

## **Exploring the Link between Natural Disasters and Politics: Case Studies of Pakistan and Peru**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the link between “natural“ disasters and politics. It argues that due to its broader perspective on the political, anthropological perspectives have been more attentive to this link than other disciplines like political science. It is pointed out that disaster vulnerability often derives from political conditions. Foucault’s concept of governmentality, “the art of governing populations”, is useful to analyze the link between politics and disasters. Disasters are, in fact, a relatively recent area into which governmentality has spread. Not long ago, disasters were regarded in many cases simply as fateful events, totally outside the control and responsibility of state and government. In Pakistan, for instance, a specialized institution for dealing with natural disasters, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has been established only in consequence of the 2005 earthquake.

In a post-disaster situation the confrontation of the affected people with instruments and strategies of governmentality - whether employed by the state or by NGOs - multiplies. The reverse of governmentality is that citizens hold the state responsible for almost all areas of life, including disasters and the (in)effective mitigation of their consequences. For affected citizens, disasters may thus become an opportunity to express discontent and to protest against what is perceived as inadequate and insufficient efforts for relief or reconstruction. Thus, post-disaster situations easily become sites of political contestation. For the anthropology of the state disaster

situations then provide unique opportunities to dissect conventional images of the state as a huge, powerful and monolithic entity. In other disaster situations the state may virtually disappear from the scene, leaving the field to national or international non-governmental organizations. Relations between NGOs and the affected people are “political” and structured by issues of power, too.

Two case studies are presented to analyze relations between politics and disasters: the massive rock avalanche that struck the Callejón the Huaylas in Peru in May 1970 and the much smaller Attabad landslide which hit Hunza in Northern Pakistan in January 2010. It is concluded that disasters are political and that any study of disasters that disregards their entanglement with power relations and political action misses an important dimension without which disaster situations cannot be fully understood.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

What do natural disasters have to do with politics? At first sight it might seem that there is no link: Disasters like earthquakes or tsunamis simply strike in some places, irrespective of governments or political relations. Yet the discussion of disasters has convincingly pointed out that no disaster is just “natural”.<sup>2</sup> Disasters may be triggered by natural events (i.e. events that occur without human intervention), but they take place in human social spaces and social spaces are always inherently political.

Still, political scientist Richard Olson (2008, cf. Hannigan 2012: 7) diagnoses for his discipline that it is largely inattentive to disasters. Political science regarded disasters mostly as “engineering problems” but not as “political

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<sup>1</sup> This is the revised version of a paper which was originally presented at the “Anthropology of Disasters Research School” at the National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-I-Azam University, Islamabad, in March 2012. I am very grateful to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for generously funding the Research School.

<sup>2</sup> On the problem of defining “natural disasters” and the problematic category of the “natural” see Oliver-Smith 1999 and Perry and Qurantelli 2005.

occasions”. And if the discipline pays attention to disasters, it is mostly to disaster *policies* (Olson 2008: 154); not to actual events and practices in the context of disasters.<sup>3</sup> Craig Calhoun (2004) calls this a de-politicizing managerial perspective. Yet Olson argues that political science should be very attentive to disasters: “Disasters constitute ‘exogenous shocks’ to which modern political systems must respond, so it should not come as a surprise therefore that literally within minutes after any major impact, disasters start becoming political. The politicization of the event then only increases as the affected community, or at times an entire society, moves from emergency response through the recovery and reconstruction phases” (2008: 155). As a political scientist, Olson’s concept of politics is centered on government and he argues that governments need not only to manage a disaster situation but also to explain it (*ibid.*). A large part of disaster politics, therefore, refers to “blame management” (p. 162). He concludes: “Disasters often strip away layers of semantic, symbolic, and process cover to provide clear insights into the nature, priorities, and capabilities of authorities, governments and entire regimes. They are deeply, deeply political” (p. 167).

Social anthropological perspectives on disasters are slightly different; probably also because anthropology holds a much broader concept of “the political”. Not focusing more or less exclusively on state and government anthropologists find politics, understood as power relations and efforts to manipulate power, in all areas of life. Anthropology has always been very interested in local level politics, i.e. in local negotiations of power relations, for instance in a village or neighborhood context. Anthropologists ask questions like who has the power to make what decision or what alliances are formed in the pursuit of certain interests. Compared to political scientists,

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<sup>3</sup> Also Hannigan (2012) focusses on disaster policies, if on global scale.

anthropologists today also focus more on political practices and action than on structures and organization. A broad concept of politics is closely related to a broad understanding of power. If we follow Michel Foucault, Alain Touraine and others,<sup>4</sup> power is an inherent aspect of all social relations. Politics and power are about making decisions and there are many decisions to be made in situations of disaster. Thus, disasters have to be seen as eminently political situations.

### **Vulnerability and Politics**

Richard Olson's framing of the relationship between disasters and politics refers exclusively to the post-disaster situation. Yet a less restricted understanding would point out that a disaster does not simply commence with some physical impact. According to Alexander (2000), disasters are cyclical processes and the post-disaster situation eventually feeds into a pre-disaster situation which to a large extent determines the consequences of an impact. It has become common sense in disaster research that not all people are equally affected by given impact, that is, they are differently vulnerable in a disaster situation. The concept of vulnerability is a political ecological concept that "blends a focus on the relationship that people have with their environment with close attention to the political economic forces characteristic of the society in which they live that shape and condition that relationship" (Oliver-Smith 2007: 10). In disaster research, the concept of vulnerability marks the shift away from the dominant paradigm that focused on the control of physical hazard agents (Hewitt 1983).

Vulnerability theory presupposes that certain conditions of persons or the social environment reduce or enhance people's susceptibility to damages by the impact of a physical event. Gender and class are regularly quoted as variables that strongly

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<sup>4</sup> Foucault 1982, Touraine 1981.

influence vulnerability. For instance, poor people are often more prone to suffer death or severe material damage from an earthquake because they cannot afford earthquake-proof construction and often reside in unsafe places like on steep slopes. Similarly, women are frequently seen as being particularly vulnerable because generally they command fewer resources than men (e.g. Ariyabandu 2009). The importance of vulnerability resulting from a lack of access to resources in disaster analysis has been strongly advocated by Piers Blaikie et al. (1994). Yet Middleton and O’Keefe argue that Blaikie and colleagues essentially presented a circular argument: “People are vulnerable because they are poor and lack resources, and because they are poor and lack resources they are vulnerable” (Middleton & O’Keefe 1998: 12). They emphasize instead that vulnerability is basically produced by *political* conditions of local or global scale. According to them the unequal distribution of power is at the roots of unequal social conditions, unequal gender relations included, which result in differential vulnerability to disasters. Similarly, Anthony Oliver-Smith aptly writes about the *hazards of domination*. He argues that “social, political and economic power relations are inscribed through material practices (construction, urban planning or transportation) in the modified and built environments, and one of the many ways in which they are refracted back into daily living is the form of conditions of vulnerability. In general, environmental security is a premium enjoyed predominately by the beneficiaries of the social relations of production and distribution” (Oliver-Smith 2007: 16). In the last instance, the emphasis on the political roots of vulnerability questions the usefulness of the distinction between “natural” and “man-made” disasters: A physical impact and triggering event may be “natural”, i.e. not caused by human intervention, but its potentially disastrous consequences are a product of human social – and political – relations.

## **Disasters and Governmentality**

In order to analyze the relations between politics and disasters it is very useful to refer to Michel Foucault's concept of *governmentality*. Governmentality is a very complex idea which lacks a clear definition. For Foucault, governmentality refers to the "art of governing populations" (Foucault 1991). Foucault uses the concept to point towards the ever-expanding scope of governing. While earlier states and governments interfered little in the everyday lives of most people, this interference greatly increased in the last three centuries. Further, the mode of interference changed. The interventions of state and government is no more limited to coercive measures like the collection of taxes or the conscription of soldiers but includes the "caring for the population" and for aspects of life which before had been outside of the interest and purview of the state. Education is a striking example in this regard: While still during the period of Enlightenment rulers did not care about the education of their subjects, education is seen as a very significant field of government in most states of the present. Similarly, governments have assumed responsibility for many other aspects of society like health or economy.

Governmentality signifies a radical change in the purpose of government: It is no more a largely Machiavellian aim of securing of power for its own preservation but, at least rhetorically, the wellbeing of the population. In order that a state or government is able to care for the wellbeing of the population, it has to "know" this population. Thus, the rise of governmentality goes hand in hand with different kinds of new techniques and specialized institutions for collecting information and acquiring knowledge like surveys, statistics and registers. These also imply increasing *control* of the people, like controlling their movements or residence, but this control is

justified as a necessity for maintaining security, for instance, and is not simply understood as a form of coercion. Governmentality is intimately connected with a disciplining power that ultimately turns subjects into citizens and forms citizens according to the exigencies of government. Through a multiplication of institutions, agencies, discourses and practices, state and government branch out into society. The boundary between state and society becomes increasingly blurred (Gupta 1995). Yet governmentality does not necessarily signify the strengthening of the state. Contemporary neoliberal governmentality, to the contrary, implies the devolution and decentering of the state and the transfer of many tasks and responsibilities that were formerly ascribed to the state to “private” or “non-governmental” agencies.

Disasters are, in fact, a relatively recent area into which governmentality has spread. Not long ago, disasters were regarded in many cases simply as fateful events which were totally outside of the control and responsibility of state and government. In Pakistan, for instance, a specialized institution for dealing with natural disasters, the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has been established only in consequence of the 2005 earthquake. Beside the state agency there are now innumerable non-governmental organizations in the country specializing in this field.

Disasters often provide situations in which the expansion of governmentality accelerates and the state advances into areas of life which before had not been under its purview and control. In his analysis of the situation after the Gujarat earthquake of 2001, Edward Simpson (2005) shows that the large-scale destruction of the town Bhuj provided an opportunity for bureaucratic intervention by the government and especially for an unprecedented endeavor of “town planning” which in fact demolished most parts of the old city which had not been destroyed by the earthquake. Simpson refers to the “enlargement

of the state” (2005: 230) after the earthquake which affected the local population more existentially than ever before.

In a post-disaster situation the confrontation of the affected people with instruments and strategies of governmentality - whether employed by the state or by NGOs - multiplies. They often have to undergo registration for relief or reconstruction, answer questionnaires or provide data for assessments.<sup>5</sup> Often they are put within the confines of camps which exert their own rationality of “taking care” of the people. They are subject to educative strategies and campaigns, e.g. by NGOs which beside the open goal of providing relief also pursue the more or less hidden agenda of changing gender relations which they consider as being oppressive for women, or of some kind of Islamization. Both could be observed after the 2005 earthquake in Azad Kashmir and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>6</sup>

To research this multiplication of encounters between “the people” and “the state” questions can be asked like: How do people encounter “the state” in disaster or post-disaster situations? What do they experience as “the state”? What do they expect from the state? How do they see and construct the state? And of course, what is the self-representation of the state in disaster situations?

The reverse of governmentality is that citizens hold the state responsible for almost all areas of life. Now state and government cannot argue that they are not responsible for an earthquake or for torrential floods because these are simply “natural” events. They are not held responsible for an impacting event itself but for the effective mitigation of its consequences.

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<sup>5</sup> This entails certain difficulties for disaster research. When a research approaches the field with some questionnaire or survey the respondents very often expect some material boon.

<sup>6</sup> The gender issue was particularly controversial for the earthquake affected communities in KPK. There was a famous fax sent in summer 2007 by a Batagram *jirga* to a coordination committee of NGOs in which they told that the work of the NGOs was welcome but that they should not sent female personnel to the villages.



Organizing disaster preparedness before or the management of rescue, relief and reconstruction after a catastrophe are now seen as falling “naturally” within the responsibility of government. While state and government may try to take a disaster as opportunity for a rather positive self-representation (i.e. the state as caring for the citizens, government as caring for voters), thereby furthering the expectations in their disaster management capacities, affected people are often not satisfied with state and government performance in post-disaster situations because the exigencies go much beyond the available resources of a given state. For affected citizens, disaster may thus become an opportunity to express discontent and to protest against what is perceived as inadequate and insufficient efforts for relief or reconstruction. Especially opposition groups or parties may take the opportunity to protest against government. Thus, post-disaster situations easily become sites of political contestation.

For the anthropology of the state disaster situations provide unique opportunities to dissect conventional images of the state as a huge, powerful and monolithic entity. In the case of the earthquake in Azad Kashmir state intervention was channeled through a number of different and often ill-coordinated and competing institutions which followed their own interests and rationalities rather than some overarching “state policy”. Here, the situation was further complicated by the condition that in fact two “states” intervened: Pakistan and Azad Kashmir.<sup>7</sup> To some extent, post-earthquake policies and interventions became a site for the contestation of power between Pakistan and Azad Kashmir. Yet in spite of the actual

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<sup>7</sup> Although nominally autonomous, Azad Kashmir is in fact largely controlled by Pakistan. Thus the Pakistani government and its Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) ultimately controlled the funds available for reconstruction in Azad Kashmir, although AJK has its own State Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency (SERRA). In the practical dealings of the reconstruction efforts, however, the Azad Kashmiri officials often attempt to wrest some space of autonomy from the Pakistan’s sway.

dissolution of the state into multiplying, often contradicting and antagonistic agencies, practices and discourses, a contrary image of the state is often produced and preserved. Thus, disaster situations may become excellent opportunities for the observation of the “state effect”, to which Timothy Mitchell refers: „... the state is no longer to be taken as essentially an actor, with the coherence, agency, and autonomy this term presumes. The multiple arrangements that produce the apparent separateness of the state create effects of agency and partial autonomy, with concrete consequences. Yet such agency will always be contingent on the production of difference – those practices that create the apparent boundary between state and society. These arrangements may be so effective, however, as to make things appear the reverse of this. The state comes to seem an autonomous starting point, as an actor that intervenes in society” (Mitchell 2006: 176).

### **Non-Governmental Organizations and Disaster Politics**

In other disaster situations, however, the state may virtually disappear from the scene, leaving the field for various reasons like disinterest in marginal regions, lack of resources or limited capabilities to national or international non-governmental organizations. NGOs / INGOs engaged in humanitarian work often portray themselves as being eminently non-political, but from an anthropological perspective this is certainly not correct. Particularly INGOs are often very potent and thus powerful actors, measured by the resources they command and the opportunities they offer; sometimes their resources equal or even surpass those of affected states. Haiti is a case in point where the devastating earthquake of January 2010 hit an almost defunct state which already before had “survived” only because of massive international intervention. Lisa Smirl (2008) aptly compares the massive influx of foreign NGO personnel in some

disaster sites with a “tsunami” and points out that their presence, their expensive cars, and their often securitized and separate accommodation may have significant effects on the targeted people. Most importantly, the NGO tsunami more often than not triggers the soaring of rents and other market rates, creating economic imbalances for the local population.

On one hand NGOs allocate goods and services to local people and the question of who gets what is intimately entangled with power relations. On the other hand, NGOs rely on local people as brokers or intermediaries, for instance for surveys of loss and damage and for the identification of beneficiaries. Such intermediaries often become very powerful persons (or the other way round: powerful locals become intermediaries) as they can manipulate the access to the NGO’s resources. NGOs are often looking particularly for persons that are well connected in the affected local society and such well-connected persons are often particularly well-versed in manipulating relations to their own advantage. Here, local politics may blend seamlessly into the politics of distributing relief and other goods and services.

Such well-connected locals are often “trapped” in networks of multiple obligations which they cannot simply cut-off while on duty for NGOs. Intermediaries, survey personnel, etc. will be forced to favor their own kin and community, even if they do not pursue any personal gain. Similarly, local power-holders may attempt to influence an NGO’s decision of how to recruit such intermediaries. There may be intense competition in local society for positions offered by organizations.

But “political” (i.e. susceptible to power relations and prone to conflicts) is not only the issue of local employees or intermediaries of NGOs. Also the NGO itself and its non-local employees and representatives are powerful, political actors; also when an organization denies being “political”. For many locals, dealing with an NGO after a disaster is a new experience. Azad Kashmir, for instance, was (rather briefly) opened for

(I)NGOs for the first time after the earthquake. New strategies of negotiation, discourse and representation have to be learnt and developed. “Political” is in particular the “interface” between an NGO and “the locals”, the site of encounter where the aims and expectations, needs and demands are negotiated. Some NGOs, however, also assume explicitly political roles by engaging in advocacy and criticizing other organizations or the state for not working efficiently for the needs of the affected people. They may channel and mobilize public protest.

### **Power in post-disaster phases**

Post-disaster processes and developments are often conventionally divided into three phases: Rescue, relief and reconstruction. There is no water-tight boundary between the phases; they may be more or less distinct or largely overlapping in different cases of disaster. However, the distinction helps to analyze post-disaster processes. As mentioned above, such processes should not be understood as linear developments but rather as cyclical. Ultimately, reconstruction becomes a pre-disaster phase as disaster might strike again any time.

Rescue refers to the time immediately after the impact when saving lives is the imperative. The first rescue work is usually done by the affected people themselves, before any external aid arrives. Relief means the time when affected people depend on mostly external aid to satisfy their immediate basic needs, like food, water, shelter, and health. Reconstruction refers to the period when the affected people struggle to “return to normalcy”, most importantly by regaining means of livelihood and constructing more durable housing.

The phase of rescue lasts for a few days only, after which no hope remains to drag people alive from the piles of debris after an earthquake, for example. The phase of relief is ideally also short, but often dependency on external aid lasts for a year or even much longer. “Reconstruction” is probably the most

equivocal of these designations as life can never be “re”-constructed as it had been before the impact of a disaster. Life changes anyway all the time, there is no “return”. The phase of reconstruction may rather be characterized by profound changes in the arrangements of life. Reconstruction may take many years, especially in economically weaker countries, and it may never be “completed” in a literal sense.

How are these phases related to politics? The days of rescue are very often described as a time where re-existing social structure almost ceases to exist, where affected and not-affected people of all strata and communities cooperate in a highly altruistic manner to save as many lives as possible. Anthropologist Oliver-Smith speaks of a “postdisaster utopia”, hastening, however, to add that there is little utopian in the lives of disaster victims (1992: 4). Journalist Rebecca Solnit has written an entire book about such experiences which she has titled “A paradise built in hell” (Solnit 2009). In anthropological, Turnerian terminology, rescue is then characterized by anti-structure and *communitas* (Turner 1995). We might conclude that rescue is largely an apolitical stage but that would disregard the fact that the opportunities of and facilities for rescue largely depend on (pre-disaster) politics like the allocation of resources for disaster preparedness, for enabling access to remote areas, for rescue equipment, etc.

*Communitas* often extends into the initial stages of relief: People are ready to contribute all kinds of things and services to affected communities. This solidarity often prevails nation-wide or even internationally. Yet as relief becomes more organized, for instance with the advent of state agencies or humanitarian organizations, distribution of aid becomes frequently a matter of contention. Social structure surfaces again in the shape of inequality (Schlehe 2006). Claims and negotiations for relief are often backed by pre-existing or newly emerging relationships of power.

Reconstruction, finally, often implicates the distribution of resources on a very large scale. Assistance for reconstruction may be given in cash or kind. It often seems that the contentiousness of reconstruction is directly related to the amount of money spent. Yet not only the allocation of resources to the affected people (or to people who are not affected but nevertheless are able to secure their share) is highly conflictual and “political”. Reconstruction implies the making of policies and plans in which many different authorities and/or other agencies including international donors are involved, often with strongly competing ideas and interests. This is certainly a highly political issue which is related to the distribution of power and competencies among and within authorities and other organizations involved.

### **Case studies: Politics of Relief and Reconstruction in Peru and Pakistan**

In what follows I will briefly present two anthropological case studies about disasters. The first is the massive rock avalanche that struck the Callejón de Huaylas in Peru in May 1970. The second case study refers to the much smaller Attabad landslide which hit Hunza in Northern Pakistan in January 2010.

#### **Case Study 1: Yungay, the “Martyred City” in the Peruvian Mountains**

On May 31, 1970 a massive earthquake shook the Andes in Peru and caused much destruction in the Callejón de Huaylas, a large valley. Yet much worse than the earthquake was what came after: The quake triggered a huge avalanche of ice, rocks and mud that came down the slope of Peru’s highest mountain, Mount Huascarán (6.768m), rushed through the valley, and erased all settlements on its way, including the provincial capital Yungay with 4,500 inhabitants, of 90 percent of which died in

the avalanche. The avalanche advanced for 18 km at a speed of around 300 km/h. Escape was impossible. Yungay was reached in a few minutes. Altogether 70,000 people were killed and an area of the combined size of Belgium, Holland and Denmark was affected. In Yungay only a few people survived who happened to be at the highest places of the town when the avalanche rushed by.

The avalanche in the Callejón de Huaylas is probably the best studied disaster from an anthropological perspective. My account largely relies on Anthony Oliver-Smith's now classical monograph *The Martyred City* (Oliver-Smith 1986).<sup>8</sup> Oliver-Smith started his research with survivors in Yungay some months after the disaster. He studied the processes of relief and reconstruction after the disaster. Yungay is a market place and administrative center of the area. The town's society was characterized by strict hierarchy: Mestizos (of mixed people Spanish / indigenous descent) formed the largely urban upper class while indigenous Indians formed the largely rural lower class. As long as Indians did not come too close, mestizos regarded the Indians with a kind of benevolent paternalism which often, however, gave way to severe contempt.

In the days immediately following the disaster, Oliver-Smith found the "postdisaster utopia" to which I referred above: "A sense of brotherhood prevailed, cutting across both class and ethnic lines, prevailed as Indian and townsman, lower and upper class, collaborated in the efforts to obtain immediate necessities. (...) people implicitly understood the need for the unity and cooperation of all people if they were to solve the immediate problems of survival. Concepts of private property were suspended, and goods were donated to the public welfare without thought of payment. The individual faced problems

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<sup>8</sup> Beside this and many articles by Oliver-Smith there is also the monograph by Barbara Bode (1980) and the unpublished PhD thesis by Dudasik (1978).

which could not be solved alone” (Oliver-Smith 1986: 76).

Yet this brotherhood did not prevail for long. Yungay was cut off from the rest of Peru and only after many days reliable news about the catastrophe reached the capital Lima. Because a huge dust cloud hang over the area for days, even aerial reconnaissance and assessment was very difficult. Yet after ten days large shipments of aid started to arrive in Yungay. While the self-help of the disaster affectees had been communally oriented (food for instance was prepared in communal kitchens) aid was now distributed to individual families. Oliver-Smith observed that “this individually oriented aid caused many of the communally oriented adaptations of the emergency phase to dissolve, and people began to return to an improvised form of household living” (ibid., p. 87).

Disaster aid became a focus of conflict. After two weeks, two tent camps were constructed at different locations of Yungay (Pashulpampa and Aura). The camps were organized separately and competition for aid ensued almost immediately between them. Shortly after, two more camps were established. Each one of the camps claimed to represent the survivors of Yungay and considered itself to be most worthy of receiving the aid pouring in (103). Also more and more people came to the camps from the surrounding rural areas. The organization of distributing aid became increasingly complex and bureaucratic. The affected people had to register and criteria to identify potential beneficiaries were established. A social and political distinction between “deserving” and “not-deserving” people was established. This implied bureaucratic procedures like applying for documents that had been lost in the disaster. This was organized by the Committee for the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of the Affected Zone (CRYRZA), a government committee.



Oliver-Smith's research focused particularly on one of the camps: the camp in Yungay Norte. It grew quickly and accommodated around 2,000 people one year after the disaster. Many of the camp's inhabitants were of rural origin or belonged to the urban lower class. In the camps, people assumed what Oliver-Smith calls "disaster identities" (p. 135). Most important was the distinction between *sobrevivientes* and *damnificados*. *Sobrevivientes* ("survivors") were those who had survived the certain death of the avalanche, while *damnificados* ("victims") had only suffered damages of the earthquake which triggered the avalanche. *Sobrevivientes* understood themselves to be the real victims and also considered themselves as embodiments of strength and tenacity. They were mostly of urban origin in contrast with the largely rural *damnificados* (136). The *sobrevivientes* also claimed to be much more deserving of aid than the *damnificados*. To some extent, they regarded the *damnificados* as kind of imposters who had not suffered much damage but still tried to secure their share of incoming aid. They also claimed that many people attempted to pass as urban *sobrevivientes* but were in fact "mere" rural *damnificados*. Increasing hostility and conflicts between the two categories ensued. Hostility was furthered by projects of reconstruction that employed locals, mostly Indians of rural origin, who earned much better wages than ever before and who consequentially refused to work for the urban elite that paid much less. "The aid agencies' wages or the nutritional support program severely curtailed the exploitation of Indian labor by urban center," concludes Oliver-Smith (p. 138). From the urban perspective, traditional social structure was under threat. Many of the urban survivors had sources of income outside of the city and were not required to work. Their attitude was sharply criticized by lower-class *damnificados*.

Oliver-Smith writes that virtually all aid that reached Yungay was controversial in one way or another, yet no

program provoked as much conflict and hostility as the provisional shelter program of the Ministry of Housing (140). Many people requested for compensation in cash or construction materials rather than being given a constructed provisional shelter, but the Ministry ignored these requests. Shelters were allocated by young social workers who had come from outside of Yungay. They allocated the shelters on a first come-first serve basis which meant that the new shelter quarters would accommodate a mixed population in terms of class and origin. They insisted that all victims were equal and deserved equal assistance while the “sobrevivientes”-elite refused to move in a shelter where they had to live side by side with Indians. Oliver-Smith quotes one urban survivor who said: “I am an authentic Yungaíno and I want to be in the city, near the road and not up the hill with the peasants” (143). Many of the sobrevivientes never moved into the shelters they had been assigned.

Oliver-Smith concludes: “Aid, then, stimulated friction and competition rather than cooperation. It continued to be an irritant in social interaction and community organization. While alleviating emergency needs in camp, aid also served as a catalyst for a return to an exaggerated form of pre-disaster social stratifications. Urban survivors saw themselves for the first time in competition with rural people for the basic necessities of life. This perception of competition stimulated an even stronger affirmation of urban superiority than had existed before the disaster. Aid was also seen in a highly political perspective. Those in charge of distribution were seen to favor their friends and political allies to the exclusion of other urban survivors with whom they had quarreled... Many people who ostensibly had little need for the articles being distributed collected them each time they were distributed and later sold them. Accusations of theft and complicity in theft by leaders ran rampant through the camp when aid goods were being stockpiled for distribution” (151f).

The survivors held the state agency CRYRZA responsible for all the difficulties they suffered. CRYRZA made many grand promises of aid which often did not materialize. In case that the agency successfully implemented a program, the victims only grudgingly admitted the success. Rather, they confronted CRYRZA with a kind of hostile cynicism. Many people insisted that they did not need another consignment of aid but opportunities for work, a loan for opening a shop or workshop and similar things. Oliver-Smith: "... while aid to Yungay helped to restore the basic material conditions of life in terms of shelter, food, clothing, and other necessities, the form and structure of delivery contributed to a deterioration of social relations in the community and between the community and the aid agencies of the government...CRYRZA and its representatives became the focus of concentrated hatred and anger throughout the disaster zone" (159f).

In late 1970 CRYRZA decided that Yungay and other towns and villages should be relocated to safer sites. In the affected community, these relocation plans were considered another disaster and the threat of relocation stimulated the formation of unity, purpose and cooperation among the survivors (201ff). The survivors said that they were not ready to leave their dead who were buried in the old site of Yungay. CRYRZA argued that the site of the town was not safe and the settlements should be relocated to safer places. At the same time Yungay's status as provincial capital was challenged by a rivalling town that had not seen such a disaster. In Yungay, festivals like carnival and festivals of saints were used to mobilize support against the resettlement plans. The city dwellers now also tried to enlist the support of the peasants of the surrounding villages. There were demonstration and at occasions police was called to control protest. In the end, the protest against the relocation was successful. Resettlement was not called off but delayed to a time "when it was convenient and

necessary". This time never came and Yungay remained in its place.

Although politics is not the explicit focus of Oliver-Smith's study, his account bears witness of a number of significant political issues after disaster. There is the temporary suspension of social differences and their conflictual re-institution, the conflicts about external aid which engenders intense competition among the affected community, and the controversies with state institutions about reconstruction and relocation.

### **Case study 2: The Attabad landslide and political opposition in Gojal**

On 4th of January, 2010, a gigantic mass of rocks came down a steep slope at Attabad village in the high mountain area of Gilgit-Baltistan.<sup>9</sup> The large-scale landslide destroyed half of the village and filled the narrow valley of the Hunza-River. The debris created a huge barrier which completely blocked the flow of the Hunza-River and also buried the Karakorum Highway (KKH), the only road link into the area which also connects Pakistan with China. Consequently, the whole area upstream, the *tahsil* (subdistrict) of Gojal, was cut off from access to Pakistan. In the subsequent weeks a lake developed behind the barrier which continued to grow till August 2010. Until then it had reached a length of almost thirty kilometers. The lake inundated one village completely and four others partly. About 250 families lost their houses, fields and gardens to the water. In Gulmit, the largest village and administrative headquarter of Gojal, also the main bazaar was inundated. Large sections of the

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<sup>9</sup> Preliminary fieldwork in the affected area was undertaken for three brief periods in 2010, 2011 and 2012. See also Sökefeld 2012a and 2012b. I am very grateful to the Swiss National Fund and the German Research Foundation for generous funding.

KKH came under water so that also communication between the villages is severely disrupted.

The lake has grave economic consequences for Gojal. In the first weeks there was no transport across the lake. The area is not self-sufficient in terms of food and a food crisis was imminent. The inundation of the KKH also disrupted the important trade between Pakistan and China. In order to restore the trade to some extent, traders established a provisional service with wooden boats across the lake. These boats also take passengers and transport goods for local consumption. Yet transport was difficult: Below the blockade, where the KKH ends in the debris, goods have to be transferred from trucks to jeeps or tractors because the trucks cannot drive across the huge mountain of debris. At the other side of the blockade, the goods have to be loaded from the jeeps onto the boats. Because of the need to reload goods and change vehicles transport and also travel has become time consuming and very expensive. Local market rates in Gojal rose by around one third. Also the export of local produce has become difficult and expensive. Gojal is an agrarian high mountain region and seed potatoes are the most important cash crop in the region. In the past, the cultivation of potatoes enabled the local farmers certain prosperity. Potatoes are bought by traders from down country Pakistan who also organize their transport to the markets of the Punjab. Before the landslide, local farmers got up to 2,500 PKR per 100kg potatoes. Since the road is blocked traders offer only 700 PKR, arguing that due to the drastically increased transport rates they are unable to pay more. In consequence of the landslide, then, Gojalis suffer from increased costs of livelihood while at the same time their most important source of income fails. In fact, from 2011 onwards potato cultivation was greatly reduced. Given that also the rates for fertilizer and fuel for the tractors had risen sharply, cultivation was no more remunerative. Beside agriculture, also tourism was greatly affected by the landslide.

Gojal had been an important tourist destination. The lake not only made access to the area much more difficult, preventing the coming of the less adventurous tourists, but also destroyed infrastructure like hotels and restaurants.

The majority of Gojalis is divided into two ethno-linguistic groups: Wakhis, the bigger group, and Burusho, the minority. Both belong to the Ismailiyya. In consequence of the longstanding engagement of the various organizations of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) in the area there is a high degree of self-organization and a strong orientation towards education. Among the younger generation the literacy rate reaches hundred percent. Most parents are willing to invest much money in the education of their children, higher education included, which they regard as the most important precondition for a prosperous future. Therefore many young Gojalis are enrolled in schools, colleges and universities not only in Gilgit-Baltistan, but also in the cities of Pakistan. After the landslide, as their sources of income had dried up, many parents had great difficulties to pay fees and boarding for their studying children, and some of the young Gojalis had to discontinue their education. Many parents told that this was the real disaster: Houses can be rebuilt, but a lost education cannot be recovered. They feel that the future of their families is at stake.

Another significant consequence of the lake is that access to health services is severely impeded. There is no medical doctor in the whole area of Gojal. The nearest hospital is in Aliabad in Central Hunza which before the landslide could be reached within one hour. Now the trip is a great hardship in cases of emergency and in several instances the medical facilities could not be reached in time.

There are different categories of affected people in Gojal. Most significantly affected are those 250 families who lost their homes to the lake. Because they had to move elsewhere, they are called IDPs (internally displaced persons). The lake produced

IDPs especially in three villages: in Ayeenabad, which is totally submerged, and in Shishkat and Gulmit, which came partly under water. While the IDPs of Ayeenabad and Shishkat moved to Central Hunza those of Gulmit were accommodated in the higher areas of their village. The second category of affected people is the “land affectees” who lost agricultural land or shops. The third category is the indirectly affected people who did not personally lose property but who suffer from the difficulty of access, from loss of income, etc. This is the largest category because it comprises the whole remnant population of Gojal, around 20,000 people.

Shortly after the landslide, IDPs started to receive small consignments of relief items like some food, blankets and other household items from government and different NGOs. In summer 2010 China started a large relief operation and brought enough basic food to feed the whole of Gojal for about eight months. This relief was distributed equally among the whole population of the sub-district. In 2011, China again sent food relief, but this time, after an intervention of the IDPs, it was distributed unequally among the three categories of affectees, with the IDPs receiving much more than the other two categories.

From the beginning, the disaster was politicized. A few days after the landslide, the *Rabita Committee Mutasirin-e Gojal* (Coordination Committee of the Affected People of Gojal) was formed in town of Gilgit, the capital of Gilgit-Baltistan. The Rabita Committee tried to pressurize the government for effective action and disaster mitigation and organized many events of protest against what it considered inadequate government efforts. Members of government, on the other hand, visited the area early and promised quick redress. In fact, two governments were involved, the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan and the Government of Pakistan. Gilgit-Baltistan is not a regular and constitutional part of Pakistan. Yet as a former part of the

State of Jammu and Kashmir and in consequence of the Kashmir dispute Gilgit-Baltistan has been under the control of Pakistan since 1947. Gilgit-Baltistan has no political representation in Pakistan; the inhabitants of the area do not have the right to vote for the Pakistani National Assembly. Until recently Gilgit-Baltistan has been directly administered by Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> In 2009, a reform brought a certain degree of autonomy to the area which is actually largely symbolic. Since then, however, Gilgit-Baltistan has its own nominal legislative assembly and a government which depends on bureaucrats deputed by Pakistan and which in fact remains under the control of the Federal Government.

In early 2010, the Federal Minister of Information, Qamar Zaman Qaira, was also Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan. Already in January he rushed to the site of the landslide and promised that the debris would be removed within three weeks. The work to cut a spillway through the debris in order to limit the rise of the water was given to an army engineering corps, the Frontier Works Organization (FWO). The debris was not removed and the governor returned after a few weeks only to repeat his promise. The local people took these promises as proof that the government did not take the situation seriously and charged the FWO with inefficiency. Whoever saw the huge mound of debris knew that it could not be removed within a few weeks. In fact, it has not been significantly reduced even after almost three years. Also the Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan visited the site and distributed small sums of relief money to the IDPs.

In the time after the disaster there was a kind of competition between the Government(s), publicly making announcements to show concern, and the Rabita Committee, charging Government with inactivity, and organizing protest.

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<sup>10</sup> For the postcolonial political history of Gilgit-Baltistan see Sökefeld 2005.



Both the Government of Pakistan and the Government of Gilgit-Baltistan belong to the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The disaster became a new arena of political competition. Yet while the arena was new, the antagonism which structured the competition was not. For decades politics in Hunza and Gojal has been dominated by the opposition between the PPP and the supporters of the Mir, the erstwhile ruler of the little kingdom of Hunza. The Mir had kept strict control on his subjects in Gojal that had to render corvee labor and pay high taxes. In the 1960s, some Gojalis managed to escape to Karachi where they came into contact with the newly founded PPP. In 1974, PPP Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto abolished the Mir's rule and the State of Hunza. Since then he is revered as a liberator by many families in Hunza and Gojal. Yet the Mir and his descendants continued to have much influence in the politics of Gilgit-Baltistan. In Gojal, he gets support mostly from the Burusho. They are allied with varying factions of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Although the Rabita Committee claims to speak for all the people of Gojal who are affected by the landslide, it turns out at close inspection that the Committee was formed by activists and supporters of those parties that oppose the current PPP government of Gilgit-Baltistan, namely of the supporters of the Mir, mostly allied with the PML, and of the MQM, another party with roots in Karachi. Among other things, the Rabita Committee charged the Government of GB with corruption, claiming that in the distribution of relief the Government favored its own PPP-clientele.

Hunza, Gojal included, had the reputation, cultivated by the people themselves, of being a politically calm region, also in consequence of the Aga Khan's teaching that Ismailis should always be loyal to and cooperate with a given government. Yet after the landslide, Gojalis took to unprecedented protest activities. There were demonstrations in Gulmit, in Gilgit and, by migrants from the area, in different cities of Pakistan. In

summer 2010, people demonstrated with hoes and shovels at the blockade and started symbolically to deepen the spillway in order to protest against the slowness of the FWO's work. In spring 2011 IDPs blocked the boat traffic by tying ropes across the lake and demanded disbursement of the promised compensation for their drowned houses. In August 2011 IDPs demonstrated during a visit of the Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan Aliabad, Hunza's commercial center. Here the situation escalated; police shot into a group of protestors and killed two persons. A riot followed; many government offices in Hunza were stormed by protestors and set on fire. A number of activists were arrested. Already before, Government had tried to repress protest events by issuing assembly bans and threatening protestors with legal action. After the Aliabad incident demonstrations subsided to some extent although discontent still prevails.

In consequence of the unequal distribution of the second consignment of Chinese relief, another discord emerged in Gojal: the antagonism between IDPs and the rest of the population. While the IDPs claimed that they had suffered most from the landslide and therefore needed and deserved a greater part of the relief, others expressed the opinion that IDPs, by getting much aid and support, had in fact made a fortune out of the disaster. The IDPs formed their own committee which in particular negotiated with government for their resettlement and rehabilitation.<sup>11</sup> The Rabita Committee charged the IDP Committee with pursuing their own, particularistic interest only while disregarding the general public, whereas the IDP

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<sup>11</sup> Till today there are no plans for rehabilitation and resettlement of the affected families. In 2010 the Chief Minister of the Punjab made some vague promises to allocate land to the victims but negotiations of the IDP Committee with the Government of the Punjab remained inconclusive. Two and a half years after the landslide, the affected people have not yet entered a reconstruction phase in any meaningful sense.

Committee accused the Rabita Committee of not caring for the special needs of the IDPs.

The Attabad disaster differs from the avalanche in the Callejón de Huaylas not only in scale but also because the inundation by the lake, although not the landslide itself, was a slow-onset disaster. Thus there was no sudden *communitas* of disaster but instead altruism and solidarity mostly organized through the Ismaili bodies. Volunteers helped the affected families to disassemble their houses that were threatened by the rising waters in order to save precious construction material and furnishings. Through the protests of the Rabita Committee and public promises made by the members of government, the Attabad disaster was politicized from the beginning. However, discord within the affected community grew with the advent of relief and outside assistance.

Often, the question has been asked whether and to what extent disasters bring change to affected societies (eg. Olson and Grawonsik 2003). Recently, Henry (2011) argued that continuity mostly prevails. Not very surprisingly, we learn from the case of Attabad that there is both, continuity *and* change. The disaster did not change the fundamental power structures and conflicts in Gojal or Gilgit-Baltistan; rather an old antagonism was transferred to a new arena. Yet there is a certain change in political practices and attitudes. Many Gojalis emphasized that they had never taken to the streets before, which is not entirely true,<sup>12</sup> but protests had been rather few and far between. Now especially the youth practiced the repertory of public protest quite skillfully. From discussions with local people it emerges that increasingly the government and its representatives are regarded as opponents of the local people who simply do not care. This is presented as contrasting the strict and rather

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<sup>12</sup> In 1991, for instance, Wakhis protested the curtailing of their grazing rights by the Khunjerab National Park by a blockade of the KKH (Knudsen 1999).

uncritical loyalty to the government which prevailed before the landslide. Also the reputation of the PPP has suffered greatly and most locals are convinced that the PPP representatives will not be able to succeed in the next elections. Yet the issue is not resolved at the time of writing. The lake is still there and continues to affect local life.

### **Conclusion**

If there can be one - rather banal - conclusion at the end of this text, it is that *disasters are political*. Any study of disasters that disregards their entanglement with power relations and political action misses an important dimension without which, I would claim, disaster situations cannot be fully understood. This is also an important message for efforts of disaster management and mitigation, because they, too, need to take politics into account. Humanitarian intervention is never apolitical. The politics of humanitarian interventions (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010) is one area of “disaster politics” which connects the global with the local and which needs to be explored further. Another one is the consequences of disasters in ongoing conflict situations. The conflicts in Aceh and in Sri Lanka would make an interesting case for comparison. Both places with their “ethnic” conflicts were struck by the Indian Ocean Tsunami, yet while in Aceh the disaster situation contributed to a solution of the conflict, in the longer run it had the opposite effect in Sri Lanka.

Finally, also the anthropological intervention in disaster situations has -- like all fieldwork -- political aspects. Above I have referred already to the problematic implications of questionnaires and surveys in disaster situations which may raise expectations that a fieldworker cannot fulfill. In any case we have to keep in mind that fieldwork in disaster situations concerns people who experience extreme distress. Imbalances of power between the fieldworker and his or her interlocutors

which are inherent in many fieldwork situations may be particularly significant in situations of disaster.

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