

A photograph of a school hallway. A line of students is standing, with many of them covering their eyes with their hands. The hallway has white walls and windows on the upper level. The lighting is bright, suggesting a well-lit indoor space.

Executive summary

# Disaster risk reduction, urban informality and a ‘fragile peace’

The case of Lebanon

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Cover photo: Students conduct a safety drill, coordinated by volunteers from the Lebanese Red Cross, at Al-Quba School in Tripoli, Lebanon.  
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## About this paper

This report is part of the project ‘When disasters and conflict collide: uncovering the truth’, a collaboration between the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). The lead researcher is Katie Peters, Senior Research Fellow, ODI ([k.peters@odi.org.uk](mailto:k.peters@odi.org.uk)).

### Available in this series

Peters, K. (2018) *Accelerating Sendai Framework implementation in Asia: disaster risk reduction in contexts of violence, conflict and fragility*. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11153-accelerating-sendai-framework-implementation-asia-disaster-risk-reduction-contexts-violence-conflict](http://www.odi.org/publications/11153-accelerating-sendai-framework-implementation-asia-disaster-risk-reduction-contexts-violence-conflict))

Peters, K. and Peters, L.E.R. (2018) *Disaster risk reduction and violent conflict in Africa and Arab states: implications for Sendai Framework Priorities*. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11208-disaster-risk-reduction-and-violent-conflict-africa-and-arab-states-implications-sendai-framework](http://www.odi.org/publications/11208-disaster-risk-reduction-and-violent-conflict-africa-and-arab-states-implications-sendai-framework))

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Peters, K., Eltinay, N. and Holloway, K. (2019) *Disaster risk reduction, urban informality and a ‘fragile peace’: the case of Lebanon*. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11412-disaster-risk-reduction-urban-informality-and-fragile-peace-case-lebanon](http://www.odi.org/publications/11412-disaster-risk-reduction-urban-informality-and-fragile-peace-case-lebanon))

Mena, R., Hilhorst, D. and Peters, K. (2019) *Disaster risk reduction and protracted violent conflict: the case of Afghanistan*. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11413-disaster-risk-reduction-and-protracted-violent-conflict-case-afghanistan](http://www.odi.org/publications/11413-disaster-risk-reduction-and-protracted-violent-conflict-case-afghanistan))

Siddiqi, A., Peters, K. and Zulver, J. (2019) *‘Doble afectación’: living with disasters and conflict in Colombia*. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11414-doble-afectacion-living-disasters-and-conflict-colombia](http://www.odi.org/publications/11414-doble-afectacion-living-disasters-and-conflict-colombia))

Peters, K. (2019) *Disaster risk reduction in conflict contexts: an agenda for action*. London: ODI ([www.odi.org/publications/11408-disaster-risk-reduction-conflict-contexts-agenda-action](http://www.odi.org/publications/11408-disaster-risk-reduction-conflict-contexts-agenda-action))

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## Multimedia content

- Online feature including videos from Colombia, Lebanon, and Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Disaster Risk Reduction, Ms Mami Mizutori ([www.odi.org/disasters-conflict](http://www.odi.org/disasters-conflict))
- Podcast series: *When disasters and conflict collide* ([www.odi.org/opinion/10507-podcast-series-when-disasters-and-conflict-collide](http://www.odi.org/opinion/10507-podcast-series-when-disasters-and-conflict-collide))
  - Episode 1: *Conflict: the elephant in the diplomatic meeting room*
  - Episode 2: *The politics of disasters*
  - Episode 3: *A call to action*

All reports and content as well as information on the project can be found online: [www.odi.org/projects/2913-when-disasters-and-conflict-collide-uncovering-truth](http://www.odi.org/projects/2913-when-disasters-and-conflict-collide-uncovering-truth)

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# Executive summary

For too long, policymakers, practitioners and funders in the international community have failed to pay sufficient attention to disaster risk reduction (DRR) in contexts of conflict. As a result, states and citizens living in fragile, volatile and violent situations are often unable to prepare for or mitigate against risk and, when natural hazards occur, the impacts are likely to be disproportionately devastating. There is a clear need for more evidence and understanding on how conditions of conflict increase people's vulnerability to disasters and hamper the attainment of DRR goals.

The Lebanon case highlights many of the complexities and contradictions associated with achieving disaster resilience in conflict situations. It also challenges conventional concepts of what constitutes a conflict context, and reveals new insights on how DRR can be pursued in these situations. Insight into sectarian divisions, urban informality, the marginalisation of refugees, and the prioritisation of conflict risk over natural hazards, help to develop our collective understanding and shed light on the types of DRR approaches and actions that are viable and appropriate in contexts characterised as holding a 'fragile peace'.

## A 'fragile peace'

Although on the surface, Lebanon appears to be a relatively peaceful and stable society, digging deeper reveals a turbulent undercurrent, described by interviewees as a 'fragile peace'. This refers to the deep-seated inter- and intra-community tensions that impede social cohesion in cities and that could flare up into violence at any time. The situation is exacerbated by a fragile political system built on sectarianism, inadequate urban governance and widespread corruption, coupled with inequitable access to rights and resources for displaced and refugee populations.

Geographically, Lebanon sits in an extremely volatile region and is impacted enormously by ongoing conflict in its neighbouring countries. As a consequence, the country currently hosts more than one million refugees from Palestine and Syria; the highest number compared to the population size of any country in the world.

A further complication relates to the fact that 89% of the population lives in towns and cities where there is a relatively high level of urban informality and poverty. There are unresolved issues around the protracted displacement and refugee status of communities displaced from Palestine, some of whom have been living in Lebanon since the 1940s. People living long-term in temporary settlements are often at high risk from natural hazards and conflict, with multiple intersecting vulnerabilities that compound to increase their levels of risk. Yet such populations are not adequately represented in formal DRR policy, planning and funding allocations. As a result, it is difficult to gain a complete picture of the country's true vulnerability to disaster risk.

Uncovering these aspects of complexity helps to unpack the socioeconomic, political, religious and cultural nuances that shape, alter, prevent and enable DRR outcomes across Lebanon. It also provides important insights into the intersection of DRR, urban informality and the 'fragile city'. Furthermore, it helps avoid distortion or underrepresentation of disaster risk by providing a powerful illustration of the need to include marginalised and excluded groups, particularly refugees and displaced persons, in formal DRR policy and planning.

## 'Conflict-sensitive' DRR

One of the principal contradictions in Lebanon is that people generally believe there is little risk to them from large-scale disasters. With no major earthquakes having occurred in living

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memory, public perceptions of seismic risk, and other major hazards, are generally low. Yet during one week of research for the study, several incidents occurred. A harsh winter storm forced evacuation of Syrian refugees, a landslide blocked a major road connecting the capital, and serious flooding affected informal coastal settlements. The risk of conflict, on the other hand, remains high in the public consciousness, and several interviewees used the term ‘conflict-sensitive’ to denote widespread awareness of conflict dynamics. This finding questions the dominance of the natural hazard profile methodology used in conventional Lebanese DRR and points to an important way forward: that of employing conflict risk as an entry point for a more comprehensive approach to risk management.

The work of the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) yields valuable insight into how civilian concerns over conflict risk can provide an impetus to advance risk management capabilities more broadly. LRC has focused on establishing relationships and building trust among communities where there is a history of violent conflict; for example, by ensuring equal service provision, using school safety programmes as an entry point, and conducting joint activities with conflicting parties using conflict-sensitive approach to DRR. Efforts to prevent and prepare for conflict have expanded over time to cover threats and hazards that otherwise would not feature prominently in the social consciousness – such as seismic risk, flooding and fires. The work of LRC also demonstrates how compromise and management of competing interests can be effective in building greater social cohesion, in addition to delivering such essential DRR capacities as first aid training and coordination of religious-affiliated ambulance service provision.

Despite being regarded as one of the most advanced countries in the Arab region for DRR, Lebanon’s complex and dynamic governance arrangements necessitate further work to be undertaken. We need to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between sectarian governance and disaster risk management, especially in a situation where conflict risk is real and dynamic, and where assessments of disaster vulnerability warrant closer inspection of these conflict dynamics. Starting with the political context – rather than the hazard profile – could

help inform new approaches to DRR that are mindful of the need to prioritise protection of neglected populations, including Lebanon’s urban poor, and displaced and refugee populations.

## Recommendations

These new insights point to several recommendations for DRR practitioners, donors and policymakers.

### Use conflict preparedness as an entry point

This includes investing in local action while also incentivising the state to protect its citizens and refugee populations. Continued investment in the National Disaster Risk Management Unit and LRC will be required while, at the same time, encouraging the government to prioritise DRR focused on marginalised and underrepresented communities. Documenting examples where the potential for conflict has been used successfully as an entry point for building disaster preparedness would allow replication of this approach elsewhere. There is also a need to shift the focus from hazards to vulnerability, and from risk management to risk reduction. This will require better data and enhanced understanding of vulnerability across the country.

### Reduce risk creation and generate expertise on disaster-resilient post-war reconstruction

A current lack of enforcement of building codes and unplanned urban development combine to increase the risk to people from earthquakes and this needs to be addressed urgently. To protect its citizens, economy and stability, the Government of Lebanon needs to give a higher priority to seismic-proofing new and existing buildings, and protecting people living in urban slums and temporary shelters. Given its position of relative stability within the region, by investing in DRR technical expertise and demonstrating how to avoid risk creation – through systematic consideration of disaster risk in its economic development pathway – Lebanon could position itself as having the capacity to provide technical

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expertise for post-war reconstruction throughout the region.

### **Accelerate protection against disasters for conflict displaced populations**

Refugees and displaced persons should be fully included in DRR policy, strategy and planning; either explicitly or through differentiated agencies and strategies which are linked to formal processes. Current experiences and links (e.g. with LRC) can be used to design and deliver appropriate DRR actions for different situations and sub-sets of society. Lessons learned to date can be used to develop practical guidance for implementing agencies which are cognisant of conflict dynamics. Similarly, Lebanon's proactive engagement in international responses to disaster displacement in conflict zones will yield useful lessons.

### **The city as a site of action in contexts of 'fragile peace'**

Further work is needed to develop a better understanding of the relationship between sectarian governance and DRR, especially relating to marginalised communities including refugees and the urban poor. Using the city as an entry point and building on the success of the Making Cities Resilient campaign, it would be appropriate to continue building capacity at the sub-national level. A sub-group focusing on fragile cities would be a useful starting point for sharing experiences within and beyond Lebanon. By focusing on the intersection of urban poverty, violence and disasters, the research has revealed new insights into how urban disaster resilience can be achieved, but also just how far we need to go to ensure those most at risk are duly protected.





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