Listing for change? Exploring the politics of relief lists after 2007 Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In the aftermath of major disasters, ideal notions of efficient disaster aid are continuously challenged by realities such as dire needs, limited resources and disaster opportunism. This article demonstrates how *relief lists* can be productive entry-points for systematic inquiry into the pervasive politics of disaster relief. Through analysis of qualitative data collected in the five-year aftermath of the 2007 Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh, it examines how relief lists featured in both physical and phantom forms, then developed beyond their transparency-making aims, becoming elevated sites of struggle for post-disaster resources. Three relief-list processes, selected to indicate the temporal, material and spatial dynamics of relief encounters, are analysed in depth. Although recipients of cyclone relief appreciated relief items' crucial value, the article argues that list politics also stimulated structures of vulnerability, including inequality. Gradually, relief as governed after Cyclone Sidr also operated to restore the differential vulnerability of the coastal poor.

Keywords

Bangladesh, cyclone, disaster governance, relief, politics of disaster, lists, list economy, Cyclone Sidr, targeting, list politics

Introduction

After surviving Cyclone Sidr (15 November 2007) the next challenge for people along the cyclone-hit southwestern coast of Bangladesh was to take up daily life again. An estimated 9 million affected people (GoB, 2008) applied multiple strategies. Some strategies, like eating less or sending children to work, were precarious. Others were restorative. Kin and neighbours shared food and the burdens of rescue, care and repair work (Islam and Walkerden, 2014). However, dealing with hunger and displacement, exacerbated by factors like higher post-cyclone food prices, exceeded local capacities. Another critical and increasingly competitive chore became trying to obtain useful relief, which normally involved getting one's name entered on various relief lists (of 'beneficiaries'), prepared by aid providers.

Aid providers derive their power to compile lists, of what is needed and for whom (discussed in greater detail below), from a global order of inequity that produces disaster-affected people.

Resultant human suffering motivates multiple actors, operating on multiple mandates, interests and competences, to come forward to assist 'the most affected'. After Cyclone Sidr, many actors emerged – including the military-backed Caretaker Government (CTG), UN organisations, NGOs, the armed forces, foreign donors, companies, and religious groups. These actors offered assistance with what they – reasoning from a nexus of knowledge, strategic focus and myths (Nogami, 2018) – perceived as immediate and longer-term needs[1]. Besides their material forms, such 'aid gifts' are also 'embodiments of cultural symbolism, social power, and political affiliations' (Korf et al. 2010, p. 560). Indeed, post-Sidr relief, limited and ideally 'targeted' at select beneficiaries by means of familiar administrative devices, was politically charged.

Aiming to highlight the inherently political operation of disaster governance, this paper analyses a set of stories revolving around one such device particularly valued by all actors involved: the *relief list.* First, drawing on recent ethnographic work on documents and governance in South Asia, I show how relief lists are keys to exploring the complexities and compromises challenging the ideal (unbiased, well-targeted, transparent) relief encounter in Bangladesh and beyond. I also argue that lists can be studied as stories, released from the format of paper. Next, presenting and discussing qualitative data emerging from fieldwork and secondary sources, I draw attention to potentially adverse effects of list politics. For example, I show how relief as governed after Cyclone Sidr produced *phantom lists* (imaginary lists over top-level proclaimed post-disaster resources) that in turn stimulated a market for highly insecure listings. Finally, emphasis on process shows that, whereas relief recipients appreciated crucial support, list politics also operated to restore the differential vulnerability of the coastal poor.

Terminology, exisiting contributions and scope

Let me first explain what is meant by 'relief' here. In focus is the assistance pledged, anticipated or distributed after Cyclone Sidr during the *relief phase* (disaster-oriented) and into the *recovery phase* (development-oriented) (Collins, 2009, pp. 26–27). Aware of longstanding attempts at bridging the two overlapping phases, I nonetheless focus on the original term 'relief'. This, for the sake of simplicity and pointing to the fact that all stories discussed (including those gathered in 2012), originate from the first months after Cyclone Sidr's landfall. The English word *relief* is also familiar from public programmes across post-colonial South Asia, and used by Sidr survivors themselves.

Analytically 'relief' is understood here as negotiated, rather than direct, outcomes of global, national or local visions, strategies or projects (Hilhorst, 2013, p. 42; Korf et al., 2010). Aid, frequently imagined within a 'humanitarian space', Dorothea Hilhorst and Bram J. Jansen indicate, plays out in an *arena* where multiple actors, including disaster-affected people, shape 'everyday realities' of responses (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). A trickle of social science-based research on disasters in

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Bangladesh has brought out some of these realities. In this landscape, relief becomes currency for aspiring leaders, especially politicians. Key public sources of relief are personalised and non-transparent (Khan and Rahman, 2007), while post-disaster funds and contracts add to the range of resources available to Members of Parliament for working political interests in home constituencies (Bode et al., 2002). Unfortunately, this literature has rarely examined the donor–state nexus.

Everyday realities have been little studied in post-Sidr studies, so the works referred to below stand out as key contributions. Interestingly however, they diverge regarding the outcome of Sidr relief. Biman Kanti Paul's (2011) article, published in *The Arab World Geographer,* sees post-Sidr relief as better-organized than expected, and highlights national politics. Having surveyed relief recipients' perceptions of 'timeliness' of relief from samples drawn from three villages in Pathuakhali and Barguna districts, Paul found that informants saw Sidr relief as far less 'irregular' than in the case of the flood the same year. Paul attributed this result to a combined set of explanations: The CTG, after responding inadequately to the 2007 floods, needed to prove its strength. Further, the absence of bipartisan politics, resulting from the 2007 'ban on politics', facilitated an effective working environment. Finally, rumours about military plans to establish a post-CTG party indicated incentives to seek legitimacy. Accordingly, the country's political situation conditioned a well-managed response from actors who stood to gain from proving their worth as capable of delivering – resonating with Naomi Hossain's (2017) concept of an operative 'subsistence crisis contract' between elites and masses in Bangladesh.

By contrast, Muhammed Nadiruzzaman and David J. Wrathall's (2015) *Geoforum* article, depicts post-Sidr relief as an exclusionary undertaking, and highlights local politics. With flow diagrams and fieldwork, the researchers follow relief's entanglement with local power structures in one 'worst-affected' village. Here, they found ample evidence of manipulation by local elites, 'patronized by upper-ranked power elites' (p. 201). Corruption was regular and embedded in the moral economy, illustrated by how a politician kept '30% of aid relief for his own party activists' (p. 201). The study also found social overlap between political elites and NGO volunteers. Most vulnerable were people 'outside the loop' to access aid resources (p. 201). The authors thus echo the 'elite capture' of decentralised government resources thesis, familiar from governance literature across South Asia (Dutta, 2009; Gellner and Hachhethu, 2008).

Such divergent outlooks on relief outcomes can co-exist largely due to the authors' emphasis on either national *or* local factors, as well as their relatively short study periods (up to one year into the aftermath). By extending the analysis across the arena and over a longer period (analysing qualitative data gathered in 2008 and 2012) this study highlights spatial and temporal dynamics of relief encounters, proposing a third way to grasp the politics of post-Sidr relief.

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Generalizing about the full effect of post-Sidr relief is beyond the scope here. The Joint Loss and Damage Assessment estimated the total costs of needs at BDT 91 billion (USD 1.3 billion) (GOB, 2008, pp. 17–18). The full extent of funding is not known, and beside the point. Evaluations abound. Although containing useful analysis, such reports primarily serve upward accountability, including 'appearance of success' (Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan, 2012; Birkland, 2009). By contrast, the present study brings out complex dynamics experienced over time, to which evaluators usually lack access.

Article overview

The analytical and empirical contribution of this paper, centred on the relief list, is built through four steps: First, I connect a growing ethnographic literature on documents and governance to relief, and argue for the significance of *phantom lists*. Next, I draw on literature, media accounts and field data to show the relevance of lists after disaster in Bangladesh, and how the regular power of paper amplifies, for all involved and across three zones of the disaster arena. Thereafter, I present and contextualise three stories of 'relief' as the resources in question filtered through lists after Cyclone Sidr. The paper concludes with comparison of the cases and reflections on wider implications.

Analytical approach: Entering relief by talking about lists

I enter the Cyclone Sidr disaster arena through a vital artefact: the relief list. Recent ethnographic work on the state and the bureaucracy in South Asia has demonstrated how studying the 'paper mediation of relations among people, things, places and purposes' (Hull, 2012b, p. 1) can provide a lens for understanding the everyday workings of the postcolonial state and bureaucracy (Hull, 2008; 2012a; Mathur, 2016). Rottenburg (2009), writing on the world of development projects and consultancy, has shown the limitations of 'list knowledge', isolated from rationales and context, as representations of reality.

'Paper', as a field and as a medium, is central in this literature. Hull, relating his study of bureaucracy in Pakistan (Hull 2008; 2012b) to a wider ethnographic interest in paper, sees documents as 'what mediate between (…) schemes of classification and particular people, places and things' (Hull, 2012a, p. 259). Documents obscure and construct reality: As ideas travel from the state, through paper and into the lives of people, documents create social categories like 'victims' (Hull, 2008). If 'attention to the associations emerging through the production and circulation of documents can help us understand (…) contested processes' (Hull 2012a, drawing on Oppenheim, 2008), the relief list emerges as a significant entry point for grasping the politics of relief. In addition

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to showing how 'bureaucratic objects are enacted in practice' (Hull, 2012a p. 259) stories about relief lists unpack the translation of aid proclamations into actual distribution.

Methodology

In methodology, my contribution departs from the literature noted above. The centrality of lists emerged from interviews and observations about disasters and change from altogether 10 months of fieldwork in three cyclone-affected districts and Dhaka in 2008 and 2012. Scholars like Hull (2012a) and Mathur (2016) have based their work on meticulous studies of files, archives, lists and records, with rich ethnographic attention to the social world. In my own attempt at studying relief lists, however, I never saw *any* of the lists referred to, let alone held them in my hands. Informants themselves had seldom seen these lists, at least not in their final version. Also, detailed probing about such lists would have entailed attention from influential people, including *mastaans*[2] who could have put the study's marginal informants at risk of sanctions. For these reasons, stories – drawn from anonymised primary accounts and secondary sources including media and project reports – remain the centre of attention.

Phantom lists

Additionally, I propose that the politics of relief lists can be studied without ever seeing paper. When paper tokens serve as evidence of concrete promises – as did the job cards instigated by the Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) analysed by Nayanika Mathur – they become objects to 'be physically controlled' (2016, p. 93). Local economies, encompassing *de facto* systems of government, typically respond by creating a market for systematic fraud. Mathur, contesting 'paper truths' associated with the NREGS, describes a 'job card economy', where cards were 'rented out, sold, bought, borrowed and stolen' (2016: 93–94). After Cyclone Sidr, such a relief-list economy was activated by Bangladesh's central disaster management apparatus – the government, donors, large NGOs and agencies trying to 'coordinate'– via intermediaries acting as community representatives – and into the lives of disaster-struck people. Here, lists, due to their perceived radical implications for people, sometimes took on a life beyond their material form, and operated as *phantom lists* – imaginary relief lists which people aspired to enter after having heard top-level actors proclaim that valuable post-disaster measures were in the making. In the disaster arena after Cyclone Sidr, what Hull (2012a, p. 2) in passing refers to as 'the documentary spectrum' therefore extended beyond material paper, to a list economy of anticipation, where even the desire to be entered onto phantom lists became commodified: Actors who were likely to control the real list (if it ever materialised) occasionally capitalised on phantom lists, by taking advance entry fees for (often unlikely) real listings.

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Disasters and the significance of lists

After Cyclone Sidr, the value of relief lists swelled, due to affected people's uncertainty about in what form, when and to whom relief would be provided. Influx of aid represented new opportunities, for the poor and the powerful alike, to access everything from items like blankets and powdered milk to productive resources and legitimacy. How relief providers – list-makers and list-shapers – manage resources, reflects back. Political studies have shown benefits to be gained for governments by showing the ability to care and losses to be suffered by failing to provide (Olson and Gawronski, 2010). Legitimacy is no less important for other actors whose efforts need to prove their stated commitment. Responders (even if acting on humanitarian or other principles) are also motivated by institutional and personal values (Fechter and Hindman, 2011; Hilhorst, 2002).

For potential 'recipients', the ability to *get listed* becomes critical. Individuals and groups experience different challenges: After Cyclone Sidr, many affected middle-class households felt constrained by the shame associated with queuing for relief like the poor. Other people failed to fit the providers' image of a disaster victim. The landless poor who, dwelling in unsafe and sea-facing locations, had lost nearly everything, struggled to plan how, where and when to search for useful relief. In addition, as some were listed, whereas others missed out, initial post-disaster solidary was put under strain.

In Bangladesh, documentary claims have always provided avenues for manipulation and legitimation of continued dominance of the elites over the poor. Documentation is also a space, which if opened – for example through Right to Information legislation and activism – can enable pro-poor access to public resources. However, overcoming the root causes of vulnerability (Wisner et al. 2004) is a colossal task. Shapan Adnan shows how *de facto* clientilist control over land in Bangladesh has repeatedly overruled attempts at *de jure* redistribution, facilitated by bribery to 'make allotments favouring the rich at the expense of the poor' (Adnan, 2013, p. 102). Studying *char[3]* land initiatives, Adnan found beneficiary list preperations 'biased towards those who had the requisite wealth and influence to gain de facto control over state lands and produce fraudulent "documents of right"' (2013, p. 102). Even when formal records exist, the poor, due to the impunity of elites, nevertheless face 'constant threat of forcible eviction or sale' (de Wilde 2011, 156–157, cited in Adnan, 2013). Thus, in 'development' too lists are 'entangled in the power-saturated mechanisms of negotiations processes' (Rottenburg, 2009, p. 144). Lists are therefore familiar[4] sites of struggle for all actors involved in the only partially 'exceptional' disaster-relief episode.

Accounts of list politics range across the disaster arena. Below I therefore briefly illustrate how outlooks on lists vary across three intersecting zones of the post-Sidr relief arena; the central

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zone, the broker zone and the target zone. In the first, national and global actor viewpoints are most visible, whereas the viewpoints of mediating actors like local-level bureucrats, politicians and NGO workers dominate the second. Finally, with the third zone, I seek to highlight viewpoints of the 'targets' – intended or unintended recipients of relief.

The central zone

In Dhaka, central coordinating bodies constantly tried to keep lists over assessed needs, affected areas, and contributions from near and far (GoB, 2008) updated. National and global ideas about reaching the 'most affected' identified by rapid-assessment teams, typically guided various agencies when compiling central lists of items and services for further distritution. The government, the UN and major relief organisations made notable attempts at coordination that proved only partly successful. Further complicating the picture, large amounts of relief were provided outside the realm of 'official', registered assistance. Moreover, as estimated needs and capacities translated into items and services targeted at affected populations across 'most' or 'moderately' affected localities, resources filtered through a web of brokers. Ideally, these brokers would follow multiple organisations' various aid governance norms (such as the Government's *Standing Order on Disasters* or the *Sphere Handbook*), typically focussed on impartial targeting and transparence, and deliver accordingly.

The broker zone

After Cyclone Sidr, the Union Parishad Council[5] (consisting of elected Chairmen and members) – sometimes in collaboration with the local civil service, other times in opposition – emerged as key gatekeepers of relief distribution. Due to the extraordinary military-backed CTG situation, political parties kept a low official profile during the relief process. Party affiliated Council members were nevertheless active in translating lists of items into lists of names, for example as (often dominant) members of the Union Disaster Management Committee, formally mandated to allocate according to need, supervise distribution and maintain accounts for reporting authorities or other donors (GoB, 1999) In a social reality that diverged from visions of neutral assistance, these actors were by default never neutral and combined service to their communities with patronage distribution.

Focusing on brokers who mediate ideas and practices in aid (Lewis and Mosse, 2006) has yielded insights into contradictory realities of development. Another, and understudied (Watkins et al., 2012), category of brokers are the mid-level staff of relief organisations. In his chapter on flash-flood relief, 'The State of Relief' in *Boundaries Undermined*, Delwar Hussain conceptualises relief as one of the most 'defining NGO rituals' (2013, p. 111) in Bangladesh. His study followed 'Tariq', a project officer employed with a regional office of an European NGO. Describing Tariq's concerns as

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he approaches affected areas where lists had been prepared by a local partner, NAT, Hussain demonstrates the limitations of lists:

> The list (…) had to be redone. According to Tariq, NAT employees had filled it with names of their own relatives and clients, arguably denying those who are the neediest. The Sunamgoinj office had learnt of this through informal channels and instructed NAT's staff to redo the list, threatening to otherwise deny it any future project work and funding. The second list that was drawn up had a different set of names, but, as Tariq explains 'there is no way of checking the validity of the revised list. (Hussain, 2013, p. 112)

Afterwards, Hussain narrates, the villagers – having received too little and fairly useless materials, too late – looked dissatisfied, and 'the only sign of relief is on the faces of Tariq and his staff, glad to be leaving the area' (2013, pp. 123–124). This resonates with Green's observation that, in the aid world, the 'right kind of knowledge as the basis for interventions is not necessarily that concerned with a problem or issue, but that which is counted relevant and useful enough to achieve the social status of evidence' (Green, 2013, p. 37). This further points up the intersection between donor policies and patronage.

The target zone

For affected people, in the absence of funding for anything like universal coverage, the value of lists increased. Relief hunting is hard work, and the young and able-bodied got ahead in queues. It was also important to have a family member at home, in case of a visit from one of the numerous assessment teams. Aid workers in Dhaka talked about what they perceived as ingenuity on the part of local people, who strategically set about getting listed for as many relief items as possible, by dividing households along the road. This echoed the humanitarian tune that affected people 'are not passive' – as if passitivity were ever an option to people facing the stark reality of hunger, forced migration and trafficking (Poncelet et al., 2010).

Lists produced tensions. *The Daily Star* (2007b) reported that a group of women, despite living in polythene tents, had not been included in the list of names eligible for one-per-household Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards. The women were angry because well-off people had been listed. Most people accused Council members of 'collecting money in exchange for inserting ineligible people's names on the list' (*The Daily Star,* 2007b). These 'usual suspects', however, pointed to the administration, claiming that the amounts of cards were insufficient. The District Relief and Rehabilitation officer, in turn, maintained to have been distributing according to demand (The Daily Star, 2007b). Head of the local civil service began 'verifying the list' while the

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police were called to investigate allegations of fraud (The Daily Star, 2007b). Indeed, central visions of an orderly and coordinated response looked quite different on the ground. Further, list quarrels showed how these governance devices, unsurprisingly to local people, failed to perform as tools of transparency.

Across zones, the many attempts at working around lists illustrated their weaknesses: International aid workers, who usually stayed in semi-urban towns after a day's work in 'remote areas', had heard of extreme cases where local elites accompanied aid organisations in distributing in accordance with procedure during the day, and then returned to collect goods in the evening. A more subtle technique was to showcase severely damaged areas to visiting assessment teams, and later capture the goods. However, such blatant use of raw power was rare, perhaps because regular arrangements including 'fees' and 'cuts' were more practicable while also offering pathways for patronage performance of care (Piliavsky, 2014). For example, NGO workers maintained that elites performed what Mahmud and Prowse (2012) term 'asset stripping', explaining how 'if there is 100 relief items, they hand out 50 or 60'. Standard cuts were also taken from cash transfers, that also activated debt collection from opportunistic moneylenders or micro-credit NGOs. For marginal interviewees, paying to be listed for relief was perceived as normal.

All the same, in most places visited, at least *some* form of relief had been distributed to almost everyone. For this *something*, people were grateful. Given the many secondary crisis people continued to face, they praised all support, including relief. Widespread approval of relief actually received (without which many said they 'would not have survived') did not, however, erase criticisms of the regular persistence of corrupt practices. The extent to which 'regular irregularities' co-existed with gratitude amidst disappointment became clear when a woman from Bhola told us, 'The relief was really good' – and added: 'and it did not cost (us) too much'.

Three stories about relief and lists after Cyclone Sidr

I now present three stories of relief-list processes involving relations 'among people, things, places and purposes' (Hull, 2008) that unfolded after Cyclone Sidr. These stories illustrate key processes entailed in the politics of relief, including management of expectations and connections. They cover scenes originating from the three broad zones outlined earlier. The point is not to detach these zones from each other, but to highlight their intersections, across cases and over time.

The first story, about relief housing promised by India, shows how top-level disaster diplomacy, by creating real as well as phantom lists, adversely impacted the prospects of displaced people after the disaster. The second story, focusing on brokers, shows how relief lists served as sites

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of struggle for aspiring leaders. The third story shows how a relief list, under unusual conditions, could unleash resistance to exploitation. However, as time passed and relief connections broke, the list lost its exceptional value; in the remnants of the project, the poor were largely left behind.

Story 1: Expanding lists

When people came to know that India was offering a large housing project in some of the 'most affected areas' in the south, the local disaster economy was set in motion. As the news were received, people strategically set about getting listed. The extent to which the pledge had transformed into list value became apparent during my visit to one of these areas in 2008. Here, a local small shopowner complained, with a shrug, of the state of relief in the area: 'We received nothing – the people who distribute relief are always after the poorest of the poor'. Then he added: 'And now India isn't giving us those promised houses. Some people have already paid for them!' The full story had started a few months earlier – and ended more than five years later.

During the first few days after Cyclone Sidr, Bangladesh received messages of condolences along with offers of assistance from countries around the globe. From Asia, neighbouring India was the largest donor. India first offered a USD 1 million relief package and waived its ban on rice export (*The Daily Star*, 2007a). In a furious article *The Times of India* journalist Indrani Bagchi (2007) called that contribution 'meagre' and said Bangladesh 'certainly cannot rely on big neighbour India', pledging a sum far less than the contribution after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. We cannot know whether or not these or similar perspectives had motivated India's Foreign Minister, when he two weeks later flew to Bangladesh on a 'mission to express solidarity'. Regardless, India's support list expanded. *The Daily Star* reported, 'India will provide assistance of $22 million, including 40,000 tonnes of rice, 10,000 tonnes of wheat, 1,000 tonnes of milk powder, 10,000 blankets and 400 tents' (Byron, 2007). Soon India also launched a relief operation with 'materials worth Rs 3 crore', including ready-to-eat food and medicines; moreover, India deployed three aircrafts for the operation (Byron, 2007).

India's list of contributions had not only expanded in volume, but also in time – from relief and into recovery: India would now 'join efforts for rehabilitation of ten severely affected coastal villages' (Byron, 2007). This soon translated into 'adoption of 10 worst-affected villages in the Sidr-hit area by paying for mid-term and long-term relief and rehabilitation efforts' (Khan, 2007). The CTG's foreign adviser responded, 'India's help fits into Bangladesh's broader plans for relief and durable rehabilitation', including 'a plan to ensure sustainable development'. He also stated the help as an opportunity to 'build back better' and protect against 'future natural disasters and adaptable to the

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effects of climate change'(Khan, 2007). The planned 'adoption' later operationalised into an offer of providing 2,800 housing units for Sidr-affected families (BDnews24.com, 2011).

Meanwhile, the 'sustainable approach' of India (and other bilateral donors) was becoming problematic. Many affected people had received one-off grants (insufficient for rebuilding, and vulnerable to debt collection) as well as immediate relief items, but frustration at the non-delivery of housing in the south was growing. A Shelter Working Group official in Dhaka explained:

> The government and some national and international NGOs are keen to work on shelter issues (…) But, they cannot take initiative as countries like Saudi Arabia and India had expressed their interests to build houses in those areas. (The Daily Star, 2008a)

With the monsoon season, worries continued to grow. In a roundtable on post-Sidr aid in Dhaka, speakers complained that much less aid than pledged had materialized. Saudi Arabia and India's offers were highlighted as examples of non-fulfilment. An Action Aid study found that 'of the 9,137 houses that are supposed to be built in Sharankhola for the affected people, only 1,300 units have been built to date' (The Daily Star, 2008a). People were also concerned with different needs than those listed by the bilateral donors. For example, cyclone victims were burdened by micro-credit loans. According to a local chairman 'the soil (…) would become saline if the embankments are not made immediately' (The Daily Star, 2008b). As the monsoon proceeded, other donors joined the chorus. In the debate, India emerged as the scapegoat, rather than shelter coordination failure.

On 12 July 2011 – four and a half years after Sidr – India delivered the first houses. The High Commissioner of India in Dhaka and the Minister of Food and Disaster Management inaugurated the first batch of houses, built in Sharonkhola. According to BDnews24.com (2011) 'beneficiaries were selected by the Bangladesh government and over 1,600 families have moved into the newly-constructed shelters' From October 2010, construction work had been 'executed by local Bangladesh contractors selected through an open tender[6].' Shelters now accomodated 'requirements of the beneficiaries as well as the local climatic and seismic conditions' while the design 'verified by the Indian Institute of Technology' was 'ideal for cyclone-prone areas and follows Bangladesh National Building Code' (BDnews24.com, 2011).

In a chapter mentioning the 'India houses' delay, Khan, Uddin and Chowdhury (2012, pp. 167–168) interpret the case as a 'striking example of poor management and coordination' (…) resulting from 'the lack of international/bilateral coordination, bureaucracy in both countries, lack of understanding of the victim's needs, and perhaps the government's unnecessary exercise of power'. These factors were mutually reinforcing. Take the issue of delays: The initially declared list entailed a range of accompanying bureaucratic tasks, like assessments, selection criteria and design codes – or,

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in the words of a Disaster Management Bureau representative, 'a comprehensive plan' (Islam, 2008) including much consideration:

> 'We got the baseline survey report from the district administration, but our teams again are going to the field to verify the information' (…) 'the finalisation of the plan depends on how quickly the bureau gets the report'. (…) The report (…) will be finalised after conducting four workshops to validate the survey in the affected areas and another at the headquarters' (Islam, 2008).

And while these bureaucratic delays kept bringing new delays, the forewarning effect of pledges had travelled from the ministers, and to the local areas, where people, sensing a chance to make a better life for themselves, started aspiring for houses that nobody had even designed. The comment about paying for the 'India houses' I heard in 2008 did not signify a unique incident. Nadiruzzaman and Paul (2013) found that patrons habitually demanded cuts from post-Sidr housing grants, in exchange for entering clients onto lists. Pledges by national and international elites fuelled an expanding disaster economy to which payment for entry onto 'phantom lists' was the latest addition. Similar accounts also concerned housing grants from Saudi Arabia. In one case people daring to raise complaints about list bribery ended up being beaten by local elites (The Daily Star, 2008c).

Despite repeated rounds of verification for projects proclaimed, no one could be held to account for failing to respond to urgent disaster aftermath crises among displaced people, whose disappointing and sometimes dangerous experiences with 'relief' had their origins far away. Hence, in the relief puzzle, elite capture is only one of many pieces, and symptomatic of a larger structure, including donors who can afford the unintended consequences of humanitarian engagement.

Story 2: Challenging the list

After roads had been cleared of uprooted trees and debris and ferries again were operating, central relief goods started their journey towards this severely Sidr-damaged coastal village. Trucks unloaded the goods with the local administration, and from here, the chairman and members acted as brokers. The following story was told us in 2012 by a 20-year old who, four years earlier, had formed a group that had tried to challenge the brokers' list. After Cyclone Sidr, he together with friends who had all volunteered for a local branch of a significant international NGO (located in the nearest town) heard rumours of manipulated relief lists. The young men, whose sense of fair distribution was in tune with their organisation's classical humanitarian mandate, were disturbed to hear of such political influence over allocations. However, raising concerns within the organisation itself was difficult. Its senior leader was a known affiliate of the largest political party in the area, and likely sympathetic to

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the local representatives. Consequently, these young people decided to take action on their own, and set out to make a 'real' assessment of 'real' needs.

These young people had been trained in accordance with the organisation's overall objective, which included assisting targeted affected communities in a coordinated and participatory manner, in line with the global policy that tilted towards 'early recovery' at the time. They saw their modality of selection as above politics, neutral and fair. Their methods were to travel to the area, and 'walk around, seeing for themselves'.They considered themselves well equipped for the task, and felt that they – in contrast to local elites – registered actual damage. The idea that someone, so simply, could determine what other people's needs were, was widespread: urgency, and absence of solid data, led many assessement teams to work in similar ways.

Very soon, this alternative list-making and probing of people about lists provoked a confrontation with the chairman and members. A heated quarrel developed, and two of the activists were removed with force. 'They held us, and tied our hands', the now-20-year-old told us. A friend was able to call a contact in the army, and the captives were released when army officers intervened. The local elites had succeeded in demonstrating their ownership of the area; in turn, the military succeeded in demonstrating their power over and above it all. All the while, accordingly, relief activities continued to be biased.

The young people had initially believed that lists could be challenged on the basis of 'facts'. However, the procedures followed in finalising such lists are often invisible (Rottenburg, 2009). In addition, Rottenburg (p. 144) notes, 'players with greater leverage have access to ways and means of asserting their own list as the most "objective one".' The argument that local elected representatives could outsmart town-kids in assessing local needs is, in fact, not so far-fetched. Secondly, as regards influence, these young people did not enjoy leverage, not within their own organisation, not within the village in question. Hence, their story also illustrates how, as noted by Hull (2012, p. 259) 'truths of falsity of documentary claims can be beside the point' for actors 'aiming to produce particular outcomes': documents 'can serve as grounds from official actions even when they are shown to be false because their falseness might suggest that they are backed by powerful interests.' In an evaluation of the organisation in question, consultants later mentioned incidents where senior staff, distributing relief along with community representatives, had been charging beneficiaries. The young people's solo assessment could also have challenged their continued involvement with the organisation, which, founded on values they liked, also provided meaningful activities and gathering places. In the end, they did not follow up the issue.

Local politicians were not the only ones to demonstrate their power to repel challenge. The army's appearance as the highest level of authority is interesting as rumour had it that plans to float a political party were discussed. Disaster response presented opportunity to demonstrate force and

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vigour. The army's involvement also led many disaster-affected people to believe that goods sponsored by the state or foreign donors had in fact been 'given' to them by the army. Although is likely that the army's presence helped to limit openly party-biased distribution; few would challenge the army's supreme authority as 'objective' overseers of relief.

Story 3: Listing against loans

While challenging power relations rarely features explicitly in largely humanitarian-framed relief, scholarship and practice have increasingly focused on reducing the conceptual and institutional gaps between disaster and development, including bridging 'relief' and 'development' (Anderson and Woodrow, 1989; Slim, 2000; Sparks, 2012). The assumption that disasters entail risk reducing opportunities (Birkmann et al., 2010) is pervasive, and scholars continue to consider whether disasters can catalyse social change (Pelling and Dill, 2006; 2009). When in 2006, 'Mr. Alam' – a middle-class man from an inland town[7] – started planning a project to transform fishermen's lives, he had never contemplated this question. The reason was simple: Disaster was yet to happen, and so from the very outset, his concern had been with development. In 2007, when the project[8] could begin, Cyclone Sidr abruptly swept across the project area, leaving thousands of already indebted fishermen and their families without boats, nets, livestock and money to recover. From now, largely by accident, Mr. Alam's became the most vulnerability-focused disaster assistance projects we encountered.

A relief list made this possible. The list, controlled by a high-ranked army officer with whom Mr. Alam had good relations, ensured some 200 (of perhaps 2000 affected) fishermen in the locality access to around 50 boats. In addition, the list, charged with excess CTG-period military authority, served as a lever in a chain of events that would lead the fishermen to stand up against elites. This resistance focused on bypassing middlemen known as exploitative gatekeepers of credit, productive assets and markets, by establishing alternative mechanisms such as collective saving, organised in two associations. The aim was to help fishermen avoid taking up loans from middlemen in the lean season, or after hazards. Another, more explicit and consequently more dangerous mechanism, was to establish an 'independent' fish market, where catches could be sold directly to buyers, avoiding the regular cheating and abuse involved in being forced, through debt contracts, to sell via middlemen.

The list was the final factor, among many, which enabled Mr. Alam to act. First, he was in touch with realities in remote rural areas, through relatives who had related accounts of intensified debt bondage. A main factor behind the greater debt burden borne by fishermen was the increased export-orientation of fisheries that escalated in the late 1990s (UNCTAD, 2017). A shift from local to national and global markets enabled intermediaries who controlled supply-chain capitals to expand

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their power to exploit the lowest level in the chain. Secondly, the existence of educational and non-governmental institutions committed to social advancement of the poor as well as cosmopolitan links for accessing them made project design possible. After college exams, contacts introduced Mr. Alam to Development Now, a participatory development-oriented NGO located in an urban municipality. Development Now soon allotted funding to consider how fishers could break debt-bondage through collective steps.

In the beginning, the project struggled to get the attention of fishers. However, in November 2007 two accidental factors occured: Firstly, the project area was badly hit by Cyclone Sidr. According to the project report[9], the situation motivated fishermen 'to get rid of poverty'. Secondly, the army officer's list of extremely valuable boats spurred interest. Apart from the beneficiaries (who managed to get listed for unclear reasons – competing theories existed, including chance, sample technique and bribery) other fishermen too saw prospects for future gains. The list thus enabled the construction of an accidental experimental control-group design: one association for fishermen who had their own boats, and another for those who operated vessels owned by others.

The project's initial power analysis showed how the middlemen's ways involved all phases of fishing, a familiar power structure across Bangladesh. Access to export markets relied on middlemen's capacity to preserve the catches, requiring ice and storage space. Nets, boats, and other gear could by aquired by marginal fishers mainly through credit. Moreover, the fishermen could take up loans from middlemen during the lean season, when day-labourjobs were unpredictable or absent. In return for access to equipment, catches had to be sold directly to middlemen, below market price. When weighing the fish, the middlemen manipulated the scales and measures. Another technique was to claim that fish were rotten, and offer minimal pay, below the already reduced price. Poor and landless, the fishermen could often not afford to refuse.

The participatory aspects of the report seem questionable. Behavioral factors cited were quite conventional ideas about the poor as seen from elite perspectives: fishermen as being 'quarrel-prone', that they took loans 'as an easy way out', and were 'uneducated'. Among 'social problems' identified were 'lack of leadership'. However, noting how shifts in 'the strategies of resistance and domination are (…) interactive' (Adnan, 2007, p. 185), the fuller story demonstrates the strategic rationality of self-constraint with regard to collective action on the part of the fishermen.

In the beginning, middlemen attended community meetings where all stakeholders were invited. Yet, as they soon understood the course of the events, elites started using counter-strategies. When fishermen gathered in temporary localities, local leaders reminded the fishers about the reality that awaited, tellingly, 'when democracy returns'.[10] However, the project managed to overcome 'the threshold of fear' (Adnan, 2007, p. 203). On a spring day in 2008, the first 'independent fish market' was opened on the ground floor of a rural food stall. Here, invited traders

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from a neighbouring town came to buy directly from the fishermen, at market prices and with accurate scales. The atmosphere was tense. Local elites sought to intimidate the fishermen, asking them, for example, 'what they would do if their children fell sick'. The fishermen, however, enthused by feeling powerful connections to the 'outside' (including the army and elite visitors from metropolitan areas) defied the threats, and sold their fish. Thereafter, the bypassed elites dynamically changed tactics, employing counter-strategies that resonated with findings from Adnan's (2007) study of 'the making and un-making' of power struggles, and included pressure, intimidation, conciliation and co-optation.

The local elites made it difficult for the fishermen to find premises. Complex results of national- and globally-induced 'development', entailing eco-system pressure[11] (Shamsuzzaman et al. 2017) also caught up with the project. The disastrous 2010 fishing season broke the poorest collective. 'All the fish were going to India, because of climate change' leadership complained. Hence, middlemen could re-appear, disguised as 'safety nets' in the lean season.

With time, the fragility of the pillars on which the project had been raised – from the outside – became evident. Years after Cyclone Sidr, project leadership was accused of a scam unrelated to the project. The rumours reached Development Now and severed their connection. Other contacts moved abroad. As time passed, the fishermen's main, symbolic power – their cosmopolitan connections – disappeared. Moreover, matters did indeed change with the 'return of democracy' by late 2008. Having regained their visible political power, local middlemen now employed tactics of rebuilding their relations with the remaining (least marginal) collective – who in fact managed to create some space for negotiation on behalf of their members, in connection with disputes. In 2012, one of its leaders greeted us after disembarking from a motorcycle, juggeling cellphones. Life had changed. Now he was working as a middleman between buyers and collective members – taking lower commissions than former middlemen, from whom he distanced himself morally. Another member, when asked about the prospects of any fellow members running for local elections a some point, responded that now that their relations with the local elites were finally better, they would not risk 'insulting' them again.

As connections broke, what in the immediate aftermath had taken shape as a vulnerability-oriented project, with high backing from connections and material leverage powered by a list of boats, proved unable to survive. The project also suffered from lack of ground support, as the majority of fishermen never had been included in the first place. The power relations that had been challenged had now largely reverted to normal, into the (perhaps for a few slightly loosening) familiar 'Net'[12].

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Cross-story reflections

Across all three stories of lists, we see that relief enabled powerful actors (including donors, the state, the army and local leaders) to be seen as governing. In the first story, India played the role of the 'Asian superpower', with the India–Bangladesh relationship cast as concerned with sustainability. Interestingly (and challenged by stories 2 and 3) the local elites here acted as the 'community voice', while other donors could perform the role of the concerned coordinator. When we realise that relief actors are shapeshifters across the disaster arena, analysing relief across zones and over time becomes productive.

All stories have documented less-than-ideal relief, ranging from poor design to vicious capture. These are familiar topics in studies of the moral and political economy of the patron–client relationships characterizing the region. As aid, charged with symbolic power, trickles through a patronage society, aspiring leaders can virtuously exhibit care for their own (Price and Ruud, 2012). Distributing 'according to need' is equally important as the opportunity to capture. Therefore, when Mahmud and Prowse, in their relief study after 2009 Cyclone Aila, found that, despite elite capture tendencies, 'wealthier households actually received less than poorer households' (Mahmud and Prowse, 2012, p. 938), that does not de-charge relief of the power it gives brokers to choose how to perform in a disaster arena. Moreover, the analysis has made visible ways in which donors, although increasingly focused on coordination, maintain relief enterprises that repeatedly fail to take account of needs on the ground. The 'local' is also widely confused with the broker zone. In the target zone, the original sources of goods and services are largely irrelevant[13] to people who, while certainly aware of the differences between agencies and countries are also well aware of the limited impacts of such actors on their own daily lives. It is the man (rarely a woman) whose face, position and list can release these resources who becomes the holder of political currency. Therefore, a cross-story tendency of elite capture (facilitated by a fuzzy and targeting-fixated aid-flow structure) can easily co-exist with high levels of gratitude among aid recipients. And, as aspirations for useful relief increased, across zones, the value of the list, including *phantom lists*, rose to the extent that desires to be listed even entered the market.

Conflicting ideas about relief, combined with pre- and post-disaster poverty, led people to work hard to get on as many lists as possible. These are among several adverse effects of targeting documented. Other effects included delays and payment for phantom lists (story 1), conflict (story 2) and the division of fishermen into two groups due to their differential ability to be listed (story 3). Here, it is important to distinguish the coincidental appearance of relief encounters from actual coincidence. Some people certainly were listed by chance, because they had happened to be present at a certain beach on the particular evening where nets were distributed. However, across cases,

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stark inequalities were baked into the relief encounter from the very beginning. Despite notable improvements in coordination, the patchiness of relief, together with the across-zone reluctance to tackle the vulnerability in which many actors also are complicit – remains a challenge. These reflections are important at a time where several humanitarian actors are moving towards cash-based assistance, and where simply shifting technology alone is unlikely to help. After Cyclone Sidr, the combined effect of cash support and post-disaster increases in land prices nullified the intended surplus for the poor, while enriching elites (Nadiruzzaman and Paul, 2013).

Conclusions

This study, drawing on literature that proposes 'lists' as productive entry points to the power-charged realities of distributive politics (Hull, 2008), has shown how *the relief list* emerges as a prime site for studying the politics of relief. I have also demonstrated the empirical and analytical significance of *phantom lists.* The analysis of 'list stories' has revealed how a focus on outcomes and single zones of post-Sidr assistance is incapable of factoring in the dynamics of the full disaster arena, embedded in power-charged and across-zone realities. National 'government survival' or 'local elite capture' emerge as only two factors among many others, including donor and foreign politics.

While 'relief' mediated through disaster governance devices such as lists did indeed help many marginal survivors after Cyclone Sidr, much of the ensuing praise was due to the substantial inflow of aid resources, as most (not all[14]) of those who had been severely affected 'received something' from one or several actors 'doing something'. We have seen how some relief initiatives, through list politics, served to stimulate the governening structures of vulnerability, including inequality. For disaster-affected people dreaming of a better life after Sidr, relief also served to reinstate an essentially risky everyday political and social order – sometimes slightly adjusted, but never altered.

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[1] The first type usually implied cash or in-kind support, like rice, tents, and kerosene. The latter included seeds, public works and livelihood diversification support.

[2] *Mastaans* are mafia-like groups and individuals who 'work in alliance with corrupt members of the state' (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2017, p. 235).

[3] *Chars* are erosion-prone river islands that emerge in the delta as a result of sedimentation.

[4] On lists and climate risks, see also Coirolo and Rahman (2014).

[5] The Union Parishad is the lowest tier of government in Bangladesh.

[6] The notion of an 'open tender' is questionable (Ruud, 2019, forthcoming).

[7] To provide anonymity, all names are fictional.

[8] I learnt about it from contacts and later (2008 and 2012) interviewed key partakers.

[9] I am grateful to a project assistant for translation. For reasons of anonymity, minor details have been changed.

[10] This refers to the (late 2008) return of general elections where political parties competed.

[11] Many species, including the popular hilsa fish *(Tenualosa ilisha),* are over-exploited (Hoque Mozumder et. al. (2018)

[12] 'The Net' is a metaphor for power relations in Bangladesh, see Lewis and Hossain (2008).

[13] Religious associations to relief might be an exception, see Salehin (2016).

[14] See Ahmed and Ashan (2007).

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