Focusing on Freetown (Sierra Leone) and Karonga (Malawi), this project sought to understand risk accumulation drivers and to improve the practice of disaster risk reduction. Through detailed spatial knowledge, the appraisal on ongoing investment in DRM systems, and the development of evidence-based tools and strategic planning options, the project aimed to contribute insights into how the governance of risk reduction currently works, to bring to the fore the experiences of those trapped in risk traps and to enhance their capacity to act in collaboration with state and external agencies to disrupt these traps strategically, inclusively and collectively.

Urban risk traps: Who is affected, where and why?

ReMapRisk—a grassroots-led data collection tool—enabled the mapping and risk profiling of 15 informal settlements in Freetown and all 44 villages in Karonga, documenting the full spectrum of risks experienced by poor women and men: from everyday risks, through small and large scale disasters. The tool allows a detailed, participatory analysis of hazard events, vulnerabilities and capacities to act and records local experiences and perspectives on the actions required to disrupt risk accumulation cycles.

Flooding was ranked as the perceived number one hazard by approximately 57% of the villages in Karonga, followed by droughts, earthquakes and strong winds. Only 6% of the villages did not report seasonal or annual occurrence of floods.

Karonga Hazard Density

Karonga livelihood Density

In Freetown, community residents through the CDMCs can request funds from the FEDURP for disaster recovery and relief. In Karonga, Urban ARK has been instrumental in translating decentralising DRM policies into action through the creation of Neighbourhood Disaster Risk Management Committees (NDRMC). While in Freetown, the search for more agile and effective DRM arrangements is grounded through the proliferation of Community Disaster Management Committees (CDMC), driven by the Federation of the Urban Poor. In both cases, DRM practices are supported by several external agencies (ESAs), which denotes the state reliance on development aid to implement new policies.

Local community efforts account for the bulk of DRM actions but they are deeply rooted in reactive responses. In Freetown, community residents through the CDMCs can request funds from the FEDURP for disaster recovery and relief. Financial efforts in DRM by local communities are often in the form of one-off investment to meet identified shared needs, pooled together through contributions made at the household level. For instance, in 2015 the Cobalt community in Freetown collectively saved 40% of the SL 1.7 million to reduce the incidence of fire outbreaks attributed to poor electric wiring and faulty meters.

To a large extent, local authorities remain the missing agent in the DRM governance chain. Efforts to decentralised DRM in Africa have been hampered by remote connections between national authorities and local communities or CDMCs, and mostly supported by ESAs.

Nevertheless, over the last five years the Freetown City Council has dedicated between 5-10% of its annual budget for DRM, amounting to about £62,500 per annum (10%) spent mainly for disaster recovery and clean-up activities. The overall spend on “Developmental Activities” was higher at 30% of annual budgets, with some funded initiatives including DRM measures, such as the construction of flood mitigation infrastructure.

State actors typically focus on responding to humanitarian crises related to intense risks, while decentralised DRM structures attempt to mitigate the non-intense aspects (WIEGO, 2012).

Cumulative urban fragility and slow-burn shocks: Two sides of the same coin

“The cascading nature of complex urban systems means that sudden shocks can reveal the underlying fragility of systems and that they are simply different sides of the coin of slow-burn shocks events.” (Coffeene & Lee, 2015)

In Freetown, 75% of the 15 surveyed informal settlements were established between 1940 and 1980, representing a critical 40-year period of rapid growth.

The enforcement of policies to avoid the occupation of prime grazing areas to preserve areas of environmental value is often discretionary applied, resulting in eviction threats and tenure insecurity for the poor, while being bypassed to favour large-scale private developments. This is turn undermines efforts and investments to reduce risk accumulation where there are most needed.

Nearly half of the 44 settlements that make Karonga today emerged during the colonial era, when land was subdivided to accommodate demographic growth and the relocation of existing villages from flood prone areas after catastrophic events.

Over the years, Karonga has recorded the largest number of disasters in Malawi, with flooding being the most prevalent. While intensive risks such as earthquakes, large scale flooding and strong winds have negligible and less frequent impacts across the town, extensive risks such as fire outbreaks and localised floods occur periodically affecting focalised spots.

Lack of knowledge and recording of extensive risks contributes to their invisibility, deepening their internalisation and consequently minimising the adoption of preventive interventions supported by the state.

Capturing where risk accumulation is most critical and how DRM practices operate in space and across scales is essential to target strategic interventions.

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Networking statutory, customary and community-led governance systems to tackle uncertainty and risk accumulation

The evidence gathered through ReMapRisk supported the identification of risk hotspots and the development of targeted and inclusive action plans in both cities to tackle risk. upscale of this work involved interaction between the two local partner teams and planned community exchange visits.

At the local level, structured protective measures with a complex internal organisation to cope with ill-health and negative hazard impacts have been developed over many years, but alone, they are insufficient to tackle risk accumulation.

The decentralised DRM platforms analysed are crucial spaces to nurture more inclusive and proactive approaches to disrupt risk accumulation cycles, as they are key interfaces between statutory, customary and community-led governance structures.

Understanding the relational and organizational boundaries within which decentralised DRM structures operate is essential to move beyond isolated interventions that tend to be reactive and focus on maintaining stability rather than transforming established modes of action.

POlICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Community-led risk mapping and monitoring is a powerful means to capture different types of risk, their causes and spatial distribution, offering a comprehensive understanding of how these risks are produced and reproduced over time, where and with what consequences.

The burdens of state regulation often inhibits local capacities to act. Intervention in informal areas should offer the “benefits and protections that come with being formal and does not simply impose the cost of being formal” (WIEGO, 2012).

Path dependency and over-reliance on hard-wired DRM practices that emphasise recovery from sudden shock events need to be thoroughly interrogated and repeatedly challenged to break into new streams of action to build not just resilience but certain futures.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Systematisation and scaling up of ReMapRisk to other African cities. Ongoing plans include articulating the risk of urban fragility and slow-burn shocks emerging in informal settings.

The Bartlett

Localised spots.

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