

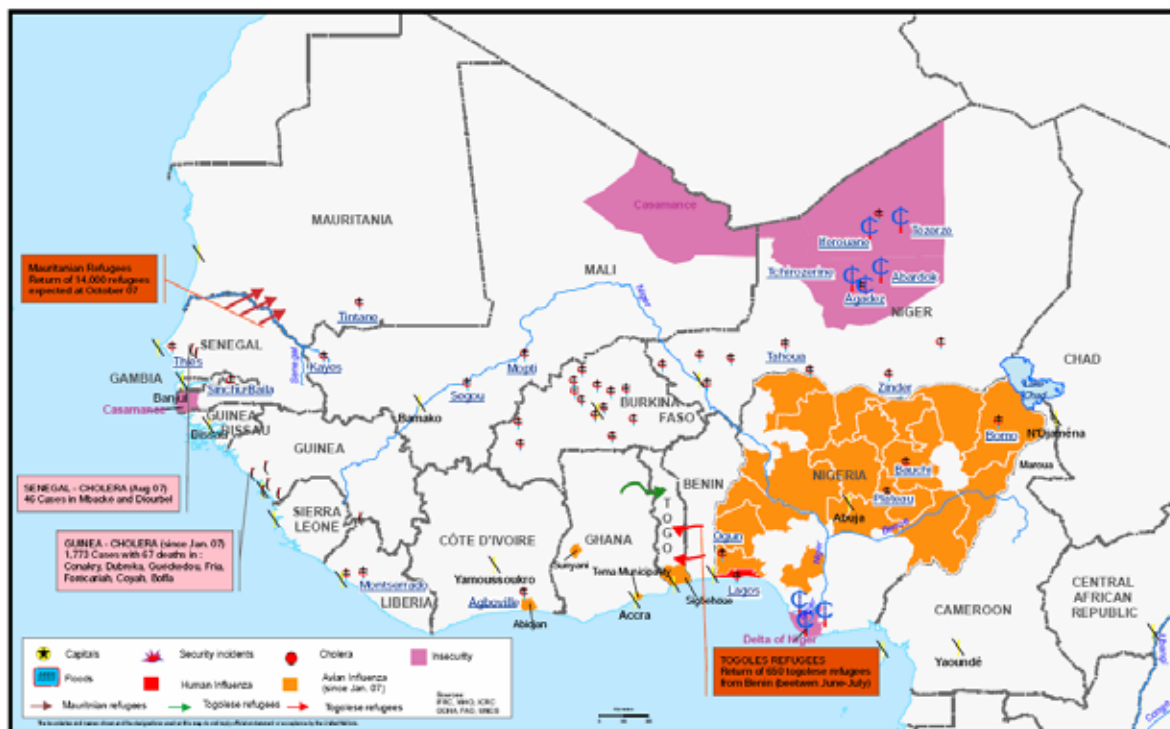


Compounding crises : combinations of vulnerabilities, risks and hazards in West Africa

The new ALNAP strategy considers “the very real possibility that crises are likely to become both more widespread, complex and characterised by catastrophic combinations of different kinds of human vulnerabilities”. This paper has been produced as a background briefing paper on these issues for the 22nd ALNAP Biannual meeting, which is being held in Senegal on December 4th-6th 2007. It is intended as a short introduction to put the theme of the meeting into context, and help to familiarise participants with some of the key issues that will be discussed. It therefore takes a preliminary look at the idea of ‘compounding crisis’, to provide definitions and look at some of the key concepts in more depth. It provides examples to help clarify and deepen understanding of the theme, and suggests a preliminary set of implications which we hope will inform and stimulate discussions at the meeting.

A regional snapshot: the West African humanitarian situation

The World Bank’s Global Hotspots Report indicates that West Africa is in the zone of the highest global risks of mortality. West Africa has suffered heavily from humanitarian crises, with war, drought, flooding, disease, locusts and impoverishment afflicting most countries in the region at some point in the last forty years. The OCHA assessment of the regional humanitarian situation (as of August 2007) shows a picture that is at once both sobering and challenging for organisations involved in humanitarian assistance, despite progress in countries such as Senegal and Ghana, and the cessation of brutal civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia.



West African Humanitarian Context, OCHA, August 2007



Behind this picture are other factors that both make these crises more likely and more complicated, such as monetary devaluation and extensive migration within Africa and to other regions. Several of the region's countries are at the bottom of the UNDP Human Development Index, and the Sahel region has seen both drought and low intensity conflict in recent years. As well as long standing issues - such as conflict and drought – there is a range of newer threats, including floods and avian flu. A central humanitarian challenge in the West African setting is how to better understand and deal with crises that are not singular but are multi-dimensional and inter-connected - what we have chosen to call *compound crises*.

Compound crises

A crisis is any disruptive or destructive event that occurs at a rate and magnitude beyond the ability of a society to cope and recover. Unless met with dedicated resources, the integrity of a society is degraded in the course of a crisis event. At a given level of degradation and damage, usually associated with the loss of lives, the crisis becomes a disaster.

Many readers will easily recognise the above view of crises, and indeed this perspective does help provide an insight into what is meant by *compound crises*. At its simplest, the idea of a compound crisis is one where a second or even third crisis occurs – either simultaneously with a first crisis, or before the impact of the first crisis has been completely resolved.

The vast majority of the literature and experiences of humanitarian crises is focused on the view of crises as single events and there is little in the literature of international aid which addresses compound crises directly. But the wealth of work on complex emergencies is a useful starting point. Complex emergencies are usually distinguished by the fact that they have multiple causes and are multi-faceted. In the early 1990s the UN defined a complex emergency as a major humanitarian crisis of a multi-causal nature, that requires a system-wide response, often combining political, conflict and peacekeeping factor. While such thinking has been associated with “man-made” emergencies, it has been long established that natural disasters - such as droughts or floods - are similarly the result of complex social and environmental vulnerabilities. The notion is that compound crises arise from vulnerabilities reinforcing each other. The highly influential peace and conflict theorist Thomas Homer-Dixon, for instance, calls compound crises “synchronous failures” of human systems.

Building on this, compound crises are characterised by multiple and inter-connected aspects of vulnerability. A drought which is exacerbated by a disease epidemic would qualify as a compound crisis, as would large scale flooding in a refugee camp. Both of these examples highlight the exacerbated human vulnerability that is generated by compound crises. As highlighted in the Malawi example on New Variant Famine (see Box 1, over), each new aspect of vulnerability will diminish people's ability to cope and to recover.

**Box 1: New variant famine in Malawi.**

The 2003 famine in Malawi and other parts of southern Africa was characterised as “distinct from conventional drought-induced food shortages, in the profile of those who are vulnerable to starvation, and the trajectory of impoverishment and recovery” (De Waal, A. and Whiteside, A). The UN regionally called it “a deadly triad consisting of a lethal epidemic, deepening food insecurity and a hollowing out of government capacity”.

New Variant Famine, as the crisis in Malawi came to be called, was a combination of drought, HIV/AIDS and government policy that had sold grain reserves (De Waal). In fact the combination of crisis drivers may have been even more complex than that. Floods had destroyed crops the previous two years (ActionAid, 2006) and a recent ActionAid study has found that the frequency of floods and droughts and changes in rainfall patterns have been marked in Malawi, probably linked to climate change (ActionAid, 2006). This means the Malawi famine was driven by HIV/AIDS, weather related disasters probably linked to climate change and weakened government response capacity.

When ongoing and new humanitarian crises are looked at closely, it becomes apparent that there are in fact many cases of compound crises. It could even be argued that compound crises are in fact the norm in many of the settings in which humanitarian agencies work. And at a global level, current projections of population growth, climate change, impending tectonic activity, rates of disease proliferation, urbanisation and so on, suggest that there is a growing occurrence of situations that are compound crises. So why has there been relatively little attention paid to them? Maybe there is an intellectual and institutional bias towards seeing crises as simple which prevents complexity from being properly acknowledged in humanitarian policies and programmes.

Compound crises - vulnerabilities, hazards and risks

In order to better deal with compound crises, it is useful to examine issues of hazards, risks and vulnerability more closely, and look at how they are taken into account in humanitarian work.

Hazards are potential threats to humans and their welfare. Hazards can be damaging physical events or phenomena, or human activities, which can cause loss of life or injury, damage, social and economic disruption or environmental degradation. There is in addition a whole range of social, economic and political hazards of which perhaps the most obvious is armed conflict. In compound crises, hazards need to be viewed in terms of their potential to occur simultaneously or in overlapping sequence with each other.

Risk is usually defined as the probability of a specific hazard occurring. It is increasingly seen as being at *the intersection of hazard and vulnerability*¹ - for example, there is a far greater risk of losing your house in a flood if it is shoddily built or

¹ The idea of the intersection between social process and physical hazards has its origin in the ‘pressure and release model’ (Blaikie, Cannon et al. 1994). The use of ‘risk’ to capture this is more recently associated with the UN ISDR.



'vulnerable'. In general, the concept of risk occurs less in thinking about conflict and other man-made crises than it does in relation to natural hazards. Even in relation to natural disasters it is used inconsistently, and tends to be confined to discussion of medium or longer-term risk. Yet arguably it provides a stronger basis for analysis of compound crises than existing needs-based models (Darcy and Hofmann, 2003).

Vulnerability is mentioned above in relation to physical structures, but it is also used to describe the extent to which people are likely to be affected by a hazard. This is about capacities to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from disasters, conflicts and other hazardous events. The World Development Report 2000/1 suggested that vulnerability is a measure of "the likelihood that a shock will result in a decline in well-being" (WDR, 2001). Vulnerability thus relates to the human dimensions of disasters. A disaster is what happens when a hazard affects a society, but is strongly related to the degree of that society's vulnerability to the hazard. Hazards that affect whole communities dramatically lessen individuals' abilities to cope as traditional 'smoothing mechanisms' - such as selling livestock - become less available. Such shocks can lead to classic 'entitlement failure' or famine (Sen, 1981) because, while vulnerability is more than simply poverty, research has shown that it is the poor and the marginalised who tend to be the most vulnerable to hazards.

These ideas are central to the idea of compounding crises and how they might be addressed. However, there is evidence to show that these issues are not addressed sufficiently, if at all, when thinking about humanitarian programmes and projects. Research by HPG² has found that analyses within the humanitarian sector tend to:

- misrepresent the level of risk;
- build on inflexible conceptual models, leading to a failure to track the evolution of crises and patterns of risk to communities over time;
- assume that crises are steady-state or linear;
- take too little account of contextual specificities, including political, social, cultural and economic factors;
- be done by and for technical sectors, leading to a lack of joined-up thinking about multi-causal problems

This poses serious problems for how humanitarian agencies are able to address and deal with compound crises. The case study on the next page (Box 2) on the Sahel crisis of 2005 illustrates some of the key issues faced in incorporating an analysis that uses the concept of vulnerability into the responses of agencies.

Some implications for humanitarian assistance

Given the above, what are some of the implications of compound crises for humanitarian agencies before, during and after response?

² Darcy, J. & Hoffman, C. (2003), *According to need? Needs assessment and decision-making in the humanitarian sector*, HPG Report 15, (London; Overseas Development Institute).

**Box 2 : Addressing vulnerability in the Sahel**

Recent work on the 2005 crisis in the Sahel (affecting Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) sheds light on how these issues are dealt with operationally. A wide range of critical and inter-locking factors - changes in climate and increasing frequency of drought, increase in the population, a dependence on natural resources and lack of economic alternatives, poor access to services, poor governance and inequitable markets - all led to more people becoming more vulnerable. Importantly, these factors were not created by the hazard, but had been present for decades.

Vulnerable households were identified among farmers and pastoralists, and among the growing workforce of landless labourers. Continuous loss of assets, including land and livestock, without time or opportunity to rebuild, left these groups even more vulnerable.

How had actors responding to this crisis understood and addressed the idea of vulnerability? It seems that the understanding of vulnerability varied between different stakeholders, and that there was a tendency to equate vulnerability with poverty. Most analyses by agencies divided the causes of vulnerability into temporary and structural, and carried with them an assumption that structural issues cannot be addressed by aid initiatives. The short time-scales of most analyses and most aid interventions made it difficult to address the complexity and deeper causes of such vulnerability.

Before response

The humanitarian sector has consistently refined and improved the basis for its understanding of disasters, from the epidemiology of natural disasters in the 1970s, to on-going work on vulnerability and capacities. When faced with a compound crisis, humanitarian agencies will need to be anticipating and understanding the complex nature of the problem. This calls for better assessments of hazards, risks, vulnerabilities and local capacities (as recommended in the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition study), and better early warning. This faces obvious time and cost constraints, but is also hindered by a lack of appropriate tools and approaches. Such analysis is currently used mainly when dealing with food security issues, but there are growing numbers of more general approaches such as the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessments of the Red Cross, and Participatory Vulnerability Analysis of Action Aid. These tools show how more sophisticated and participatory data collection can give better insights into the inter-connected nature of vulnerability. Other ongoing work to test and develop such analytical tools, as well as work to develop better indicators and benchmarks, will aid our understanding of compound crises.

During response

When a compound crisis is actually underway, it poses more challenges calling especially for dynamic approaches to programme management. At a minimum, this calls for increasing trust and flexibility in the contractual relationship between donor agencies and implementing agencies. Analysis of compound crises will need to be matched with improved mechanisms for monitoring changing hazards, risks



and vulnerabilities - the WFP Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping approach provides one example of how this is presently done.

Effective monitoring requires good information management, and good coordination of information, such that data and analysis can be shared more transparently, and more quickly. More generally, compound crises may place enormous stress on partnerships, as well as creating a more profound need for partnership and “joined up” working to ensure that affected people do not fall into the gap between agency mandates.

After the response

The characteristics of compound crises may make problems of information about key indicators or decisions – already challenging – even more serious. Evaluators will have to grapple - even more than at present - with a lack of information on the context, the precise sequence of events during the period and the goals and changing policies of different actors at different stages of the compound crises. The fluidity of the context and the complexity and inter-relatedness of the crisis may call for methods which are more common in historical or philosophical research; these may be more productive than those traditionally employed in the social sciences. Such methods acknowledge the complexity and interdependent nature of events in the real world and ask not, ‘did x cause y ?’ but rather, ‘what happened?’ and ‘why?’ In other words, in order to understand and be able to deal with situations and structures, they seek to build narratives about specific events and processes, rather than trying to establish causal relationships.

The notion of compound crisis also feeds into the call for combining elements of humanitarian and development work. Specifically, where compound crisis have been eroding local capabilities and increasing vulnerabilities to even small-scale hazards, building resilience will be as necessary as response to immediate needs. This has implications for both linking relief, recovery and development (LRRD) and disaster risk reduction (DRR). . The idea that disaster relief agencies can only help with immediate relief and some rebuilding may be severely challenged by compound crises.

Conclusion

This paper has looked at some of the key ideas related to ‘compound crises’ – that is where more than one hazard affects a community at the same time, reducing their ability to cope. Compound crises are a function of increased and interconnected hazards and vulnerabilities. Dealing with such issues makes even more stark the understanding that it is the combination of hazardous events and people’s vulnerability to them or otherwise that determines the extent of suffering.

If there is weight in the argument that crises have ‘always been compound’, then the rise in the frequency of disasters alone suggests that compound crises are likely to be a growing phenomenon³. In addition to this, the forces of globalisation and trends such as climate change, population growth and urbanisation are leading to

³ See CRED database EM-DAT for rise in reported disasters, number affected and economic damage.



more compound crises. Events such as Hurricane Katrina are making it harder to offer simple disaster narratives, with single causative factors, which justify responses based on the idea that there are specific deficits to be met.

On the one hand, more inter-connected hazards, risks and vulnerabilities pose the very real threat of more severe crisis, and pose serious challenges to international agencies. On the other, they simply amplify the need to resolve long standing issues in the sector around early warning, analysis, institutional flexibility, monitoring and evaluation. Many agencies have made great strides in understanding and even quantifying the nature of human vulnerability and these efforts need to be built on if we are to be able to help people facing compound crises. In this respect there may be lessons from the development arms of international agencies that is useful. Through approaches such as sustainable livelihoods, the development sector has experience of dealing with issues in a more systemic way. Experiences such as the Rwanda and Tsunami joint evaluations have identified the potential for learning mechanisms to be collaborative. Shared analytical approaches offer the potential for new and more fruitful relationships that recognise the proper role of the humanitarian sector and simultaneously build on the strengths of both communities.

Final remarks

West Africa has suffered its share of protracted and compound crises. Devastating wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone have had effects on the entire sub-region, with Côte d'Ivoire the most recent casualty. The Sahel region has faced potential hazards for decades. The degree of human fragility in West Africa is enormous – even small disasters are likely to have disproportionate impacts. In this regard, the recent rise of hazards with possible links to climate change does not bode well. The humanitarian sector finds itself stretched as it is, and the prospect of having to do more, for longer, in more complex future disasters is not a message that overburdened staff and organisations wish to hear. The prospect that such a thing will come to pass merits proper consideration in terms of how agencies should be thinking about and dealing with crises.

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