

Response to “Beyond Disasters: Creating Opportunities for Peace”, a Worldwatch Report

By Ilan Kelman, 12 June 2007

Background:

On 12 June 2007, a Worldwatch Report by Michael Renner and Zoë Chafe was released at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. The report is called Beyond Disasters: Creating Opportunities for Peace <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5111> and concludes the project “Natural Disasters and Peacemaking” <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/5123/results> funded by the Ford Foundation.

The text here is an invited commentary which Ilan Kelman made in New York on the occasion of the report’s release. See also <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/projects.html#wwi>

Ilan Kelman’s response to “Beyond Disasters: Creating Opportunities for Peace”, a Worldwatch Report (12 June 2007):

Thank you for the opportunity to comment and thank you to the Worldwatch Institute for an impressive, much-needed, and fascinating report. I found it be a useful synthesis of broad and pertinent material, mixing history with contemporary knowledge and field-based examples with background and theory. As well, I wish to highlight the report’s realism and common sense which, too often, is uncommon. In fact, in reading the report, the academic in me reacted that this study could become a nice peer-reviewed paper in a top international journal. Then I realized that it would be too practical, realistic, and grounded for most academics.

Nonetheless, in reading and reacting to this report, as an academic, I am naturally biased towards my own studies which here means “disaster diplomacy”. Disaster diplomacy examines how and why disaster-related activities do and do not induce cooperation amongst enemies. The key phrase is “disaster-related activities”, because that refers to pre-disaster activities such as prevention, mitigation, and preparedness along with post-disaster activities including aid. Disaster diplomacy research suggests that disaster-related activities can catalyze diplomacy which has a pre-existing basis, but it will not create new diplomacy. That pre-existing basis might be cultural or trade links or could be secret negotiations amongst the parties in conflict. As well, that catalysis occurs 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. Non-disaster factors could be a leadership change or belief that an historical grievance should have precedence over the humanitarian imperative.

Disaster diplomacy, including its limitations and the many instances where it does not work, is of course only one small aspect of all the interactions amongst disaster-related activities, conflict, and peacemaking. It is through continual collaboration and interaction with others that I can maintain wider perspectives and keep my disaster diplomacy academic work grounded in reality.

In particular, the overall lesson related to this report from my disaster diplomacy experience, is that disaster-related activities are and always have been political. From this observation, a research and practice question emerges: Are they inherently so? With regards to disaster diplomacy, some people have told me “no”. They suggest that extensive effort occurs to divorce disasters from politics, and so new mechanisms for relating disasters and politics are not needed. Instead, encouraging further separation would be preferable.

Yet the disaster diplomacy evidence and the wider contexts in the Worldwatch report all suggest otherwise, that disaster-related activities are inherently political—which I think is also common

sense. The more positive outcomes from disaster-related activities which can be fostered, the better. Such outcomes should be actively pursued and, as the report emphasizes, actively created.

That means that we must work within the politics as both a constraint and as an opportunity. Regarding the politics as a constraint, aid will literally be a band-aid, helping the surface wound to heal without addressing the fundamental cause of the injury, unless it can factor in and link to root causes. Even for a tsunami or an earthquake, political and conflict concerns need to be addressed within the context of the tsunami or earthquake; for example, by permitting tsunami aid to be used for people who are conflict affected but not tsunami affected, as well as potentially for underlying development problems in areas not affected by the tsunami. Regarding the politics as an opportunity, aid could potentially be used as a process to bring the conflicting parties together in a neutral and mediated environment to work out how to manage the aid.

Yet such suggestions, while good-hearted, can cause many other problems and attempts to implement them might backfire. If we choose to advocate aid-for-peace and to advise a leader that aid is political—that aid could and should be used for peace—that leader could say “Forget it. I don’t want peace and so I have no interest in post-disaster help”. Or the leader could optimistically and naively try based on our advice, only to be rebuffed and embarrassed by the other side.

So is it possible that pretending to remove the politics from the aid is the way forward? We could pretend externally that aid is not political while admitting amongst ourselves that aid is political and seeing how we could use those politics not only to better provide aid but also to address the root causes which led to the need for aid. Such duplicity is hardly transparent or honest, but if it works?

Within this context that disaster-related activities, including aid, are always political, I will highlight three other points which I feel are particularly poignant and worthwhile expanding in order to answer some of the questions posed to us by the report. They are also common themes in disaster diplomacy case studies.

First, individuals can make a difference. In speaking of groups and governments and states, we often forget the influence which a single person can have. Sometimes that individual is motivated by greed, self-protection, or ignorance rather than by generosity or caring.

Second, those involved in disaster, conflict, and peace often have motives other than peace or disaster risk reduction. Religion, ethnicity, natural resources, and history can be used as excuses for the conflict which actually perpetuates and covers up corruption, drugs, diamonds, arms trading, or simple lust for power.

Third, the influence of cultural values and perceptions should not be underestimated, as in loss of face or perceived loss of face; the need to look tough; and the expectation of solid, direct decision-making and leadership rather than seeking a middle road or waiting until facts are verified before setting policy. Western democracies are particularly poor in that a leader is expected to respond instantly to questions and then is not permitted to admit mistakes or to backtrack. Compromise looks weak. When did we last hear a political leader say “I don’t know”?

What does this mean for solutions? Here I raise three points, although I have more questions than answers.

First, ethics. Mary B. Anderson wrote of “Do No Harm” for humanitarian aid. UNDP has established good governance principles: participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, effectiveness, and equity. Plenty has been written about them and there is immense experience in

making them applicable on the ground. We should use these principles and experience in all our work, including humanitarian aid.

Second, the ethos. To overcome inertia, complacency, and fear, do we need to become gamblers and risk-takers demonstrating boldness and creativity for the sake of boldness and creativity? Open the Line of Control. Remove the army from Aceh. Offer the Tamils a referendum on sovereignty. The danger is that many successful diplomacy case studies are ponderous, careful, and thought out, taking small steps, proving that they work to build confidence, and then taking more small steps. Radical maneuvers can send us into a tailspin where we head rapidly in another, often opposite, direction. Perhaps what we really seek is imagination combined with patience.

Third, I would question the need for a single solution applicable to all cases. Is it possible that different approaches work in different case studies? Is it possible that a multi-pronged approach simultaneously could be beneficial despite competing interests and contradictory approaches? That is, “vive la différence” in order to tackle complex, multi-faceted, long-term problems with complex, multi-faceted, long-term solutions.

In doing so, we must never forget that while we might seek disaster risk reduction and peace, those two activities are not necessarily a high priority, or even a direct interest, of those in power. Politics can be uncaring. The humanitarian imperative—as with development, sustainability, and environmental management—can be superseded by personalities, money, egos, ignorance, or Machiavelli. That is hardly an innovative notion, but we must admit it explicitly and emphasize it as common sense and, frequently, as human nature which must be dealt with.

As the report implies, we know enough to go beyond disaster and beyond conflict. Despite the barriers, it is up to us to create and pursue opportunities for peace. If only because, in many instances, no one else will. Thank you for your attention.