

## Learning Lessons From Disaster Management Diplomacy

By Ilan Kelman, Mickey Glantz, and Rebecca Paxton

This document is from <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/pb/diplo2008.pdf>

The slides are at <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/pb/diplo2008.ppt>

### **Background**

From 7-8 February 2008, the conference Climate Change Diplomacy was held in Malta by the DiploFoundation <http://www.diplomacy.edu>. The text here is from Ilan Kelman's presentation in Malta, the full reference of which is:

Kelman, I., M. Glantz, and R. Paxton. 2008. "Learning Lessons from Disaster Management Diplomacy". Presentation at Climate Change Diplomacy, Malta, 7-8 February 2008.

See also <http://www.disasterdiplomacy.org/cep.html>

### **Full Text**

[Slide 1]

Thank you for the opportunity to be here and to the conference organisers for their work and generosity in making this event happen. As well, thank you to my co-authors Michael Glantz and Rebecca Paxton. Thank you also to the fossil fuels which brought me here.

[Slide 2]

I will talk about the lessons for climate change diplomacy from an area which I have been researching, called disaster management diplomacy or disaster diplomacy. Most of the material which I summarise today is available in greater detail on the disaster diplomacy website of [disasterdiplomacy.org](http://disasterdiplomacy.org)

When I speak of "disaster diplomacy", I am not referring to instances where diplomacy breaks down, goes wrong, or does not work. I am not examining a disaster or difficulty in diplomatic efforts.

Instead, my work on disaster diplomacy defines it as how and why disaster-related activities do and do not reduce conflict or lead to cooperation amongst enemies. The key phrase is "disaster-related activities", because that refers to pre-disaster activities such as prevention, risk reduction, and preparedness along with post-disaster activities including response, recovery, and reconstruction. 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 it could be secret negotiations amongst the parties in conflict.

For example, the peace deal in Aceh, Indonesia is commonly linked to the tsunami of 26 December 2004 but, in fact, secret negotiations had started between the Indonesian government and the independence fighters just two days before the tsunami. There is no doubt that the tsunami created conditions which permitted the peace deal to be successful, at least so far, but the tsunami did not create the peace deal. The disaster catalysed but did not create the diplomacy.

As well, disaster diplomacy work shows that any 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. For example, there have been a few instances over the past few decades of the USA providing assistance to Iran after an earthquake, but

any opportunities to reduce the animosity between the two countries were lost as time went on and both countries continued to pursue their normal state of diplomatic activities with respect to the other.

Yet sometimes, even when countries wish to pursue their normal state of diplomatic activities, pressure from outside government leads to a different diplomatic outcome. In 1999, Greece and Turkey had deep conflicts over multiple issues, but they were negotiating in secret and collaborating behind the scenes to work towards reconciliation. In August, an earthquake hit Turkey, and Greece assisted. In September, an earthquake hit Greece, and Turkey assisted. Propelled by the media and a grassroots uprising to see each other as friends, the careful diplomacy worked out between Greece and Turkey was thrust into the spotlight, significantly catalysed by being forced along at a rapid pace—and it nearly collapsed as a result. Grassroots efforts might be well-intentioned, but they can cause more problems than they solve, especially over the long-term when people's attention drifts to other matters.

In having examined multiple disaster diplomacy case studies of many different forms, the conclusion is that disaster-related activities can catalyse diplomacy in the short-term, but not create diplomacy nor overwhelm non-disaster factors in the long-term.

The reason is basic politics: the humanitarian imperative and the desire for peace must compete with other priorities in political and diplomatic circles. It is rare that disaster-related activities are a high priority and that usually happens after a disaster. In fact, we tend to be exceptionally good at preventing the disaster which has just happened.

Or, the overall lesson from disaster diplomacy is that, in general, it does not work. While most of us might wish to stop disasters and might wish for peace, the reality is that not everyone always shares our views and they have their own reasons, good or bad, for placing other activities as a higher priority.

[Slide 3]

That conclusion has applied to many disaster types and disaster circumstances. Climate change is one example of a long-term, global disaster to which the disaster diplomacy principles can be applied. That is, when trying to understand and address climate change, what are the implications for wider peace, conflict, and diplomacy? I provide three main lessons. But in describing them, please remember that my discussions are restricted to disaster diplomacy lessons. The world has much more to offer than only disaster diplomacy and it could be that other experiences or evidence negates arguments which are developed through only a disaster diplomacy lens.

The first lesson is that climate change is a long-term issue. The problem witnessed has built up over the long-term and long-term consequences are likely which means that long-term solutions are necessary. Yet disaster diplomacy does not do much in the long-term. So, if we take only disaster diplomacy, the advice is that people dealing with climate change should focus on that issue and try to develop long-term robust solutions rather than seeking quick and superficial fixes which try to connect climate change diplomacy to topics beyond climate change, such as non climate change related peace and conflict.

Because the second disaster diplomacy lesson is that dealing with climate change should not be expected to contribute to resolving wider conflicts. Many people advocate that increased cooperation and improved diplomatic relations beyond the specific issue should be an aim of multilateral climate change negotiations. That is unlikely to work. Instead, the disaster diplomacy perspective is that international climate change negotiations should be a forum free from

consideration of these external conflicts and divorced from non climate change issues in order to bring people to the table. In fact, some argue that the multilateral framework focused on a specific issue and nothing else permits conflicting states to cooperate directly, as illustrated by the Antarctic Treaty System.

In 1982, the Argentine and UK representatives to the Antarctic Treaty System sat down and negotiated on the treaty while their two countries were at war and killing each other's soldiers in the South Atlantic. But they dealt with nothing else apart from Antarctica. Keeping the negotiations about only the environmental issue with no distractions permitted the negotiations to work.

Except that, scientifically, boxing climate change into narrow confines and dealing with nothing else is not the most effective way of tackling the problem over the long-term. Instead, explicitly considering connections—such as poverty, livelihoods, and human rights—is essential for solving a long-term problem. The political reality and the scientific reality do not match.

Nevertheless, these first two lessons refer to only the state level of diplomacy. The third lesson from disaster diplomacy is that there can be successful cooperation amongst states in conflict at lower political and diplomatic levels, particularly at the scientific and technical levels.

For decades, Cuban and American scientists have collaborated on hurricane modelling and monitoring. How can that happen? Because they don't tell the politicians. If someone desires to share climate change expertise amongst various countries, including countries which are not collaborating politically, then disaster diplomacy suggests, don't try to create political collaboration. Deal with the lower level. Scientists, whose job is to share knowledge, are an excellent way of establishing a network across borders. Small non-profits often have a mandate to bring grassroots initiatives together.

In fact, grassroots efforts frequently succeed where high-level attempts do not. Yet that can also backfire. Any interest at any level may have their own reasons for fermenting animosity and for avoiding diplomacy.

[Slide 4]

To truly create climate change diplomacy—with a long-lasting, solid foundation which will not fall apart at the first sign of trouble—the main lesson from disaster diplomacy is that the root cause, the fundamental reason for that conflict, must be tackled, however difficult and deep that might be. Sadly, the political reality is that this approach is not always possible.

Thank you.