

How humanitarian assistance practices exacerbate vulnerability: Knowledges, authority and legitimacy in disaster interventions in Baltistan, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines humanitarian assistance practices to understand how approaches followed by various actors address – or fail to address - social vulnerability to disasters. This question is addressed through a study of humanitarian responses in two disaster-affected villages of Baltistan in northern Pakistan. Through analysis of key informant interviews, semi-structured interviews with men and women, group discussions and secondary data sources, we identify how government, non-governmental and faith-based organisations understand and seek to address underlying socio-political processes that define vulnerability. We analyse how knowledges and practices serve to legitimise authority relations between and among humanitarian organisations and local populations. The paper finds that a simplistic understanding of vulnerability - that people with higher losses are more vulnerable and deserve more assistance in comparison to those who suffer lower losses - tends to favour well-off people, as they own (and lose) more physical assets. This understanding is shared between humanitarian actors and the local elite, such as settlement leaders. This convergence of knowledges enabled the elite to privilege themselves, both in terms of material benefits and influential positions. The reliance of local humanitarian organisations on external actors, such as national governments and donors for funding and legitimacy further hindered contextual understandings of disaster vulnerability. This finding demonstrates how politics of humanitarian assistance transcend geographical scales. We conclude that humanitarian actors not only failed to address the socio-political drivers of vulnerability but also contributed to the exacerbation of vulnerability through reinforcing inequitable village-level and cross-scalar authority relations.

1. Introduction

In this paper, we examine the practices of various humanitarian actors to understand how particular humanitarian assistance approaches address - or fail to address - social vulnerability to disasters. Disasters are not natural events [1,2]; rather an outcome of the interaction between hazards and vulnerability defined by socio-political processes and power relations [3]. This conceptualisation has challenged the traditional narrative that disasters are an outcome of the physical impact of natural hazards [4]. The emergence of vulnerability as a key aspect causing disasters acknowledges the possibility that addressing the underlying dynamics contributing to vulnerability can help in preventing disasters [5].

A focus on preventing disasters is particularly crucial in the context of global climate change, which is expected to lead to an increase in the frequency and the intensity of extreme weather events [6]. In this context, traditional approaches addressing disasters with response-based thinking remain insufficient [7]. Although response in the form of humanitarian assistance is crucial and has contributed significantly towards saving lives in the aftermath of crises, an ‘arrive, act and leave’ approach lacks consideration of contextual power relationships contributing to vulnerability and disasters, and may further aggravate the circumstances [8]. Therefore, there is an increasing emphasis on redesigning humanitarian assistance approaches such that they complement long-term development interventions and contribute to reducing vulnerability [9–11].

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Several international humanitarian assistance actors and policy-makers have thus begun to focus their attention on reforms in humanitarian approaches. These reforms have led to the emergence of ‘new humanitarianism’ [12]: 16) or ‘resilience humanitarianism’ in parallel to ‘classical humanitarianism’ [13]: 1). Classical or old humanitarianism follows need-based, short-term interventions by adhering to the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality. It is mainly led by United Nations agencies and international non-governmental organisations including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [14]. In contrast, new or resilience humanitarianism is premised on the principles of disaster risk reduction [15] and focuses on preventive - rather than response-based - measures by addressing underlying vulnerability [12]. However, addressing vulnerability requires an understanding of the underlying socio-political relations and power struggles contributing to vulnerability. Furthermore, humanitarian governance involves multiple actors including governments, humanitarian organisations, affected communities and their representatives. Each of these sets of actors has a particular worldview of humanitarian governance [16,17] and knowledge of vulnerability that is shaped by the power relationships among these actors [18]. At the same time, various actors use their knowledge and understanding during the provision of assistance to gain legitimacy and fulfil their interests. Thus, on the ground humanitarian response is ‘socially constructed and embedded in wider social (power) relationships’ with the struggle for legitimacy as an important aspect of the power relationships [19]: 29.

These observations suggest that it is crucial that humanitarian actors are conscious of their role as social actors in influencing socio-political relations that produce vulnerability. Such consciousness includes understanding how their interventions reproduce or challenge socio-political relations by legitimising certain knowledges and recognising the authority of particular actors, including themselves and their respective donors at the international level. Fulfilling these requirements poses several challenges for humanitarian actors, as they place a strong emphasis on what they call ‘humanitarian space’; a symbolic and physical space where core principles of humanitarianism including neutrality, impartiality and humanity are practised [20]: 1117.

While arguing that inconsistent humanitarian approaches have led to many problems [13], this paper puts forward the case for studying humanitarian practices to understand how organisations understand and address vulnerability, and how their approaches may be shaped by their position in socio-political relations both locally and internationally. In doing so, the paper aims to provide a contextual understanding of politics in the humanitarian arena through engagement with recipients of aid, something that has been lacking in the development of innovative humanitarian approaches [21].

In this paper, we examine contemporary humanitarian assistance approaches followed by government, non-governmental and faith-based organisations and analyse how understanding and practices of humanitarian actors serve to legitimise authority relations between and among humanitarian organisations and local populations. To study these issues, we selected two villages in the mountainous region of northern Pakistan. One of the villages, which is located on the riverbank of the Indus, suffered a loss of land caused by flooding in the river while the other, on a hillside, experienced debris and mudflow. Both villages received humanitarian assistance from the government, non-governmental and faith-based humanitarian organisations. Based on the analysis of interviews, focus group discussions and a review of secondary data sources we argue that the humanitarian actors in this region continue to follow a ‘traditional’ response-based approach of assistance with little consideration of underlying socio-political relational dynamics of social vulnerability. Rather, their responses are based on the understanding of vulnerability that, ‘people who suffer more material losses deserve more assistance’ in comparison to those who suffer lower losses. This understanding of vulnerability tends to favour well-off people, as they own (and lose) more physical assets. This understanding is also shared and

supported by the settlement leaders who themselves are well-off and own more assets than the rest of the people. The shared understanding of vulnerability between humanitarian actors and settlement leaders contributes to the legitimisation of authority of settlement leaders and provision of more assistance to the well-off compared to the vulnerable and marginalised. Such dynamics result in the strengthening of unequal power relations based on deleterious authority figures and exacerbation of vulnerability.

2. Conceptualising vulnerability, disasters and humanitarian assistance

This paper distinguishes between hazards and disasters by conceptualising disasters as an outcome of the interaction between hazards and social vulnerability rather than an outcome of the impact of the physical forces of an extreme event [3]. To better understand the complexity of disasters, it is crucial to consider the mutuality of hazards and vulnerability and the broader relationship between society and nature [22]. Increasing risks of hazards - due to degradation of the environment and climate change as a result of human activities - as well as social vulnerability, allude to a multidimensional aspect of disasters [23]. Vulnerability is a concept that ‘expresses the multidimensionality of disasters by focusing attention on the totality of relationships in a given social situation which constitute a condition that, in combination with environmental forces, produces a disaster’ [24]: 11. Despite its dynamic nature and focus on relationships within a social setting as well as between society and nature, past approaches have been criticised for representing vulnerability as a static property [25,26]. Such an understanding of vulnerability has tended to mainly focus on ‘who is vulnerable rather than why’ ignoring the broader understanding of context and underlying causes that lead to vulnerability [27]: 669 [original emphasis]. A focus on the political dimension of vulnerability that analyses socio-political relations and the creation of social hierarchies by marginalising some while securing others can lead to a more nuanced understanding of underlying dynamics [5,28].

Disaster responses are socially constructed, political and embedded in broader aid-society relations [29,30]. These aid-society relations involve power dynamics and struggles for legitimacy among various social actors, including humanitarian actors and recipients of aid, and take place in a humanitarian arena [19]. However, these struggles involve not only populations affected by disasters, but also include social actors implementing measures to help these populations. Based on an actor-oriented approach, the humanitarian ‘arena’ is ‘where a multitude of actors, including humanitarians and the disaster-affected recipients of aid, shape the everyday realities of humanitarian action’ [20]: 1117 [original emphasis]. Actor-oriented approaches are based on the premise that social actors are neither ‘disembodied social categories’ nor ‘passive recipients of interventions’; they play an active role in the planning and execution of various interventions [31]: 6. Furthermore, the emergence of a particular form of social organisation is a result of struggles, interactions and negotiations among these social actors [31]. Therefore, humanitarian action in a humanitarian arena is based on struggles over legitimacy, negotiations, needs and self-interests of various social actors including donors, on-ground staff, recipients of assistance and other associated actors [20,32].

Aid-society as an analytical concept represents relationships between aid as well as social actors as part of the humanitarian arena. Aid actors are primarily focused on the provision of humanitarian assistance and are part of or associated with an international organisation. Social actors include local people and state and non-state actors [19,33]. The relationships built between social and aid actors in a humanitarian arena are rife with politics involving contestations, collaborations, negotiations and exhibition of power. These politics involve struggles over authority and power through establishing legitimacy.

Legitimacy can be defined as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within

some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' [34]: 574. Humanitarian and development organisations seek legitimacy by following various normative, cognitive and pragmatic measures. In particular, self-interests, dominant discourses and approaches are major areas that organisations rely on for self-legitimation [33,35]. While humanitarian organisations follow a normative aspect of legitimacy by 'being moral actors', recipients of assistance seek legitimacy for 'being in need' [20]: 1122. Therefore, in the aftermath of a disaster, recipients present themselves as 'the most vulnerable' so they can receive assistance, while humanitarian actors 'vulnerabilise' recipients to legitimise their interventions [36]: 260. Humanitarian actors adopt certain pragmatic measures such as supporting and empowering local leaders and elites to increase their legitimacy, influence and religious followers in case of faith-based organisations. This was evident in Haiti, where actors involved in post-disaster recovery politicised the situation in a way that increased their role and strengthened their interests and position [37]. NGOs' implementation of bureaucratic requirements and decisions made in advance in international headquarters by their donors represent an unequal system where the needs of the local population are side-lined. Thus, humanitarian actors also seek legitimacy from international donors [19]. Furthermore, direct funding of various NGOs and civil society organisations can lead to side-lining of the state [38]. In 2010, the Haitian government was seen as lacking capacity, thus it received only 1% of the total humanitarian aid and 15–21% of the longer-term relief aid. Rest of the aid was allocated to UN organisations, international NGOs and private contractors. However, this money was substantially reduced when it reached the local level after deductions of administrative costs by multiple subcontractors [39]. Therefore, it is important to focus on 'multidirectional', 'multilevel' and 'bilateral' aspect of legitimacy by asking 'legitimacy for what', 'according to whom', and 'by what criteria' [40]: VII-IX [original emphasis].

Contrary to the widely held notion of impartiality and neutrality in the humanitarian space, humanitarian action not only takes place in a political space but also itself involves socio-political dynamics [41]. Authority relations form an important aspect of these socio-political relations as well as struggles for legitimacy. Various aspects of authority such as its recognition, contestation or imposition explain how different actors serve their interests and result in inequities that lead to social vulnerability [18,42]. Struggle for authority is not restricted to individual social actors only, such struggle also 'characterizes the capacity of politico-legal institutions, such as states and their constituent institutions, village communities, religious groupings and other organisations, to influence other social actors' [43]: 8. In the context of resource-based populations, access and ownership of natural resources - property or water sources - play a significant role in defining power and authority relations [42,44]. In Baltistan, inequitable land ownership and water governance influence authority-based relational dynamics, which in turn define social hierarchies through co-production of power and vulnerability [45].

The contestation and convergence of knowledges of various social actors are an important feature of struggles over authority as well as legitimisation processes. When the knowledge of a particular social actor takes precedence over the knowledge of another actor, this legitimises the authority of the first actor over the second to make decisions and act based on that knowledge [18]. Hence, the knowledges and vulnerability understandings of humanitarian actors become part of the humanitarian arena and play a vital role in defining actions as well as struggles for legitimacy. In particular, the way that longer-term vulnerability is addressed (or not) also forms part of the politics - as well as what is conceived as causes of and solutions to vulnerability (and consequently who should be helped and why). These actions also legitimise the authority of certain people within a community as 'leaders' and decision-makers and categorise others as 'vulnerable'. We see the politics and practices of humanitarian assistance as taking the form of authority relations that are (re) produced through the struggles

over legitimacy and knowledges that take place in everyday practice and decision-making.

A key question emerging from these debates is how the politics and practices of humanitarian assistance shape disaster responses and how these responses in turn influence authority relations and socially differentiated vulnerability patterns. We pose four research questions. First, what is the character of disaster response by different actors and extent to which the various humanitarian interventions address longer-term and social aspects of vulnerability, rather than shorter-term response-based measures? Second, how do various social actors understand vulnerability in a post-disaster political arena? Third, which vulnerability knowledge (of which group) do humanitarian actors legitimise and how does this (re)define authority relations in the affected villages? Fourth, how do humanitarian actions serve to legitimise the humanitarian organisations in the eyes of national governments and international donors?

3. Studying vulnerability, disasters and humanitarian assistance in Baltistan

This research focused on four settlements of Hoto and Qumra villages located in the Skardu valley (see Fig. 2) of the Baltistan region of northern Pakistan (see Fig. 1). Baltistan is a remote mountainous region with more than 20 mountain peaks that are above 6100 m high. The steep slopes of these high mountains offer limited space for human settlements and agricultural activities. Most of the settlements are located in deep valleys with a sparse population. Their locations offer proximity to resources such as glacial and snowmelt water and mountain pastures but also risks to various natural hazards including landslides, debris flow, flooding and snow avalanches. Skardu valley is located at the elevation of 2210 m [46] with surrounding peaks ranging from 4500 to 5800 m in elevation [47]. The significant difference in elevation influences climatic patterns, for example, total annual precipitation in Skardu valley is 210 mm while at elevations above 5000 m it can be approximately 2000 mm. Lower precipitation in valley basins has led to arid and desert-like conditions while higher precipitation has led to massive glaciation at higher altitudes [48]. The mean maximum temperature is between 25 and 30 °C during summers while in winters mean minimum temperature ranges between -2 and -10 °C [49]. The physical vulnerability is further exacerbated by socially differentiated vulnerability shaped by class and gender relations [50]. The region experiences frequent disasters and ensuing aid responses from humanitarian and development organisations. It presents an interesting case for studying how humanitarian assistance practices intersect with vulnerability patterns.

Until the early 1970s, the region was predominately under the rule of local dynasties ruling in different valleys. The dynastic rulers formed a feudal state comprising a ruling class, administrators and common people. The feudal past has a strong influence on contemporary social differences and ownership of resources. In addition, the region is a disputed territory between India and Pakistan; therefore, residents of the region do not have full constitutional rights. Despite being a disputed territory, the region has largely remained peaceful, although intermittent violent incidences of sectarian nature have occurred. The region has a diverse ethnic, linguistic and religious composition. While the majority of the people are Muslim, they belong to various sects and subjects including Sunni, Twelver Shia, Ismaili and Nurbakhshi. The majority of the residents of Baltistan are Shia, but small groups of Sunnis and Nurbakhshis are also present [51]. The lack of political representation as well as the ethnic and religious diversity render particular importance to understanding the process of legitimisation of authority and authority



Fig. 1. Map of northern Pakistan showing Skardu's location in Baltistan.
 Source: Martijn van Beek, Aarhus University and Moesgaard Museum, Graphics Department

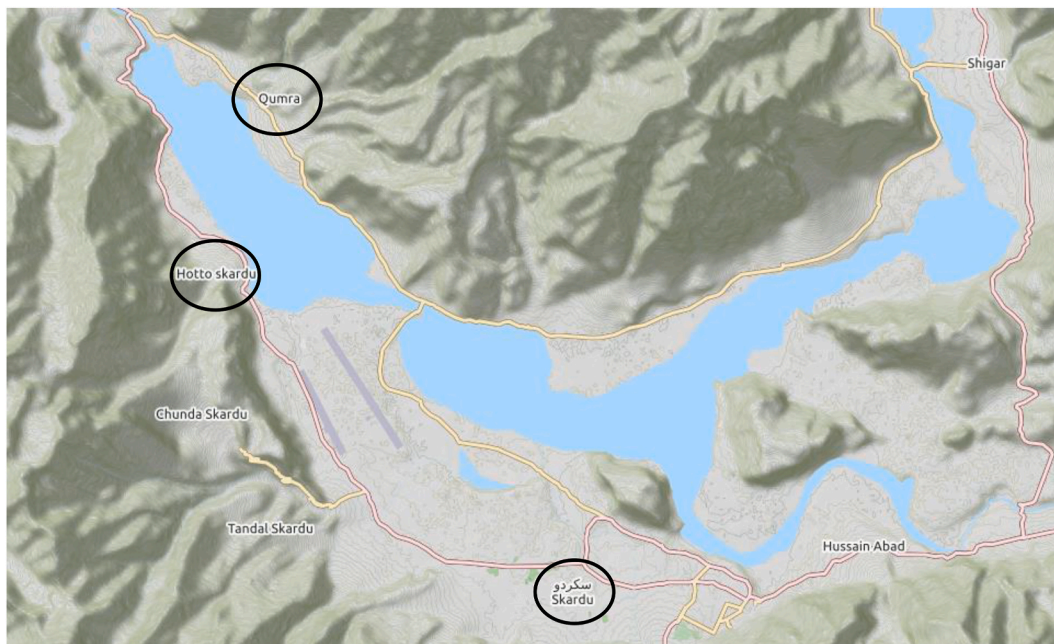


Fig. 2. Map showing the location of study sites and the town of Skardu.
 Source: <https://www.openstreetmap.org>

relations with outside organisations.

The region has a few humanitarian and development organisations that are associated with religious leaders [52], the major one being Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), led by the Aga Khan.¹ AKDN is a transnational foundation which consists of multiple organisations

working for rural development, infrastructure building, culture preservation and humanitarian assistance [51]. AKDN plays a major role in humanitarian as well as development interventions in northern Pakistan. Despite its Ismaili origins, according to its webpage, 'AKDN does not restrict its work to a particular community, country or region

¹ The Aga Khan as Imam (spiritual leader) of the Ismaili Muslims founded AKDN <https://www.akdn.org/about-us/his-highness-aga-khan> (Accessed on July 1, 2020).

and aims to improve living conditions and opportunities for people regardless of their particular religion, race, ethnicity or gender.² Yet the need to emphasise this impartiality also indicates the importance of the differentiating dimensions of religion, race, ethnicity and gender in counting as a legitimate recipient of aid. Other than AKDN, several organisations such as Hussaini Foundation are working in Baltistan under the patronage of Shia leaders and scholars (see Fig. 3).

The majority of the people in Baltistan speak Sino-Tibetan Balti, with a minority that speaks Shina. Shina-speaking people live mainly in the villages located at the top of the valleys, where the feudal rulers placed them to guard the valleys from invasion from the high plateaus. Gilgit-Baltistan's society is highly gendered; however, there are great variations across the region. In Baltistan, gender segregation is a strictly followed norm, particularly in urban areas. Although women can be seen working along with men in villages, interaction with men outside the close family is restricted [51].

3.1. Hazards in the study villages

Keeping in view the focus of the paper on humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of disasters, four settlements from two villages exemplifying quick-onset and slow-onset disasters were selected to investigate post-disaster response and their impact on authority relations and longer-term social vulnerability. The selected settlements (settlement 1 and 2) in Hoto village experienced a slow-onset hazard in the form of land loss which started in 2010 when flooding in the Indus river shifted its course towards the settlements. The land loss continued and reached its peak during another flood in 2013 resulting in loss of houses, agricultural and forested land. While two flood protection walls have been built in 2013 and 2016 respectively at different locations, the village is still at risk of further land loss. In Qumra, the selected settlements (settlements 3 and 4) experienced a quick-onset disaster in 2010, involving a heavy rainfall, flooding and debris flow. This disaster led to losses of human lives, agricultural land, pastures, houses and irrigation systems.

3.2. Data collection

Data were collected during two research visits of three months' duration each during 2015 and 2016. We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with men and women of various households including those affected and not affected by the disasters. The respondents from selected households were chosen by purposive sampling. Focus group discussions were conducted to gather data about various classes and social groups in the settlements, the socially differentiated impact of the disaster on households within the settlements, character of response provided by various organisations and opinion of participants about the response. Participants of focus group discussions in different settlements varied from fifteen to twenty in number. Although we sought to interview equal numbers of male and female respondents, the strict gender segregation and cultural norms restricted our open interaction with women. We had to ask the settlement leaders for permission to interview women, and they always arranged the meetings in an open public space. In the first round, data were collected from the respondents that were affected by the disasters through purposive sampling based on the information gathered through focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Settlement leaders were interviewed to understand their role during the response. In the second round, respondents from the same settlements who were not affected by the disasters were included in data collection. Details of data collection in the settlements are summarized in Table 1.

In addition to data collection from settlements, semi-structured

² <https://www.akdn.org/about-us/akdns-approach-development> (Accessed on July 1, 2020).

interviews were conducted with key informants from government departments of the region, non-governmental organisations working in the area, a local support organisation³ and faith-based organisations (see Fig. 3). The government officials interviewed included Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Skardu, *Tehsildar* and *Patwari* (official designations of revenue department staff responsible for assessing losses), ex-employee of District Disaster Management Unit (DDMU), District *Qanoongo* (official responsible for the record of revenue collections), District Attorney, Assistant District Health Officer and a doctor working in the district hospital.

For Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), key informants from five organisations including Pakistan Red Crescent Society Baltistan, Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) (part of AKDN), Focus Humanitarian (part of AKDN), Marafie Foundation (local NGO) and Shifa Foundation (National NGO) were interviewed. In the case of faith-based organisations, a key informant from Hussaini Foundation (national organisation) and a regional religious leader was interviewed.⁴ Moreover, we examined the assessment reports prepared by the revenue department estimating the damages suffered by households in both the villages, reports with details of assistance provided by the government and non-governmental organisations, and newspaper articles sharing the concerns of the people regarding lack or insufficiency of response and court rulings about the assistance.

For analysis, empirical data were organised into various themes: (i) details of various actors involved in the provision of humanitarian response (i.e. government, non-governmental and faith-based organisations), when the response was provided and what was the nature of response; (ii) who decided how much assistance should be provided to whom; (iii) impact of losses on different social groups including the well-off and the most vulnerable (data about social groups were collected from group discussions); (iv) opinion of respondents from various social groups about the assistance provided to them; (v) knowledge and understanding of respondents from various social groups as well as humanitarian actors about vulnerability. Data regarding these themes were co-related and analysed to develop insights. For example, to understand how humanitarian actors legitimised authority of specific social groups, we co-related the data of decision-making process involving key decision-makers from settlements and humanitarian organisations and their understanding of vulnerability, with the opinion of respondents from various social groups about assistance provided to them.

4. Disaster response, vulnerability knowledge and legitimacy struggles of various social actors

In this section, we discuss four important aspects that emerge from our analysis of humanitarian efforts in the study area: (1) how various humanitarian actors have responded to the disasters and the extent to which their interventions addressed longer-term and social aspects of vulnerability, or shorter-term response-based measures; (2) how humanitarian actors differ in their knowledge and understanding of vulnerability; (3) how the privileging of the vulnerability knowledge of elites has reified elite authority and legitimised humanitarian actors locally; and (4) how humanitarian actors legitimise themselves at government (local and national) and international levels.

³ Local Support Organisation is a multiple village-based organisation, supported by a local development organisation. It is comprised of members of village organisations from respective constituent villages.

⁴ A proper definition of faith based organisation does not exist; for this study we refer to faith based organisation as an organisation which is affiliated with a particular 'religious structure, doctrine or community' [53]: 40.

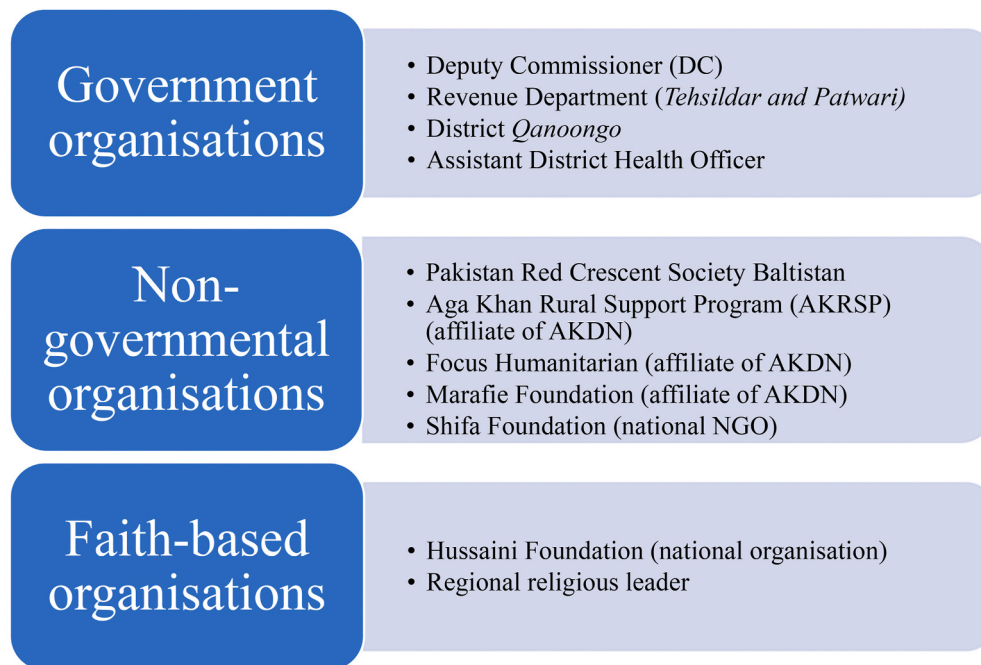


Fig. 3. Different organisations involved in the provision of assistance in humanitarian arena of Baltistan.

Table 1
Data collection.

Settlements	Population (No. of households)	Key Informants (settlement leaders) Interviews	Semi-structured household interviews		Focus Group Discussions (with men)
			Male	Female	
Settlement 1	60	3	27	7	1
Settlement 2	32	3	13	4	2
Settlement 3	110	3	14	5	2
Settlement 4	100	2	16	3	3

4.1. Response by the government, non-governmental and faith-based organisations

4.1.1. The response led by government organisations

The response led by the government organisations in both the villages mainly focused on emergency assistance and short-term measures, rather than longer-term preventative measures. The DC as head of the District Disaster Management Authority Skardu led the government’s response in both villages. For example, respondents from Hoto complained that despite the slow-onset nature of the hazard in settlements 1 and 2, the government did not take any preventative measures. They explained that they informed officials of the district government in 2010 about the increasing loss of land and requested appropriate measures to control it, however, the government only responded after the major loss of land in 2013.

The efforts of the villagers to demand preventative measures from the government were significant. To protest against the negligence of government officials, people from both the settlements organised a demonstration in 2010 and blocked the Gilgit-Skardu road. A key informant explained that ‘The Chief Judge was also stuck in the road blockage. He inquired about the reason for our protest, so we explained our demands to him’. The key informant further explained that they also submitted an application to the Chief Judge requesting compensation

for the losses and construction of a protection wall to prevent further loss of land. The judge ordered the local courts to prepare a report detailing the grievances and suggestions to redress them. He also, however, suspended an official of the police for not being able to maintain law and order. Later, the police arrested protesters and registered a case against them for blocking the road. The court case continued for about three years and people had to pay the lawyers’ fees and other related expenses, which was an additional financial burden in an already vulnerable situation. Later, officials of the district government informed the Chief Judge that a compensation plan of approximately six million Pakistani Rupees (PKR) (6000 USD)⁵ had been prepared and submitted to the regional government for approval. They also informed the court about their plan to construct a protective wall. However, neither was the compensation paid, nor the protective wall constructed. Prevention was not a priority for the government, and since the losses were not acute, the response was slow and lacking.

In June 2013, both settlements experienced a major additional loss of land resulting in further physical losses. In contrast to the lack of response to the 2010 claims, the DC responded quickly as the land loss seriously threatened the settlements as well as the Skardu-Gilgit road. Under his supervision, different departments of the district government including public works, forestry and agriculture were involved to minimize the loss of land. Government officials bought trees worth 0.1 million PKR from the people of the settlements and used them as a protective barrier to control the loss of land. Police personnel instructed the people to evacuate and helped them to move their belongings, crops and trees to the safer locations. Rescue 1122 (the emergency response force) declared the area as a red zone and established a medical camp to provide first aid service. Despite all the efforts, loss of land continued and resulted in heavy losses, something that may have been reduced or avoided had the government acted earlier.

In their response to the 2013 damages, the government focused on quantitative assessment of material losses and formulated three categories of the affected households based on the amount and nature of losses they suffered. The documents shared by the revenue department show that two weeks after the disaster in Hoto, the DC of Skardu

⁵ 1 USD = 167 PKR (June 2020).

submitted a report to the Gilgit-Baltistan government detailing the initial assessment of losses and measures taken by the district government to control the further loss of land. Later, officials of the land and revenue department conducted a detailed assessment of losses including houses, cultivated and uncultivated land, crops and fruit and non-fruit trees suffered by each household. A key informant from Hoto explained that 'A committee including Deputy and Assistant Commissioner of Skardu and settlement leaders was formed to manage the assistance process'. They categorised the affected households in A, B and C categories for the provision of assistance.

- Category A included households that lost their houses, agricultural and forested land
- Category B included households that lost agricultural and forested land
- Category C included households that lost trees

Key informants and respondents in Hoto explained that emergency assistance by the government included the provision of tents and other basic ration items. Households with fully damaged houses received 20,000 PKR, while households with partial damages received 5000 PKR. The government also provided ration items such as dates, tea and flour once a month for three months to the households in category A. Households in Category B received ration items (similar to category A) only once, while category C did not receive any assistance in any form. The assessment and assistance provided by the government reveal that the government prioritised those who suffered higher material losses.

In Qumra, a quick-onset disaster and a larger loss of human lives triggered extensive humanitarian assistance in the affected settlements. A key informant explained that a few hours after the disaster, settlement leaders contacted government officials and asked for help. The immediate response by the government was to rescue injured people and provide them with medical assistance. Access to the village was restricted due to a damaged road, so Pakistan Army used its helicopter for transferring the injured to the hospitals in Skardu city. The District Health Office established a medical camp, the district government set up tents provided by the Pakistan Red Crescent Society (PRCS), and some villagers stayed in a school. About 18 households from both settlements lived in tents for three to six months, moving to relatives' houses when winter came. Government officials provided flour and other basic items including cooking pots to the households staying in tents. These measures show that the government's initial response focused on the immediate emergency.

The government's approach in Qumra focused on quantitative assessment of losses and payment of compensation to households that lost family members. DC initiated an assessment of losses through the officials of the land and revenue department. The assessment reports included the number of human lives lost, injured people, completely/partially damaged houses, livestock, crops and trees (fruit and non-fruit) in village Qumra. Based on the assessment, the government paid 0.5 million PKR for each member lost and 0.1 million PKR for each injured person to the affected families. However, most of the respondents were not satisfied with the assessment and complained that people bribed the staff of the revenue department to get their names included in the assessment reports and that many exaggerated their losses to get more assistance. Consequently, many households with genuine needs did not receive enough assistance. As one respondent said '*Considering my losses, I did not receive even half of the compensation. I received only the 1/5th of the compensation that I deserved*'.

The government response was not only inequitable and insufficient but also did not address the long-term vulnerability. Both the Citizens

Damage Compensation Program⁶ and the 'Watan Card Scheme' (cash transfers through bank debit cards) were designed to provide emergency relief. Also, respondents who received money had various grievances. One respondent explained '*My wife used to receive 1000 PKR per month through the Benazir Income Support Program*' which we used for paying the school fee. However, after the issuance of the Watan card, she is not receiving the money anymore'. Not all respondents affected by the disaster received the cash instalments, and although the government assessed the damages, respondents claimed they did not pay any compensation, particularly to those who lost their fruit and non-fruit trees and/or their agricultural land. The respondents who lost houses and agricultural lands were critical of the government for its payment of high compensation to households that lost family members; they considered themselves more deserving than those who lost family members. Losses that led to long-term impacts on livelihoods of the marginalised households - such as destruction of agricultural lands - were ignored by the government.

Our findings show that for both the quick and slow-onset disaster sites, the government focused on a response-based approach and assisted people based on the quantified assessment of losses. The government's assessment of losses and emergency assistance through the provision of cash and materials was mainly led by DC. As a key decision-maker, DC had the liberty to decide who should get how much assistance. While other departments of the government were also involved, such as health department established medical camps, army transported the injured through helicopter due to road blockage and police evacuated the people during land erosion in Hoto, nevertheless, these activities were not restricted to well-offs and elites. Thus, the exclusion of the marginalised from decision making and reliance on well-off settlement leaders by DC (representing the government) led to more material support for well-off people and legitimisation of the authority of settlement leaders. These findings are similar to those from Haiti in the aftermath of 2016 Hurricane Matthew, where representatives of local government were involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance. However, lack of involvement of the marginalised in the decision making reproduced and empowered a 'neo-feudal system' [30]: 358. These dynamics also allude to the political nature of the humanitarian arena where various social actors struggle for legitimacy [19], particularly over material and non-material dimensions of loss and vulnerability.

4.1.2. The response led by non-governmental organisations

NGOs had a major role in emergency assistance as well as recovery activities in both the villages. They mainly relied on the assessment of losses conducted by the government and prioritised short term, response-based forms of assistance. Both settlements of Hoto received assistance from different NGOs including Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) on behalf of Focus Humanitarian Assistance (FOCUS), and PRCS. FOCUS, through AKRSP, mainly provided tents to the households in category A. Respondents in settlement 1 explained that the staff of AKRSP Baltistan also assisted on a personal level by donating part of their monthly salary. The assistance provided by PRCS included provision of tents and ration items to the households in category A only. In settlement 2, Al Khidmat (National NGO) assisted a few households by providing wheat flour.

In Qumra, various NGOs were involved in both emergency and recovery activities. In settlement 4, new houses were constructed for households that lost houses and family member(s), with the households

⁶ <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/153031468139211888/pdf/806210WP0P12680Box0379812B00PUBLIC0.pdf> (Accessed on July 1, 2020).

⁷ A nationwide social security net program that provides monthly cash payments to female head of a household in the poorest 20% of Pakistan's households.

themselves contributing labour. One respondent lamented that although they thought one organisation's construction of houses was better than the rest, they still did not deliver all of the promised materials, making it necessary for people to use their own money to buy what was missing. Therefore, even those who received assistance based on material losses complained about the unjust provision of material for the construction of houses.

Damages to crops and agricultural land were among the material losses experienced by households in both the selected settlements of Qumra. Assistance for the restoration of agricultural land was mainly in the form of 'Food for Work' aimed to restore agricultural infrastructures, such as the reconstruction of irrigation channels, land terracing/leveling, restoration of water reservoirs, reconstruction of pony tracks, footbridges, boundary walls, protective walls, and repair of link roads. However, as one of the respondents explained '*By the time this project had started [about one year after the disaster], I had restored most of the land*'. Another respondent complained that the restoration of land involved tough work and high costs, so for him, assistance was merely a token of appreciation.

The provision of emergency assistance linked to the categories and quantified material losses was contested and criticised by many of the respondents. Soon after the disaster when many households were homeless, one organisation arranged temporary shelters in the form of tents and provided sheets, utensils and ration items to the people living in the tents. However, as one respondent explained '*The ration that was provided to us during our stay in a tent was based on the categories. These categories were based on losses and damages. It was not a good approach. Ration items are basic items of need so they should be equally provided to all. The ration that I received was not as per my requirements*'. Since basic requirements after the disaster are the same for all the affected households, category-based criteria were seen as discriminatory.

As in the case of response by DC, people complained about the response of NGOs during the emergency as well as the recovery phase. NGOs relied on the assessment reports and categories developed by the government and settlement leaders for the provision of assistance. This led to the provision of more assistance to those who suffered more losses. Apart from calling the response unfair and unjust, people contested those approaches that required their contribution. There was a continuous struggle by the affected people against the government official responsible for the provision of assistance and NGOs to ensure that they provided appropriate and fair help. The lack of attention to vulnerable households, and particularly their livelihoods, not only increased their grievances but also exacerbated their vulnerability. Beckett [55]: 169 has alluded to these findings as 'banality of care' where the response to frequent disasters and emergencies has become a routine and humanitarian care thus mainly focuses on 'managing and containing, rather than resolving or abolishing, crises and emergencies'.

4.1.3. The response led by faith-based organisations

In addition to government and NGOs, religious leaders through their organisations also assisted affected people of both villages. Although faith-based organisations carried out a separate assessment of losses from the government and NGOs, their approach was also based on the assessment of material losses and short-term cash compensation. The *Nazim-e-Aala* (administrator) of the *Madinat-ul-Ahlibait* colony was responsible for the provision of assistance on behalf of the Hussaini Foundation. The administrator explained that the foundation starts the assistance process when people of an affected village apply through an application. On receiving the application, the *Nazim-e-Aala* assesses damages with the help of volunteer engineers. The regional Shia scholar supervises the whole process while local religious leaders of the village or settlement are also involved during the assessment. A report of the assessment is forwarded to the main office of the foundation for necessary action.

In settlement 1, the foundation assisted in the form of cash, based on a quantified assessment of material losses, and the majority of

respondents claimed to have received such help. For example, a widow explained that she received fifteen thousand rupees from the *Sheikh Sahib* (regional religious leader), while she did not receive assistance from any other organisation or government. There was no assistance provided by religious leaders in settlement 2.

In Qumra, the *Nazim-e-Aala* explained that they found the assessment of damages challenging. They carried out their separate assessment because the one carried out by the government had been criticised by people as erroneous. The *Nazim-e-Aala* explained that he visited the village four times and followed the advice of the religious leaders in the settlements. Based on these assessments, the Hussaini Foundation provided 200,000–500,000 PKR (from donations given to the religious leaders) to families who had lost their houses in both the settlements of Qumra. Respondents also confirmed that they received cash from the regional religious leader, amounts varying from 3000 to 12,000 PKR. These findings show that faith-based organisations generally followed a short-term and response-based approach for assistance.

Mutual legitimisation processes that humanitarian aid represents also transcend scales to involve actors from other countries [39,54]. In particular, assistance in the study villages was also provided by religious scholars from the rest of the country and Iran. One respondent explained that a team from Iran visited the area to assess losses. They initially planned to construct seven houses in the settlement but constructed only two houses due to concerns that it was an unsafe area to construct houses. Another respondent confirmed that Imam Khomeini provided 1–2 houses. Another religious scholar also assisted in the construction of houses. These house construction efforts, too, were contested, with informants complaining that they received only construction materials, that only some households received assistance, and that they had to contribute as labourers.

In conclusion, the response of all three groups of actors (government, non-governmental and faith-based organisations) was mainly based on quantitative assessment of losses with little attention to underlying socio-political processes that shape local patterns of vulnerability. A recent study conducted in the USA also shows that local emergency managers defined social vulnerability based on their intuition and understanding of right and wrong which was in contrast to the understanding in hazards and disaster literature [54]. Furthermore, much of the assistance focused on short-term emergency assistance. Although assistance to rehabilitate agricultural land in Qumra or access to additional land and irrigation water to compensate the permanent loss of land in Hoto could potentially help secure longer-term livelihoods, this mainly benefited those who already had large landholdings. No compensation was paid for the loss of livelihoods. The formulation of three categories based on quantitative assessment of losses without an in-depth understanding of social vulnerability favoured the relatively well-off. While faith-based organisations responded to people's dissatisfaction with the government's assessment by conducting their separate assessments; these assessments, too, focused on material losses. These findings show that vulnerability assessments are one arena in which struggles for legitimacy take place. Humanitarian actors generally follow response-based short-term assistance approaches which also become sites of contested legitimisation and social differentiation processes [30].

4.2. The understanding and knowledge of various social actors about vulnerability

Differences in knowledge about vulnerability play a crucial role in shaping socio-political relations between and within settlement leaders and different groups within a settlement, as well as between settlement leaders and humanitarian actors. These differences, and the convergence of knowledge and understanding between particular actors, form part of legitimisation processes and contestation of authority relations resulting in a process of co-production of power and vulnerability as previously observed in the area [45].

In general, both male and female respondents associated vulnerability with a lack of access and ownership of resources as well as income generation activities, in particular, permanent employment. A respondent from Qumra explained *'In our area, those who own land and have a government job are seen as well-off ... those who own relatively less land and have a private job are in the middle ... the poor have no animals, ... have very little land and no job'*. Ownership of resources is beneficial not only in economic terms but also in terms of socio-political status and authority to make decisions. A key informant corroborated this by stating, *'My position as settlement elder is because of my [material] possessions and my knowledge'*. However, in the aftermath of the disasters in Hoto and Qumra, vulnerability understandings differed among villagers as well as among humanitarian actors. Settlements leaders owned relatively larger landholdings and suffered more material losses, so they related higher material losses with higher vulnerability and claimed to be the most vulnerable. One settlement leader in Hoto legitimised his understanding of vulnerability by arguing that the well-off were not adapted to the tough situations that they were facing after the disaster, in contrast to poor people who had been living a tough life and therefore could cope. He explained that two well-off people of his settlement had lost houses, agricultural and forest land and relied on their income from their jobs to survive; therefore, they deserved more assistance than the rest.

At the same time, informants that suffered lower material losses due to relatively smaller landholdings and who had very little or no additional income claimed that they were the most vulnerable. A daily wage worker in settlement 1 explained that he had lost a small agricultural field and pasture and was worried that further loss of land in the future would affect his house. Permanent land loss in Hoto had a severe impact on the livelihoods of poor households and increased their long-term vulnerability by threatening future ability to earn an income. In Qumra, people in both study settlements who owned relatively smaller agricultural land, which was destroyed by the debris flow, claimed to be the most vulnerable. Such damage affected livelihoods both in the short and long term; additional expenditure was required to remove debris and rebuild the terraces.

Government officials, like NGOs and faith-based organisations, generally understood vulnerability as an outcome of the physical impacts of hazards and material losses. Government officials nevertheless had a slightly different problem understanding than the rest of the humanitarian actors by prioritising households that had lost family members. For example, the government in Qumra paid cash compensation only to households that had lost family members, but not to households that lost agricultural land or crops. Many respondents who suffered losses of agricultural land considered the prioritisation of households that lost family members as unfair. As one of the women respondents explained *'Those who have died are already dead; others who have survived will die due to loss of income'*. Compensation to the families that lost their members reflects the government's response-based approach, which prioritised the loss of lives as a result of a 'natural phenomenon'.

The knowledge that associate vulnerability mainly with the physical impacts of a hazard has consequences for how organisations conduct vulnerability assessments. Specifically, such knowledge can lead to a focus on physical risks and response-based technical and structural measures for disaster prevention [56]. For example, after the disaster in Hoto, one NGO conducted a risk and vulnerability assessment to develop a plan for disaster risk management and to train volunteers for a better response to future hazards. The plan identified hazards (snow avalanches, debris flow, rockfall and floods), probability of their occurrence (low, medium and high) and the physical vulnerability of various structures such as houses, agricultural fields and irrigation channels based on their exposure to hazards. The resulting plan focused on response rather than identifying preventive measures. For example, they trained Community Emergency Response Teams as 'first responders' after a disaster and provided them with equipment and tools. An analysis of social vulnerability would have allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the underlying dynamics contributing to disasters and

help in preventing disasters in the longer term.

Hence, contestations over vulnerability understandings become part of struggles by recipients to legitimise themselves as 'being in need', as well as how humanitarian actors define particular groups as vulnerable to justify their intervention approaches. Findings show that while vulnerability understandings varied among social groups within settlements, humanitarian actors, well-off households and settlement leaders generally agreed on a common understanding that those who suffered higher material losses needed more assistance. Marginalised households, however, often understood vulnerability in terms of livelihood losses. This understanding concurs with past studies of the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, Hurricane Katrina and Indian Ocean tsunami (Reale and Handmer [57]; which identified the impact of the longer-term loss of livelihoods and lack of alternative sources of income as major aspects of longer-term social vulnerability. The identified differences in the understanding of vulnerability among social groups and humanitarian actors allude to the political nature of aid-society relations [19] and the humanitarian arena [20]. Furthermore, the impact of the disasters on men and women within a household varied and their understanding of vulnerability, particularly in the aftermath of the disasters also differed [50]. However, all humanitarian actors including government representatives, NGOs and faith-based organisations ignored the intra-household dynamics and focused on a household level both in terms of assessment of impacts of disasters as well as provision of assistance. The findings add nuance to past studies of the politics of the humanitarian arena [20] by highlighting the role of vulnerability knowledge as a major aspect that underlies authority relations and struggles for legitimacy.

4.3. Legitimation of vulnerability knowledge among recipients and subsequent humanitarian interventions

Distinguishing whose knowledge takes precedence and is legitimised by humanitarian actors for the provision of assistance is critical to understanding the practices and politics of humanitarian arena. Different humanitarian actors interpret the context and devise interventions that are a direct outcome of competing vulnerability knowledges of social actors. Therefore, identifying whose knowledge counts in defining humanitarian practices also reveals whose authority is recognised by whom and the consequences for authority relations among various beneficiaries, as well as between beneficiaries and humanitarian actors.

Key informant interviews revealed that humanitarian actors often legitimised the knowledge of those already influential in the settlements. We found that the government and NGO actors consulted and relied on settlement leaders to assess who suffered and what are appropriate ways to assist them. Settlement leaders and their network of well-off relatives and friends use such opportunities to gain material benefits as well as to legitimise their position in the social hierarchy by claiming to represent local people, as further described in Ref. [45].

Since all humanitarian actors associated vulnerability with the quantified material losses, their understanding converged with the vulnerability knowledge of settlement leaders as well as other well-off people. Through this mutual understanding, settlement leaders influenced how humanitarian assistance is organised and delivered. They (with the support of humanitarian actors) used their knowledge and understanding to define who deserves how much assistance, which legitimised their authority in the settlement. These legitimisation processes were also contested; for example, a respondent from Qumra explained *'Many people managed to receive assistance through contacts, which left many deserving people with no assistance'*. Another respondent also expressed similar concerns: *'Regarding assistance, my concern is that people who were well-off and resourceful got more assistance than those who deserved. Therefore, assistance provision was not fair'*. A respondent from settlement 3 of Qumra expressed his frustration saying *'Rich and well-off people took our share of the assistance'*.

In Baltistan, the humanitarian arena plays a key role in the co-

production of highly inequitable authority and vulnerability relations, rooted in historical feudal socio-political structures. The mutual understanding and cooperation between humanitarian actors and settlement leaders contribute not only to the legitimisation of authority of leaders but also to that of humanitarian and development actors themselves. Humanitarian actors cannot operate in a settlement unless they have the support of settlement leaders, although support of leaders may not guarantee that all groups in the settlement will legitimise and accept the role of humanitarian actors. Some groups contest the authority and legitimacy of both leaders and humanitarian actors. Nevertheless, the mutual understanding over vulnerability knowledge between humanitarian actors and leaders helped both sides in gaining legitimacy. At the same time, this ability of leaders to assert their knowledge and power to act in cooperation with humanitarian actors deprived vulnerable men and women of assistance and support.

These insights add depth and nuance to our understanding of the practices and politics of the humanitarian arena, showing how differences in knowledge of vulnerability among various actors define allocation and implementation of humanitarian assistance as well as entrenchment of local authority relations [20]. The finding that a mutual understanding between humanitarian actors and settlement leaders on who is the most vulnerable and deserves how much assistance explains the means adopted by organisations at the settlement level to increase their legitimacy and influence. The findings reveal that a lack of integration in humanitarian assistance approaches of the vulnerability understandings of marginalised households leads to grievances and antagonism against both settlement leadership and humanitarian actors. Our findings concur with those of Billaud and Lauri [58]: 65, who have argued that outcomes of humanitarian interventions always result in 'social asymmetries' and 'political imbalances' as humanitarian interventions aim to move from crisis to a state of normality.

4.4. Self-legitimation of humanitarian actors in multiple arenas

The struggle to seek legitimacy is not restricted to affected people and settlement leaders but also includes world outside the village involving national and regional governments as well as international donors. Each context requires humanitarian actors to strive for legitimacy by not only reaching out to those in need but also catering to their respective institutional interests.

Since the regional government in Baltistan has limited capacity and resources to address the demands and expectations of local populations, NGOs have long played an important role. In recent years, however, these organisations have struggled to gain the legitimacy of the national government. In 2015, the government of Pakistan launched a policy to regulate and register all the international NGOs working in Pakistan and directed them to conduct financial audits [59]. Since then, the government has refused to register many international NGOs and have asked them to close down their offices in Pakistan.⁸ To maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the government, organisations have to be extra responsive to the requests made by government officials. A key informant from one of the NGO explained that 'Our organisation provided shelters on the request of the district government to the people who lost their houses'. The project helped the organisation to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the government. These findings are in contrast to the situation in Haiti, where the government has not able to register or maintain an official record of the NGOs. Nevertheless, NGOs fill the gap left by the weak and incapacitated government institutions in the provision of basic services such as health and education. NGOs and private contractors have limited accountability with no evidence of their performance, however, their agendas and efforts to gain legitimacy have weakened the state's capacity to perform and allocation of international funds leading to the

creation of aid dependency [39].

The survival of most NGOs depends on international donor funding and legitimacy. This can, however, create dilemmas. For example, while assisting on behalf of the World Food Programme, a regional development organisation had to follow specific guidelines and criteria shared by the donors concerning who should receive how much assistance, rather than using their local experience and competence. In another case, a regional NGO received funding from the Norwegian Government for disaster risk reduction and disaster risk management training, infrastructure support, and equipment so that 'the knowledge, thus, imparted stays with them [beneficiaries] and makes their contribution sustainable' [60]: 71). Assumptions from donors that sustainability is ensured when knowledge is 'imparted' exclusively from the implementing partners rather than derived from experiences and expertise in the villages is problematic. Such dilemmas put organisations in a difficult position where they have to negotiate between several different worlds, and in the end, must conform to guidelines set up by the donors to be able to receive funding and gain legitimacy. Beckett [54]: 166 calls this situation as 'a new mode of power' in which humanitarian emergencies are a 'structural feature of the global order of things' used by global powers under 'ethical guise'. This new mode of power involves certain global powers in the form of aid donors and other international organisations that define specific responses in their headquarters to be implemented in a specific local setting of a crisis [37].

For faith-based organisations, maintaining legitimacy is not only crucial but also a daunting challenge; they often work at a transnational level with a variety of actors, all of whom have specific and often contradictory expectations. Islamic faith-based organisations working in Muslim communities in Pakistan may have an advantage in terms of legitimacy, they may nevertheless lack legitimacy if they are seen to represent a different sect.

In Baltistan, a Twelver Shia majority area, findings suggest that sectarian affiliation (perceived or otherwise) plays a crucial role in struggles over legitimacy among organisations as well as among beneficiaries, organisations and the government. Various organisations led by religious leaders of Twelver Shias are involved in humanitarian and development activities in Baltistan, sometimes to counter and sometimes to draw inspiration from the AKDN model to gain legitimacy. Like AKDN, these organisations also claim to be based on humanitarian principles rather than working for a specific sect or community. A key informant working for one of these organisations explained that 'Our organisation is not established for a specific sect and has therefore implemented various projects in Sunni majority areas of the region as well'.

Like NGOs, faith-based organisations struggle to gain support and legitimacy of the national government. In August 2016, the name of a prominent Shia scholar leading a network of development and humanitarian organisations in Baltistan was added to a watch list by the government and bank accounts of the organisations under his supervision were frozen, which in turn affected the functioning of the organisations. This led to protests in Baltistan and media campaigns demanding the removal of his name from the watch list so the organisations could continue their humanitarian work. Finally, the government removed his name from the watch list in January 2017. Therefore, despite their secular mission statements, both people and the government associate faith-based organisations with a particular sect and these organisations continuously struggle to gain legitimacy both at the village and government levels. Based on affiliation with various religious institutions, NGOs and faith-based organisations and their inventions have become part of 'sectarian imaginaries' [52]: 241. Therefore, the arena of humanitarian assistance, in this case, is a battlefield of beliefs, similar to the battlefields of knowledge [61] in which agendas, orientations, influences, symbols and practices being followed and imposed are influenced and perceived through beliefs and 'sectarian imaginaries' [52]: 241. The sectarian affiliation of faith-based organisations - despite their secular claims - shapes their struggles for legitimacy to national governments as well as donor organisations.

⁸ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1911633/1-govt-refuses-register-42-ngos/> (Accessed on July 1, 2020).

Our findings clearly show that humanitarian actors, whether they are government, NGOs, or faith-based, all work to maintain legitimacy through complex relationships with each other, and with the world outside the affected communities. NGOs face multiple dilemmas in their struggle for legitimacy such as being asked by the government to work in areas that are beyond their mandate. Flexibility and adaptability of the humanitarian actors to local contexts have reduced while pressure to gain legitimacy both from their main offices as well as donors has increased [62]. These findings reveal that to fully understand how various humanitarian actors respond in the aftermath of a disaster, it is crucial to analyse how they legitimise themselves to donors and national governments.

5. Conclusions

We have analysed the response of humanitarian actors in the aftermath of two different disasters to examine how they understand and address underlying dynamics that shape social vulnerability. In particular, we analysed how knowledge and understanding of humanitarian actors – as part of the politics of humanitarian arena - legitimise the authority of various social groups and thus (re)define socio-political relations.

Our analysis reveals three key features. First, humanitarian actors rely on a simplistic understanding of vulnerability that those who suffered more material losses are more vulnerable than those who suffered lower material losses. This understanding is endorsed by the well-off and influential settlement leaders as they own (and lose) more resources and are eligible to receive more assistance. In contrast, marginalised people who owned few resources (e.g. land) and suffered lower material losses in absolute terms were seen as less vulnerable; even though the damage and permanent loss of their resources had a long-term impact on their livelihoods. Humanitarian actors tended to adopt short-term response-based approaches and neither understood nor addressed the underlying dynamics of social vulnerability. Assistance therefore further exacerbated social inequity and vulnerability among the already marginalised.

Second, how various actors understand vulnerability and whose understanding and knowledge is followed play a key role in the struggle for legitimacy and authority relations. These dynamics are an important aspect of the humanitarian arena where diverse actors attempt to claim and contest legitimacy as they engage in provision as well as the receiving of humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of disasters. Humanitarian actions through being based on short-term response-based approaches not only benefited the well-off and influential leaders materially but also served to legitimise the authority of the relatively privileged in the villages by conforming to their understanding of vulnerability. In doing so, humanitarian actors also legitimised their presence and actions, for which they required the facilitation by settlement leaders. Thus, politics and practices of humanitarian assistance are exhibited through authority relations that are (re) produced through the struggles over legitimacy and knowledges that take place in everyday practice and decision-making. Furthermore, the association of various NGOs, as well as faith-based organisations with religious institutions, reveal humanitarian arena as a battlefield of beliefs, similar to the battlefields of knowledge [60] in which agendas, orientations, symbols and practices are imposed over others. These insights allude to the politics of aid-society relations and further elaborate the mechanisms involving struggles for legitimacy and power dynamics through which leaders and humanitarian actors serve their political interests and how such actions can exacerbate unequal power relations [19,33].

Third, local power dynamics and processes are influenced by how humanitarian organisations strive to legitimise themselves locally, nationally and in a global setting. In particular, reliance on the national government and international donors for legitimacy restricts the ability of the organisations to work in the area of their mandate and expertise. For faith-based organisations, their real or perceived affiliation with a specific sect plays a crucial role in struggles to gain legitimacy in relation

to other organisations, national government or international donors. Overall, we conclude that contestations around vulnerability knowledges as well as religious beliefs, particularly sectarian affiliation play a vital role in the struggle for legitimacy by the settlement leaders as well as humanitarian actors. Worryingly, a lack of focus on addressing the underlying relational dynamics resulting from these multi-scalar politics of the humanitarian assistance contributes to further exacerbating disaster vulnerability. To address this challenge, humanitarian policies must ensure that humanitarian actors develop an in-depth understanding of multi-scalar authority relations so that their vulnerability understanding and knowledges, as well as interventions, address rather than entrench these relations. To achieve this, it is crucial to engage and involve the marginalised social groups in the decision-making process who may not be represented by the settlement leaders. Doing so will ensure that marginalised people -who in the present assistance approaches are unable to directly challenge the current practices- have the opportunity to share their understandings and knowledges and resist any assistance approaches that favour the well-off.

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Declaration of competing interest

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