Conflict sensitivity considerations relating to the Libya Storm Daniel response

22 September 2023

Introduction

The consequences of the floods resulting from Storm Daniel on 10 and 11 September pose an urgent and unprecedented humanitarian emergency in communities in the East of Libya. The disaster, moreover, overlays Libya's complex conflict environment. Libya has experienced divided governance, in various configurations of rival authorities, on an ongoing basis since 2014. This has impacted the country's resilience and ability to mitigate and respond to natural disasters while playing a direct role in the mismanagement of key infrastructure, such as the dams upstream from Derna which collapsed during Storm Daniel.

> The Peaceful Change initiative (PCi) has been working with Libyan communities in support of peacebuilding since 2012. One of PCi's programming pillars in Libya is providing targeted conflict sensitivity advice to international actors and programmes to promote better understanding of Libya's peace and conflict context, and support capacity to undertake activities in a conflict sensitive manner. From 2012 to 2022 it facilitated the Conflict Sensitive Assistance in Libya Forum (CSA), a multistakeholder conflict sensitivity facility.

Fundamentally, Libya's conflict dynamics will also be shaped by this emergency and the response there-to. Failing to acknowledge this when providing international assistance risks exacerbating tensions, contributing to structural drivers of conflict and overlooking potential opportunities to contribute to sustainable peace.

This note provides a brief overview of conflict sensitivity considerations relating to the international response to Storm Daniel in Libya which can be identified at this early stage of the response. It is intended to inform planners and implementers and identifies both issues to be considered as part of a conflict sensitive response and recommendations for potential ways to mitigate these.

Conflict sensitivity considerations

This section identifies conflict sensitivity considerations for international assistance after Storm Daniel which should be taken into account by planners and implementers.[1]

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[1] Conflict sensitivity considerations are based on PCi's conflict sensitivity interactions typology, for more information see: PCi, 'Conflict Sensitivity Manual for Libya', June 2022, https://peacefulchange.org/resource/conflict-sensitivity-resources-for-international-assistance-providers-in-libya/

Geographic focus of response may increase local perceptions of marginalisation (Distribution effect).

Derna certainly bore the brunt of the devastation caused by Storm Daniel, both due to its position downstream of the dams and its population. However, a primary focus on Derna, both in terms of assistance and the visibility of assistance, may inadvertently contribute to a sense in other affected communities that their needs do not receive the same level of attention. Within a week of the disaster, there was evidence of social media narratives that residents in areas such as Shahat, Marj and Sousa have been deprioritised in relief efforts.

While inter-communal tensions are less evident in Eastern Libya than in other parts of the country, a perception of inequality in the distribution of relief may contribute to resentment between geographic communities. It may also fuel public anger in communities towards authorities.

Recommendations:

- Refer to the response using terms that do not specify geography, such as 'Storm Daniel response' rather than a 'Derna response.'
- Strengthen coordination mechanisms among international assistance and ensure coordination is inclusive, wherever possible, of Libyan CSO and grassroots support efforts.
- Using coordination efforts, plan for and measure that affected communities are receiving a similar quality of assistance to each other.
- In visibility materials and communications regarding relief activities directed at both the Libyan and international communities, stress the ways in which assistance is being delivered to a range of communities in need.

Assistance is stolen or diverted to particular communities (Diversion effect).

The redirection of aid originally earmarked for other communities to Derna has been reported anecdotally and exacerbates the prevailing sense of marginalization discussed earlier. Several incidents have been reported where aid was initially intended for specific locations, based on the specific needs of those communities, but instead was redirected to Derna. This misallocation of resources underscores the importance of ensuring that aid is distributed according to the assessed needs of each affected area, in order to prevent further disparities and address the broader needs of all communities affected by the catastrophe. Aid may be diverted by armed groups or other interested parties who wish to support their own constituencies or have their own impressions of need.

This diversion of aid, particularly when seen to be intentional by influential groups, could intensify the sense of marginalisation within and between affected communities.

Recommendations:

- Improve monitoring to assess how assistance gets to where it is intended.
- Using coordination efforts, identify where diversion is occurring, by whom, and engage with authorities to ensure more unfettered access.

Public dissatisfaction with authorities as a result of ineffective and insufficient national and international response has a destabilising effect (Capacity effect).

While the full political ramifications of Storm Daniel remain uncertain and will unfold in the weeks and months to come, there is already significant anger directed at the authorities, both in affected communities and among the Libyan public more broadly. A response to the crisis, including by international assistance providers, that is seen to be badly coordinated, ineffective and insufficient, will likely fuel public anger further.

The way public anger manifests could be potentially destabilising to Libyan politics by reshaping political narratives, affecting the credibility of national political groups and fostering a desire for alternative political outcomes. Political and armed groups are more likely than not to respond to public anger by reducing civic space and promoting polarising political narratives. To a certain extent, this has already been seen in efforts by the Khalifa Haftar affiliated Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) to remove journalists from Derna after public protests there.

Recommendations:

- Assistance providers should communicate the response to Storm Daniel widely within Libya within the short term, placing assistance into context with need. Over the medium term, assistance should be communicated widely while also highlighting continued assistance to other areas.

Insufficient or ineffective international response is seen as intentional (Capacity effect).

Significant portions of the Libyan public appear to believe that international aid capacity is greater than it actually is, both in terms of resources and effectiveness. International assistance since 2011 has fallen short of many Libyans expectations and are willing to interpret this as intentional. There are persistent ideas that international engagement in Libya is informed by some ulterior motive, a desire to keep Libya unstable, or discrimination against Libya as a country.

An international response to Storm Daniel that is seen to be ineffective may exacerbate these narratives, undermining the credibility of the international community and its ability to play a positive role in the country – including in promoting political efforts at peace. National political actors may seek to capitalise on these sentiments to minimise blame on themselves.

Recommendations:

- In communications, assistance providers should place the response to Storm Daniel within context – highlighting the challenges and level of need involved and the difficulties in meeting that.

Approach to managing displacement leads to long-term social tensions between host communities and IDPs (Social contact effect/ Economic market effect).

Immediately after the disaster, there has been positive and supportive sentiment towards Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) within the broader Libyan community. People have opened their homes to displaced people and hotels have provided free accommodation. Such a compassionate response is unlikely to be sustainable, however; particularly given that levels of destruction in affected communities mean that returns of displaced persons are unlikely in the short or medium term.

In many parts of Libya, tolerance of large IDP communities is limited. There is a concern that once the immediate emergency settles down, tensions could arise between host communities and Storm

Daniel IDPs, particularly where IDPs are structurally dependent on host community accommodation and services.

Recommendations:

- Proactively engage with municipal authorities to plan for IDP needs, including IDP-host community relations, sustainable accommodation and access to services, for the medium term.
- Consider how to support IDP communities to reduce structural dependences on host communities, pressure on services and economic impacts of and on IDPs.

The evolving social dynamics between the 'Easterners' and 'Westerners' who have arrived to assist in the wake of the disaster hold both promise and uncertainty (Social contact effect).

Overwhelmingly, Libyans' immediate response to the Storm Daniel disaster have been compassionate. People from across the country have self-organised to provide help, including many people from the West of Libya travelling to affected communities to deliver material assistance and to provide help themselves. The story of this response, particularly across the social divide that exists between East and West, can potentially reduce some of the social (and political) polarisation within the country. Positive stories, including some specifically referring to bridging political and social differences, are evident on social media.

On the other hand, disputes between individuals, mistakes, and the spread of misinformation can give rise to blame and tension between communities in the East and in the West. Within a week of the disaster, social media narratives were emerging that people from West Libya were involved in looting and were coming to affected areas to take advantage of the situation. These sorts of narratives have been increasing. Over time, these narratives could feed back into existing sense of social distrust while being instrumentalised by rival political actors to polarise Libyan politics further.

Recommendations:

- Support communications stories around positive interactions between people from East and West as part of the Storm Daniel response.
- Support fact-checking and counter-disinformation actors to respond to divisive media and social media narratives.

Donors and organisations might redirect their assistance from other programmes towards Storm Daniel response (Prioritisation effect).

Acute humanitarian need can lead to the reprioritisation of international assistance away from longer-term aid activities to address immediate needs. This can mean that current or planned assistance that directly or indirectly addresses structural drivers of conflict does not happen, with potentially significant opportunity costs.

At the same time, resentment may increase in communities where programmes are stopped, or which see aid programmes supporting other parts of the country.

Recommendations:

- Wherever possible, seek additional resources to address humanitarian response rather than redirecting allocated or planned budgets for peacebuilding, early-recovery or development activities.

- When reassessing aid priorities and planning, carefully consider the costs, including opportunity costs, associated with not undertaking programmes in other communities or addressing structural governance and conflict related issues.

This emergency shifts international focus away from elections (Attention effect).

The Libyan political process envisaged that national elections for a new unified government would be held in December 2023, and that municipal elections would be held in January 2024. International diplomatic and technical efforts have supported this intention, with a cautious sense of the challenges involved, particularly the degree of political will among important stakeholders. Nevertheless, the expression of international support for elections remains an important dynamic in shaping potential outcomes for Libya's transitional political process. Without it, some political factions could find it easier to promote non-democratic and non-inclusive models of governance.

On the one hand, public anger after Storm Daniel could increase public calls for elections as a way of holding authorities to account for the disaster. However, after the disaster, key political actors and armed groups may be even less willing than before to create the necessary conditions for free and fair elections. Given this, and urgent humanitarian need, international actors could reduce pressure for holding elections in the short term, though with the result that the prospects of holding elections in the future become even more remote.

Recommendations:

- While acknowledging the short-term challenges to holding election, international diplomatic and political assistance should continue to apply pressure to promote elections as soon as possible as the only viable political path for Libya's transition.

Further information

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