Bringing the state back in to humanitarian crises response: Disaster governance and challenging collaborations in the 2015 Malawi flood response

T.D. Hendriks[a,*], F.K. Boersma[b]

[a] *Centre of African Studies (CAS), University of Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom*
[b] *Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, the Netherlands*

A B S T R A C T

Malawi is a disaster-prone country with a long history of flooding. Yet disaster response policies have been largely neglected and disaster risk reduction efforts are mostly donor-led. The 2015 floods showed that Malawi's local and national state institutions struggled to respond adequately. To support the Malawi government, the United Nations implemented its cluster system to coordinate the collaborations between the state, humanitarian and nongovernmental organizations in the disaster response. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with relief intervention participants, we argue that a focus on the localization of aid without explicit attention to the affected state's institutions is problematic in contexts characterized by limited state capacity and overall donor dependency.

Disaster response has long been severely underfunded and a neglected policy theme in Malawi, but it has recently risen to prominence due to the devastating impacts of the 2015 floods. A severe drought preceded the turbulent rainy season that Malawi endured from the start of December 2014. Then, in January 2015, rain started pouring, a cyclone hit and was soon followed by another. The heavy rainfall and subsequent flash floods created what survivors described as 'walls of water' that flushed away the possessions, houses and crops of thousands. By the end of January 2015 more than one million people had been affected; more than 200 people died and roughly 230.000 people had become internally displaced [1]. President Arthur Peter Mutharika termed the floods a national tragedy, declared half of the country a disaster zone, and appealed to the international community for emergency assistance – on top of the general budget support that Malawi normally receives [2]; cf [3]. Due to a recent corruption scandal, termed *Cashgate* [4], his request seemed to be met with some hesitation on how to go about this. Soon however the international community realized the immense scope of the disaster and Malawi was flooded again; this time with aid workers and staff from (international) humanitarian and non-governmental organizations (INGOs). By this time, thousands of people had found refuge in internal displacement camps that were set-up across the country. Although the 2015 floods were more destructive than other floods that the country had (recently) experienced, Malawi clearly struggled to implement effective and sustainable disaster response and risk reduction policies. The damage

caused by the recent March 2019 floods in the wake of Cyclone Idai further underline this point.

When the Malawi president declared the state of emergency in 2015, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) leaped into action. First established in 1991, it currently (after the merging of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) and the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator (UNDRC) in 1998) 'coordinates effective and principled humanitarian action, advocates the rights of people in need, promotes preparedness and prevention and facilitates sustainable solutions' (cf. [5]; p. 423).[1] Since 2005 its disaster response has been structured according to the cluster approach, bringing together organizations working on similar themes to facilitate communication and collaboration between different actors [6]; p. 589). This cluster system has been implemented in several big crises and emergencies across the globe, notably the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the 2010 tsunami in Haiti and the 2015 earthquake in Nepal [7]. The UNOCHA cluster system has proven to be useful, albeit not unproblematic, for professional's activities in disaster response and relief: it enables coordination, exchange of information and collaboration between international and local NGOs, local responding networks and local authorities (i.e. state institutions). In recent studies the enabling and containing factors of the cluster system have been studied, including the role of local authorities [6]. However, in particular the (role of the) state, a crucial partner in the cluster system, deserves more attention, since without the integration of local

structures, the UN OCHA cluster system will not be effective and may eventually even lose legitimacy.

The 2015 floods were the first time that the cluster system operated in Malawi. In this article we discuss the UN OCHA cluster system and the way it functioned in Malawi in the 2015 flood response, as the most important part of the overall disaster response. Based on the first author's experiences in the field and ethnographic data, supplemented by joint semi-structured interviews with several key-actors who worked within the cluster system, we explore how the (international) humanitarian organizations collaborated with local and national organizations as well as Malawi state institutions.

In what remains in this paper we will reflect on what this means for the local knowledge and capacity to deal with disasters and their aftermath, the so called 'local disaster cultures' [8]; see also [9]. On the one hand the local disaster subcultures refer to the adaptive strategies of communities to deal with and survive in hazardous environments. On the other hand, it refers to the early warning systems, safety/security measurements and - indeed – a resilience approach that moves beyond victimization [10]. The question that is central in this article is how international collaborative mechanisms, such as the UN OCHA cluster system, relate to state institutions and local disaster cultures.

1. Disasters and disaster responses in Malawi

According to the World Bank, Malawi is one of the poorest countries in the world. Located in southern Africa, landlocked and having a largely agro-based, rain-fed economy, Malawi and its population are heavily affected by fluctuating weather conditions [11,12]. For instance, the International Monetary Fund predicted that 2.8 million Malawians were 'at risk of food insecurity' as a direct result of the 2015 floods [13]. Early 2016, a year after the floods, many people in the south survived on water lilies, boiled green mangoes and corn waste, clearly indicating a context of dire need and utter destitution.[2] Late 2017, the situation remained largely unchanged: climate change and the El Nino phenomenon continued to influence weather conditions, severely complicating subsistence agriculture not just in Malawi but throughout southern Africa. Partly as a result, the World Food Programme has been providing food aid almost continuously for the last couple of years (see also [14]; who drew a similar conclusion already more than a decade ago).

The above described damage and chaos instigated by the 2015 floods is rather surprising when taking into account that Malawi, especially its southern region which is home to the mighty Shire river, has a long history of droughts and floods (cf [1,15,16]. The first records of floods in the Lower Shire Valley stem from 1942 and after another major flood in 1956 'the latest flood disasters occurred in 1997, 2001, 2003, and in 2006' [17]; p.492). The floods of 2015 were the worst in decades, but they clearly form part of a long history of disasters in the area where droughts and floods have become near seasonal occurrences [14,17–19]; see also [20]. This, of course, begs the question: what has been done to prevent these disasters from occurring and to curb their effects?

Already in 2005 it was concluded by the *Malawi Inter-Agency Contingency Plan* that '15% of the rural population in Malawi, live on the fringes of highly flood-risk areas' (UN System, in Ref. [17]; p. 492). Yet, so far, large scale resettlement and relocation plans, which were seen as central to disaster risk reduction efforts, have not taken place (see Ref. [21] for an urban, northern perspective and [22] (unpublished PhD-thesis) for a rural, southern perspective). In addition, investments in physical infrastructure appear to have been minimal [17,21]; cf.

[23].[3] This being said, awareness of the need for increased efforts to mitigate or adapt to climate change and climate variability has increased (cf. [14,16–18,24].[4] However, because the Malawi state is profoundly aid dependent, this development is largely donor-led [1,2,25].

The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction being the 'first major agreement of the post-2015 development agenda', points to the increased international attention for disaster risk reduction and the awareness that developing countries are more vulnerable when it comes to dealing with the consequences of climate change.[5] As such, the Sendai framework provides important momentum for international assistance and collaborations in this field, with a clear emphasis on the inclusion of the local level and community-based organizations. This is also articulated in the so called *Grand Bargain* that was agreed on at the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in 2016. Aiming to 'return local actors (local authorities or civil society) to the center of the humanitarian system with a greater, more central role', this localization of aid is ultimately meant to 'build the resilience of crisis-affected communities by establishing links with development activities' [26]; 1). In this context, the localization of aid is thus situated at the heart of the donor-led disaster-development nexus.

Yet, the focus of the localization of aid has so far revolved around partnerships between (international) donors, humanitarian organizations, civil society and local or community based organizations; pushing state institutions and national governments of affected states to the margins. This seems counterproductive, especially in developing countries that are both disaster prone and donor-dependent, like Malawi, where paying greater attention to collaborations with state institutions could build long term disaster risk reduction capacities (see also [34]). As our data of the 2015 flood response in Malawi will show, this article can therefore be read as a continued call to 'bring the state back in' (see [35,38]). On the one hand, it conceives the state as a formal organization claiming control over territories and people. In relation to international humanitarian response – and the UN OCHA cluster system in particular – it questions the determinants of state autonomy (at times of disasters) and state capacities. On the other hand, 'bringing the state back into humanitarian crisis response' means that – if the Sendai framework indeed serves as a momentum for building resilient societies – we may encourage leading state officials to pursue transformative strategies needed to build sustainable systems for disaster risk reduction.

1.1. Disaster response policies in Malawi: the Department of Disaster Management Affairs

Assisted by the international (donor) community (cf. [2,3], the Malawi state has been attempting to deal with the recurrent disasters and efforts have been made to improve the governance structures that operate during disaster responses (cf. [24]. One example is the creation of the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DODMA) in 1991, the installation of a minister for 'Environment and Climate Change Management' in 2013 and the development of a revised 'National Disaster Risk Management Policy' shortly after the devastating 2015 floods [24]; p. 17). When the floods took place, however, it quickly became clear that the state was not capable to respond adequately to the disaster on its own. This is partly caused by the fact that DODMA does not

---

[2] https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/world-food-programme-ready-respond-food-crisis-malawi http://reliefweb.int/report/malawi/malawi-food-crisis-nearly-3-million-risk https://www.wfp.org/countries/malawi (last accessed 11-12-2017).

[3] The Shire River Basin Management Program, funded by the World Bank, forms a notable exception (http://www.shirebasin.mw/and http://projects.worldbank.org/P117617/malawi-shire-river-basin-management-project?lang=en&tab=documents&subTab=projectDocuments) Last accessed 06-03-2018.

[4] See Ref. [18] for a discussion of potential policy options to alleviate the impacts of both droughts and floods in (Southern) Malawi.

[5] http://www.unisdr.org/we/coordinate/sendai-framework (last accessed 12-12-2017).

have its own Ministry or direct resources; heavily politicised, late 2018 DODMA moved from the Office of the Vice-President to the newly created Ministry of Homeland Security, only to move back to the Office of the Vice-President after the highly contested 21 May 2019 elections. It continues to rely largely on non-state and donor assistance.

The status of DODMA underlines the extent to which disaster response policies, their implementation and the ultimate aim of disaster risk reduction in Malawi are donor-led. The country struggles to devise and implement its disaster response policies effectively and due to the frequent disasters that take place, disaster response seems to take precedence over disaster risk reduction. By studying the functioning of the UN OCHA cluster system in the 2015 flood response, we aim to highlight the importance of increased attention to the institutions of the disaster affected state. Situating our argument in line with the increased calls for localization of aid, and the ongoing calls for radical social change and political transformation through participation in development (see [27,37]), we show how effective disaster response and disaster risk reduction ultimately need to come together in improved local state institutions. In the next section we first elaborate on our methodology.

2. Methodology

This paper is based on data gathered in three separate stages. The first stage was conducted by the first author and took place in the city of Blantyre, in Malawi's southern region, from February up to July 2015. The first author participated in distribution activities organized by individuals or small (often faith-based) organizations to come to the aid of flood affected people, both in urban and rural areas. Two displacement camps were visited, one of which regularly over the course of several months. Detailed notes were taken before and after these visits and activities. Throughout the ethnographic fieldwork the floods, the flood response, the government's (new) disaster management policies, and the manifold (I)NGO activities in the displacement camps figured prominently in the daily newspapers and in people's everyday conversations, alluding to important general sentiments and understandings [28]. The first author's command of Chichewa, Malawi's national language, facilitated contact and informal talks with anyone who was willing to share his/her thoughts on the floods and its aftermath. Detailed field notes were taken either during or after these conversations. In addition, two interviews with employees of organizations that took part in the cluster approach were conducted.

The second stage of fieldwork was conducted jointly by both authors and took place in Lilongwe, Malawi's capital, in the central region of the country, in March 2016, with a follow up in Blantyre in February 2019. Over the course of several days we conducted 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with employees of organizations that were active in the flood response. Some of these were representatives of UN-organizations such as the World Food Program (WFP), others worked for organizations like Save the Children, International Organization of Migration (IOM), CARE and the Red Cross, whereas again others represented faith-based organizations like ICCO and Act Alliance. To safeguard anonymity, we do not specify which representative from which organization made the statements we refer to. One of the interviewees had changed organizations after the floods but was still active in the NGO-sector and another interviewee was a Malawian Member of Parliament (MP) for a severely affected urban area. With permission from the interviewees these interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically, with a focus on the functioning of the UN OCHA cluster approach and their everyday experiences in the disaster relief interventions.

During the third stage of fieldwork, in February 2019, the authors jointly spoke with representatives of CARD, CADECOM, Malawi Red Cross Society and visited the Department of Climate Change and Meteorological Services at the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Mining in Blantyre. We interviewed professionals and fieldworkers

on the use of (big) data for weather forecasts, such as Project510,[6] and early warning systems, and joined a DODMA district officer in a displacement camp visit. Our analysis as presented in this paper, however, draws more heavily on data gathered during the second stage of fieldwork.

3. Disaster governance: the UN OCHA cluster system

Before describing the experiences of people who worked within the UN OCHA cluster system, we need to better understand how the system is supposed to function. The UN OCHA cluster system is governed by guiding principles that were agreed upon in the General Assembly of the United Nations [7]; p. 44). The first of these is that the system never activates automatically when a disaster strikes: to respect state sovereignty, its activation 'should be upon the request of individual countries' [7]. Second, UN OCHA involvement is supposed to follow the lead of the affected state's national agencies (ibid). Third, neighboring countries are expected to operate as 'collaboration facilitators' and fourth, both 'UN and non-UN international humanitarian agencies are grouped as a cluster in the main sectors of response operations' ([7], 45). By grouping the response in clusters, UN OCHA aims to establish a clear communication structure that connects the activities of different stakeholders per cluster theme and on global, national and local levels (cf. [5,6,29]; p. 423). Examples of clusters are health, emergency shelter, food security and protection.

The one ultimately overseeing UN OCHA's operations on a global scale is the Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs at the UN. Referred to as the Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC), this person appoints a Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) who is supported by a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), which is 'responsible for agreeing on common strategic issues related to humanitarian action'.[7] The HCT consists of several (I)NGOs and the cluster leads. The World Health Organization, for example, usually leads the health cluster (cf. [6,29]; p. 589). The cluster lead organizes regular meetings at the national level where information is exchanged within the cluster, while OCHA continues to organize regular meetings where all clusters are represented thus ensuring both inter- and intra-cluster communication.[8] These (inter)cluster meetings are meant for information sharing from the national to the local level and the other way around, but they are also meant for decision-making processes so as to ensure a swift humanitarian response (see also [29]; p. 284). To this same end, representatives of all organizations active in the response, including the national government's agencies, are expected to be present during (inter)cluster meetings at both national and local levels. Overall, the cluster approach aims to strike a balance between the widely acknowledged need for coordination during disaster relief on the one hand, and the importance of autonomy and political neutrality of humanitarian aid (organizations) as well as state sovereignty on the other [29].

The above description of the cluster approach paints a highly organized picture of disaster response. However, as we all know, how a system is supposed to function, is hardly ever how it functions in practice. One of the persistent critiques is that communication between different levels, ranging from the global UN structures to the local response organizations, does not always function smoothly [7,29]. Apart from the chaos that comes with disasters, this problem can oftentimes be related to the governance structures of the affected state that are expected to fulfill important leadership roles when it comes to activating the cluster system and subsequently facilitating its operation (cf

---

[7,29]. In Malawi this process is severely hampered due to prolonged overall donor-dependency, the recent corruption scandals and the regular occurrence of disasters within its territory. This leads DODMA Chief Mitigation Officer Stern Kita to argue in his article '*government doesn't have the muscle*', that although the Malawi state at times hesitated to declare emergencies and activate the cluster system [14], disaster risk reduction as well as disaster relief operations have so far been left largely up to (I)NGOs ([2] p. 253). This both explains and is in itself partly explained by the limited capacity of both national and local governance state structures, which in turn hampers the functioning of the UN OCHA cluster system.

Another important critique deals with the inclusion of smaller, local organizations in the disaster response: in practice, the cluster approach might not be as inclusive as it (cl)aims to be. Benton Heath, for example, discusses how cluster meetings during the disaster relief in Haiti in 2010 were often held in international languages which inadvertently sidelined employees and volunteers of local organizations, as well as spokespersons of the affected population ([29] p.275). Also, as we saw and experienced in Malawi, people on the ground will respond when disaster strikes, regardless of which larger framework of governance is officially in place (see [30]). Whereas the cluster system has its value by connecting agencies at the national level, the reality teaches that local networks and brokers are vital to mobilizing people and resources. International brokers such as UN OCHA tend to overlook the importance and value of local cultural and social capitals [31]; see also the work of Smirl, 2015 [39] on how humanitarian organizations tend to create and function predominantly within their own 'bubble'). This makes finding ways to not only nurture but also include these local disaster cultures within the larger disaster governance and response structures one of the key challenges of humanitarian action worldwide (cf [5,29].

4. The 2015 flood response in Malawi

A day after the floods on January 13th, 2015, the following statement appeared on UN OCHA's website *reliefweb*: 'Following the Declaration of State of Disaster in areas affected by floods by His Excellency the President Prof. Arthur Peter Mutharika, the Government of the Republic of Malawi has activated the cluster system'.[9] A Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) was installed, as was a Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), to collect data and assess the situation. By this time, the response on the ground in the affected areas, had of course already started: communities were attempting to take each other to safety and so called first responders, like the Malawi Red Cross Society, formed the first search and rescue teams. While these teams did their work, several (UN) organizations assisted the Malawi government in assessing the overall impact and damage that the floods had caused.

One thing that troubled the start of the cluster system in Malawi, was that this was the first time it was activated on this scale. Also, UN OCHA does not have a permanent country coordinator or office in Malawi: the team that operated during the 2015 floods was flown in from South Africa. One (I)NGO employee stated: 'I mean UN OCHA, it doesn't have a presence here, so they sent in some people and it was not really very effective at all (…) no one could really figure out what their role was and what they were doing (…) they travelled around a lot to different areas but I don't know what they ended up [doing]'. As these remarks exemplify, several interviewees voiced their surprise at this lack of permanent presence considering the fact that Malawi is a disaster prone country. Yet the fact that establishing effective disaster response structures took valuable time, has as much to do with UN OCHA as it does with the Malawi government.

Although the national government is expected to take – and

maintain – the lead throughout the entire humanitarian response, in the case of Malawi, funding, capacity and material used in the response, originated from elsewhere (see also [2,29]). As mentioned in the above, the Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DODMA) does not have its own resources, nor does it have its own ministry. From the remarks of our interviewees, we distil that DODMA is chronically understaffed and even a year after the 2015 floods, some of Malawi's 28 districts still did not have DODMA officers (cf [1]). Despite DODMA's aim to mainstream disaster risk reduction and improve disaster responses – as mentioned on their website – no valid preconceived response plans were available at the time of the 2015 floods, hence it was difficult for the Malawi government to take the lead. Several interviewees mentioned that this has been a struggle and incorporated it in their 'lessons learned': [we have] 'to respect that this is the government ['s] thing, and in all the process, we need to (…) engage and work together with the government, because we, for our work, it's helping and supporting the government'. In practice however, most decisions concerning the response were taken by the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), the government was included by chairing the clusters – or at least the meetings.

The most important thing for all responding organizations was to receive information: where should they go, what to focus on, what were the needs of the people affected and where were these people now? The main idea behind the cluster approach is of course that the clusters allow for thematic information sharing, to avoid duplication of efforts or the occurring of 'gaps' in humanitarian aid coverage [6,29]. Yet in order to share this kind of information, two things need to happen first. The data needed to be collected and second, the data needed to be agreed upon with the Malawi government. In 2015 this entire process was slow and delayed the start of disaster relief interventions. 'Usually', an NGO official explains, 'the government will send information going to one of the agencies and then we validate it' in the field. Especially faith-based organizations with long histories in the communities where they work, were able to rely on their own networks, receiving quick and regular updates about the situation on the ground. As a leader of a large FBO explained:

> '*During the floods there was a lot of variations, which we had to go and verify. But in the places where we have set up structures already, people already know that if [X] is going to come and work in this particular area, we give them a figure, if 500, they will come and verify and it should be 500*'.

Obtaining trustworthy information was much more difficult for organizations that were (relatively) new in the districts where they joined the disaster response. They could only rely on figures given by the government, or other organizations, as communicated in the cluster or HCT meetings. An NGO official explains: 'well yeah, I mean we didn't have a lot of choice, but then the different agencies who were attending the [cluster] meeting might update it (…) I mean we do have our own forms and our own methodology, but we coordinate with the other actors as well, so we're trying to gather similar, it may not be exactly the same, but we make sure we're gathering similar information'. Despite this aim to collaborate and collect information in similar ways, numbers varied greatly. Several (I)NGO officials blamed this on (local) government institutions: 'I'm not very sure about the government system because at times they will inflate the figures' (…) or 'politicians would want their role or their area to be favored' which would lead them to inflate numbers to increase their access to resources.

Yet disagreement on numbers was not always due to ulterior motives: oftentimes far more practical reasons existed. Some heavily hit areas were difficult to reach; internally displaced people looking for higher grounds covered great distances or (initially) remained mobile; and in some areas only little information was available on the situation before the floods. Whenever information was collected, attempts were made to reconcile with the government and agree on the same numbers before disseminating further. This, of course, took time and delayed the

---

flow of information: 'it was taking a long process (…) we would start verification with the government in liaising, discussing, where we went wrong and agree that these are the figures that are there. So after that, that's when we would go to the whole cluster now'. Some NGO officials added that validation took a long time because they had not taken a government representative with them when they collected the data; there were simply not enough civil servants to perform all the tasks that needed doing. Overall, receiving and validating received information was a challenging exercise. This led to frustrations among humanitarian organizations and as a result most organizations decided to rely on their own information and needs assessments, rather than to wait for "validated" information to be disseminated by the HCT and/or government channels.

Information that was collected and validated, was shared in the regular national HTC meetings as well as in the cluster meetings that took place both on the national and the district level. At first meetings were held daily, then weekly and towards the end of the disaster response monthly. Most interviewees deemed these meetings time-consuming and not very effective: 'the meetings that I've attended, haven't been that many, but they were really, they're information sharing and not decision-making'. Most interviewees blamed this on the capacity of DODMA functionaries: 'the DODMA people are really not effective in those meetings', whereas others complained that DODMA civil servants stopped showing up for meetings at some point, because they were too busy. This seems to have been mainly the case for district level meetings; the national cluster meetings were often well-attended, with sometimes more than one hundred people present. Several INGO officials held that these meetings changed into a see-and-be-seen type of event: 'it was also as a follow up, where everybody working the floods, wanted to show [up]'. Over time several NGO officials stopped visiting the meetings because they felt that the information shared there could be shared through other channels more effectively. Most information sharing was done via e-mail, telephone calls or text messages and especially during the first few weeks of the disaster response, the number of meetings for further information sharing appears to have overburdened (especially the smaller) responding organizations, including DODMA. 'I mean, I can't spend all my time going to meetings!', one NGO official exclaimed.

Cluster meetings at district levels equally focused on information sharing, but several interviewees mentioned that they were more 'practically focused' than the national level cluster meetings. The district level meetings were chaired by a state functionary, the chair of the District Civil Protection Committee (DCPC), sometimes the District Commissioner (DC) himself, who did not always have a lot of experience in the area where he worked. Some DC's even changed post during the flood response – much to the dismay of the humanitarian organizations active in the district: 'I think it probably was a normal rotation, they do move them on a regular basis, but you would think with the special circumstances … [they would wait]'. Some NGO officials complained that not all DC's actually understood the cluster system; some were not able to organize or chair the meetings (effectively), others 'wanted to be in all the committees themselves' thereby defeating the purpose of the cluster system. Several interviewees commented on the lack of network and authority of some DC's: 'at district level there is need for improvement of the coordination (…) the people who may be district commissioners, lack the skills of coordinating'. Others added 'it was overwhelming for the DC' and, by extension, also for the government: 'government should be able to say, (…) your role is working here. They should have that authority' (see also [2]). Legally, they do, but in practice, this was not always the case. All interviewees agreed that information flows between the national and district levels were very difficult, as the following remark underlines: 'there is a lot of good things and good resolutions made at national level, very good. But now translating those into action on the ground, there has been a very, very big gap'.

Yet it was not just communication and collaboration between and among clusters organizations that was challenging. Especially the collaboration with Malawian citizens who spontaneously joined in the disaster response was experienced by all actors (INGOs and government included) as particularly difficult. Two interviewees explained that several churches came to displacement camps to ask if their followers where there: 'churches would go for their faithful followers, so they would come sometimes in the camp to say "we want only our followers"; 'each comes and then just target[s] their own'. In view of the neutrality of humanitarian aid, this was very difficult to deal with: one does not want to discourage local churches from assisting flood affected people, but one can also not allow discrimination when it comes to providing assistance. Humanitarians also noticed that 'most NGO's had started distributing along the road, so people along the road were getting more' than people who were situated in camps deeper in the rural areas. Eventually this led to flood affected people trying to move to camps closer to the road: 'people knew that it is better to be in a camp near the road, than a camp far'.

A wide range of spontaneous initiatives emerged in the aftermath of the floods, ranging from church-based donations to donations made by people in the diaspora: 'sometimes friends in Europe would say, here, please go distribute', one NGO official stated. But also fellow Malawian citizens sprung to action, as this NGO official narrates:

'over the past three years, we have been responding to floods through international aid, but for the first time [in 2015], we have seen local people even here in Malawi, bringing items to us. (…) A lot of local people came here and they say OK, I've got this bag of cloth, I can't take it to the field, please, will you go for us (…)'.

In the example above, citizens were making use of the cluster system to distribute their assistance, but many others travelled to the affected areas themselves. Among them were also many (expat-led) faith-based organizations. Many organizations active in the cluster system greatly struggled to deal with these spontaneous actions.

5. Discussion: localization, the state and disaster risk reduction

Disasters often strike in areas that are already disadvantaged [32,33]. This was also the case in Malawi, where the southern districts, the poorest areas of the country, were hit hardest. Although often conceptualized as poor, vulnerable or even passive victims, it is the people who live and work in these areas who possess a lot of knowledge and experience when it comes to dealing with disasters (see also [22]; unpublished PhD thesis). 'People have a cultural assortment of knowledge, beliefs, values, norms, techniques and artifacts that help them engage with and manage their physical, natural and man-made, and social environment' [8]: 2).

The widespread assumption is that integrating these local responses into the wider disaster governance structures would make disaster responses faster, more effective and more appropriate. Global frameworks such as Sendai (2015) and the call to action of the Grand Bargain on the localization of aid are also rooted in this assumption. Putting this into practice, however, is complicated. In describing the disaster relief interventions that took place in Nepal after the earthquake in 2015, Wolbers et al. showed how even though UN OCHA aims for collaborations and inclusivity, once 'the formal mechanisms kicked in and the international aid coordination mechanisms started functioning, they gradually pushed out grassroots coordination initiatives' ([5] p. 429). Daly et al., also writing about Nepal after the 2015 earthquake, argue that this process in the long run only serves to further undermine already underfunded and weak local governance structures [40].

In the case of Malawi, it should be emphasized that the local disaster response and efforts towards disaster risk reduction are mainly funded by global humanitarian institutions and I/NGO's. DODMA endorses the localization ideology, but is itself donor-dependent. This clearly complicates bringing local concerns to the forefront of disaster response and disaster risk reduction agenda's (cf [25]. Also, although most disaster

response policies strive to include spontaneous relief activities of fellow citizens, these same activities were experienced as a hindrance to providing relief in the aftermath of the floods, rather than seen as an integral part of it. Increased attention to processes that play out locally and how these can be strengthened and build on to create more 'disaster-resilient' cultures, is needed [8]; see also [1,9].

Considering the fact that Malawi has a long history of frequent flooding, one would expect the state and its institutions to be more prepared to deal with disaster, if not of this magnitude, then at least of this kind [17]. Yet as the everyday experiences of our interviewees showed, international assistance was very much needed, information exchange was slow and collaborations between different governance levels were challenging, as were collaborations between state and non-state actors. Throughout the disaster relief intervention, the Malawi government struggled to lead the cluster system effectively and this profoundly hampered its functioning (cf [2]. In the aftermath of the floods, several (I)NGO's lobbied in vain for DODMA to become a separate ministry with its own resources, clearly seeing the need and value of improving the affected state's institutions. They stated that strengthening these would improve communication and collaboration across different governance levels. Contrary to the UN's intention of having created a 'one size fits all' solution to disaster response and one that can be implemented top-down, our findings show that the functioning of the cluster system varies per context, even within the same country. As one NGO official put it: 'its effectiveness [of the cluster system] is dependent a lot on who is running it'. Having more qualified civil servants and building a stronger national state apparatus to run disaster relief would thus improve the quality of the response and future disaster risk reduction programmes.

The arguments that we put forth in this article draw on our fieldwork and overall engagement with the topic of disasters and their governance. It is therefore important to keep in mind that we did not, apart from one day in February 2019, engage with DODMA officers. Also, our interviews with NGO-representatives took place one or three years after the 2015 floods themselves had happened. This also meant that some of the disaster response professionals had already moved to another field site and could not be interviewed. Interestingly, despite the fact that most of our interviewees emphasized that the collaborations in the 2015 flood response had been challenging, they did see the added value of the cluster system. 'I think the cluster system in theory is a good idea, getting people to work together', an NGO official stated. Other interviewees expressed hope that during the 2015 flood response, long-lasting connections between organizations had been made that could be used during future disaster relief interventions, allowing for smoother collaborations in the future. They seemed to take the intense collaborations after the 2015 floods as a start for not just future disaster response activities, but also integrated and joint disaster risk reduction efforts. Unfortunately, it seems there will be plenty of time to practice: since the 2015 floods, the cluster system has functioned (mainly in the south of the country) in response to armyworm infestations, cholera outbreaks, food insecurity, localized flooding and the large-scale March 2019 floods that occurred in the wake of Cyclone Idai.

6. Conclusions

In this paper we have described the ways in which the UN OCHA cluster system functioned during the Malawi flood response in 2015. After presenting how the cluster system is designed to function in order to enhance communication, coordination and collaboration, we based ourselves on in-depth interviews with people who worked in the cluster system to demonstrate that its functioning in practice leaves much room for improvement. We highlighted several challenges that complicated the collaborations between the Malawi government, (I)NGO's, humanitarian aid organizations and local actors, mainly highlighting the limited capacity of the national government. Its Department of Disaster Management Affairs being largely dependent on external funding for

both disaster response and disaster risk reduction policies, shows the need to focus on the role of the affected state and its institutions to build capacities and foster sustainable disaster risk reduction activities. Based on our findings we thus argue that localization without explicit attention to the state, particularly in contexts characterized by limited state capacity and overall donor dependency, is problematic and hampers the functioning of transnational disaster governance structures.

Our main argument in this article is that, in order to understand how to foster local disaster cultures, build capacity, enhance disaster risk reduction and integrate these networks within the larger transnational disaster governance apparatus as represented by the UN OCHA cluster system, localization of aid needs to explicitly include the state institutions of the affected state. Especially if this concerns a state with only limited capacity, which is already donor-dependent and disaster prone, such as Malawi. In other words, we need to bring the state back into the humanitarian crisis response debate *and* practices in order to meet the ambition to build disaster resilient societies as expressed in international treaties such as the Sendai framework.

Conflicts of interest

None.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2019.101262.

References

[1] R. Šakić Trogrlić, G.B. Wright, A.J. Adeloye, M.J. Duncan, F. Mwale, Taking stock of community-based flood risk management in Malawi: different stakeholders, different perspectives, Environ. Hazards (2017), https://doi.org/10.1080/17477891.2017.1381582.

[2] S.M. Kita, "Government doesn't have the muscle": state, NGOs, local politics, and disaster risk governance in Malawi, Risk Hazards Crisis Public Policy 8 (3) (2017) 244–267.

[3] D. Wroe, Briefing: donors, dependency, and political crisis in Malawi, Afr. Aff. 11 (442) (2012) 135–144.

[4] B.B. Majanga, Sealing leakages of public funds abuse: the Malawi "Cashgate" case, Appl. Financ. Account. 1 (2) (2015) 38–46.

[5] J. Wolbers, J. Ferguson, P. Groenwegen, F. Mulder, F.K. Boersma, Two faces of disaster response: transcending the dichotomy of control and collaboration during the Nepal earthquake relief operation, Int. J. Mass Emergencies Disasters 34 (3) (2016) 419–438.

[6] M. Stumpenhorst, R. Stumpenhorst, O. Razum, The UN OCHA cluster approach: gaps between theory and practice, J. Public Health 19 (6) (2011) 587–592.

[7] N. Oh, J. Lee, Activation and variation of the United Nation's cluster coordination model: a comparative analysis of the Haiti and Japan disasters, J. Risk Res. 20 (1) (2017) 41–60.

[8] J. Warner, K. Engel, Disaster culture matters, Scielo Ambient. Soc. 17 (4) (2014) Available here: http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S1414-753X2014000400016.

[9] R. Šakić Trogrlić, G.B. Wright, M.J. Duncan, M.J.C. Van den Homberg, A.J. Adeloye, F. Mwale, J. Mwafulirwa, Characterising local knowledge across the flood risk management cycle: a case study of southern Malawi, Sustainability (2019), https://doi.org/10.3390/su11061681.

[10] K. Engel, G. Frerks, L. Velotti, J. Warner, B. Weijs, Flood disaster subcultures in The Netherlands: the parishes of Borgharen and Itteren, Nat. Hazards 73 (2) (2014) 859–882.

[11] S. Devereux, The Malawi famine of 2002, IDS Bull. 33 (4) (2002) 70–78.

[12] K. Pauw, J. Thurlow, D. van Seventer, Droughts and Floods in Malawi. Assessing the Economywide Effects. IFPRI Discussion Paper 00962. Development Strategy and Governance Division, International Food Policy Research Institute, 2010.

[13] International Monetary Fund (IMF), Country Report No. 15/345. Malawi 2015, Article IV Consultation – Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Malawi. December 2015, (2015) Available here: https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2015/cr15345.pdf.

[14] A. Conroy, M. Blackie, A. Whitsedie, J. Malewezi, J. Sachs, Poverty, Aids and Hunger. Breaking the Poverty Trap in Malawi, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2006.

[15] J. Chidanti-Malunga, Adaptive strategies to climate change in Southern Malawi, Phys. Chem. Earth 36 (2011) 1043–1046.

[16] E.C. Nkomwa, M.K. Joshua, C. Ngongondo, M. Monjerezi, F. Chipungu, Assessing indigenous knowledge systems and climate change adaptation strategies in agriculture: a case study of Chagaka Village, Chikhwawa, Southern Malawi, Phys. Chem. Earth 67–69 (2014) 164–172.

[17] P.L. Mijoni, Y.O. Izadkhah, Management of floods in Malawi: case study of the lower Shire river valley, Disaster Prev. Manag. 18 (5) (2009) 490–503.

[18] S. Devereux, The impact of droughts and floods on food security and policy options to alleviate negative effects, Agric. Econ. 37 (1) (2007) 47.

[19] P.I. Pangapanga, C.B. Jumbe, S. Kanyanda, L. Thangalimodzi, Unravelling strategic choices towards droughts and floods' adaptation in Southern Malawi, Int. J. Disaster Risk Reduct. 2 (2012) 57–66.

[20] M. Vaughan, The Story of an African Famine. Gender and Famine in Twentieth-Century Malawi, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987.

[21] S.M. Kita, Urban vulnerability, disaster risk reduction and resettlement in Mzuzu city, Malawi, Int. J. Disaster Risk Reduct. 22 (2017) 158–166.

[22] N.E. Chawawa, Why Do Smallholder Farmers Insist on Living in Flood Prone Areas? Understanding Self-Perceived Vulnerability and Dynamics of Local Adaptation in Malawi, Unpublished PhD-thesis University of Edinburgh, 2018 Available here: https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/31421.

[23] D. Brown, Making the linkages between climate change adaptation and spatial planning in Malawi, Environ. Sci. Policy 14 (2011) 940–949.

[24] D.W. Malcomb, E.A. Weaver, A.R. Krakowka, Vulnerability modeling for sub-Saharan Africa: an operationalized approach in Malawi, Appl. Geogr. 48 (2014) 17–30.

[25] B. Chinsinga, M. Chasukwa, Narratives, climate change and agricultural policy

processes in Malawi, Afr. Rev. 10 (2) (2018) 140–156, https://doi.org/10.1080/09744053.2018.1485253.

[26] V. De Geoffroy, F. Grunewald, R. Ní Chéilleachair, More than the money – Localisation in practice. Trocaire and URD groupe, Available here, 2017. https://www.trocaire.org/resources/policyandadvocacy/more-than-the-money-localisation-practice.

[27] S. Hickey, G. Mohan, S. Hickey, G. Mohan (Eds.), Towards Participation as Transformation: Critical Themes and Challenges, Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation Zed books, London, 2004, pp. 3–24.

[28] H. Driessen, W. Jansen, The hard work of small talk in ethnographic fieldwork, J. Anthropol. Res. 6 (1) (2013) 87–95.

[29] J. Benton Heath, Managing the "republic of NGOs": accountability and legitimation problems facing the UN cluster system, Vanderbilt J. Transnatl. Law 47 (2014) 239–293.

[30] R. Solnit, A Paradise Built in Hell: the Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster, Penguin Books, New York, 2010 [2009].

[31] N. Oh, A. Okada, L.K. Comfort, Building collaborative emergency management systems in Northeast Asia: a comparative analysis of the roles of international agencies, J. Comp. Policy Anal. Res. Pract. 16 (1) (2014) 94–111.

[32] D. Hilhorst, Disaster, Conflict and Society in Crises. Everyday Politics of Crisis Response, Routledge, London, 2013.

[33] S.M. Hoffman, A. Oliver-Smith, Catastrophe and Culture. The Anthropology of Disaster, 2013 School of American Research Press, Santa Fe, 2002.

[34] D. Booth, Aid effectiveness: bringing country ownership (and politics) back in, Confl. Secur. Dev. 12 (5) (2012) 537–558.

[35] T. Skocpol, P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, Bringing the State Back in, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

[37] G. Williams, Evaluating participatory development: tyranny, power and (re)politicization, Third World Quar. 25 (3) (2004) 557–578.

[38] P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, T. Skocpol, Bringing the State Back in, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985.

[39] L. Smirl, Spaces of Aid. How Cars, Compounds, and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism, Zed Books, London, 2015.

[40] P. Daly, et al., Situating local stakeholders within national disaster governance structures: rebuilding urban neighbourhoods following the 2015 Nepal earthquake, Environ. Urban. (2017), https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247817721403.