



Contextualising humanitarian response to natural disasters in urban environments: the international humanitarian community's response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown, Sierra Leone

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The work presented in this dissertation was carried out in the Department of Geography, Birkbeck, University of London and is entirely my own except where other authors have been referred to and acknowledged in the text. It has not previously been submitted for a degree in this or any other university. The views expressed in this dissertation are my own, and not those of the University.

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Abstract

Humanitarian response to natural disasters in urban environments presents a unique set of challenges for the international humanitarian community. Contextually-appropriate interventions cannot rely on generalised good practice, therefore documented case studies are necessary to understand the distinct nature of responding in a specific urban environment. This dissertation explores how the international humanitarian community contextualised their response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown, Sierra Leone. The research draws on semi-structured interviews with – and reports from – agencies involved in the response, and applies a conceptual framework to the findings based on a review of literature on contextualised urban humanitarian response. The overall finding was that a concerted effort was made on the part of the international humanitarian community to contextualise its response through the conceptual pillars of Coordination, Localisation and Appropriateness. An additional pillar of Capacity was proposed following data analysis to reflect the specifics of the Freetown context. The approach to contextualisation underpinning the four pillars was not always consistent, and there were challenges around preparedness, government capacity, information sharing, beneficiary targeting, local partner engagement and intervention rationale. A revised framework based on the specifics of the response notes that the pillars of contextualised urban response are not separate and distinct, but overlapping and competing, unequal and changing over time.



(Source: Author's field trip photo, April 2019)

This slogan was emblazoned on the office wall of a community-based organisation in Freetown who participated in interviews for my dissertation research, and the words have stuck with me ever since.

This work is dedicated to all the victims of the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown, and to everyone who worked tirelessly to help the survivors.

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Acronyms

| | |
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| CBO | Community based organisation |
| COORD | Coordination |
| DFID | Department for International Development (UK) |
| FBO | Faith-Based Organisation |
| GoSL | Government of Sierra Leone |
| ICRC | International Confederation of the Red Cross |
| IOM | International Organisation for Migration |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NFI | Non-Food Item |
| NNGO | National Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| ONS | Office of National Security (Government of Sierra Leone) |
| PPSS | Protection and Psychosocial Support |
| Sit Rep | Situational Report |
| SL | Sierra Leone |
| Soc. Mob. | Social Mobilisation |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNDAC | United Nations Disaster Assessment and Coordination |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNDSS | United Nations Department of Safety and Security |
| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| UN WOMEN | United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women |
| WASH | Water, Sanitation and Hygiene |
| WFP | World Food Programme |
| WHO | World Health Organisation |

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The world is becoming increasingly urbanised. At least 54% of the global population now live in urban areas, in contrast with 43% in 1990, and that proportion is projected to rise to 66% by 2050 (UN Habitat 2016). Furthermore, 90% of urban growth is taking place in developing countries (Ibid). An increase in the size and number of people living in urban areas in low income countries has been accompanied by an increase in the number of humanitarian emergencies occurring in these contexts (Archer and Dodman 2017). This is not a simple link based on the rise of rural to urban migration; it is a complex phenomenon driven by poor urban planning, the rise of often precarious informal settlements, climate change and deforestation (World Bank 2010).

When a natural disaster occurs in an urban environment, national and local governments, civil society organisations and individuals often step in to support those in need. In instances where the required response overwhelms local capacity, external assistance can be invited to support the humanitarian response (Walker and Maxwell 2009). The ‘international humanitarian community’, made up of United Nations organisations, the International Confederation of the Red Cross (ICRC) and International Non-Governmental organisations (INGOs), can help with search and rescue activities, the provision of basic services for affected populations and rebuilding and recovery efforts (see Figure 1). Those humanitarian agencies already face a number of difficult challenges on the ground following major natural disasters. However, the complexity of urban environments can exacerbate those challenges, in addition to presenting a unique set of considerations for an industry which is traditionally used to responding to crises in rural or refugee camp settings (Archer and Dodman 2017).



Figure 1: The three types of organisation that form the 'international humanitarian community'

Despite a growing focus on the peculiarities of urban emergency response within the aid industry, recent humanitarian action in urban environments has too often been “ad hoc, ill-judged and poorly coordinated” (Pantuliano 2012: 52). Each urban area differs markedly in the make-up of its inhabitants, their pre-existing vulnerabilities and capacities, layers and types of stakeholder engagement, potential hazard risks and the local response structures in place when crises occur (Campbell 2018). It has been argued that the only commonalities between the world’s urban areas is their “complexity and distinctiveness... making the use of guidelines and handbooks problematic” (Archer and Dodman 2017: 341) and presenting a challenge for humanitarian agencies to learn from and apply best practice.

1.2 Research Problem

In a review of the existing literature on urban crises and humanitarian response undertaken for the UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), academics at University College London noted a need for policy and practice to move away from developing good or best practice in urban crises, and towards documenting

“contextually appropriate, dynamic and iterative programming” (Brown et al 2015: 38). Indeed, there has been an increasing focus in urban humanitarian response of the need to be “context relevant”. This requires an understanding of the environment and the circumstances in which a disaster has occurred, building on existing structures and capacities and taking a holistic, coordinated and long-term approach to programming (Campbell 2018). Failure to understand context in urban environments could mean that “the potential for a broader and longer-lasting positive impact on urban life and livelihoods may be lost” - or worse, the response could do more harm than good to the urban environment’s formal and informal systems and the people that navigate them (Earle 2016: 82).

1.3 Research Question

This research seeks to contribute to the dual imperative to focus on contextualisation in urban response while moving away from ideas of best practice and towards documented case studies. Therefore, using the 2017 Freetown flooding and mudslide in Sierra Leone as a case study, the primary research question this dissertation will address is as follows:

Research question: how has the international humanitarian community contextualised its response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown, Sierra Leone?

This is achieved by applying a conceptual framework which addresses the overlapping themes of coordination, localisation and appropriateness as fundamental pillars of urban response contextualisation. By looking at a cross-section of humanitarian responses to the disaster and seeking input from a range of stakeholders, I hope to present a nuanced understanding of this urban humanitarian response and help fill a gap in the literature which calls for documented case studies to exploring context-relevance in urban humanitarian response.

1.4 Research Objectives

In order to answer the research question, this dissertation aims to meet the following objectives:

1. Explore and synthesise the relevant literature on the relationship between natural hazards, urbanisation and vulnerability, the international humanitarian system, humanitarian emergencies in urban areas and contextualising urban humanitarian response.
2. Develop a robust methodology and collect relevant data to help answer the research question.
3. Analyse the data and present findings on how the international humanitarian community contextualised its response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown.

1.5 Methodology, Scope and Limitations of the Research

The methodology to explore contextualisation in urban humanitarian response is to use a case study approach, focusing on the international humanitarian community's response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown. Research data has been collected from written reports and evaluations, together with semi-structured interviews conducted with a range of organisations with detailed knowledge of the humanitarian response, including national and international NGOs, civil society organisations, academics and coordination bodies. The data has then been analysed against a conceptual framework, looking at how the humanitarian responses individually and collectively contextualised their approaches to Freetown's urban environment. While soliciting input from a range of actors, the scope of the research focuses on the response of several international humanitarian organisations to the flooding and mudslide in Freetown. It has only been possible to gather data for a limited number of the organisations involved, and therefore this research cannot take into consideration the full breadth of interventions which took place.

1.6 Structure of the Dissertation

In this dissertation I will first undertake a literature review to explore the role of humanitarian response in urban environments, taking into consideration the relationship between natural hazards, urbanisation and vulnerability, the international humanitarian system, and how the urban context impacts humanitarian response to natural disasters. I will then unpack the methodology used to conduct the research, describing the research approach, data collection methods, limitations to the research and ethical considerations.

The research will then be grounded in an overview of Sierra Leone, Freetown and the case study of the 2017 flooding and mudslide. A timeline of the events of the disaster and the humanitarian response will be placed in the context of Freetown's urban vulnerability, as well as Sierra Leone's broader profile in relation to NGO intervention. I will then present my findings and analyse how the international humanitarian community contextualised its response to the 2017 mudslides and flooding in Freetown. This is achieved through drawing on reports, evaluations and interviews with a range of organisations with detailed knowledge of the humanitarian response and applying the data to a conceptual framework. Finally, a revised framework which reflects the specifics of contextualisation in the case study of the 2017 flooding and mudslides in Freetown will be presented, followed by a conclusion summarising the key learning points.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In order to effectively explore contextualisation in urban humanitarian response, it is important to place this research topic within the framework of existing literature. First, I will look at the relationship between natural hazards and urbanisation that provides the catalyst to which humanitarian agencies respond when a disaster strikes. Then I will give an overview of the international humanitarian system, its architecture and processes, in order to place the international humanitarian community's role within the wider emergency response context. Following this I will bring these two topics together and focus on what makes urban humanitarian response unique, and the role that understanding context plays in implementing effective programming. Based on this exploration I will present a conceptual framework which seeks to define the fundamental pillars of a context-relevant urban humanitarian response, against which my case study data is analysed to answer my research question of how the international humanitarian community has contextualised its response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown.

2.2 Natural Hazards, Urbanisation and Vulnerability

Natural hazards such as storms, flooding, landslides and earthquakes can be detrimental anywhere in the world. However, "urban expansion and development are actually generating new patterns of hazard, exposure and vulnerability", which are themselves compounded by the impact of climate change, such as sea level rises and temperature extremes (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2012: 143). Health crises such as the spread of communicable diseases and air pollution, food and water security crises caused by market or infrastructure failures, and technological hazards such as fire and transport accidents all add to existing urban disaster hazard burdens (Pelling and Wisner 2009).

Urban growth in lower-income countries has increased by 326% over the last 40 years (Earle 2016). In the global south specifically, the expansion of cities is largely attributable to the growth of existing urban poor and to the migration of economically disadvantaged and displaced people looking for opportunities to improve their livelihoods, as well as a search for greater environmental and political security (Pelling and Wisner 2009). For example, Figure 2 shows a marked rise in the number of forcibly displaced people living in urban settings, overtaking those residing in camp or rural settings. But it is precisely this type of marginalised people who are most vulnerable to threats to their life and work from environmental risks in urban areas. They are likely to live in poorly constructed shelters with insecure tenure on the most hazard-prone and densely populated land on the outskirts of cities (Wisner et al 2004). Additionally, poor access to services, few employment opportunities and a wealth of other chronic everyday struggles resulting from urban poverty impact people’s ability to overcome stresses and shocks (Pantuliano 2012).

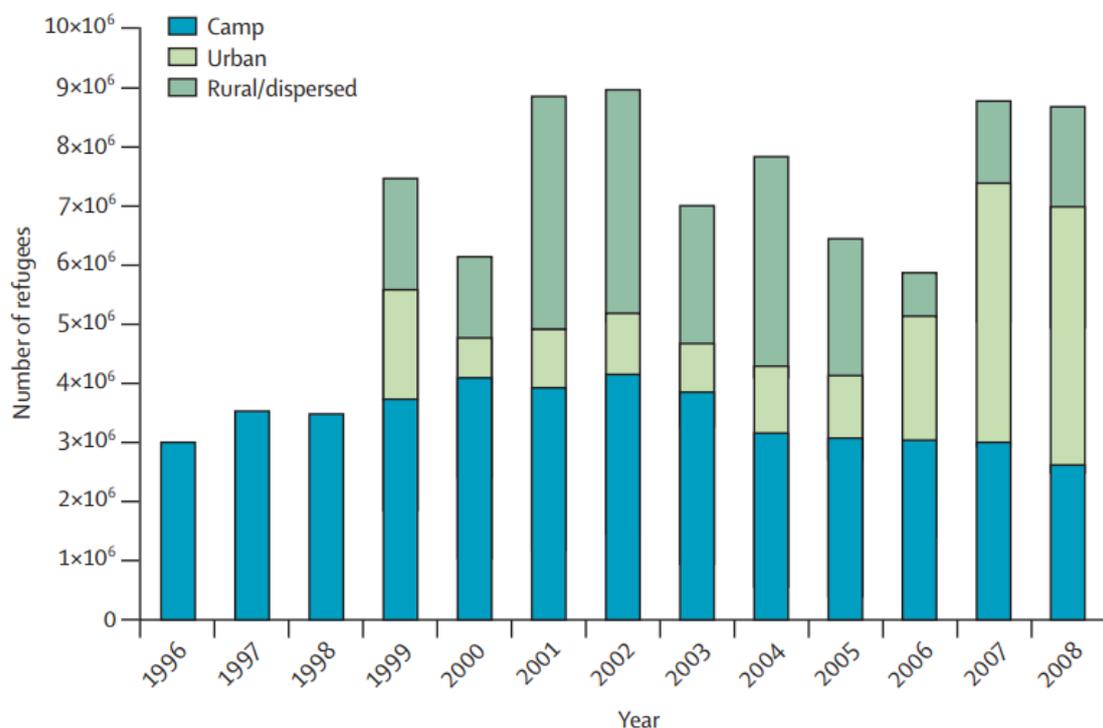


Figure 2: Number of refugees living in camp-like, urban, or rural and dispersed settings, 1996–2008 (Source: Spiegel et al 2010)

2.3 The International Humanitarian System and Emergencies

When natural hazards, urbanisation and vulnerability combine to create an urban natural disaster that overwhelms local capacity to effectively support those in need, the international humanitarian community can step in to help. This is a system of support external to the country where the disaster took place, and it can be invited to lead or assist with the response by the local authorities, often the government (Walker and Maxwell 2009). The international humanitarian community is made up of United Nations agencies, the Red Cross Movement and International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), and they have the capacity to respond to rapid onset emergencies, such as natural disasters, or slow onset emergencies, such as chronic food insecurity caused by drought or conflict (Barnett 2011). In theory, once invited, the agencies will make an assessment of the needs on the ground, and raise or draw down funds from donor governments, bilateral agencies, private foundations and companies and the general public to meet those needs (Krause 2014). The organisations then provide supplies and personnel to support a response, in coordination with local authorities, national and local civil society organisations and the affected community (Walker and Maxwell 2009).

The humanitarian coordination architecture – developed after the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami – coordinates responding agencies into ‘clusters’ split along sectoral lines, such as shelter, health and nutrition. Through these clusters, agencies share their locations and activities with one another to avoid duplication and to align strategies for consistency in the provision of aid (Jahre and Jensen 2010). Humanitarian interventions to natural disasters are typically short-term relief and recovery operations, separating them from the longer-term development programming, which is more likely to focus on chronic poverty alleviation, livelihoods generation and human rights issues (Cunningham 2018).

2.4 Urban Humanitarian Response

Historically, the international humanitarian system developed out of a need to respond to emergencies in rural and refugee camp settings (Spiegel et al 2010). Urbanisation and the increase in the scale and frequency of humanitarian emergencies taking place in urban environments has both exacerbated existing difficulties and created new challenges in effectively responding to those in need (Archer and Dodman 2017). The most obvious challenge is that urban areas present a greater scale and population density than rural areas, and therefore the potential for significantly higher numbers of crisis-affected people who need to be supported, putting pressure on humanitarian organisations' limited capacity and resources (Fan 2012).

The previous existence of formal and informal systems in urban environments offers another new potential challenge for humanitarian organisations, who are often better versed in setting up their own structures in refugee camps than working within existing ones (Sanderson 2019). For example, if existing food and goods markets can adapt to the shock of a natural disaster and stay functioning in its aftermath, the traditional 'humanitarian aid' method of goods and service provision can be both inappropriate and sometimes even detrimental to the recovery of the local economy (Janneck et al 2011). That being said, other methods, such as cash and voucher programming in urban areas built on solid market assessments, can present new opportunities not always present in rural areas, as affected populations are empowered to buy what they need while supporting local livelihoods (Cohen and Garrett 2010).

Targeting those people and communities most in need of the support on offer can also be a challenge. Within a city, more than in rural areas, people come from a wide range of backgrounds – be it their place of origin, wealth, race, religion or politics, to name just a few. Even a comparatively small area of an urban environment can include rich and poor areas, old and new neighbourhoods and “no common level of vulnerability, capacity or need” (Campbell 2017: 4). Traditional methods of beneficiary selection in rural areas include enlisting the support and knowledge of a 'community leader' to

highlight the most vulnerable, along with conducting household surveys. In urban environments where the scale and number of households is much greater, and where communities are formed not just around location but other aspects such as work, interests and religion – with no singular or clear leader – these tools can become inappropriate (Harroff-Travel 2010).

Additionally, in areas with chronically poor and vulnerable residents whose access to basic needs and services is limited even in ‘normal’ times, trying to assess which individuals or households are most deserving of support in the wake of a disaster can be complex and sometimes even arbitrary (Lucchi 2012). On an even broader level, short humanitarian response timeframes and limited scope of activities are also often at odds with a need to address chronic longer-term needs and vulnerabilities in the population (Pelling 2003). Humanitarian organisations have been encouraged to address disaster risks before and after they develop into emergencies by investing in community preparedness and resilience activities. But the short funding cycles and “complex interrelations between risk and broader development issues discourage concerted and consistent efforts” by humanitarian organisations intent on providing temporary goods and services (Christoplos 2003: 96).

While individual agencies are presented with the challenge of who to support and how best to support them, coordination between all of the agencies and other stakeholders can itself be a considerable and interrelated challenge. The siloed approach to the cluster system is often at odds with the complexity of urban environments, where a sectorial priority takes precedence over the need to engage with local institutions and wider related needs (Sanderson 2017). The international humanitarian community needs to work with and alongside numerous levels of national and local administrative bodies - often with overlapping responsibilities and competing priorities – as well as multiple service providers, civil society and religious organisations, the private sector and the people and communities themselves, which can make coordination a huge challenge (Campbell 2017). The concentration of official state institutions in urban areas

means it is also more likely that the national government will expect to lead the coordination of a response, which requires international humanitarian organisations to rethink their usual leading approach, and play a more supporting role (Clarke and Ramalingam 2012).

Additionally, when a natural disaster strikes in an urban area, and prior to external assistance arriving, it will tend to be local people and organisations who are first to respond and support those in need (Twigg and Mosel 2017). Local NGOs, community-based groups and religious organisations have a long history of responding to crises and are “among the most active in humanitarian crisis response and recovery, providing a focus and structure for local mobilisation [and] assistance” (Brown et al 2015: 35). Their standing and knowledge of the community, their work on previous projects and access to pre-existing networks make them well placed to provide localised and contextual support (Janneck et al 2011). However, the international humanitarian community has frequently been accused of overlooking or bypassing civil society organisations and local community structures, missing opportunities to better understand the local context, build local capacity and support community cohesion (Sanderson 2019).

2.5 Context in Urban Humanitarian Response

While many of the challenges facing international humanitarian organisations as they respond to natural disasters in urban environments are consistent, how best to mitigate them relies on an understanding of the local context. Context is a term used widely in humanitarian response, but it is rarely defined, resulting in inconsistent and often inappropriate usage (Campbell 2018). For the purposes of this dissertation, context is defined as the “environment and circumstances within which something happens, and which can help to explain it” (Ibid: 10). Context is broader than any individual situation or experience, and incorporates the social, cultural, political, economic, spatial and infrastructural realities of how people live and interact with each other and their surroundings.

In humanitarian response, understanding context is “essential to minimise the risk of harm, maximise benefit and optimise efficient use of resources” (Greene et al 2017: 1). However, contextualising urban humanitarian response when the organisations and many of the practitioners involved are ‘outsiders’ from a range of geographic, economic, social and cultural backgrounds different to the location of the disaster represents another challenge (Ibid). Context relevance is not a new phenomenon, nor is it one which only applies to humanitarian responses or urban settings. But while it is widely accepted in the humanitarian and development spheres that context-sensitivity is essential for effective interventions, a quest for best practice and scaled-up approaches has resulted in “insufficient articulation of how external development agencies ought to tailor what they do to specific contexts” (Ware 2011: 47).

Participatory and community-led approaches, mainstreamed in development theory by Robert Chambers, are an important foundation of contextualisation. Chambers suggests that local communities know how best to help themselves but lack the power and means to enact this contextual knowledge (Chambers 2005). Participatory development results in international aid organisations providing this support, and revolves around the ideas of empowerment, partnership, accountability and ownership (ibid). While participatory approaches form part of a route to contextualisation, it is important not to conflate the two as the same thing, particularly as macro-economic and political factors of the society and the aid organisations themselves can be overlooked at a local level (Ware 2011). ‘Communities’ are not homogenous and in possession of one coherent view or opinion (particularly in urban environments), and individuals and groups have their own power dynamics, needs and motivations (Lee 2008). Therefore, an understanding of context needs to build on participatory methods while also considering community dynamics and macro-contextual factors (Ware 2011).

Since generalised best practice guidelines cannot grasp the complexity and uniqueness of urban environments, the international humanitarian system is wrestling with how to contextualise their responses to natural disasters to each individual location. The

questions of whether and how to respond and in what timeframe, who to support and who to partner, coordinate and engage with will all be answered differently depending on the urban environment, and approaching these questions with a solid understanding of the local context is the best way to implement an effective humanitarian response.

2.6 Synthesis of Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

The literature reviewed above indicates several themes which must be tackled by humanitarian organisations looking to implement a contextualised response in an urban area. The first is coordination: being led by the host government, and working with members of the international humanitarian community and engaging with other relevant stakeholders to implement a holistic and multi-sectoral response. The second is localisation: working with and through local organisations and supporting community engagement and community-level structures to aid participation and target those most in need. The third is appropriateness: placing the response in the wider timeframe and spectrum of needs, and looking to work within the formal and informal urban systems - not parallel to them. It is through this conceptual framework of the Pillars of Contextualised Urban Humanitarian Response (see Figure 3) that my case study data is analysed.

While I have noted the necessity for agencies to work within formal and informal urban structures, based on my review of the literature on humanitarian response to natural disasters in urban environments, it is beyond the scope of this research to go into depth on this subject. Assessing which formal and informal urban structures existed in Freetown at the time of the flooding and mudslide and how the international humanitarian community worked within these systems would require a strong contextual understanding in itself to make the analysis meaningful.

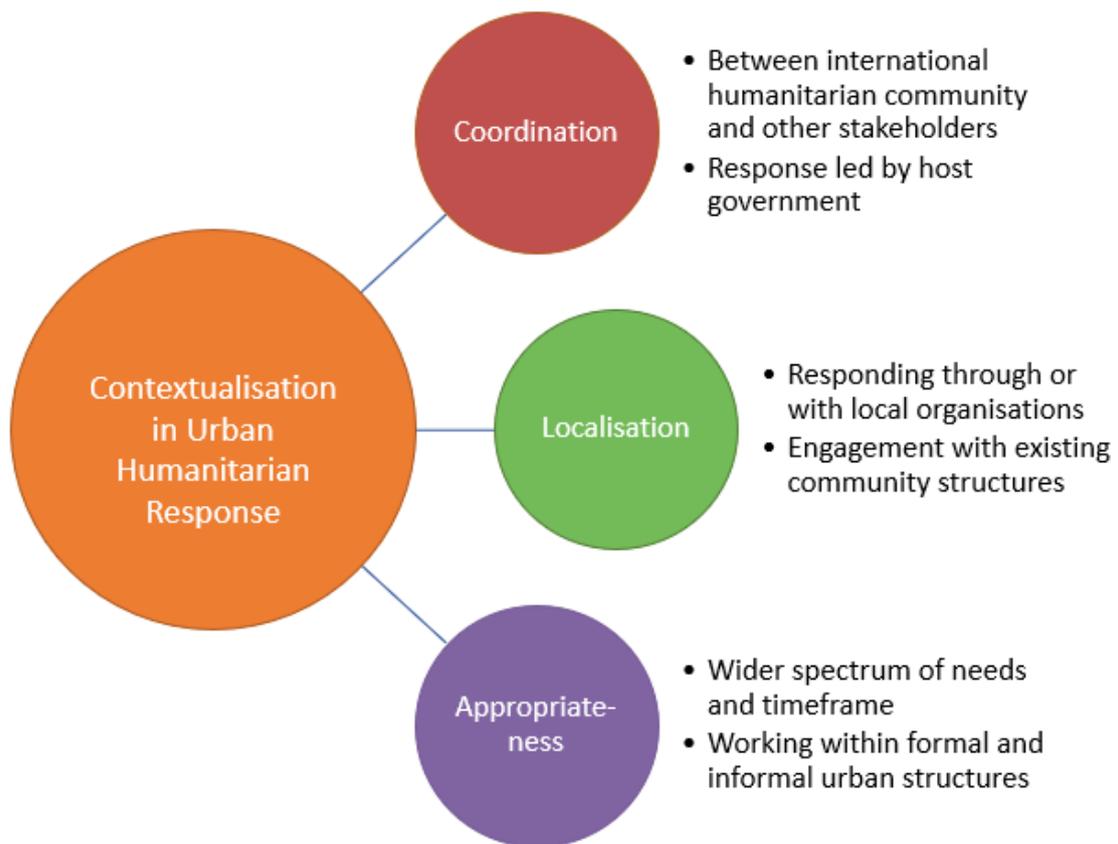


Figure 3: Conceptual framework of the three 'pillars' of contextualised urban humanitarian response (Source: Author)

3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will detail my approach for developing the most appropriate research methodology to explore the topic of contextualising humanitarian response to natural disasters in urban environments. A methodology can be defined as the “strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty 1998: 3). To answer the research question, I have taken a constructivist approach to ontology, whereby it is suggested that social actors in a given context produce social meaning which constantly changes, and that my account of such meaning is itself constructed (Bryman 2008). This constructed reality leads me also to take an interpretivist approach to epistemology, which posits that there is no objective truth, and that the “best way to study social order is through the subjective interpretation of participants involved...and reconciling differences among their responses using [my] own subjective perspective” (Bhattacharjee 2012: 19).

3.2 Research Approach

In order to explore contextualising of humanitarian response to natural disasters in urban environments, I have adopted a case study approach for the purposes of conducting my research. A case study can be defined as an “in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a ‘real life’ context” (Simons 2009: 21). As discussed in section 1.2, this method has been chosen because the complexity and uniqueness of urban environments makes the traditional approach of best practice in humanitarian response problematic - instead, specific and in-depth examples of context-relevant programming can be more effective. While there are other qualitative research approaches available, such as grounded theory, ethnography and surveys, case studies

are useful for taking a holistic view of interrelated processes and are open to the application of a conceptual framework to guide data analysis (Meyer 2001).

To select the most appropriate case study for exploring natural disasters in urban environments, I developed several criteria based on Yin's selection logic: firstly, the requirement that the researcher has sufficient access to suitable data, and secondly, that they use cases that are most likely to best explain and illustrate the research question (Yin 2009). Therefore, to support my access to data, the case needed to be based in an English-speaking country where my current employer CAFOD – a faith-based international humanitarian and development organisation – both had an office and helped respond to the emergency. The natural disaster also needed to have taken place in a timeframe that was historic enough for humanitarian organisations to have produced reports and evaluations, but recent enough that there would still be institutional memory left from which to draw interviewees. Lastly, the emergency needed to be of sufficient scale to have warranted the involvement of the international humanitarian community, but localised enough that it was contained to an urban environment. The flooding and mudslide which took place in Freetown in 2017 met all these criteria, and was therefore considered the most suitable case study to access data and address the research problem.

The case study was examined using a range of qualitative research methods in order to ascertain both what responses the humanitarian organisations implemented and why those decisions were made, and also perceptions around the successes and challenges of contextualising the interventions from the organisations involved. The concept of 'context' and the ways in which contextualisation is achieved is not a fixed notion to which a 'correct answer' exists, so it was important to allow for flexibility and nuance in questions and responses. Therefore, the two primary methods of data collection were through document review and analysis of reports and evaluations, as well as semi-structured interviews with a range of organisations with detailed knowledge of the

humanitarian response, including national and international NGOs, civil society organisations, academics and coordination bodies.

A deductive and inductive approach was taken towards the case study research, because with such research methods “both prior theory and theory emerging from the data are always involved, often simultaneously” (Richards 1993: 40). As such, a conceptual framework that addresses the overlapping themes of coordination, localisation and appropriateness as fundamental pillars of contextualisation (see Figure 1) was developed as an initial basis to collect and analyse the data.

3.3 Data Collection

Of several methods available for selecting respondents, including random and convenience sampling, purposive sampling was chosen as it “groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant to a particular research question” response (Mack et al 2005: 5). In this instance, the sample was selected from those working for international humanitarian organisations who had responded to assist people affected by the flooding and mudslide in Freetown in August 2017, as well as specialists in urban humanitarian. Prior to April 2019 I had not visited Sierra Leone before, but was fortunate to be asked to undertake training in Freetown for CAFOD and Partner staff, and added four days onto my trip for field research.

The strategy for recruiting participants was to utilise existing social and professional networks, and use those networks to gain referrals for new participants - a strategy that is particularly useful for populations who are hard to identify or locate. In the case of the Freetown mudslides, it was initially not possible to access a comprehensive list of humanitarian organisations who responded to the disaster, or indeed within those organisations, individuals who were involved in coordinating the respective agencies’ responses. However, through professional contacts, it was possible to find entry points into agencies with which I had no personal connection, and to be put in touch with the

most relevant person. While in some instances this resulted in leads which appeared outside the scope of my research question, such as interviewing representatives from local NGOs, the observations of these respondents were indeed still pertinent to the research. This approach is supported by Patton, who argues that “taking advantage of unforeseen opportunities after fieldwork has begun...is a primary strength of qualitative strategies in research” (Patton 1990: 179).

One of the challenges of drawing on social and professional networks for data collection is the potentially limited number or non-representative potential interviewees it is possible to connect with. For example, since I work for a faith-based organisation (FBO), most contacts made through CAFOD were also faith-based organisations. In order to broaden out the respondents to secular and UN organisations, publicly-available data sources such as ‘4W mappings’ (that detail which organisations are implementing a sectoral response in a given area) and response reports were also utilised to pinpoint further potential contacts.

Interviews earlier in the data collection process were broad and iterative in nature to ascertain a range of themes that might have been beyond my own understanding and reading of the literature. All interviews began with asking the interviewee to describe their experience after they received news of the mudslide - an approach that aims to “capture the interviewee’s perceptions, and not the researcher’s” (Perry 1998: 791). Interviewee responses were then used to inform later interviews, in which more in-depth questions were asked on particular topics emerging from the earlier interviews.

Overall, reports and evaluations covering 13 international humanitarian organisations were collected. A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven INGOs, one INGO Network, two local NGOs and civil society organisations, and two academic institutions specialising in urban humanitarian response. These interviews took place between 12th April 2019 and 8th August 2019. From 3rd to 17th April 2019 I was based in Freetown, which allowed the opportunity to conduct five face-to-face

interviews. These took place in the offices of the respective responding agencies. The remaining seven interviews were conducted remotely in London using Skype and WhatsApp. A breakdown of respondents for this research is shown in Figure 4 at the end of this chapter, although names and organisations have been omitted to provide anonymity and confidentiality towards the interviewees.

3.4 Limitations

While the intention was to obtain both written and oral data involving the humanitarian organisations included in the study, this was either not always possible - some agencies who agreed to be interviewed did not share written reports - or not always desirable, since in some cases it was possible to locate response documentation in the public domain for agencies who had not replied to requests for interview. As mentioned previously, it was not initially possible to access a comprehensive list of agencies involved in the humanitarian response, limiting the number and representativeness of respondents to be included in the study. This also meant it was not possible to identify those agencies who had not responded to the mudslide and to establish why they took this decision.

It is important to recognise that interviewees from responding agencies, while capable of independent reflection and critique, were likely to be influenced by their own agency's agenda. The respondents were at a range of different levels and positions in their organisations, and also varied in terms of the type and extent of their engagement with the management and implementation of the response itself, so due caution was required when comparing and contrasting responses to different questions. Respondents were also unaware of what specific questions would be asked of them. Therefore, their answers could only be considered to represent their views and feelings at the time of the interview. Furthermore, the possibility of response bias (that interviewees might say what they thought I wanted to hear), given my professional role

at CAFOD, should not be discounted. The findings should be understood with this in mind.

3.5 Ethical considerations

One of the benefits of already working in humanitarian response and having contacts in the industry is that it afforded a certain level of legitimacy when it came to gaining trust and support for the research. However, at times I was conscious of conflating my work and academic pursuits. I deliberately corresponded with most of my potential contacts through my CAFOD email address, and was introduced to several contacts while they were attending a training session in Freetown, for which I was lead facilitator. I must acknowledge a power dynamic in this situation – that, despite my reassurances that I was undertaking an academic project and that they were under no obligation to agree to being interviewed, how confident did partner agencies, funded by CAFOD, feel to reject my request? This power imbalance also had the potential to shape some of the responses I received to questions, as partners who undertook mudslide responses with CAFOD funding may be less willing to genuinely critique their response to their donor, for fear this would be construed as incompetence and impact future funding.

There was an ethical approval process in place at Birkbeck to ensure that ethical concerns are “explicitly articulated and systematically checked”, and that all the respondents I spoke to were professionals discussing their field of work (Thomas 2013). However, the interviewees were, to various degrees, involved in a very challenging, emotional and traumatic humanitarian response in which over 1,000 people lost their lives. Although consent was given freely, asking respondents to relive these experiences for the purposes of my research raises ethical considerations about the impact that this experience may have had, and the limited aftercare on offer.

| Organisation Type | Faith-based or secular | Position of Interviewee | Programming during SL mudslide | Location of Interviewee |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| INGO 1 | FBO | Governance and Livelihoods Officer | Food and NFIs, Shelter, Burial Management | Freetown, SL |
| INGO 2 | FBO | Monitoring and Evaluation Officer | Communication and Information, Psychosocial Support | Freetown, SL |
| INGO 3 | FBO | Project Officer | Cash Transfer Programming, Psychosocial Support | Freetown, SL |
| INGO 4 | FBO | Senior Programme Officer | Food and NFIs, Cash Transfer Programming, HIV support | Freetown, SL |
| INGO 5 | Secular | Youth Engagement and Disaster Risk Management Specialist | Food and NFIs, Education, Social Mobilisation, Psychosocial Support | Freetown, SL |
| INGO 6 | Secular | Programme Coordinator | Social Mobilisation | Freetown, SL |
| INGO 7 | Secular | Former Country Director, Sierra Leone | Communication and Information | London, UK |
| INGO Network | Secular | Crisis Anticipation Technical Advisor | INGO Coordination and Funding | London, UK |
| Local NGO | FBO | Monitoring and Evaluation Manager | Food and NFIs, Shelter, Psychosocial Support | Freetown, SL |
| CBO | Secular | Unknown | Search and Rescue, Shelter, Social Mobilisation, Coordination | Freetown, SL |
| Academic Institution 1 | Secular | Executive Director and Director of Research | N/A | Freetown, SL |
| Academic Institution 2 | Secular | Senior Research Officer, Urban Response | N/A | London, UK |

Figure 4: Breakdown of respondents interviewed by organisation type, position and location (Source: Author)

4. Case Study: 2017 Mudslide and Flooding in Freetown, Sierra Leone

4.1 Introduction

In order to effectively address the research question of how the international humanitarian community contextualised their response to Freetown's urban environment in the wake of the 2017 mudslide, it is important to provide some background to the case study. In this section I will place my research in the context of Sierra Leone, Freetown and the events of the humanitarian emergency.

4.2 Sierra Leone and NGO Involvement

Sierra Leone is a country of 6.3 million people in West Africa, bordering Liberia, Guinea and the North Atlantic Sea (CIA 2019). It is one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 184th out of 189 countries in the 2017 Human Development Index, despite being rich in natural resources (UNDP 2018). As such, Sierra Leone has a long history of engagement with humanitarian and development organisations, and those organisations have been credited with playing a "significant role in the socio-economic development process of the country since the 1960s" (Government of Sierra Leone 2014: vi). A survey by the Sierra Leonean government in 2013 found that there were 96 international and 231 national NGOs operating in the country, with over 40% engaged in the health sector, 20% in education and the rest in other services, agriculture, microfinance and governance (Ibid: vi).

It is not clear how many of these organisations are based or have headquarters in Freetown, but during my field visit the omnipresence of the aid sector in the capital was evident, indicated by the visible presence of many NGO signs, buildings and vehicles. Being able to undertake field research in Freetown itself supported my prevailing

understanding of the aid infrastructure present when the flooding and mudslide occurred – a phenomenon to which I was to some extent contributing to with my visit.

4.3 Freetown, Urbanisation and Vulnerability

Sierra Leone has seen rapid urbanisation, from around 20% of the population living in urban areas in 1967 to around 40% in 2015, increasing at 3% annually (World Bank 2017; Government of Sierra Leone 2019). Freetown, the country's capital, has a population of around 1 million people – hosting 15% of the country's population on just 0.02% of the land (Government of Sierra Leone 2019). Despite being an attractive destination for migrants, the city's high poverty rates, poor urban planning, a lack of investment in housing and infrastructure and inadequate legal and financial frameworks has led to an increased number of informal settlements in Freetown (Ibid). Echoing literature on urban vulnerability explored in the literature review, the estimated 72 informal settlements in Freetown are characterised by poverty, unemployment and poor transportation as well as “inadequate access to drinking water, poor sanitation, and poor-quality house construction” (Ibid: 65).

Sierra Leone is prone to natural disasters, primarily from drought, flooding and landslides, and is one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to the effects of climate change, ranked 156 out of 181 in the Notre Dame Global Adaption Index (World Bank 2017 and ND-GAIN 2017). Freetown is situated in the west coast of the country on a mountainous peninsula, with the highest peak near the city – named Sugar Loaf Mountain – measuring 795m above sea level (World Bank 2017). The highest areas are covered by dense forest, but deforestation and urbanisation populate the lower slopes, while the climate, topography and man-made interventions make some areas of the city susceptible to landslides (Ibid). The low-lying and coastal areas of Freetown, where many of the informal settlements are located, are also prone to flooding from the watercourses which carry rain from the mountainous areas (Ibid).

During my field visit it was possible to gain a sense, although limited in scope, of how the topography of the land makes it so vulnerable to natural disasters: the precarious nature of many of the settlements and the poor quality of the roads, combined with the levels of poverty present in the capital. I also saw the site of the mudslide on Sugar Loaf mountain, which 20 months on still looked precarious (see figure 5). Together these factors offered an insight into what makes urban humanitarian response, particularly in the context of Freetown, as inevitable as it would be challenging.



Figure 5: Sugar Loaf mountain 20-months on from the mudslide (Source: Author's field trip photo, April 2019)

4.4 2017 Freetown Mudslide and Flooding and the Humanitarian Response

On 14th August 2017, after several days of heavy rainfall, Freetown was hit with a dual humanitarian disaster. A slope below Sugar Loaf collapsed and caused a major landslide, carrying clay soil and boulders at high speed downhill and destroying the lower Regent area of the city (World Bank 2017). The area was already flooded, so the debris continued to travel downstream towards the coastal area of Lumley Beach, causing more destruction in its path to the Kamayama/Malama, Lumley, and Juba/Kaningo

wards of the city (Ibid). This was the largest of four known landslides to hit Freetown on the same day, and the heavy rainfall also caused severe flooding in the Culvert, Mountain Cut and Dwazak areas of the city (Ibid – see figure 6).

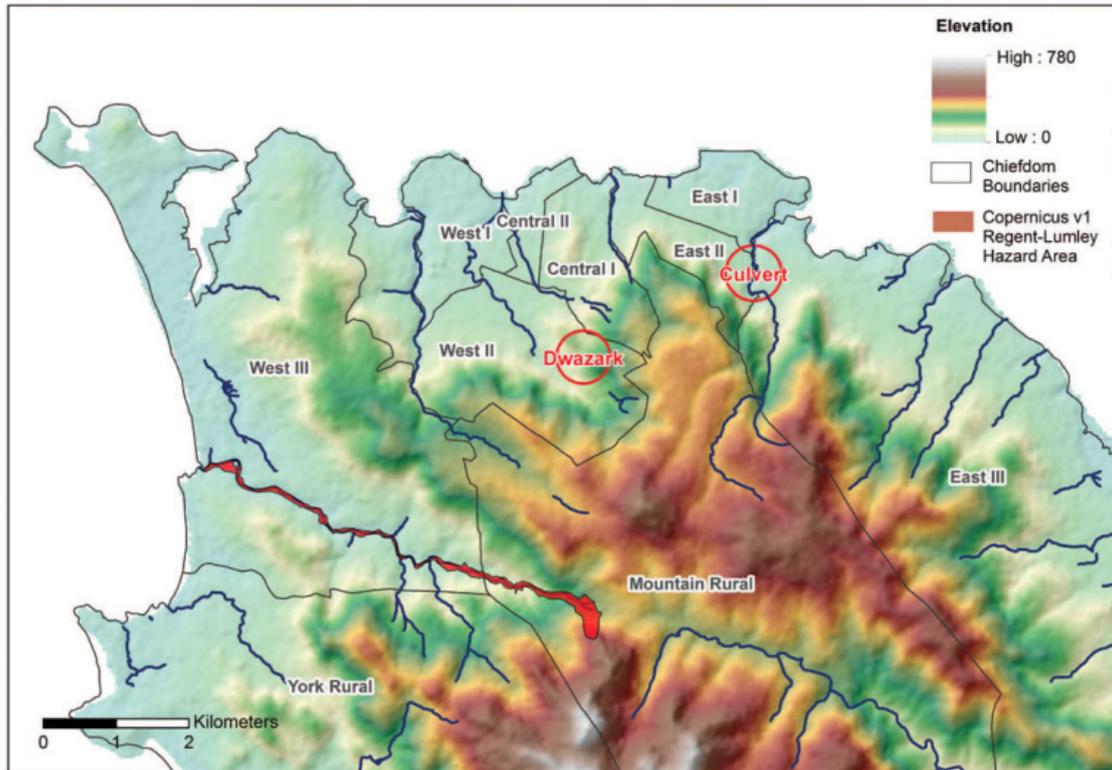


Figure 6: Map showing Freetown topography, landslide and flooding sites (Source: World Bank 2017)

While exact figures remain elusive, the landslide and flooding between Regent and Lumley affected around 6,000 people (1,600 households) and 1,141 people were confirmed dead or missing (Government of Sierra Leone 2017). In the immediate aftermath of the disaster the government of Sierra Leone declared a national emergency and requested international assistance with the humanitarian response. The response was to be led by the Disaster Management Division (DMD) of the Office of National Security (ONS) and organised into 10 sector-specific pillars to support coordination - similar to the UN Cluster System – each overseen by the relevant government ministry (Government of Sierra Leone 2017 – see figure 7). Following the immediate rescue efforts and recovery of the deceased, the response was, according to the Government of Sierra Leone, implemented on three levels:

1. Ensuring support to communities affected by the landslide as well as mitigation of resurgence and potential risks;
2. Providing support to citizens in the temporary displacement centres
3. Mitigating potential risks, such as cholera or any other outbreak (Government of Sierra Leone 2017)

The ONS set up a command centre near the mudslide to coordinate the response and minimise duplication between humanitarian organisations. The UN designated the country representative of the World Food Programme (WFP) as the Incident Manager (World Bank 2017). Two temporary camps were also established in the Old Skool compound in Hill Station and Juba Barracks in Lumley.



Figure 7: The Government of Sierra Leone emergency response coordination structure (and UN support) for the flooding and mudslide (Source: Author)

According to the Freetown Landslide Response Contact List, dated 1st September 2017, which was shared with me towards the end of my research period, 81 separate organisations were listed (UNDAC 2017c):

- 11 departments of the Government of Sierra Leone
- 17 UN agencies
- 22 INGOs
- The International Confederation of the Red Cross (ICRC)
- 12 NNGOs
- 14 international donor agencies
- 4 private organisations

From my own additional research, it is clear that this list is not comprehensive. Nevertheless, it appears to cover the largest 'key players' in the response. As mentioned in my methodology chapter, I collected reports and evaluations from 13 international humanitarian organisations and conducted 12 semi-structured interviews with seven INGOs, one INGO Network, two local NGOs and civil society organisations, and two academic institutions specialising in urban humanitarian response.

5. Findings and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

In this section I will detail the findings drawn from the document review and semi-structured interviews, and will analyse the data against my conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The structure of the section will, therefore, reflect the pillars of coordination, localisation and appropriateness. Additional themes falling outside my initial conceptual framework that were revealed through the data analysis will be presented. Lastly, I will develop a revised framework which reflects the specifics of contextualisation in the case study of the international humanitarian community's response to the 2017 flooding and mudslides in Freetown.

5.2 Coordination

"We always think government should be in the driving seat and whatever information they give to us we consider it very authentic...One of the biggest challenges was coordination, it was tough for us NGOs to decide what to give out because there was a complete duplication of resources."

– INGO 4

The literature on urban humanitarian response highlights coordination as a particular challenge, given the increased number of organisations, types of stakeholder and the increased role of national government in leading the response (Campbell 2017). However, supporting a government-led response and coordination between humanitarian organisations and other stakeholders is important to tackle the complexity of the urban environment and implement a contextualised response.

It was clear both from written reports and interviews that the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) did indeed take a leading role in the coordination of the humanitarian response to the flooding and mudslide in Freetown. As mentioned in the previous

chapter, the response was coordinated by the Office of National Security, and a sector-based pillar system was put in place to coordinate responding organisations, each led by a different government department. The United Nations was officially mandated to assist the response and did so by supporting existing national structures to “avoid unnecessary and potentially duplicative coordination forums” (UNDAC 2017a: 8).

All the INGOs and the NNGO respondents interviewed noted that their organisations were aware of and had engaged to some extent in the government coordination system. According to one interviewee, the ONS made it clear in the first coordination meeting that NGOs could not begin a response or donate any money until they had gone through the government. Therefore, until the overall response mechanism had been set up, NGOs were encouraged to plan and organise a coordinated approach.

This process had its drawbacks. Several INGO respondents felt that the government’s strategy, although understandable, served to delay the scale up of the response, as the NGOs sought to comply with the outlined process. One interviewee described how another INGO began their intervention immediately, without explicit government approval, while still sending a representative to the ONS meetings and providing updates. This was viewed largely positively by several other members of the international humanitarian community, who felt that the immediate needs of the affected population should be responded to sooner than the government-led response had been able to initiate.

Another delay appeared to occur in the coordination around cash transfers, which ultimately proved a source of frustration and anger from affected people who had been promised money which had not arrived. INGO 3 had implemented cash programming and did so outside of the government coordination mechanism. Their reasoning was that their donor required all activities to be completed in a short 45-day period, making it necessary to bypass the official process to make sure it was done quickly. The fact that there were instances where NGOs felt it necessary to circumvent the government

coordination mechanism to implement a timely response (be it for the sake of beneficiary needs or donor requirements) is a challenge to the contextualisation of the response on the basis of coordination, but could perhaps be justified on the basis of appropriateness, with the affected population receiving much needed support sooner than they might have otherwise.

But the government-led approach also had its strengths. It was clear that the coordination meetings convened by the government were held continuously and consistently throughout the response, both at the overall response and pillar levels. The ONS-led meetings provided a consolidated review across all pillars and sites in the response (see Figure 8) and highlighted the primary gaps and concerns from affected people. There was also documented evidence of situational reports being compiled and circulated by the UN in liaison with the ONS, in both the relief and recovery phases (see Figure 9), and these were commended by several agencies for being helpful when coordinating the overall response. The respondent from INGO 2, which ran information kiosks during the response, noted that coordination with the government was a key factor in the success of each kiosk; the closer the two were situated, the easier it was to pass information on and get timely responses.



Figure 8: Excerpts from a PowerPoint presentation given at the central coordination meeting on 1st September 2017 (Source: ONS 2017)



This weekly update is produced by UNDP in collaboration with the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in Sierra Leone, liaising with the Office of National Security and development partners.

Situation overview

Following emergency response to the landslide and floods in and around Freetown on 14 August 2017, the UN system in Sierra Leone is now supporting national recovery.

Under national leadership and drawing on a number of assessments, including the recently-completed Damage and Loss Assessment, the Risk Management and Recovery Action Plan is currently being developed and is scheduled for completion in October 2017.

In the meantime, UN agencies and humanitarian organizations continue to address the urgent needs of those affected. For the purpose of information and coordination, these efforts are detailed here.

Figure 9: Excerpt from a weekly UN situational report on the flooding and mudslide response (Source: UNDP 2017)

Separately, there was some frustration from NGOs engaged in the government coordination mechanism that designing appropriate interventions was challenging because other organisations were acting alone, and this led to a duplication of resources, with some beneficiaries receiving double and others receiving nothing. This may have in part been down to the sheer number of organisations responding to the flooding and mudslide; many of the agencies interviewed noted an unusually large international response with a huge number of organisations wanting to be involved. According to UNDAC, often there were over 50 people present at central ONS coordination meetings. While this suggests the GoSL was being as inclusive as possible, there were concerns that this was often detrimental to decision-making (UNDAC, 2017a). However, one NGO noted that some donors and agencies passed their funds directly through the government instead of funding and implementing their own responses - another positive signal for the international humanitarian community's support for a government-led response.

The government also led the registration process of affected people, which entitled them to support, such as shelter, goods, access to services and money. One INGO

respondent and one CBO respondent noted that their organisations collaborated with the ONS to undertake this process, and several agencies commended the government on their willingness and flexibility to add to the registration list additional names given to them by NGOs of people who had been omitted.

However, again there were some concerns around the speed of the registration process from the government, and whether the responsible department involved – the Ministry of Social Welfare – had the capacity or manpower to undertake the task. The majority of interviewed agencies used the government’s list of beneficiaries as a basis for whom to target in their interventions, which supports contextualisation by reducing duplication of effort. However, the CBO respondent recounted an incident where a UN agency turned up 3 days after the emergency response had started and attempted to re-register victims. The CBO, which was supporting the government’s response, challenged the UN agency but were told “this is what our policy states”. After taking it to the ONS, the UN organisation was told to follow the government list – a demand that they complied with. This challenge of authority in a response is a common characteristic of urban humanitarian response, according to the literature, which suggests that a concentration of government institutions in urban environments shifts the balance of power - challenging the international humanitarian community to adopt a more supporting role (Clarke and Ramalingam, 2012).

One of the primary frustrations cited by the NGO respondents was around inaccurate figures and statistics from the government of those who were affected, which hampered coordination efforts and challenged the accuracy and relevance of some of the NGO responses. The literature on urban response would suggest this could be an issue with population density and movement, but those who raised it as a problem believed it was largely due to inadequate government capacity and / or their unwillingness to share data. The UNDAC team deployed to support the government response noted that a lack of detailed data being provided by the government led to many INGOs undertaking their own assessments without coordination (UNDAC 2017a).

In addition to the government coordination mechanism, there were several UN and INGO mechanisms in place supporting the overall response. Four of the INGO respondents noted that their organisations were part of an INGO network that was facilitating coordination before and during the emergency response. The network itself had funding available to support the response, and all agencies applying were required to coordinate among themselves to avoid duplication of areas and needs. In addition, the WASH Consortium and Cash Working Group, two technical coordination mechanisms for INGOs, were also active during the response. One INGO respondent also noted that they engaged in a consortium arrangement with several other organisations within the Burials pillar so that it was easier to establish what they could provide together to best support the response and avoid duplication.

A specialist mapping organisation was deployed by the UN to provide “support to the damage assessments, assistance in identifying the humanitarian caseload, and support to the 4W mapping process” which suggests a concerted effort to contextualise the response through strong coordination (MapAction 2017a). Looking at Figures 10 and 11, it is clear from the various mappings and 4Ws undertaken that attempts were made to coordinate between humanitarian agencies. However, gaps in information are visible in Figure 10, denoted by the number of question marks and the limited number of responding organisations included.

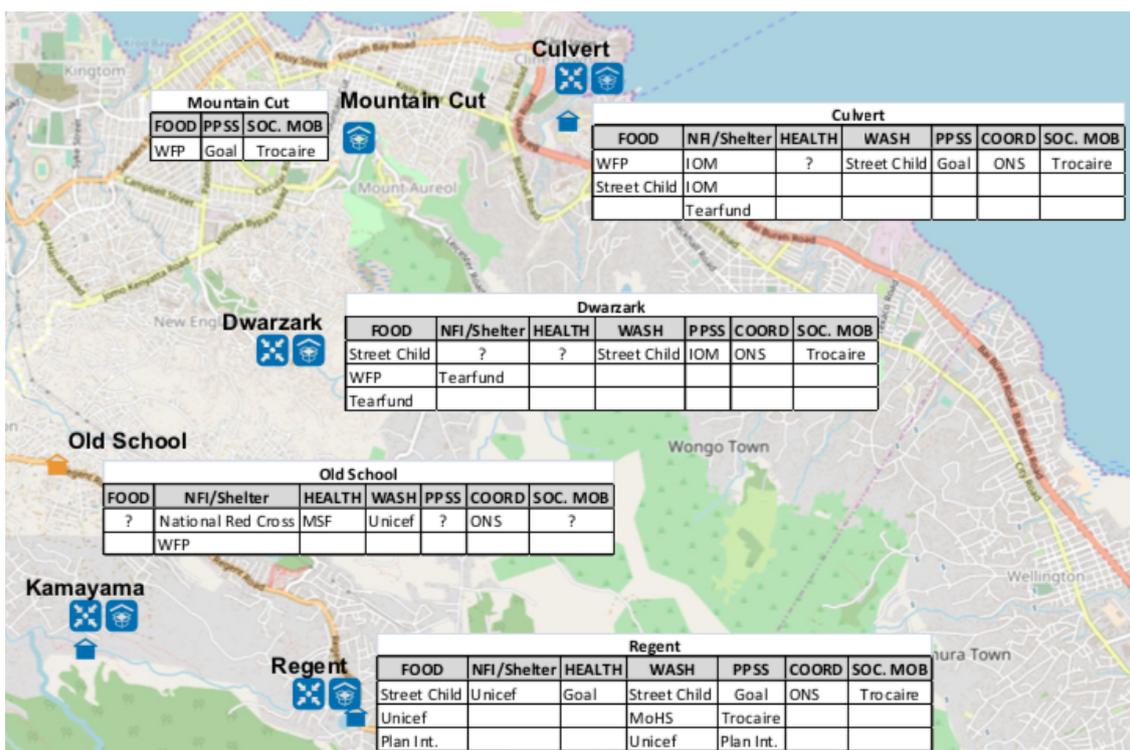


Figure 10: Excerpts from a response coordination mapping 28/08/2017 (Source: MapAction 2017b)

| Who? | When? | What? Which pillar were you | Where? |
|----------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Action Against Hunger | 25/08/2017 | WASH | CULVERT: Rosezain Pre-primary School shelter |
| Action Against Hunger | 25/08/2017 | WASH | WELLINGTON: Wellington distribution site (on C. |
| IOM | 29/08/2017 | Shelter | MOUNTAIN CUT: Mountain Cut (on Mountain C. |
| IOM | 26/08/2017 | Shelter | DWARZARK: Dwarzark Community Centre ICC;/ |
| Christian Aid Sierra Leone | 25/08/2017 | Food and nutrition | JUBA/KANINGO: Kaningo School ICC/shelter (or |
| Christian Aid Sierra Leone | 26/08/2017 | Food and nutrition | Pentagon |
| Caritas | 12/09/2017 | Food and nutrition | Culvert Bomeh |
| Christian Aid Sierra Leone | 13/09/2017 | WASH | JUBA/KANINGO: Juba Baracks proposed shelter |
| Handicap International | 21/08/2017 | Protection and psychosocial | JUBA/KANINGO: Kaningo School ICC/shelter (or |
| Handicap International | 21/08/2017 | Protection and psychosocial | KAMAYAMA: Kamayama house ICC/shelter (near |
| Handicap International | 21/08/2017 | Protection and psychosocial | REGENT: Regent ICC (on Kowar Drive) |
| Caritas | 18/08/2017 | Food and nutrition | CULVERT: Bumeh |
| World Hope International | 12/09/2017 | WASH | JUBA/KANINGO: Kaningo School ICC/shelter (or |
| Caritas | 21/08/2017 | Food and nutrition | REGENT: Saio School shelter (on Regent Rd) |
| Caritas | 29/08/2017 | Food and nutrition | HILL STATION: Old School proposed shelter (on |
| Handicap International | 21/08/2017 | Health and burials | JUBA/KANINGO: Kaningo School ICC/shelter (or |
| Handicap International | 21/08/2017 | Health and burials | JUBA/KANINGO: Kaningo School ICC/shelter (or |

Figure 11: Excerpt from a 4W mapping from September 2017 (Source: UNDAC 2017b)

There were also some challenges in the communication between INGOs. The INGO implementing the information kiosk response noted difficulties when the query related to another INGO or NGO instead of the government, because they did not have all of the contact details for the different responders, so it was hard to make referrals. Another INGO noted that it was politically sensitive for INGOs to share beneficiary lists

with one another to try and avoid duplication; it was contingent on having good personal relationships with people in other organisations, instead of information sharing that was transparent and systematic.

In answer to my research question, my findings suggest that the international humanitarian community took steps to contextualise its response through the pillar of coordination. Coordination between the humanitarian community and other stakeholders was achieved through 4W mappings, situational reports, technical working groups, an INGO network and consortium arrangements. However, information sharing appeared to have mixed results, with incomplete data and unsystematic dissemination of contact details and beneficiary lists.

The international humanitarian community also contextualised their interventions through supporting a government-led response; the GoSL set up and managed the emergency coordination mechanism with support from the UN, which was engaged with to varying degrees by all responding organisations. Contextualising their interventions in this manner did appear to lead to delays in the overall response and some confusion around statistics and beneficiary targeting. Perhaps as a result, there were instances of organisations circumventing these mechanisms, and evidence of other agencies not engaging in them at all, which resulted in a duplication of resources but in some instances a timelier response to those in need.

5.3 Localisation

“We ensure that we speak to the community structures...all we need to do is speak to those people because they are the ones that will give you first-hand information. But sometimes they do lie because they are politicians, they want people to bring relief to them. So, we also speak to ordinary people in the community, those without titles.”

- INGO 5

Engaging local organisations, community engagement and involving the community in the design and implementation of a humanitarian response is considered good practice, but it is particularly important in urban environments in order to navigate the complexity and peculiarities of the context (Ware, 2011). Of the seven INGOs interviewed, five implemented responses with or through local organisations. All these organisations explicitly noted that one of the factors leading to their decision to respond to the crisis was having pre-existing local partners with experience of working in Freetown. This suggests that there was a considered effort among some members of the international humanitarian community from the outset to contextualise their interventions by partnering with local organisations with a solid understanding of Freetown’s context.

However, several INGO respondents also noted challenges when trying to connect local partners with the government and NGO coordination mechanisms. One respondent struggled to successfully add their local partner to the pillar communications structures, and another noted a reticence on the part of the local partner to engage, perhaps due to a nervousness to enter spaces which were primarily made up of international humanitarian actors. However, another INGO respondent said that once engaged, their local partner had attended meetings on their own without prior consultation, which was seen as a success for capacity building and localisation of the response.

One issue which was raised by a cross-section of interviewees was the question, 'How local is local?' An interesting example of this was from the information kiosk response. In this case, the supporting INGO questioned whether one of their local partner's expertise was strong enough to respond to the mudslide, because they did not have existing programming or trained staff in Freetown itself. This partner NGO was Sierra Leonean with an office in Freetown, but without the pre-existing programming and links to local affected communities, the INGO questioned whether they were truly 'local enough' to support the contextualisation of a response to Freetown's urban environment.

Conversely, community-based organisations are often held up as the entities who have the most local contextual knowledge but are often overlooked or bypassed by the international development community because of concerns over their weaker systems, policies and processes (Neef and Shaw 2013). A reflection from one INGO respondent who worked with a CBO was that they should have provided much more support with regards to financial management, procurement and logistics - existing issues that are magnified in a humanitarian context. However, the CBO respondent who worked for a voluntary organisation in the Lumley area of Freetown lamented the international humanitarian community for bypassing these organisations with a truly local understanding of the context. They felt it demonstrated naivety and a lack of respect for local structures.

According to the literature on urban humanitarian response, a primary challenge is that population density, dynamics and movement often mean that community structures are either non-existent or fail to capture the full diversity of people living in a particular area (Campbell 2018). In the context of Freetown, however, it became apparent from interviewing several local organisations that these community structures did in fact exist, and that in the areas where the flooding and mudslide occurred, population movement was limited – most were long-term residents. Several respondents explained that Freetown has a system of chiefdoms, with each area containing a local community

management committee made up of a community chief (or head man), youth leader, women’s leader, religious leaders and others.

A second critique of the international humanitarian community is that it often fails to engage these existing community structures before and during a response, instead preferring to set up its own systems of selection and accountability (Sanderson 2019). However, all the INGOs and the local NGO respondents noted that for the flooding and mudslide response, the community structures were clear (either to them or their local partners) and that there has been engagement with the chiefdoms to support programme interventions and aid beneficiary selection. For those agencies working in the camps set up to house displaced people, they noted the creation of a camp management system to support engagement between implementing organisations and affected people. While many of the maps created to support coordination and information sharing around the response only had area names, it was possible to locate several which included chiefdom administrative boundaries - (see Figure 12) recognition, perhaps, of the importance of this level of authority in the overall response implementation.

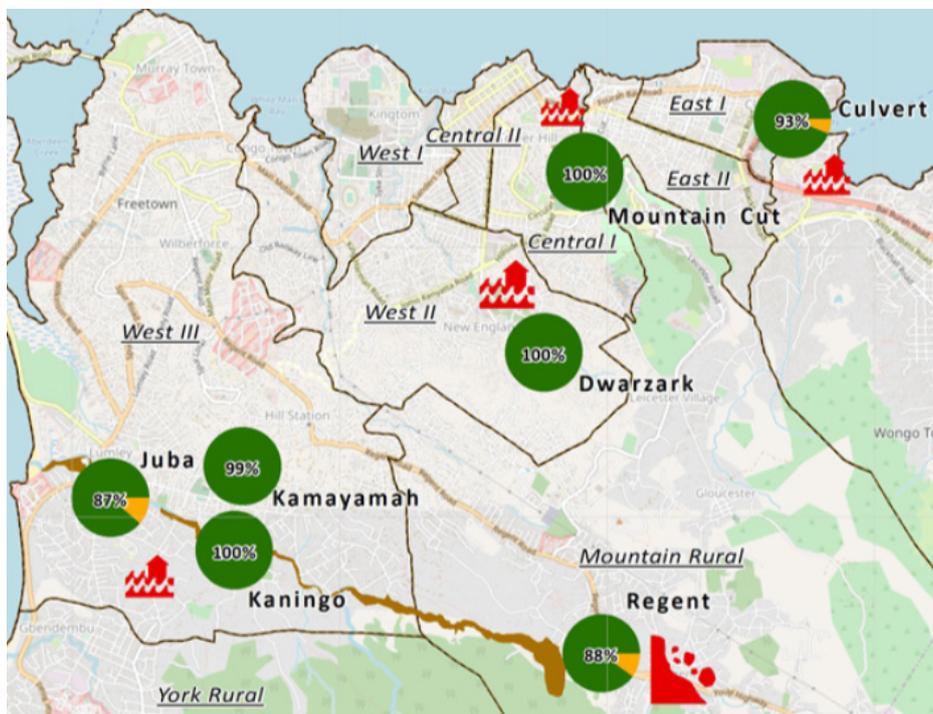


Figure 12: WFP beneficiary distribution map, August 29th 2017. Thin brown lines denote chiefdom administrative units (Source: WFP 2017)

Despite this apparent success, beneficiary targeting still appeared to be one of the biggest challenges of the overall response. Many of the INGOs interviewed worked in the camps set up at several sites in Freetown to provide temporary shelter for displaced people. However, it was clear that not everyone who went to the camps for assistance were really impacted by the crisis. Determining who was genuinely affected and who was not, especially in a city which suffers from such chronic poverty, was hugely challenging – a difficulty equally reflected in the literature on urban humanitarian response (Lucchi 2012). Even the measures used for beneficiary verification were not fool-proof; community chief recognition or being ‘vouched for’ by two other residents were open to exploitation or collusion. For agencies implementing comparatively small-scale responses, choosing those most in need of assistance out of the large number of affected people was challenging, even with predetermined vulnerability criteria.

The extent to which the international humanitarian community involved the community in needs assessments appears mixed. While it is clear that some agencies did undertake community needs assessments in advance of their interventions and / or supported the government in what they asked for, others appeared to have made assumptions about what the community needed. Several INGO respondents said that in the immediate aftermath of the disaster either they or their partners went to the site to take a look for themselves, and based their interventions on what they saw with their own eyes, and what they therefore believed was needed in the aftermath of an emergency. However, while all interventions were no doubt well intentioned, there was also evidence of affected people being given huge quantities of uncooked rice without any accompanying means of cooking it, as well as beneficiaries being seen selling relief items for money - suggesting the cash would be more useful than the goods.

Cash transfer programming is often presented as an opportunity in the literature around urban humanitarian response, because the existence of functioning markets and a cash-based economy means it can be a cheaper and more empowering response modality (Cohen and Garrett, 2010). One INGO respondent who conducted a community-based

needs assessment to inform their response was told that the affected people wanted cash. Despite not having any experience in cash programming and working with local partners who had no experience either, they hired an experienced cash consultant from Kenya to come to Freetown to support with the response. This is another example of the pillars of contextualisation competing with one another. In this case, the INGO worked with local partners, implementing a response through community structures based on community needs - thereby contextualising their response from the point of view of localisation. However, their lack of experience in the modality could call into question the appropriateness of the response, and by relying heavily on an external consultant it is possible that the intervention was not grounded in an understanding of Freetown's context.

In answer to my research question, the international humanitarian community appears to have contextualised their response through the pillar of localisation, with a high proportion of interviewed agencies working with or through local organisations. While there were some challenges in engaging local partners in coordination mechanisms and supporting their organisational procedures, their contextual knowledge of Freetown was seen as an important aspect of the INGO's rationale to respond to the crisis. According to the interviewees, community engagement was undertaken and achieved through well-understood existing structures, although this was not verified with the communities themselves. However, there were still big challenges with beneficiary selection and examples of agencies making assumptions about the needs of communities, as well as attempts at supporting a localised response coming into conflict with other pillars of contextualisation.

5.4 Appropriateness

“For vulnerable people caught in a downward spiral of poverty, including living in chronically flood-prone community, there is without doubt a need for a different approach towards recovering and reintegration. What we provided, in hindsight, was to provide relief to chronic problem, without solving its root causes.”

– Local NGO

Short humanitarian response timeframes and limited scope of activities are also often at odds with a need to engage in an urban environment’s context and address chronic longer-term needs and vulnerabilities in the population (Pelling 2003). Freetown is no exception, and as noted in Section 4, high poverty rates, poor urban planning, a lack of investment in housing and infrastructure and inadequate legal and financial frameworks has led to the most vulnerable populations being at greatest risk from natural disasters. Therefore, for the humanitarian response to the flooding and mudslide to have been truly contextualised, the international humanitarian community needed to address issues beyond the short-term scope of basic life-saving needs, such as food and shelter, and taken a more holistic and prolonged approach.

The Government of Sierra Leone released a Landslide Recovery Framework which detailed short, medium and long term needs up to August 2020, covering the sectors of housing, transportation, electricity and telecommunications, water and sanitation, health, education, social protection, macro-economic, commerce and productivity, environmental issues, solid waste management and disaster risk management - all estimated at a combined cost of \$100 million USD (Government of Sierra Leone 2017). The plan does not detail the extent to which the international humanitarian community was expected to be involved in this recovery process, but an examination of the available reports and interview data suggests that interventions were primarily short-term and focused on meeting immediate needs. Most responses appeared to last between two weeks to three months, and covered food, non-food items, shelter, psychosocial

support, information and communications and water, sanitation and hygiene activities. The final interagency bulletin, produced by UNDP to support information and coordination among humanitarian agencies, was shared on 31st October 2017 – approximately 11 weeks after the disaster occurred (UNDP 2017). This suggests that humanitarian interventions for the flooding and mudslide were scaling down to the extent that such information sharing was no longer deemed necessary.

However, there did appear to be instances where some members of the international humanitarian community were broadening out their timeframes and activities to address longer-term vulnerabilities. Several respondents detailed small projects which had taken place or were due to take place covering issues of livelihoods opportunities and educational support for the affected communities.

It is also important to take into consideration that the appropriateness of a response cannot be seen in isolation, but as part of a wider response and policy context. In the ICRC's six-month update to their mudslide response, the organisation states that its activities have changed from semi-permanent shelter construction over ten months to cash transfers and disaster risk reduction (DRR) activities over 18 months as a result of "unforeseen policy limitations from the government" (ICRC 2018: 1). According to the ICRC, the government would not allow permanent structures – earmarked for poor squatters – to be built on undesignated land, instead wishing to relocate these vulnerable communities to a site on the outskirts of Freetown (ibid). The affected population, who had their livelihoods and social networks in the city, refused to move and therefore continue to live in precarious environments.

This is another example of the complexity of contextualisation, and how the pillars of contextualisation can compete against one another and shift over time; in supporting a coordinated government-led response, the ICRC was unable to address the chronic issue of shelter conditions. That said, even then, the response it subsequently developed combining cash grants with DRR activities over the course of 18 months also addresses

a wider spectrum of needs and timeframe than the typical humanitarian response would allow for.

While my research was focused on the humanitarian response following the mudslide and flooding, it became clear that the emergency was not wholly unexpected among the international humanitarian community. The US National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center had released a weather forecast predicting that Sierra Leone would see three times as much rain than usual during July and August 2017 (Start Network 2017). For a capital city already prone to flooding during the rainy season, this forecast raised a red flag for the respondent from a network of international and national NGOs. Once this information was circulated to a pre-existing Skype group made up of representatives from INGOs operating in Sierra Leone, conversations took place about what an anticipatory response might look like, where the efforts would be focused and how much funding it would require. In the end, conversations were ongoing for a fortnight ahead of the mudslide without any decisions taken, and what was anticipatory turned into a rapid-onset humanitarian response.

This attempt at preparedness suggests the international humanitarian community took strides to contextualise their response first by coordinating between one another, but also by considering a pre-emptive move outside the typical humanitarian timeframe, which traditionally begins when a disaster occurs. However, there was also a lack of concrete action, which according to the respondent could be attributed to a dearth of understanding of the specific sites of risk in Freetown and knowing which areas were most vulnerable.

Having said this, it is not clear whether or where contextual understanding of this nature existed in Sierra Leone, either. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) noted that for the Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL), "capacity to forecast and disaster preparedness are minimal" (ACAPS, 2017: 3). Indeed, one INGO interviewee noted that they approached the Sierra Leonean metrological department

three days prior to the mudslide to retrieve data to form the basis of a proposal, but they did not have the information available. In fact, the department was visibly poorly resourced, without enough computers for staff to work on.

Despite the challenges associated with anticipating where a disaster may strike, the respondent from the INGO network noted that much more work needed to be done to convince the international humanitarian community to act based on a forecast. This was, they believed, primarily due to a risk-averse culture in the industry, partly as a result of pressure from donors and the public to spend funds prudently. This therefore makes agencies prefer to act once a disaster has occurred, not beforehand, as this is seen as 'less risky'. But the question has to be asked: less risky for whom?

Little evidence was obtained of other ongoing preparedness activities taking place in Freetown prior to the flooding and mudslide occurring. This is reflective of the literature on the international humanitarian community's reluctance to invest in community preparedness and resilience activities in favour of the post-disaster temporary goods and service provision (Christoplos 2003). This is a challenge to the appropriateness of the response, in that failing to undertake preparedness activities within an urban environment prone to disasters fails to contextualise the response within the wider timeframe and spectrum of needs present in Freetown.

It should be noted, however, that concrete steps appear to have been taken since the 2017 flooding and mudslide to address these issues. In addition to the ICRC activities mentioned above, the Pacific Disaster Centre is collaborating with the Government of Sierra Leone, the UN, the ICRC and others to undertake a National Disaster Preparedness Baseline Assessment to improve "disaster risk reduction capacity and capability at the national and sub-national level" (Pacific Disaster Center 2019). One respondent also spoke of the development of a radio production handbook specifically focused on flooding, which has been sent to local radio station partners in recognition of the recurrent and ongoing challenges that Freetown faces.

In answer to my research question, it would seem that contextualising interventions through the pillar of appropriateness was the most challenging aspect for the international humanitarian community. While some effort was made to broaden the typical humanitarian response needs and timescale to consider issues of preparedness and recovery, most agencies appeared to conform to the usual post-disaster response supporting immediate needs of the affected population. However, there were also challenges with the wider policy context, as well as positive signals from the international humanitarian community that the importance of preparedness in the context of Freetown are being heeded.

5.5 Capacity

“We did not even think about our lack of expertise, actually the needs of the people, the impacts, we witnessed those things with our own eyes, so that triggered the response...if it happened in a village we would have been sorry for the people but we would not maybe had the sudden need to actually respond. If we’ve got to be truthful.”

– INGO 3

My data analysis revealed further findings on the contextualisation of urban humanitarian response in the Freetown context that were not captured in my initial conceptual framework. I have therefore added a fourth pillar of ‘capacity’, which encompasses an intervention rationale based on the need and scale of the emergency, and responses which draw on relevant prior experience in humanitarian emergencies.

An unexpected finding arising from the analysis was the scale of the international humanitarian community’s response to the flooding and mudslide - and the role that the unique character of Freetown as a capital city appeared to play in this phenomenon. It was not possible to compare a comprehensive list of responding agencies versus agencies operating in Freetown at the time. However, during the initial research period

to gather reports and interviewees, it was impossible to find a well-known member of the international humanitarian community that did *not* respond to the emergency in some way. Many respondents commented on the unusually high number of agencies responding to an emergency which, while devastating for those caught up in it, was self-contained and limited in scale in comparison to a major earthquake or typhoon.

There were differing opinions as to why this was the case. Reasons cited from respondents included that the disaster was easily accessible, because all of the key NGO and private sector actors had their Sierra Leone headquarters there; that responding to a disaster in the capital city attracted 'celebrity status'; that actors wanted to align positively with the government (who are also politically motivated to mount a big response); and that this particular disaster represented a good opportunity to attract public donations.

Several respondents admitted that their organisations would not have been likely to respond to a similar emergency had it occurred outside Freetown, or recalled instances where they had done so but had struggled to obtain funding or public interest. It should be noted, however, that this wasn't a unanimous view: one INGO respondent did note a limitation of what their media and communications response could achieve due to the localised nature of the emergency and successfully pushed back against the idea of raising an appeal for funding. It should also be stressed that all interviewees expressed a 'humanitarian imperative' to respond. Since the disaster occurred 'on their doorstep', they and their organisations believed that they had to do something to help.

Whatever the cause, the scale of the response had mixed results. While it could be argued that the high level of response mobilisation among the international humanitarian community benefited the affected population by bringing greater resource capacity, it poses challenges to contextualisation. As mentioned in Section 5.2 on coordination, the sheer number of responding organisations resulted in oversubscribed pillar meetings and duplication of resources. Likewise, a lack of previous

experience in the chosen response mechanism has not appeared to be a deterrent to responding for some organisations, prompting the question of whether an organisation's ability to respond automatically means that they should therefore do so.

While a contextualised intervention rationale should be based on an assessment of who is best placed to respond and how best they can support the affected population, it did not appear that the overall response to the flooding and mudslide was proportionate to the need and scale of the emergency. There seemed to be a combined 'capital city bias' in the international humanitarian community's decision to mount such a large response to the crisis in Freetown. It is notable that this is not a phenomenon that I have seen referenced in the wider literature on urban humanitarian response.

It was also interesting to note that in every interview I conducted, Ebola was mentioned on several occasions. The Ebola outbreak in West Africa between 2014-2016 killed almost 4,000 people in Sierra Leone, and had a devastating impact on the country's economy, healthcare system, child services and education (CDC 2016). During my field trip to Freetown, it was possible to see evidence of the crisis, such as slogans painted on walls throughout the city declaring 'Ebola stops with me' (see Figure 13). It became clear that in order to implement a contextualised response to the flooding and mudslide it was imperative that the international humanitarian community understood and learnt from the wider context of the Ebola experience, as well as other previous responses, instead of viewing the latest disaster in isolation.



Figure 13: Wall on Spur Road in Freetown painted with Ebola slogans (Source: Author's field trip photo, April 2019)

It appeared to be the case that as a result of the Ebola tragedy, the Sierra Leonean government had a considerably strengthened capacity to respond to emergencies, as did the international and local NGOs who supported the response. Many of the lessons learned during the Ebola period also seemed to have been applied. It was clear that the 'pillar system' leadership and coordination function (see Figure 7) and National Situation Room developed and refined during the Ebola response was also set up for the flooding and mudslide response. This was considered as a positive development, given that both the government and the international humanitarian community had experience in operating within these structures (Ross 2017). One respondent noted in particular that protocols around containing the spread of diseases were followed, including cordoning off the site of the mudslide, excavating bodies and implementing a Cholera immunisation programme. It was also possible to identify a number of activities implemented around psychosocial support and counselling - an area so often overlooked in humanitarian crises, but brought to the fore in Sierra Leone following the traumatic impact of Ebola (Ventevogel et al 2015).

Several INGOs noted that their and their local partners' knowledge and understanding of operating in an emergency was considerably increased as a result of responding to Ebola, which prompted new areas of programming and partnership. One respondent recalled replicating an Ebola consortium arrangement with three other INGOs to implement safe and dignified burials after the mudslide. They noted that it was easy to come together again because all agencies now had expertise in this area, and that they understood their roles and responsibilities in relation to one another. One local partner had developed expertise in running information kiosks during Ebola, supporting coordination and information sharing with the affected population, and that this was seen as an appropriate response to replicate during the flooding and mudslide given the level of confusion present and the number of agencies responding to the crisis.

However, the primary challenge of drawing on previous experience is the danger of replication without consideration for, or knowledge of, the contextual peculiarities of the current crisis. While the pillar system, which is similar to the UN's cluster system, may have been well suited to a slow-onset national health response such as Ebola, the literature on urban humanitarian response suggests it may have been less appropriate for a rapid-onset urban crisis where both needs and solutions are multifaceted and complex and cannot be packaged along sectoral lines (Sanderson 2017).

In answer to my research question, 'capacity' was identified as an additional facet of contextual urban humanitarian response in the Freetown context, which arguably under-reported in the literature. The international humanitarian community appears to have utilised their previous relevant experience in responding to the Ebola epidemic to contextualise their response to the Freetown flooding and mudslide, although it is possible that this presented its own set of challenges when translating contextual knowledge between two very different types of emergency. Capacity was also a challenge, however, as the potentially inflated nature of the humanitarian response presented difficulties for coordination and appropriateness, and appeared to be driven

by a 'capital city bias' rather than a proportionate intervention based on the need and scale of the emergency.

5.6 Synthesis of Analysis and 2017 Freetown Flooding and Mudslide Framework

It is clear that a concerted effort was made on the part of the international humanitarian community to contextualise its response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown. This was achieved through the original pillars of my conceptual framework: coordination (between agencies and other stakeholders and supporting a government-led response); localisation (responding through or with local organisations and engagement with existing community structures); and appropriateness (responding to a wider spectrum of needs and timeframe and working within formal and informal urban structures). Through the analysis of my findings a new pillar of contextual urban humanitarian response in the Freetown context was also added around capacity. The response to Freetown flooding and mudslide did not happen in isolation, but was the product of previous experience, in particular following the response to the Ebola epidemic.

But there were also challenges in how the international humanitarian community contextualised their response to the flooding and mudslide. Within the appropriateness pillar, preparedness was also an added consideration given the finding that the INGOs had been warned of the likelihood of the disaster occurring beforehand but had not acted. Within the new capacity pillar, it was evident that the response perhaps did not reflect the scale of the emergency and associated needs, but that capacity was inflated due to the disaster having taken place in Freetown. As a result, I have added humanitarian interventions based on need and scale of the emergency as an aspect of contextualised urban humanitarian response. While agencies drew on all four pillars to contextualise their response, the application in practice was not always consistent, and they faced challenges around preparedness, government capacity, beneficiary targeting, information sharing, local partner engagement and intervention rationale.

Conceptually it has been helpful to consider coordination, localisation, appropriateness and capacity as the fundamental pillars of contextualisation in urban humanitarian response, but the case study of the Freetown flooding and mudslide has also demonstrated tension within and between these pillars. For example, if required to choose between a Freetown-based partner (localisation), or a national partner with prior experience and expertise in the intervention (capacity), which takes precedence? When seeking to support a government-led response that exhibits gaps in capacity, is it more important to stick to the mandated mechanism (coordination) or circumvent it to provide a timely response in line with beneficiary needs or donor requirements (appropriateness)? These are the sorts of 'real world' issues that humanitarian agencies have had to grapple with when trying to contextualise their response, to which there is no 'right' answer.

In developing my revised framework for the contextualised urban humanitarian response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown (see Figure 14) I believe that my initial pillars of coordination, localisation and appropriateness remain of key relevance, but that it is important to add a fourth pillar around capacity, reflecting the role of prior experience and the need to base interventions on disaster scale and associated needs. I have also specifically referenced aspects of preparedness within the appropriateness pillar and through the response timeline to highlight its importance in the Freetown context. Lastly, I have changed the structure of the framework to reflect some of the complex choices which agencies have to make within and between the pillars, and have therefore shown them as overlapping and competing, but also as unequal and changing over time.

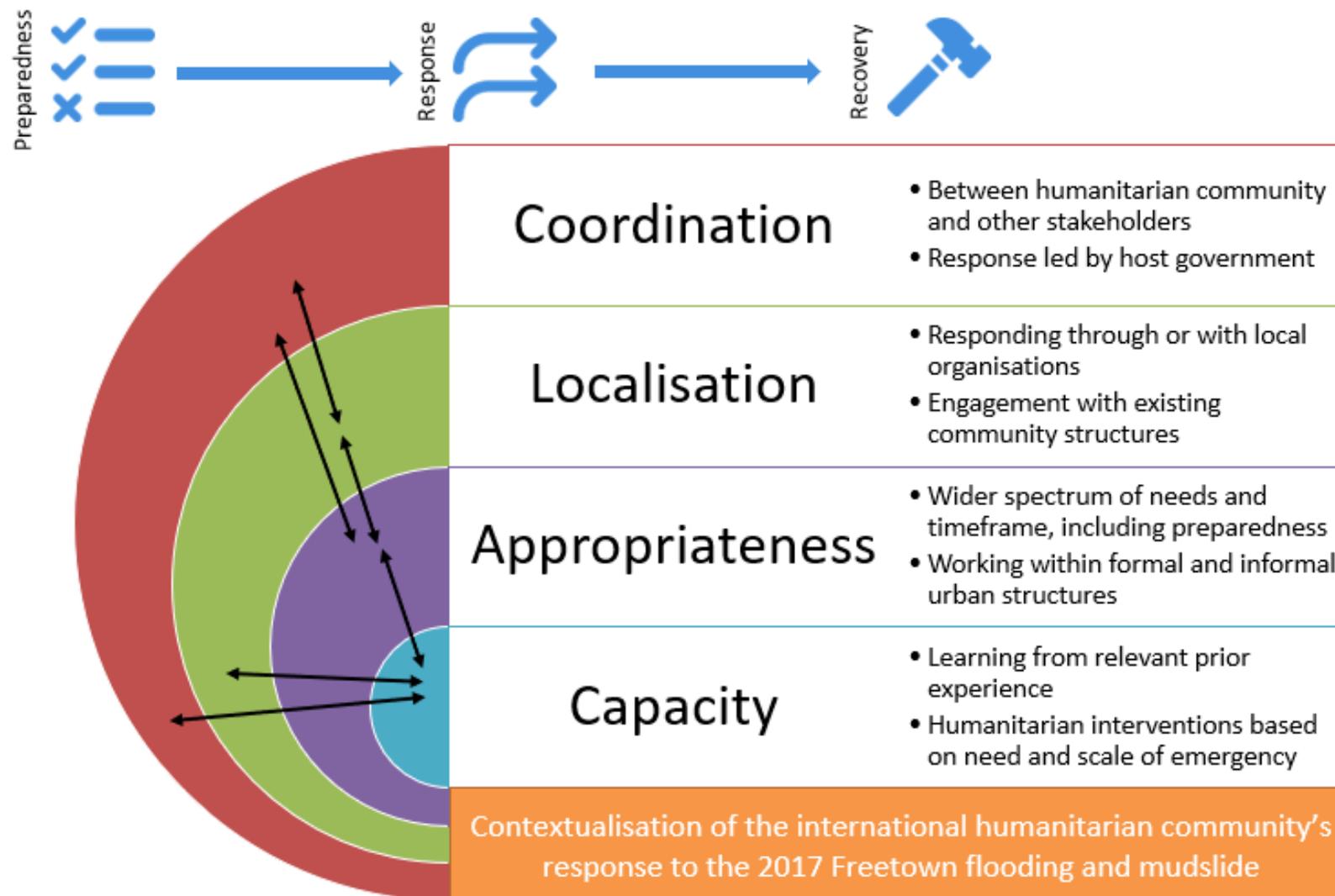


Figure 14: Revised framework for contextualisation of urban humanitarian response in the 2017 Freetown flooding and mudslide (Source: Author)

6. Conclusion

The complexity of humanitarian response to natural disasters in urban environments present a unique set of challenges for the international humanitarian community. Contextually-appropriate interventions cannot rely on generalised good practice, therefore documented case studies are necessary to understand the distinct nature of responding in a specific urban environment. Using the 2017 Freetown flooding and mudslide in Sierra Leone as a case study, the primary research question this dissertation sought to address was “How has the international humanitarian community contextualised its response to the 2017 flooding and mudslide in Freetown, Sierra Leone?”

The research drew on semi-structured interviews with – and reports from – members of the international humanitarian community involved in the response, along with other key stakeholders. A conceptual framework was applied to the findings based on a review of literature on contextualised urban humanitarian response, which covered the key pillars of Coordination, Localisation and Appropriateness.

The overall finding of my research was that a concerted effort was made on the part of the international humanitarian community to contextualise its response through these pillars, but that the complexity of urban humanitarian response in the Freetown context meant that their application in practice was more complicated than the conceptual framework suggested.

Firstly, it was necessary to add a fourth pillar around Capacity to take into consideration the important role that previous relevant experience played in the international humanitarian community’s contextualisation of their response to the Freetown flooding and mudslide – with particular reference to the Ebola response. However, Capacity appeared to be a double-edged sword, with too many agencies intervening in the crisis, perhaps as a result of a ‘capital city bias’.

Secondly, the pillars of contextualised urban humanitarian response in the Freetown context were not separate and distinct but overlapping and competing. The international humanitarian community had to make 'on the ground' decisions to prioritise contextualisation through one pillar at the expense of another, and that these decisions varied and shifted depending on the agency and through different stages of the response.

While the validity of these findings must be considered within the limitations of the research approach, I believe this study contributes to the dual imperative to focus on contextualisation in urban humanitarian response while moving away from ideas of best practice and towards documented case studies. Exploring the international humanitarian community's contextualisation of the 2017 Freetown flooding and mudslide has provided a concrete case study highlighting some of the specific opportunities and complexities of responding in this context which may be worthy of further consideration to inform future humanitarian responses in this urban environment.

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