

Kelman, I. 2007. "Disaster diplomacy: Can tragedy help build bridges among countries?" UCAR Quarterly, Fall 2007, p. 6.

Full text:

"Hurricane devastation reconciles Cuba-U.S. differences," blazes one newspaper headline. Another shouts, "International flood aid leads to 'a nuclear-free future' for North Korea."

Well, not quite. In reality, disasters have rarely yielded durable conflict resolution. Instead, unsurprisingly, the memory of assistance and humanitarianism fades away while petty-politics-as-usual dominates. Yet interest in the idea of "disaster diplomacy" continues to build (see [www.disasterdiplomacy.org](http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org)). A growing body of research is examining how and why disaster-related activities do and do not induce cooperation among enemies. The key phrase here is "disaster-related activities," including those that take place before a disaster strikes (such as prevention, mitigation, and preparedness) as well as afterward (including response and recovery).

The research to date suggests that disaster-related activities do not generate entirely new diplomatic efforts, but they can catalyze diplomacy which has a pre-existing basis, whether it be cultural or trade links or secret negotiations among the parties in conflict. When ongoing diplomacy is influenced, it tends to happen in the short term—on the order of weeks or months—whereas in the longer-term, non-disaster factors tend to dominate the diplomatic process. These factors could range from a leadership change to an historical grievance that trumps the humanitarian imperative.

For example, North Korea's international relations were on a roller coaster following a series of floods, droughts, and famines beginning in 1995. Half a dozen countries took part in a difficult diplomatic dance around issues such as nuclear proliferation, missile testing, humanitarian relief, and international access. On many occasions, North Korea accepted aid while making concessions on specific areas of disagreement but ramped up conflict in other areas after the aid was provided. In contrast, the 1991–93 drought in southern Africa was successfully managed against the backdrop of rapid political and developmental changes across the region at the time. As noted in work by Ailsa Holloway (University of Cape Town), disaster diplomacy efforts prevented the drought emergency from becoming a catastrophe.

The overall lesson from dozens of case studies like these is that disaster-related activities are and always have been political. Are they inherently so? Some argue that divorcing disasters from politics—for example, through neutral and impartial humanitarian aid, such as from the Red Cross and Red Crescent—is the best approach. Yet most of the science indicates that disaster-related activities are inherently political, which opens the door for potential positive outcomes from disaster diplomacy.

To make these outcomes a reality, we must recognize that politics serve as both a constraint and an opportunity. In itself, disaster aid is only a Band-Aid—helping the surface wound heal without addressing the fundamental cause of the injury—unless it can factor in and link to the root causes which lead to disasters. Hurricane deaths occur not merely because a storm is particularly intense but because of long-standing policies, decisions, and actions which lead people to live in the hurricane's path without adequate preparation for the possible consequences. The lack of preparation could be due to poverty, ignorance, apathy, or other factors, such as the need to avoid an ongoing conflict or simply finding food for tomorrow.

Politics also provide opportunity. Disaster mitigation and aid efforts could potentially be used as a process to highlight and avert the long-term dangers of poverty, ignorance, and apathy. Where a transnational conflict already exists, and a disaster then affects one or more countries, leaders could

try to create a neutral and mediated environment to determine how to manage the aid and relief operation. Any collaboration and trust thus generated could be used as a stepping stone to further non-disaster-related diplomatic interactions.

The reality is that such goodwill is rarely seen, as evident in two recent examples. Pakistan's 2007 floods occurred as India-Pakistan relations were becoming increasingly positive, a process affected but not created by earthquakes in Gujarat in 2001 and in Kashmir in 2005. Previous cyclones devastating parts of India barely influenced rapprochement between the two countries even after incidents such as in May 1999, when Pakistani authorities rescued Indian fishermen from Gujarat. (As an example of disaster impacting war—possibly the converse of disaster diplomacy—the problems in aid management that occurred following the November 1970 cyclone in East Pakistan were one trigger of the successful war for independence that produced Bangladesh.)

In recent years, Cuba and the United States have had four opportunities to thaw frosty relations through post-hurricane aid. None worked. Hurricane Michelle in 2001 and hurricanes Dennis, Katrina, and Wilma in 2005 each led one country to offer aid, followed by snubs or roadblocks from the other side. As Michael Glantz (NCAR Center for Capacity Building) has noted, "U.S.-Cuban actions related to hurricanes—hazards which are specific, direct and traceable threats to both countries in space and time—are fruitful for a variety of reasons. However, those interactions are encapsulated—bounded by realpolitik."

The suggestion that disaster diplomacy should be mandated, while good-hearted, might backfire. If a country chooses to advocate aid-for-peace and advises another country's leader that aid could and should be used for peace, that leader could respond, "Forget it. I don't want peace and so I have no interest in post-disaster help." Alternatively, the leader might respond optimistically and naively, only to be rebuffed and embarrassed by the other side.

In fact, no example has yet been found for new and lasting diplomacy based on only disaster-related activities. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. A successful example might yet emerge by researching history or by observing future events. However unsuccessful disaster diplomacy appears to be today, anything can happen given the mixture of people, politics, and extreme events from weather and climate. Headlines such as "Peace from the ruins" and "Disaster mitigation averts war" might yet become reality.

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