



POLICY BRIEF

TEN WAYS TO REDUCE DISASTER RISK IN CONFLICTS AND RECURRING CRISES

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Key messages

- **International assistance has focused on humanitarian support in conflicts and recurring crises and disaster risk reduction (DRR) has been neglected. DRR should be a much higher priority, and it should be understood widely.** Whatever gives people more options to cope reduces their risks from disasters, even if it does not carry a DRR label.
- **People facing risks of crises are already doing what they can to reduce those risks.** The starting point for DRR should be to identify and support what they are trying to do for themselves.
- **Supporting people's own actions locally means working incrementally, and with informality and diversity.** It is not possible by requiring them to follow national blueprints, whether for technical solutions or ways of working collectively.
- **Disasters are never entirely natural events.** People are affected according to their power or marginalisation. DRR can therefore never be entirely technical. Where there is conflict, all DRR must be conflict-sensitive and informed by an understanding of inequalities and power dynamics.
- **People's resilience depends greatly on social organisation and how institutions treat them.** Building a social infrastructure that supports people in the face of shocks is as integral to DRR as is making physical constructions more resistant to shocks.

About this brief

This policy brief draws on five years of research conducted by the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme, which has aimed to inform policies, practices and investments to support the resilience of dryland communities in Africa and the Middle East.¹ It is one of a series of three policy briefs that draw out the specific policy implications from SPARC research. The other briefs offer learning for conflicts and recurrent crises from SPARC research on the delivery of people-centred early warning systems (Gogerty and Levine, 2025) and anticipatory action (Levine and Gogerty, 2025).

The briefs do not attempt to summarise all the existing knowledge and understanding on the topics. They present only the lessons emerging from SPARC research.²

Introduction

DRR³ has taken a back seat in the last decade and a half, as other agendas have raced forward – resilience, climate change adaptation and anticipatory action – the last of these particularly in conflicts and recurrent crises where the humanitarian sector is particularly dominant. The prevention of disasters and conflict has largely been treated separately from these three (Peters, 2019), even though they are not separate agendas at all: each is about reducing people's risk of being caught in crises or disasters.

The problems are particularly extreme in situations of underlying conflict, where people face risks directly from conflict, such as from forced displacement and the destruction of livelihoods (Wiggins et al., 2021), and because natural hazards are more likely to lead to crises where there are conflicts (Caso et al., 2023). Fragility and conflict often mean less government support for affected areas, less institutional capacity,

weaker markets, and less likelihood that there are effective policies and plans in place to support people and society to manage these shocks (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2023a). Particular populations may be at heightened risk of crisis due to: political and economic marginalisation; forced displacement; the lack of government support and limited access to essential systems, services and information in certain parts of the country; and simply because chronic poverty is often more prevalent and deeper, meaning that many people are already living close to the edge, using every available strategy to get by.

Countries experiencing conflict and recurring crises receive very few resources for DRR investments from international partners (Ras, 2019; Peters, 2021). A parallel conflict blind-spot has been identified in climate adaptation finance (Cao et al., 2021), despite the call to support national governments and local actors in countries affected by fragility or conflict, and those facing humanitarian crises (UNFCCC, 2023). For various reasons, humanitarian assistance has been offered instead, rather than alongside DRR investment or climate adaptation finance, and donors have made longer-term investments as post-disaster recovery, instead of reducing risks in advance.

Global DRR efforts have been organised around the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2015). Because this was an inter-governmental initiative, its starting point is the perspective of state-led action, and thus it has tended to assume a functioning state as the primary actor. The Sendai Framework thus does not even mention the words conflict or fragility, amid a general perception that investment in DRR is not feasible in these most difficult places, that it overly complicates existing aid programming or that the return on investment is low (Peters, 2021). The disconnect between humanitarian response and DRR lies on both sides, though: few humanitarian actors work in close familiarity with the Sendai Framework (Mena, 2025).

1 The countries covered by the SPARC programme are: Burkina Faso, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Uganda and Yemen.

2 Different terminologies and typologies exist for describing places that suffer variously from state fragility and contested authority, conflicts, violence and recurring crises, e.g. 'fragile and conflict affected states' (FCAS), 'complex political emergencies' or 'situations of fragility, conflict and violence' (FCV). Learning from SPARC does not cover all such situations. For example, Mena and Hilhorst (2020) have found that DRR is possible even in high-intensity conflict but SPARC was not able to conduct research in such situations.

3 DRR aims to 'prevent new and reducing existing disaster risk and manage residual risk, all of which contribute to strengthening resilience and therefore to the achievement of sustainable development' (UNDRR, 2017).

More recently, recognition has been growing of the ways in which conflict amplifies vulnerability to natural hazards, and of the need to invest and deliver DRR in conflicts and recurring crises. This brief draws on five years of SPARC research to contribute to that growing concern. It draws on evidence that DRR is indeed necessary and possible even in conflicts and recurring crises, and offers ten recommendations for making it more effective.

Is DRR possible in conflicts and recurring crises?

Since disasters pose most risk where there is state fragility, insecurity and recurrent crises, these difficult places are where risk management is most needed. However, these places tend to share features that make reducing disaster risk more difficult. Gogerty and Levine (2025) highlight a number of these challenges, including: contested governance; a weak rule of law; high degrees of volatility in many domains including economics, markets and security; insufficient resources for state functions; degraded institutional capacity in the state and private sectors; difficulty in finding and retaining high-quality technical expertise; limited availability and quality of multi-hazard data; insufficient data on demographics and socioeconomics, so that the perspectives and priorities of the most marginalised are excluded from decision-making processes; and limited state presence and essential services in under-represented or remote areas.⁴

Despite the challenges, SPARC research has found that DRR in conflicts and recurring crises is possible – because it is being done locally, even without support, although usually without the DRR label. Investments are being made by individuals and families, communities, businesses and local governments to reduce their future risk of crisis. Among many examples, our research has found the following:

- Climate change is not going unnoticed: in parts of the Horn of Africa, herders are investing in camels, because they are more resistant than cattle to drought (Otieno et al., 2024).
- People recognise that flooding is becoming more frequent. In Mali and in Somalia, communities or local authorities are creating funds for responding

to flood warnings, and setting up social-media groups to share warnings more quickly (Nassef et al., 2025; Levine et al., 2023).

- Mutual support is in the culture of many communities. In Chad, communities' ability to help members in droughts has been expanded by setting up emergency community grain banks (Benoudji et al., 2025).
- In South Sudan, the previously unthinkable has become possible: risks related to livestock have increased from conflict and floods, and many are diversifying into fishing (Humphrey et al., 2023a), while women are using the need to support their families to transform acceptance of the types of work a woman can do (Mayhew et al., 2025).
- In Uganda, local authorities have set up informal surveillance networks for livestock epidemics (Nassef et al., 2025).
- In many countries, families are investing more in education for their children (including daughters), having recognised that all livelihoods possible without education are facing increasing threats (Dupar et al., 2021; Humphrey et al., 2023b; Okemwa et al., 2024).
- Across the drylands of Africa, pastoralists work to guard their mobility and freedom of movement as a way to manage risk, adapt to changing weather patterns and seek the resources they need for their lives and livestock (Bedelian, 2024; Opitz-Stapleton, 2023).

These few examples illustrate how people have reacted to a perception of increased risk through steps that can be technical, social or institutional, and that this is happening without external support. But the actions that people are taking for themselves do not always conform with how external actors think about risk reduction. Few of these examples would be thought of as 'DRR' by many professionals. This should raise questions about the use of labels by the DRR community: if this is how people are reducing their risks from future disasters, how can such actions be excluded from discussions about DRR?

⁴ See also Jaime et al. (2024).

The evidence that people are working to reduce their own risks in conflicts and recurrent crises shows that it is not sensible to ask whether it is possible to support them to do so. Instead, the question must be: from everything that we know about working in such places, what should support to DRR look like in these most difficult of situations?

The links between conflict, state fragility and DRR

Conflict, civil unrest and violence are now integrated as hazards in the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction's (UNDRR) Hazard Information Profiles (UNDRR/ISC, 2025). The increasing inclusion of conflict as an additional risk is an important step, but research shows that fragility and conflict are not just hazard types bringing a new set of risks: they are also the context in which all other risks exist, and they create or increase vulnerability to other risks, including climate-related risks (Vazquez, 2025).

It is important to expand DRR models to include conflict and fragility, but this is not enough. Working in such difficult places demands that everything changes about the way work is done. This can be seen more clearly by setting out some of the challenges posed by state fragility and conflict in an explicit way.

- Fragility and conflict make it harder both to attract investment, including in DRR, and to use it well. There may be reasonable fears, for example, that any investments will be destroyed in conflict.
- Even without this risk, DRR may be deterred if narrow economic calculations are used for targeting resources. Where economic infrastructure and markets are under-developed, such as is common in conflicts and recurrent crises, rates of return may appear low in financial terms.
- There are often high fiduciary risks, associated in part with a weak rule of law (especially where the state does not have a monopoly on the use of violence).

- Implementation may be difficult because of insecurity and, in crisis-prone countries, the capacity of state and other institutions is often weak or contested.
- It is more difficult to design DRR interventions because all investments made into conflicts can exacerbate tensions and lead to more conflict over resources. DRR (and other development investments) must be designed with conflict and power dynamics in mind.
- A humanitarian focus on responding to crises has displaced investments in longer-term development, risk reduction and resilience-building efforts. When humanitarian support is consciously designed and implemented to support longer-term benefits, it can lead to improved social protection and service delivery, as in Somalia. However, if this is not considered in its design, humanitarian action can undermine state structures, social institutions and the sustainability of DRR and other development efforts (Balfour and Levine, 2025).

These greater challenges are not arguments for DRR being optional or a 'nice-to-have' in conflicts and recurring crises: they are an argument for making sure that efforts are appropriately designed for dealing with the challenges.

The humanitarian sector is currently attempting to scale up the use of humanitarian resources in response to the forecasts of crises, to reduce the risk that crises may develop (under the label of 'anticipatory action').⁵ SPARC research has shown, though, that anticipatory action is not a substitute for DRR, but should be part of a disaster risk management (DRM) strategy (Levine and Gogerty, 2025). Anticipatory action works on short-term horizons, delivering assistance between the forecast of a shock and the crisis. This timeframe rarely provides a window of opportunity for taking measures to protect against future risk. Indeed, investment in DRR is often necessary for effective anticipatory action to be possible (Levine et al., 2023).

⁵ See www.anticipation-hub.org for a library of literature on anticipatory action, and Levine and Gogerty (2025) for SPARC's lessons on anticipatory action in conflicts and recurring crises.

Ten recommendations for reducing disaster risk in conflicts and recurring crises

By setting out the lessons from SPARC research for DRR in conflicts and recurring crises, SPARC is not initiating a new debate. Attention is increasing to the challenges to be faced and the ways of overcoming them. IFRC et al. (2024) have produced a handbook to help practitioners to deal with some of the practical problems faced in implementing DRR programmes in such places. The recommendations below do not repeat this work. They contribute to the same debate by offering suggestions on how to *think differently* about DRR in conflicts, rather than on how to *implement* it. The recommendations below are not an exhaustive list or a summary of all that is known; they are the lessons from SPARC's own research projects over the past five years, offered as a contribution to ongoing debates.

1. If it helps people avoid or cope with disaster, then it's DRR

Because so many people are living 'on the edge' in conflicts and recurring crises, every shock can create problems in many dimensions of their lives, including health, safety and livelihoods. Anything that helps people to move further from the edge, by giving them more options and more agency, makes them better able to cope and thus reduces their risks from disasters. This includes all resilience-building or risk-informed development efforts (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2019). Preconceptions about what should be funded under a DRR label are not helpful in conflicts and recurring crises. Comments that are sometimes heard, such as 'this isn't really DRR, it's a water intervention' miss the point. If it helps reduce the risk of people being caught in a disaster, then it is DRR.

2. DRR cannot be only technical, because disasters are never natural or neutral

DRR is always based on decisions that are political, such as where investments are made, or which population groups, assets and resources are to be protected – and which are not (UNDRR, n.d.). This is much more pronounced in conflicts and recurring crises, because the contest over resource allocation is often a symptom and a cause of state fragility and conflict. Where there is conflict, all DRR must be conflict-sensitive.

All support to DRR has to be informed by an understanding of the interplay between disasters/ conflict and existing inequalities and power dynamics within society. This is not optional. Nothing is immune from politicisation or from being used to gain power and resources. DRR investments in one domain can be used to make claims on resources in another. For example, where to site a borehole looks like a technical question, but access to water is used to make claims on land (Balfour et al., 2025). If the politics are understood, a new borehole may be a good DRR intervention, rather than creating more conflict and vulnerability.

3. The causal paths from shocks to impact are not chains – they are webs, and spread widely

Crises in these difficult places are almost always the outcome of several interacting factors, including weather events, insecurity and/or economic shocks. These threats, like people affected by them, cross borders and regions (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2023b). How they are managed in one place will influence what happens somewhere else. DRR cannot work by addressing risks that come from one simple chain. It has to be based on an understanding of the interactions of the risks, including those that come from across borders and from different sectors. Some of the threads in the causal web are always political, so no DRR analysis can be politics-free.

4. Identify agency and support people's options

The best place to start efforts to help people is usually with what they are already doing, and what they are already trying to change. This is not always assessed or understood: situations are usually presented in static terms, whether a description of livelihoods or the functioning of the civil service. This makes it easy to miss out the most important dimension, the directions of change.

Change in conflicts and recurring crises can be quick, where previous livelihoods become impossible, old social structures break down or people are forced to move. But even displacement brings opportunities, as movement brings people together with different ideas and experiences. Gender transformations too happen very fast in conflicts, as women have found ways to challenge previous norms about what they could do (Mayhew et al., 2025; Levine et al., 2019). One of the main goals of DRR is to increase people's agency in the face of risk and threats. It should always seek to understand and harness this dynamism to the goal of DRR.

5. DRR needs local diversity, not national blueprints

Homogenous and cohesive societies, with a strong and accepted policy direction set from the centre, are less likely to be in conflict settings. The risk landscape therefore tends to be more varied in conflicts and recurring crises, and the state, society and communities tend to function in diverse ways. In Mali and in Uganda, SPARC found that local authorities worked very differently even in two neighbouring administrative areas (Nassef et al., 2025). The appropriate ways to support DRR are therefore also more heterogenous. Because social, economic, cultural, political and geographical diversity shapes the impacts of disasters on people, national blueprints for DRR are unlikely to be appropriate. DRR efforts should embrace and prioritise diversity. Planning can be centralised only if it facilitates local actors to design and implement measures appropriate to their own contexts.

6. DRR efforts must engage with informality

People living in marginalised areas (such as the drylands and crisis-affected areas) rely on informal systems and networks in so many ways: for resources, for support in times of crises, for information and for providing the norms and rules by which their local societies function. Informal systems shape people's behaviour, social capital, livelihood decisions and access to markets, all of which influence their capacity to manage shocks and their resilience. Informal institutions provide people with credit and protect – or threaten – their land rights, whether as individuals, families or collectively.

Most external assistance to DRR, whether from governments or international actors, is focused exclusively on what is called the formal realm. This makes it much less relevant to real life and is a major reason why so many development, resilience or DRR investment efforts have not lived up to expectations (SPARC, 2024; Pain and Levine, 2024a and 2024b; Banerjee et al., 2022; Benoudji et al., 2025; Bedelian and Levine, 2025). DRR efforts must understand the informal rules and institutions that shape how people live, and they should seek to work with and through these systems and networks – just as much as the people they are trying to help work with and through.

7. Change takes time. Be realistic and go step by step

Too many development and DRR efforts are based on unrealistic visions of external interventions driving social transformation (Levine and Pain, 2024; Bedelian and Levine, 2025). The greater the ambition, the greater the need for a strong theory about how change will unfold – and that means a theory that is plausible, backed by evidence and an understanding of how people in different societies are likely to behave. Too often, interventions replace this theory with simple assumptions, for example that if profits can be made, people will change their way of living to maximise them. This is unlikely to be true where conflict and state fragility make life uncertain and people must decide what risks they can afford.

Experience shows that transformation is best approached step by step (Benoudji et al., 2025). The closer an innovation remains to existing elements of people's lives, the more likely it is to be successful – and to be built on for making further changes. The more complicated a mechanism is, the less likely it is to function in difficult places. It is better to concentrate on improving things a little than to try for something ideal.

8. Understand trade-offs: accept that people will make different decisions

DRR does not come cost-free, including to the people whose risk is being reduced. People have to bear financial costs, and costs associated with their time or dependency – these costs can hamper the success of DRR efforts. This is more of a challenge in conflicts and recurring crises, where people have less ability to bear additional costs and have fewer possible choices in their lives.

The costs cannot be hidden. If the trade-off between future risk and potential cost is addressed explicitly, people can make informed choices for themselves. Because everyone is different, with different abilities, resources, status and risk appetite, people will make different decisions (Elsamahi et al., 2021). The outcome might not be a simple yes or no – people may find intermediate ways of compromising around the trade-offs. This is sometimes regarded as undermining the proper implementation of development efforts. This is an unhelpful attitude. People should be encouraged to make their own informed decisions for themselves. It is probably a sign of success if everyone is adapting DRR measures to suit themselves.

9. Work differently: strengthen social infrastructure

Ultimately, reducing people's risks from disasters requires supporting the creation of societies that are stronger and better able to manage risks, and where vulnerability is reduced. This can be achieved by strengthening all kinds of social infrastructure – including state institutions and state services, the private sector and civil society in all its forms. This cannot be delivered piecemeal by different projects. It takes time and needs a coherent and strategic approach.

Delivering a set of DRR outputs matching a checklist is not the same as creating societies that are more resilient to disasters and crisis. Delivering solutions can even undermine DRR, by undermining local accountability and initiative or sidelining important local institutions (Balfour et al., 2025). DRR cannot be delivered from outside, it can only be built by societies themselves.

Much talk of 'partnerships' and 'local ownership' does not match reality, though, because the business model and systems of accountability in the aid sector encourage the delivery of outputs, not supporting other societies to manage risks in their own ways. A less directive role does not come naturally to all aid

organisations, and changing the business model, and the system of incentives and accountability, in the aid sector will be difficult. Unless and until everyone is open about admitting the challenges that this poses, it will not be possible to make progress. Consequently, efforts to build more disaster-resilient societies in places affected by conflict will not fulfil their potential.

10. Change the metrics

The picture that has emerged from SPARC research does not suggest that progress on reducing disaster risk can be measured by counting how many DRR committees are set up or community action plans written down. In the big picture of DRR, so many changes can reduce disaster risk; and some effective ways of reducing risks may open up new risks for others. How can progress be measured if DRR is so amorphous? There is unlikely to be a good answer to this question but perhaps it is not the right question. Progress towards reducing specific risks can be assessed in different ways. Compounding progress into distinctly 'DRR progress' is likely to remain out of reach. If that encourages a vision of DRR that removes it from a silo and sees DRR as a relevant consideration in all sectors and domains, that might not be a bad thing.

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Acknowledgements

This policy brief is published through the Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) programme, which is supported by the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO).

We would like to thank Veronique Barbelet and Marcus Oxley (independent consultants), Sam Derbyshire (SPARC/ILRI), Catalina Jaime (Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre) and Niccolò Lombardi (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) for providing feedback on this brief. We would also like to thank Adessou Kossivi (Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction), Rodrigo Mena (Institute of Social Studies, Netherlands) and Mauricio Vazquez (SPARC/ODI Global) for providing peer-review comments. Thanks go to Nina Behrman for copyediting this brief, Steven Dickie (squarebeasts.net) for typesetting and Jo Fottrell for proofreading.

About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agropastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, nongovernmental organisations, local and national governments and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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How to cite: Gogerty, E. and Levine, S. (2025) 'Ten ways to reduce disaster risk in conflicts and recurring crises'. Policy Brief. London: SPARC Knowledge (<https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/publications-resources/ten-ways-reduce-disaster-risk-conflicts-and-recurring-crises>) (<https://doi.org/10.61755/GSIJ3730>)

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Funded by



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.