a problem for the security sector (police and army) to deal with. Following the old logic of apartheid, the focus remained on policing, not on protecting the victims of violence and preventing disasters. Most notably, refugees were regarded as a concern for international organisations in coordination with the Department of Home Affairs as it was seen as a remote problem, implying large-scale displacement in foreign countries where wars were still raging. Nonetheless, this type of scenario was forgotten in subsequent legislative documents (the White Paper, Act, and framework). Collective violence had finally loosened its grip on institutional memory. An expert who played a major role in the drafting the legislation recalls that "it [legislation] was too contentious, too political" (Interview C).

Nonetheless, at the global level, the displacement of population during civil strife is commonly understood as a disaster, dealt with by UN organisations such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In South Africa, it was expected that a massive influx of refugees might come from outside the country, which became a realistic prospect with the worsening situation in Zimbabwe from 2000. In 2002 researchers from the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of the Witwatersrand lobbied together with the

5 Archives, Southern Africa Disaster Reduction Agency, UNISA.

6 See for instance Mark Pelling and Benjamin Wisner, *Disaster Risk Reduction: Cases from Urban Africa*. London: Earthscan, 2009.

UNHCR to plan disaster management operations in the event of an influx of refugees from Zimbabwe after the presidential elections. However, it is important to note that here the disaster that requires an intervention is the displacement of people, not the conflict itself. Ironically, when South Africa dealt with a significant displacement of people, the conflict was *inside* the country because of a resurgence of collective and widespread violence directed towards foreigners.

From Crisis to Disaster

Defining a disaster can be understood as part of the process of using disaster management tools to deal with a situation, whatever that situation is. In other words, it is about making a situation governable by means of disaster management technologies. The purpose here is to outline how the so-called crisis of xenophobic violence entered into the realm of risks and disaster, and explore the consequences of defining a crisis in these terms. I will look at the strategies, mobilisation practices, and the framing by the various actors involved in the xenophobic violence to understand how disaster management was used to deal with this complex situation. The discussion will focus on events in Cape Town.

The first part of the crisis unfolded in the Gauteng region in the north of the country, where most of the violence took place. It appeared initially to be a security issue, and was largely dismissed by some government officials (Wa-Kabwe Segatti 2008). In the initial reactions to the situation, the role of disaster management was less central ~~than the deployment of security services~~ than. However, the situation in Cape Town was slightly different as violence started 10 days later, enabling actors to prepare their interventions and to stabilise the understanding of the events as a disaster. The events mainly consisted of a sudden and massive displacement of more than 20,000 people across the metropolis on 23 May following attacks in two informal settlements. This displacement laid the ground for the proclamation of a disaster situation. Yet, this was not necessarily an obvious response given the complexity of the situation and the polemical issues around xenophobia; it was a consequence of the mobilisation of three types of actors – government, civil society and international organisations.

Claiming a Disaster: The Role of Civil Society

Civil-society organisations were amongst the first group of actors to respond to the displacement of people with numerous autonomous reactions from

TABLE 2 *Chronology of events.*

11 May 2008.	Violence started in Alexandra, Johannesburg.
21–22 May 2008.	First signs of violence in Cape Town.
23 May 2008.	Eruption of violence in Cape Town and displacement of more than 20,000 people. Setting up of refugee camps.
3 June 2008.	Disaster was declared by the provincial government of the Western Cape.
1 December 2008.	Official closure of the camps in Cape Town.
14 May 2009.	Dismantlement of the camps.

communities, NGOs and churches to provide shelter, food, care, and medicines. For instance, community halls and churches provided shelter for people. A forum was soon established in order to coordinate the actions of the civil society organisations, to work on the prevention of violence, the protection of foreigners and to develop an ‘emergency contingency plan’.⁷ This coordination relied primarily on a large and heterogeneous group of organisations – trade unions (the Congress of South African Trade Unions); faith-based organisations (Shade, the South African Council of Churches, the Muslim Judicial Council, the Jewish Board of Deputies); legal and human rights organisations (the South African Human Rights Commission, Aids Law Clinic, People Against Suffering Oppression and Poverty, the Aids Law Project, the Black Sash); humanitarian organisations and refugee organisations (Cape Town Refugee Centre, the AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa, Since Gender Justice Network); and NGOs such as the Social Justice Coalition and the Treatment Action Campaign. A striking feature of these coalitions was the fact that humanitarian organisations and social movements were more visible than the organisation specialised in refugee issues (Wa-Kabwe Segatti and Polzer 2012). As Steven Robins suggests, the disaster situation enabled humanitarian organisations, such as the Treatment Action Campaign, working in the realm of HIV/Aids, to expand their competency to newly emerging fields of a ‘politics of life’ (Robins 2009).

By responding to an emergency, civil-society organisations not only provided important care for the displaced (Everatt 2011; Peberdy and Jara 2011), but also shaped public perceptions by assessing the situation, undertaking advocacy, and sending reports to journalists. Although there were tensions within these groups, organisations’ ventures into care for displaced people

7 From the Civil Society Memorandum, May 21.

contributed to the definition of a humanitarian situation by shaping and stabilising the spaces of interventions, not only in a terms of physical space – in the form of establishing camps – but also in creating a symbolic space as it demanded a state intervention. In reacting to the displacement of foreigners they opened a symbolic space in which the state was supposed to take responsibility for the situation; as a prominent figure of civil society put it: “it’s a job for the state, it’s not a job for civil society.”⁸ By controlling the situation, producing their own data on the displaced persons, and mobilising the media they could direct the public and the government to where it was supposed to act: the scene of the disaster.

Who Cares? Disaster Management as a Default Government Response

For the crisis to be identified as a disaster it had to be labelled as such by the government. In Cape Town, a dynamic of mobilisation across government bodies took place both at the City of Cape Town and at the provincial level. The first to intervene was the police service as it tried to ensure security. Two days later, when the situation reached a magnitude that exceeded the existing capacities of the system; the provincial Disaster Management Centre was called to manage the displaced population. Although community halls and then safety sites were opened and managed by the disaster management officers of the City of Cape Town from the beginning, the situation was eventually declared a provincial disaster by the premier on the 30 May,⁹ which facilitated coordination through a joint operation centre. This centre comprised ‘stakeholders’ of the City of Cape Town and the provincial administration of the Western Cape – that is disaster management units, the Department of the Premier, the Mayor’s Office, Security, and Social Development. This allowed the release of funds to manage the disaster, but it was also a strategy by the ANC premier to seize the initiative from its party-political opponents from the city administration, chiefly Helen Zille from the Democratic Alliance.

During this period the administrations were facing dilemmas about the definition of the situation. It was unclear who should act and how the problem should be understood. The magnitude of the population displacement and the associated humanitarian crisis spoke for the disaster interpretation. However this did not delineate the role of the disaster management unit. Indeed, the legislation states that the disaster management unit is only a coordinating

8 Nathan Geffen. “Shattered Myths: The Xenophobic Violence in South Africa,” June 1, 2008. <http://www.tac.org.za/community>.

9 The Premier is the head of the provincial government.

body during emergencies and that departments should take responsibility for each identified disaster risk. Yet, violent conflict was at that time not an identified disaster in the administrative framework of the Western Cape Province, nor elsewhere. It was thus uncertain which department would take the leadership and take political decisions on crisis management.

"Even now it's not entirely clear, you know, if it's a lower skill thing, we should lead on it, but because it escalated and it was declared as a provincial disaster, then the Disaster Management Centre is responsible for coordinating it. But I think what's not clearly understood till now, is that there are different kinds of risks in disaster management, we call them 'hazards'.... And for every single one of them you actually have to identify who is the lead agency responsible.... It wasn't and it's still not entirely clear who would lead on it in that case. So, if the violence breaks out again in the province, who should actually be leading the response? Should it be the Department of the Premier, should it be the Department of Social Development, or should it be the Disaster Management Centre? So it's still, the final custodianship is still being discussed, but it's such a complex disaster that whatever answer I can give you as to who I think is in charge, somebody else could argue against it and they would be right."

Interview D

shouldn't there be quotations mark ?

The problematic nature of xenophobia made things even more complicated, as it was not obvious which department (Social Development, Department of the Premier) or level of government (local government or national government represented by the Department of Home Affairs) was responsible for the thousands of asylum seekers, foreigners, refugees, permanent residents, illegal immigrants, or even South Africans.¹⁰ Besides, given the context of institutional xenophobia (Wa Kabwe-Segatti and Landau 2008), the constrained resources and forthcoming elections, the public administration was reluctant to deliver social services to migrants and take responsibility for the problem of xenophobia. As this problematic question of the ownership of the problem would never really be clarified, Disaster Management ended up by taking the lead. The fact that a technical body finally took over other departments with more decision-making power is both a reflection of a misfit between the problem and institutional structures, and a lack of political willingness by political

¹⁰ South Africans in this situation were either foreign born having acquired citizenship or South Africans from ethnic minority (Venda, Shangaan, Pedi), who felt threatened by the dominant 'ethnic groups' such as the Xhosa (in the Western Cape) or Zulus (Gauteng).

representatives to address xenophobia. The decision to declare a disaster in order to manage the displacement of thousands of foreigners not only designed the space of intervention (the camps) but also framed the mobilisations and intervention as a humanitarian intervention (rather than a pure 'security' intervention).

UN must be
capitalized

The Intervention of Disaster Specialists: ~~Un~~ Organisations as a Crisis Designer

This process was also indirectly governed by the presence of international organisations and crisis specialists. Although international UN agencies in Southern Africa have their headquarters in Johannesburg, they generally do not intervene in the country as South Africa is supposed to be able to deal with its own problems. Moreover, such a large-scale displacement was simply not expected. Consequently, international agencies of the UN, the Organisation for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the UNHCR intervened at a minor level, monitoring the management process, assessing the situation, providing advice and guidelines to set up and manage camps and searching for conceivable legal solutions for displaced populations.

The only direct action taken by UN agencies was for UNICEF to deliver food and more importantly for UNHCR to provide tents and money for displaced people. It is noteworthy that equivalent debates took place within the UN family between UNHCR and OCHA and led to a result that echoed that reached by the South African authorities: on the ground, the humanitarian disaster situation (the realm of OCHA) took over the narrow definition of a refugee or displaced person (UNHCR), although no integrated plan of action was established due to disagreements on whether the situation was a humanitarian crisis or a problem of forced migration.

Still, the visibility of the UN bodies helped shape the crisis as a humanitarian disaster. Crisis situations are windows of opportunity for disaster specialist actions which enable them to impose a framework and their agenda and thereby reinforce the disaster agenda. In this regard, it was supported by the internationalisation strategy developed by civil-society organisations calling for international interventions and advocating for the adoption of depoliticised and international norms for managing camps (SPHERE Humanitarian standards, UNHCR camp settlement) or displaced populations (UNHCR guidelines on internally displaced persons).

The disaster thus provided a common framework facilitating the intervention of various actors with different objectives and quite divergent views on how to handle the situation. Despite strong disagreement on issues such as the management of the camps and the status of foreigners, it is remarkable that

most actors shared the same repertoire of practices and ideas established by a nexus of tools (camps, risk assessment), models, and organisations in disaster management, which translated a complex, multi-layered and political situation into a manageable disaster.

Seeing Like a Disaster

What made the disaster framing visible? How was the conflict interpreted? This section analyses the implications of creating a space for disaster as an object of intervention and the redefinition of the risk of conflict. The focus here is on the social ordering of the conflict as a displacement through the mobilisation of disaster management tools. This framing created an order which exclusively focused on the scene of the disaster that disconnected the disaster from the conflict and made the causes of the conflict invisible.

Conflicts and Techniques: Politics of Disaster Management

A first consequence of the disaster framing was that it focused the management of the situation on the techniques of disaster and the inner politics of what was defined as a disaster. Most of the energy was concentrated on managing displaced people and resolving logistical issues ('food and blanket politics'). Disaster management aimed here at ensuring the safety of people's lives and livelihoods.

A sign of this disaster politics was that the politicisation of the crisis in Cape Town was not concerned with issues such as inequalities, service delivery, institutional xenophobia, violence and so forth, but focused instead on the management of the displaced, and more precisely on the question of where to provide shelter – community halls (as advocated by the provincial government) or safety camps (the city's position). Although this case was taken to the courts by the provincial government and civil-society organisations, it was quickly resolved by internal negotiations and smoothed over by the existence of regular management relations between the disaster management centres of both the city and the province. Similarly, the civil-society organisation, the Treatment Action Campaign, brought a case to court to ensure the application of disaster management standards, subsequently adopted by the provincial disaster management centre.

Therefore, the focus on the technical issues of camp management and on the reintegration problem revealed a striking convergence within the disaster framework: opposition from civil society was aimed at the way the process was dealt with (against camps or to insure standards at camps), without contesting

that it was a disaster (Zachie Achmat, the charismatic leader of Treatment Action Campaign would declare: “We have a very good Disaster Management at the City”). The strong pressure from civil society to apply international norms and standards led the provincial government of the Western Cape to adopt its own guidelines for emergencies (August 2008). Although UN organisations whose aim is to mainstream disaster management were cautious about the opening of ‘camps’, they nonetheless brought their support to this standardisation process by providing analytical frameworks and practical tips on how to run a camp.

Finally, the disaster management model, although apparently a highly technical and specific governmental organisation, provided a framework within which government, civil society and international organisations could establish dialogue, however strongly they disagreed. Nonetheless, as Cooper and Randall already noted with regard to development techniques, the technical is always political as it aims at acting on people’s conduct. This political implication of what seemed a technical, de-politicised machine (Ferguson 1990), was strategically deployed by civil-society organisations which played the technical, international, objective card to articulate their political views on the new South Africa. In this way the political re-entered the management of the disaster.

The Disaster and its Victims

In the meantime, it also transformed the intervention in, and the meaning of, the situation. A notable effect of this translation of conflicts into disasters was the focus on the victims of the disaster. This was visible through the creation of ‘refugee spaces’ which embodied the powerless victims in the Blue Waters and Youngsfield camps in Cape Town; or countrywide, in the refugee camps at the Zimbabwean border in Musina; or in 2009 in downtown Johannesburg at the Central Methodist Church where hundreds of Zimbabweans were being sheltered and taken care of by NGOs. These spaces are nevertheless problematic as they trap people in the victim position, as highlighted by the way displaced people remained for months in the former safe sites in Cape Town, where they wished to settle but were cut off from communities and later declared ‘unlawful’ by the City of Cape Town. Furthermore, the disaster framing had a paradoxical effect: by allowing a wider debate and a larger sphere of humanitarian action, it addressed the effects of the violence (the displaced populations) but without really addressing its causes, i.e. violence and social integration in communities, and local contexts of violence (Cooper 2009). In the end, this offered no solution as most displaced people had no choice but to return to the communities. Moreover the reintegration was even more complicated as the

disaster provided access to scarce state resources, which was in part the contention that motivated the violence. The reasons for this bias could be in the nature of the framing process and the government's difficulty in handling such a complex issue, which requires long-term policies; or in the pressure of some civil-society groups who "only saw a part of the problem" (the displaced populations) according to a provincial official. Ironically, the translation of the situation as a disaster prevented a real embracing of the problem by cutting the management of the crisis off from the regulation of communities at the local level. For example, in Imizamo Yethu, a Cape Town informal settlement, a 'reconciliation process' took place in which belongings were forcibly given back to foreigners and the perpetrators of xenophobic violence were beaten and chased out of the settlement, which is a questionable way of ensuring a sustainable peace in the community.

In the end, the model of disaster management used by government and by international actors created a focus on the victims (here the displaced) as 'vulnerable' populations. This focus, sustained by civil-society pressure, led to a neglect of what was not in the object of the action but was core to the problem, the context of violence. The redefinition of the situation through the disaster framework thus translated the object of action. Nonetheless it risked depoliticising and making issues invisible which were at the root of the conflict. Focusing on the rights of the victims neglects the local politics of the 'violent' communities, which in turn may lead them to resort to blaming foreigners as scapegoats again in future.

Ironically, both provincial and local government ultimately reversed this policy by first ending care for the displaced (December 2008), then destroying the space of safety sites and finally by turning the victims into culprits who cheated the UN system (May 2009). This un-making of the status of victims is precisely what allowed government to legitimate the end of its action, even if contested, leading to the end of the disaster situation.

Conclusion

The case of conflict as disaster ultimately appears as a story of transforming a socio-political object into a disaster risk through a set of institutional and organisational transformations, linking the actions of international organisations, state actors, experts and activists. It transformed the space of conflict in South Africa, in particular after the xenophobic violence, bringing disaster management to care for the victims – however imperfectly – and to redefine migrants and displacement as a security risk. The immediate consequence in

the aftermath of the crisis was the re-enforcement of the disaster management mechanisms in case of violent conflict or large-scale displacement, which generated this redefinition of the object. Various initiatives from provincial government – and supported by the OCHA – aimed at establishing a ‘social conflict emergency plan’, and later to the recognition of conflict as a newly identified ‘disaster risk’. It institutionalised disaster management as a solution to deal with xenophobic violence, as illustrated in another spate of xenophobic violence that took place in De Doorns in the rural Western Cape in November 2009.

In the meantime, the translation also had the effect of discouraging efforts to address the ‘root causes’ and the specific nature of the violence displayed in these events. The state, through disaster management, was able to de-politicise the conflict by restricting it to a disaster scenario and avoid the underlying question of the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in contemporary South Africa. In terms of conflict management, it is doubtful that the framing and re-ordering of these social situations under the aegis of disaster management will encourage debate and action on the issues at stake. Besides, from the point of view of disaster management, it reveals the difficulty, if not the impossibility of using the same model for different types of disaster situation as it may impede the identification of root causes that are precisely the point of departure for disaster prevention techniques. This last observation also highlights the limits of these travelling models that may encounter difficulties in addressing local contexts.

Interviews

Interview A. Disaster management officer, October 2009.

Interview B. Political actor, ANC member, December 2009.

Interview C. Disaster academic, January 2008.

Interview D. Head of the provincial Disaster Management Centre, November 2008.

The research was carried out during two five-month periods of fieldwork in 2008 and 2009 in South Africa. The first was dedicated to the management of the xenophobic violence in the Western Cape. I met with several actors from government, civil society and UN organisations, and also made observations in the safety sites (Blue Waters). In 2009, I focused on disaster management more broadly so as to understand how notions of disaster management were integrated in the South African environment. I met with several actors involved in the policy process, as well as scientist and practitioners.

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