

Depoliticising disaster response in a politically saturated context: the case of the 2016–19 droughts in Zimbabwe

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Responding to disasters triggered by natural hazards is a deeply political process, but it is usually presented by practitioners as an apolitical endeavour. This is striking when disasters occur in authoritarian and politically highly polarised conflict-affected settings. Although the literature provides leads as to why and how humanitarians depoliticise aid, there has been little empirical research on the implications of depoliticisation, especially at the community level. Based on qualitative fieldwork that focused on the drought responses that overlapped with the 2016–19 sociopolitical crises in Zimbabwe, this paper details the practices, motivations, and implications of humanitarian depoliticisation. It differentiates between strategic, coerced, and routine managerial depoliticisation, and argues that, in an authoritarian conflict-affected setting, depoliticisation strategically allows state and non-state actors to defuse sensitive issues and actor relations and to remain safe. However, depoliticisation can also have implications for information management, monitoring, accountability, and protection, and thus ultimately for upholding humanitarian principles.

Keywords: authoritarianism, conflict, depoliticisation, disaster, drought, governance, humanitarian, politics, Zimbabwe

Introduction

Red Cross institutions must beware of politics as they would of poison, for it threatens their very lives [...] Like the swimmer, who advances in the water but drowns if he swallows it, the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] must reckon with politics without becoming part of it.

This statement was famously made by Red Cross jurist Jean Pictet (1979, pp. 31–33). He presented the separation of humanitarianism and politics as key to maximising humanitarian independence and neutrality, thus increasing acceptance and allowing humanitarian action to proceed in conflict settings. Today, humanitarianism continues to be associated with a ‘pragmatic avoidance of judgement’ of the causes of war and poverty (Leebaw, 2007, p. 223). In line with the principle of humanity, humanitarians’ core objective is to prevent and alleviate suffering, not to take a position in political debates or conflicts (Barnett, 2013). Politicising humanitarian aid (such

as by tying it to donor conditions or capitulating to domestic political concerns) is considered pragmatically counterproductive and ethically wrong (Dany, 2014; Gordon and Donini, 2015).

However, some have dismissed humanitarian claims of non-involvement in politics as ‘misleading, naïve’, and ‘counterproductive’ (Leebaw, 2007, p. 223). Scholars have argued that the humanitarian principles are Western rather than universal (Baughan and Fiori, 2015; Gordon and Donini, 2015) and that humanitarian action is ‘intimately tied to imperial, military, and geopolitical endeavours’ (Lopez, Bhungalia, and Newhouse, 2015, p. 2233). Others have described humanitarianism as ‘a political project in a political world’ (Slim, 2003). Aid provision results in the readjustment of relations of legitimacy and power, and affects political stability (Kleinfeld, 2007).

The scholars cited above, including Pictet, would certainly agree that the relationship between humanitarianism and politics is complex. However, those maintaining the inherently political nature of aid usually share a wider ontological understanding of politics.¹ These authors would likely concur with political theorists’ argument that depoliticisation, referring to processes such as framing an issue as beyond control or setting up technical committees to make decisions, is ‘something of a misnomer. In reality the politics remains but the arena or process through which decisions are taken is altered’ (Flinders and Buller, 2006, p. 296). Depoliticised governance has been found to: avoid or conceal power relations and conflicts (Mouffe, 1995); increase problems with transparency and accountability (Lövbrand, Rindeljäll, and Nordqvist, 2009; Wood and Flinders, 2014); and exclude certain actors, visions, and practices and maintain the status quo in fields such as climate change (Swyngedouw, 2013) and food security (Duncan and Claeys, 2018).

What, then, are the implications of humanitarian depoliticisation, especially in contexts rife with power imbalances, societal polarisation, and political controversies, as in authoritarian low-intensity conflict (LIC) settings? In these restrictive environments, humanitarians find it particularly difficult to straddle the line between state compliance and complicity and pragmatic compromise and actual harm (del Valle and Healy, 2013). They often ostensibly depoliticise their discourses and actions so aid operations can proceed (Desportes, 2019). Although this approach may logistically enable humanitarian operations, we contend here that it shapes the nature of these operations, with the possible ultimate consequence of losing the ‘essence’ of humanity. Through depoliticisation, space is created; but is it still a ‘humanitarian’ one? Relating the implications to the humanitarian principles of independence (from political actors and other authorities), impartiality (that is, needs-based aid distribution only), and neutrality (that is, not taking sides), we highlight the paradox of a depoliticised approach potentially undermining the very principles designed to help ‘protect’ the humanitarian space from politics.

Humanitarian aid geared towards so-called *natural* disasters is particularly suitable for studying the how, why, and ‘so what’ of depoliticising aid. The interface of LIC and disaster response dynamics, as exemplified here in the droughts of 2016–19 in Zimbabwe, appears to be a collision between politically saturated and ostensibly

apolitical governance paradigms. Disaster governance is generally practised and often studied from a technical perspective, even though vulnerability to disasters derives from political processes of marginalisation (Olson, 2000; Siddiqi, 2018), and disaster aid is prone to politicisation. In Zimbabwe, the long-term practice of partisan food aid distribution has been denounced by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) such as Oxfam (Feeny and Chagutah, 2016), human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch (2004), the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) (Phiri, 2018), and the Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission (2016) itself. Some Zimbabwe scholars have mentioned the politicisation of aid (Thurow and Kilman, 2009; Grove, 2011; Mutowo and Chikodzi, 2014; Hove, 2016; Muderredzi et al., 2017), but this has happened peripherally, without explaining why or how it occurs or the specific implications. In this paper, we include community perspectives on the topic, which is rarely done (Cunningham, 2018; Siddiqi, 2018).

The paper is based on four months of fieldwork in Zimbabwe conducted from October 2018 to May 2019, with follow-up digital exchanges. We contrast the perspectives of international humanitarians and civil society based in Bulawayo and Harare, and members of a community in peri-urban Bulawayo. The studied community was impacted by drought and (non-)state aid initiatives in the 2016–19 period, is located in a Ndebele ethnic minority area, and is close to 2016 and 2019 protest hotspots. The MDC has achieved substantial electoral victories in (peri-)urban centres since the first decade of the twenty-first century. As contested ‘electoral battlefronts’ (McGregor, 2013), Zimbabwean peri-urban communities are a useful setting for studying the depoliticisation of aid and its implications.

Depoliticising disaster response in authoritarian LIC settings

When a disaster strikes, deeply political and potentially antagonising questions emerge (Olson, 2000): what happened? Why? Who must respond, and how? Political theorists have identified three core tactics frequently employed by politicians, supranational bodies, and other agenda-setting actors to depoliticise the answers to such questions (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Wood and Flinders, 2014; Beveridge, 2017):

- Discursive depoliticisation in response to questions of ‘what?’ and ‘why?’: rhetorically framing an issue as beyond (policy) control and presenting broader societal debate on the reasons and goals of action as unnecessary.
- Institutional depoliticisation in response to the question of ‘who?’: establishing independent bodies free of short-term political considerations to set the decision-making framework and take decisions.
- Rule-based depoliticisation in response to the question of ‘how?’: setting the framework using explicit rules, rather than political discretion, which guide decision-making.

Rule-based depoliticisation, especially, concerns the mundane, bureaucratic practices that can restrict aid and other activities. Such ‘everyday politics’ affect aid in less visible ways as compared with major political declarations but may have significant consequences for aid recipients (Hilhorst, 2013).

Why depoliticise in authoritarian LIC settings?

LIC and authoritarian settings are marked by ‘state–society disarticulation’, with part of the population perceiving the institutional state as not representing their interests (Azar, 1990) and with protest movements being met with ‘patterns of action that sabotage accountability . . . by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice’ (Glasius, 2018, p. 517). Zimbabwe illustrates both points well.

Mpofu (2016, pp. 40–41) described the construction of Zimbabwean identity and processes of marginalisation and stigmatisation as tightly interlinked under President Robert Mugabe. Two polarised national narratives have been distinguished, although they should not be superimposed on all struggles (Kalyvas, 2003; Rutherford, 2017). First, for those viewing ‘politics as oppression’, the Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ) ‘uses all available means to remain in power, including abusing the human rights of [its] own citizens’ and ‘deploying coercive politics for the benefit of a few’ (Rutherford, 2017, p. 242). Alexander and McGregor (2013, p. 753) have described how ‘partisan politics and networks of accumulation and patronage’ have permeated the Zimbabwean state. Second, in contrast, proponents of the ‘politics as liberation’ narrative frame the GoZ’s use of power as liberating the country from the remnants of colonial rule (Rutherford, 2017). Here, pro–democracy movements are pictured as part of a ‘recolonisation agenda’, and ‘the West’ is described as ‘using the MDC to plunder Zimbabwe’s gains of independence’. In response, ‘Mugabe subtly clustered the MDCs, the West and the Bretton Woods institutions together as Zimbabwe’s enemies’ (Mpofu, 2016, p. 32).

Divisions within and between state ministries, the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF), security services, and the military lead to unpredictability (Beardsworth, Cheeseman, and Tinhu, 2019). Nevertheless, ZANU–PF remains largely synonymous with the GoZ, with the party spearheading a centralised and ‘forcefully politicised and militarised’ state system (Hammar, McGregor, and Landau, 2010, p. 277). ZANU–PF controls powerful bodies with unclear mandates and accountability mechanisms, such as the Office of the President and Cabinet, the Politburo, and the Central Intelligence Organisation (CIO). The CIO along with ‘the party itself . . . and [the] partisan militia’ are the ‘key agents of surveillance’, supported by ‘the police and other arms of the state’ (Alexander and McGregor, 2013, p. 753). Uncertainty, precarity, and fear play a key role in daily life in Zimbabwe, especially among those involved in party politics (McGregor, 2013).

When a disaster unfolds in such an authoritarian LIC setting, political controversies and legitimacy battles intensify; various actors blame each other regarding the cause of the disaster and the nature of the response (Venugopal and Yasir, 2017;

Olson, 2000). This can weaken or bolster actors' legitimacy and political support (Jacoby and Özerdem, 2008). Providing a Zimbabwean example of the close interrelation between disasters and politics, Musemwa (2006) detailed the hydro-politics between the GoZ and the 'dissident' opposition-ruled Bulawayo City Council after the 1970s. When policies such as the Water Act of 1976 eroded local autonomy, Bulawayo City Council officials and residents felt that the GoZ had 'hijacked' their attempts to address the water crisis, locating this within the broader history of ethnic, political, economic, and regional marginalisation of the area. As detailed for Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Zimbabwe, in authoritarian LIC contexts, disaster responders have to navigate political sensitivities, rumours, and accusations, bureaucratic obstructions, and uncertainty, which all further restrict their room to manoeuvre (Desportes and Hilhorst, 2020).

Political tensions tend to increase when international aid actors are present, which is why some governments prefer to keep them at bay, as was initially done following Cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 (Selth, 2008). International actors are, 'at some level, a representative of a foreign viewpoint and potentially a different political ideal' (Cunningham, 2018, p. 186). Baughan and Fiori (2015) have described appearing apolitical as the core identity marker of Western humanitarian agencies. It preserves funding, operations, moral authority, acceptance by authorities, and community access (Middleton and O'Keefe, 1998; Baughan and Fiori, 2015; Desportes, 2019). International aid standards, frameworks, and guidelines can save time, decrease partisan pressure, and reduce associated conflicts. Efficient processes are especially valuable in times of crisis.

State responders want to avoid being seen as pursuing a political agenda, valuing their own legitimacy, which is linked to popular support and international humanitarian funding. They also want to maintain control, creating a difficult balance. Concerning service provision in Zimbabwe, ZANU–PF pursues 'de facto partisan control, while also trying to maintain legitimacy through a normative commitment to the law, professional delivery of services and the general good' (McGregor, 2013, p. 803). Thus, the different approaches and politics of legitimisation coexisting among state and non-state disaster response actors are sometimes in tension (Calain, 2012).

The implications of depoliticisation

De facto exclusion of certain actors, viewpoints, and/or practices is a major mechanism of depoliticisation: only those willing to 'self-discipline', such as by remaining silent on sensitive topics, are included in the depoliticised governance system (Mouffe, 1995; Swyngedouw, 2013; Duncan and Claeys, 2018; Desportes, 2019).

While little is known about the effects of depoliticising disaster response in authoritarian LIC settings, a similar critique is found in humanitarian governance. Slim (1997, p. 345) noted that some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) 'seem to have convinced themselves that a humanitarian position and a human-rights position are somehow at odds with each other'. In contrast, practitioners in the 'new

humanitarianism’ tradition consider neutrality a ‘dirty word’, viewing the humanitarian principles as ‘leading to politically blind acts of charity where the act of giving was more important than delivering positive impact’ (Gordon and Donini, 2015, p. 87). Pringle and Moorson (2018, p. 284) argue that advocacy and accountability are crucial for humanitarian action to be action ‘of defiance and solidarity’. Even more critically, Baughan and Fiori (2015, p. 137) asserted that humanitarian agencies pretending to be ‘non-political’ ‘is a politics of reinforcement of the status quo’, stressing that ‘the appearance of doing little more than protecting biological life can mask collusion in the entrenchment of existing social hierarchies’, power hierarchies, and imbalances (Baughan and Fiori, 2015, p. 137).

Community members know best whether their suffering is alleviated by humanitarian action. When studying the situation ‘on the ground’, national-level conflict lines should not be superimposed on local conflict dynamics (Kalyvas, 2003). Rather, livelihoods—here, livelihoods and coping strategies during droughts—should be seen as rooted in place-specific hierarchies, historical pathways, and power relations. Political and personal identities and actions are ambiguous (Kalyvas, 2003), and ‘[a]xes of inequality, differences of identity, and power relations make places subject to multiple experiences, not a unitary, evenly shared “sense”’ (Moore, 2005, p. 21).

Methods

We explored the views of 107 drought responders, including community actors (see Table 1). Although we chose not to approach government officials or politicians directly for safety reasons—see Glasius et al. (2018) on the practices and ethics of research in authoritarian settings and Hove (2016) on Zimbabwe specifically—their framing of the drought response was examined using newspaper articles and parliamentary and Senate debate transcripts. The data collection focused on the 2016 drought response, but informal exchanges and observations leading up to the January 2019 protests and drought embedded the interview data in the wider context of social, economic, and political instability, as well as fear and surveillance.

The semi-structured interview participants included 29 non-state actors involved in the planning and/or implementation of the overall drought response of 2016–19. These actors were active in organisations ranging from United Nations (UN) agencies to church groups, and were involved in humanitarian decision-making at the national level in Harare or at the Matabeleland regional level in Bulawayo. Of the approached civil society organisations, some were registered under the Private Voluntary Organizations (PVO) Act (last amended in 2007) and are referred to as Zimbabwean NGOs (ZNGOs). The others, without PVO registration, are referred to as trusts.

In addition to the abovementioned reasons for selecting the study area, a peri-urban community was easier to access during the peak of the Zimbabwean ‘fuel crisis’ and allowed us to build on pre-existing contacts. A total of 73 village residents

participated in semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, and participatory institutional mapping and activity rankings (Moser and Stein, 2011) centring on drought impacts, coping mechanisms, and assessments of external drought support initiatives. Participants were selected to achieve balance in terms of gender, age, and power position. They ranged from those in extreme poverty to, for instance, members of Village Development Committees (VIDCOs)—the lowest-level governance body responsible for drought issues in peri-urban areas. We also sought balance in selecting participants from the two sub-settlements in the community: (i) re-settled community members—former urban squatters forcibly resettled in the area during the Murambatsvina operation of 2005, which violently dismantled informal settlements throughout Zimbabwe; and (ii) the better-off community members who had lived in the old ‘village’ prior to 2005.

Through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), we clustered narratives about, for example, information management, area and aid beneficiary selection, monitoring, and protection. In fieldwork in authoritarian settings, certain critical voices (that is, those willing and able to risk speaking out) come out strongly, whereas the views of state actors, the most fearful and vulnerable community members, and ‘average’ people are less represented (Glasius et al., 2018). We tried to reduce this potential bias by asking pointed questions about processes and by triangulating critical statements. Moreover, silences, contradictions, and polarised perceptions are part of our findings.

During the fieldwork, each research participant was approached with full respect for the ethical guidelines of informed consent and strict confidentiality. The VIDCO members were approached prior to starting community-level fieldwork. All research participants who requested it were provided with a full transcript of their statements for them to proof-read.

Table 1. Overview of research participants

Actor type	Number of participants
Trusts and church groups	6
ZNGOs	6
Independent consultant for the international/NGO sector	1
INGOs	8
International organisations including UN agencies	5
International humanitarian donors	3
Old village residents	42
Residents resettled in the area after 2005	36
Total	107

Note: Participant numbers refer to in-depth individual interviews, except for community members, some of whom participated in focus groups.

Source: authors.

Context

Zimbabwe is chronically drought-prone and food insecure, especially in the (semi-) arid and socioeconomically precarious Matabeleland region (Gandure, Drimie, and Faber, 2010). Both rural and urban areas became more vulnerable following poor harvests in 2014–15 and little rainfall in 2015–16. The GoZ declared a state of disaster on 3 February 2016 and requested international support (UN OCHA, 2016). Another call was made in November 2018 (ReliefWeb, 2018). The 2016 drought was considered to be the worst in 25 years, with more than five million people facing food insecurity, including 1.1 million urban residents (United Nations Resident Coordinator for Zimbabwe, 2016). Response activities were implemented, in order of spending amounts, in the sectors of agriculture and food security, water and sanitation, education, health and nutrition, and protection (UN OCHA, 2016).

The 2016–19 period also saw political, social, and economic turbulence. Following the ZANU–PF Congress in 2014, internal party battles over the ageing Mugabe's successor split the party. In 2016, the country witnessed unprecedented protests, strikes, and calls for the president to resign, especially in urban centres. In 2017, a military coup assisted Emmerson Mnangagwa's rise to power. Hope rose around the 2018 presidential election. However, Mnangagwa 'resorted to a mix of political theatre and soft reforms to endear himself to both Zimbabweans and the international community', resulting in him and the party retaining sufficient power to win the poll (Beardsworth, Cheeseman, and Tinhu, 2019, p. 4).

Political violence and economic decline followed, a consequence of corruption and ill-advised economic policies. Both a lack of commodities and inflation further hampered access to food and agricultural inputs (ReliefWeb, 2018). Security forces shot civilians protesting the contested election result in August 2018 (seven reported victims) and the tripling of fuel prices in January 2019 (17 reported victims). Broader repression included hundreds of beatings and thousands of detentions, sometimes targeting opposition politicians and civil society figures (Beardsworth, Cheeseman, and Tinhu, 2019; Solidarity Peace Trust, 2019).

The study community is situated just within the Bulawayo City Council area. It was represented by an MDC councillor but also had a non-negligible number of ZANU–PF party members. Most residents were unemployed youths and older adults, who could not move to urban centres or South Africa to work. With its thatched-roof houses and small maize plots, the village gave a rural impression. The resettled community was in a separate area that consisted of brick houses built with international organisation (IO) support and contained no farmland. Peri-urban dwellers are generally poor and marginalised, relegated to the outskirts of the city and of society, but the forcibly relocated squatters lived in particularly precarious conditions. Squatters have been labelled as 'social deviants' by the GoZ (Mpofu, 2012, p. 46), and they were treated as such during the violent Murambatsvina operation of 2005. Because of their foreign ancestry, many of the relocated residents lacked Zimbabwean citizenship or a birth certificate and therefore also voting rights. The resettled community and other villagers had separate VIDCOs. About 60 per cent of the households

Table 2. External drought response initiatives in the study community

Government support	IO support	Support by INGOs/NGOs	Support by trusts
The distribution of 20 kilograms of maize as well as seed and fertiliser was reported for 2016; food aid promises were made in August 2018.	One IO distributed food among the resettled community.	Two INGOs with previous shelter and health projects in the area engaged in smaller-scale and child-targeted food distribution in the school and clinic.	Churches distributed aid to their members. The teachers' association organised school feeding in the village.

Source: authors.

had access to running water; others fetched water from the one borehole that remained functional during the droughts.

In Zimbabwe, the state provides food aid in peri-urban areas, with non-state actors engaging in drought-related health and livelihoods projects only (IO #2, 26 November 2018; IO #5, 22 January 2019).² This was also observed, and criticised, in the study community; Table 2 lists which actors provided which type of aid there.

Findings: practices, motives, and implications of depoliticising the drought response

A heated debate took place in the Parliament of Zimbabwe on 1 February 2017. The Deputy Minister of Public Service, Labour, and Social Services, Eng Matangaidze (2017), reacted to what he termed 'disturbing allegations by various media that the Government Food Deficit Mitigation Programme is being run on partisan lines'. In the address, he presented the drought response programme as an apolitical endeavour. In Table 3, we explore the framing of the drought response, following the categories of discursive (what and why), institutional (who), and rule-based (how) depoliticisation.

Motives, or the depoliticised system as a refuge

The non-state study participants relayed two main motives for depoliticising their own aid interventions as part of the Zimbabwean drought response, which they frequently referred to as 'the system': (i) *strategic depoliticisation* to defuse politically sensitive issues, allowing them to engage with state actors; and (ii) *coerced depoliticisation* to protect their safety.

Strategic depoliticisation

The drought response in Zimbabwe drew both open and silent accusations concerning responsibility for the disaster and the potential ulterior motives of engaged actors. These accusations intertwined with broader geopolitical, partisan, and societal tensions, as well as racial and ethnic politics, in which historical baggage plays a major role. Frequently cited historical events were the land redistribution enforced since the first decade of the twenty-first century and its contested impact on food productivity,

Table 3. The depoliticisation of the drought response system in Zimbabwe

Categories	Summary of the depoliticised views
What and why	<p>External factors alone caused the drought, particularly the El Nino weather phenomenon.</p> <p>External factors, particularly (international) funding, determine the scope of the response.</p> <p>The goal of the response is self-evident and shared: to save lives and livelihoods.</p>
Who	<p>Decision-makers are apolitical:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the <i>government</i> side, Drought Committees in the Cabinet at national level, District Drought Relief Committees, and VIDCOs were in charge of making decisions, and are framed as apolitical since they are composed of diverse administrative, technical, and traditional authorities. • <i>Non-state actors</i> stressed their own apolitical, 'unthreatening' nature, highlighting ties to religious or African networks. When they lacked such linkages, they presented themselves as technical and/or 'global consensus' bodies (such as the UN). They also used this framing during everyday engagements with the authorities, following long-term presence and trust-building. • At the <i>community</i> level, concerning the meetings of the VIDCO of which he was a member, a village resident (#2, 3 December 2018) stated that: 'We also are in our own political parties, but we do that in private. [During the VIDCO meetings] we do not threaten, and we do not abuse people'. <p>Cases of political bias are caused by individual misbehaviour, such as 'abusing the name of the party' (trust #1, 10 November 2018).</p>
How	<p>Data on disaster impacts and needs are collected and analysed following a precise technical process:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drought impacts and needs are understood using a four-step annual data collection and analysis process, through which the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee, composed of key state and non-state actors, compiles and releases information on food insecurity needs in each area, down to the district level. • The district and subdistrict committees are involved in data collection and subdistrict prioritisation. • Aid beneficiaries are selected by communities themselves in a participatory way. As stated by the Deputy Minister of Public Service, Labour and Social Services, Eng Matangaidze (2017), '[t]hey are fully aware of vulnerability levels within their communities'. He claimed that those entitled to food benefits needed to show only proof of identification, not party cards, to get relief items.

Source: authors.

the subsequent Western sanctions and anti-Zimbabwean 'propaganda' (IO #8, 31 January 2019), and the 2008 drought response when some INGOs had distributed food aid with a pro-opposition bias.

By treating the drought and the response as matters of natural forces and logistics, non-state actors could defuse even the hypersensitive issue of politically biased distribution, and indirectly address it. This was clear in the accounts of IO, INGO/NGO, and trust research participants. One IO representative (#5, 22 February 2019) heavily relied on technical jargon to explain how his organisation conducted 'randomised and purposive sampling' across households after reports of what he referred to as 'targeting inefficiencies'. If the 'inclusion or exclusion' of needy households overstepped '40 per cent of the sample', the entire community had to reconvene to 'do retargeting' and engage in training on the 'objectives and guidelines' of humanitarian assistance. The aim of protecting lives and livelihoods was highlighted during training sessions for village and district authorities, stressing that better-off households benefitting from food aid could create dependency and destroy livelihoods.

Depoliticisation thus created a space where actors asserting themselves without political, especially ‘regime change’, motivations could work together. Drought response necessitated cooperation between historically polarised state and non-state actor blocs. One Zimbabwean INGO representative (#4, 21 November 2019) described relations between these actors as ‘given the history, quite hostile’. He recalled when a group of INGOs and NGOs were ‘summoned to meet at province level’, where they were ‘accused of having ulterior motives’ and of aligning with the opposition. Non-state actors mentioned the GoZ’s limited capacity and malignant intentions, as well as the pervasive politicisation of food aid, particularly in relation to vote buying in election years. Several community residents, particularly youths, interpreted food aid promises made to them in August 2018 as vote buying. Concerning NGO work, one resettled resident (#29, 23 March 2019) claimed that ‘no one is clean here; NGOs are pro-MDC, and they will always give food to the MDC supporters’.

To some extent, non-state actors’ institutional depoliticisation tactics (such as highlighting an organisation’s ‘African roots’ and backgrounding its Western funding) were successful. However, they did not entirely avoid blame in political speeches and newspapers or short-term political fluctuations. Political events during the 2016–19 period affected actor relations. The research participants noted more difficult communication, with ministries aligning with different ZANU–PF sub-factions in 2016. Moments of ‘openness’ and a ‘change of mindset’ were reported at the start of the Mnangagwa era (INGO #7, 1 February 2019), but this space later closed down, as was exemplified in the weeks following the January 2019 protests and repression. As one INGO member (#9, 22 January 2019) stated:

We are an easy target, in terms of perceptions. We are portrayed as having a Western agenda. It is a frustrating place to be in when you just want to help. So last week [just after the January protests] we stopped activities for one week. Just to stay out of it.

Coerced depoliticisation

Pragmatically, depoliticisation keeps non-state disaster responders safe. Lingering suspicions and uncertainty surrounded many drought response actors. As a high-ranking IO representative noted (#8, 31 January 2019), ‘here, everybody looks at everybody’, but ‘all is fine for you, as long as you don’t do politics’. The non-state actor participants encountered surveillance agents through telephone calls, during escorted monitoring visits, and sometimes even in monthly meetings.

Likewise, community initiatives perceived as suspicious were controlled or suppressed. In the study community, when residents wanted to organise a meeting to discuss drought-sensitive farming techniques in 2016, they were denied the necessary police clearance for the gathering. A local farmer (village resident #12, 4 December 2018) explained that this was because the police:

have their own preconceptions of what people are trying to organise. . . . Say we are of the opposition or revolting or doing something against the government. . . . Still on the suggested day [when the meeting was planned], the police came and were all over. Looking for me.

When asked whether this level of control was normal, the farmer said that the drought might have increased distrust towards ‘actors coming to assist in the response’, but he also cited the political run-up to the election and the concurrent protests.

Actors could face both organisational and personal consequences for going outside ‘the system’ (IO #8, 31 January 2019). A trust staff member (#8, 29 November 2018) operating in peri-urban Bulawayo recounted how, during the 2016 drought, she and her colleagues observed that the community where they offered legal advice desperately needed food support. They felt that they must source and distribute food aid despite lacking PVO registration. The tedious, expensive, and sometimes arbitrary registration was required for conducting activities such as food distribution, which was always done with local authorities (INGO/NGO consultant #1, 29 November 2018; INGO #3, 16 November 2018). As recalled by the trust staff member:

There was an investigation when we started doing drought response; the police came, even I was questioned by the CIO. By the security police! I said, ‘No, it is okay, you can question me; we remain apolitical’. The whole issue also happened because it was at the time of the internal ZANU-PF battles. . . . We were there with our t-shirts [shows the one she is wearing, with a symbol on it], and the [symbol] is also the symbol of that [splinter] group. So they said . . . ‘they are funding you’. But we proved ourselves innocent. We were transparent, we even invite them to question us. We even said, ‘there is no problem; you can go take the truck and distribute [the aid]’.

This statement illustrates the level of intimidation faced by actors choosing to work outside the system, as well as the speed with which they could fall back into line, even offering to let the government distribute their non-governmental aid supplies.

Different motivations and depoliticisation tactics can conflict with each other. For instance, at the national headquarters level in Harare, an IO representative (#2, 26 November 2018) indicated that her organisation could do high-level advocacy on the politicisation of food aid, provided they had a solid grounding in ‘objective and technical’ data. Yet, for many disaster responders acting at ground level, this was deemed too unsafe an action: ‘We do not have or collect data on how common the phenomenon [of rewriting NGO food beneficiary lists] is. Then we would have enemies’ (ZNGO #2, 22 November 2018).

Implications, or the depoliticised system as a trap

This subsection reviews the particularly problematic implications of self-disciplining within the system, relating them to the humanitarian principles of independence, impartiality, neutrality, and humanity.

Independence

Working in the Zimbabwean humanitarian governance system means accepting the political influences that are built into it; non-state drought responders do not act

independently from the state. We illustrate this with the Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZimVAC) process and information management practices more broadly.

In its 2016 drought response assessment, Oxfam (Feeny and Chagutah, 2016, p. 2) noted that, in addition to inadequate national and international funding, the ‘response has also been hampered by a lack of key data’ on ‘malnutrition, food insecurity, disease outbreaks [and] the status of grain reserves’, ‘which due to sensitivities are either unavailable or undisclosed’. An IO director (#7, 28 January 2019) pointed out how data were ‘manipulated left, right and centre’. Census data were likewise debated, particularly in urban opposition areas (INGO/NGO consultant #1, 29 November 2019).

Key actors providing information on, for instance, grain reserves and health issues, are the District Administrators (DAs), the powerful Grain Marketing Board parastatal, and traditional chiefs in rural areas. Most of these are ultimately political figures, according to both non-state actors and community members. A member of the post-2018 VIDCO (#2, 3 December 2018) stated: ‘Agriculture extension officers, they have their data which they use. In government offices. But we want to have our own true data’. In another interview, a reasonably GoZ-inclined member of the former VIDCO active until 2018 (#11, 4 December 2018) showed us a photocopied handwritten community register that his VIDCO had compiled, noting: ‘Although that is not authentic. You are not allowed to count people; only the government does that’. On the topic of data sensitivities, a high-ranking IO official (#8, 31 January 2019) emphasised the importance of backstage diplomacy and psychology in convincing influential ministry, cabinet, and Politburo members to act on ‘technical ideas’ because ‘frustrations and emotions’ tend to overshadow ‘facts’ and ‘objectivity’.

Following probing on the ZimVAC, research participants described the process as coming late in the drought season, based on sketchy data collection,³ and manipulated by groups including the Politburo. One highly placed IO member (#8, 31 January 2019) also described manipulations by a major funder behind UN humanitarian programmes. Strikingly, a former member of a donor organisation funding the ZimVAC process (#4, 4 June 2019) said that the Committee’s results should be approached with ‘a healthy dose of scepticism. It comes out of a political body, and [the] findings are political’. The same participant explained how political control was built into the process: only actors who sign a disclaimer concerning information use and sharing can join the committee and access the raw data. She explained that her former organisation still funded the ZimVAC because that was standard procedure in the region—pointing at a new depoliticisation category, that of ‘routine managerial depoliticisation’.

Doubts about the validity of ZimVAC data were compounded by non-state actors’ (perceived) obligation to rely on them and their difficulty in collecting their own information. When asked if he relied on ZimVAC data in his work, an INGO representative (#5, 31 January 2019) replied: ‘The government relies a lot on ZimVAC. So at the end of the day, you are forced to too . . . ZimVAC results are the document with authority’; this was also the case from the donors’ viewpoint. Concerning

possibilities for collecting their own data, aid actors highlighted how general suspicion and low donor funding were more constraining than were government restrictions. Nevertheless, authorisations for independent needs assessments were also delayed and came with conditions such as Ministry of Health staff accompaniment (INGO #10, 24 May 2019).

No community participants reported visits from ZimVAC enumerators or other household-level assessors, and direct encounters with INGO staff were rare. INGOs and ZNGOs had to work via local structures, notably ‘NGO extension workers’ who channelled information up and down. Local authorities sometimes influenced appointments to these positions (INGO #5, 31 January 2019; INGO/NGO consultant #1, 21 November 2018). Although this should not be generalised, it is notable that the statements of an INGO extension worker in the village (village resident #33, 9 May 2019) were government-aligned, and that she was also involved in childcare extension work for the government.

Impartiality

According to the principle of impartiality, humanitarian assistance must be provided on the basis of need alone. One may question the extent to which disaster responders can be impartial when the needs data are perceived as ultimately dictated by the government, and thus politically biased. As put by a ZNGO representative (#3, 28 November 2018), government agents are not required to push you out of areas; via the ZimVAC, ‘the figures push you out’. A couple of highly placed IO officials (#2, 26 November 2018, and #5, 22 January 2019) considered the fact that their organisations were not allowed to distribute food aid in peri-urban areas as specified by the rules of the game applying to ‘the system’.

In the studied community, nearly all of the residents perceived food aid as biased. Villagers felt disadvantaged as compared with the neighbouring rural area, where longer-term government food aid distribution was reported although the landscape, rainfall, and livelihood patterns were perceived as largely identical. In the village community, government food aid was intended exclusively for people aged 60 years or more, but an overwhelming majority had observed deviations. Some explained how they were indirectly excluded from receiving government food aid (for instance, because their house number was (purposefully) not included on official registers or they lacked the required national identification documents). Concerning non-state support, a village resident (#27, 9 May 2019) said that the ‘white people’ catered only to resettled community members, who lacked identification and hence voting power. Many community members did not understand why INGOs did not expand their interventions ‘while people are starving’ (village resident #2, 3 December 2019). Church groups seemed to enjoy more freedom to distribute food aid, even when internationally sourced.

There were links between participants’ positions (Zimbabwean or foreign origin, socioeconomic status, and political affiliation) and their statements regarding perceived

biases and responsibilities. Bulawayo- and Harare-based INGO and NGO staff of Ndebele ethnicity and a 2016 drought response review of the Matabeleland NGO consortium noted a domination of Harare-based NGOs in the humanitarian governance system, which led to prioritisation of areas inhabited by the Shona people, the majority ethnic group in Zimbabwe. Several Shona staff members dismissed this claim, and ethnic bias was never mentioned at the community level. Some community members thought that the VIDCO was guilty of bias in selecting state aid beneficiaries (for example, village resident #12, 4 December 2018, and village resident #21, 10 December 2018); for others, the DA was responsible (such as village resident #33 (9 May 2019), who was directly involved in the VIDCO drought sub-committee), and some saw ZANU–PF members as influencing the selection process, sometimes even from neighbouring rural areas (village resident #12, 4 December 2019).

Interpretations of the guilty party's motivations also diverged. Some believed that biased distribution sought to exclude opposition members or persuade the unaligned to join ZANU–PF, but most considered it a matter of greed and corruption. Young people were particularly likely to describe preferential treatment as rational: 'We are too young to . . . be in charge of anything. But if I had the opportunity to lead, then it would be my turn to steal if I can. And to practise corruption if I can' (village resident #23, 10 December 2018).

A key question is what non-state actors can do about such bias. A Zimbabwean INGO/NGO consultant (#1, 29 November 2019) was pessimistic, saying that INGOs can only passively observe food distribution, like 'election observers'. Community members' assessments of what could be done varied widely, depending on their position of power. An active VIDCO member (village resident #2, 3 December 2018) who was also a Bulawayo Independent Residents Association member judged their freedom of speech and room to manoeuvre as more substantial in the study village than in neighbouring rural areas. Overall, though, pessimism prevailed. Only two residents (#2, 3 December 2018, and #20, 10 December 2018) reported going to government offices in Bulawayo directly, with no concrete results. Most stated that complaints had to go through somewhat dubious go-betweens, such as VIDCOs, INGO and NGO extension workers, and administrative government officials. Fear and self-censorship also played a role: 'When you start challenging that system, you start questioning the government', so better to stay silent (village resident #12, 4 December 2018). Several community participants in both the old and the new settlement saw 'boycotting' the registration and distribution process as the only way to express dissatisfaction. Social Welfare Department staff reportedly also once resorted to a boycott when their maize distribution beneficiaries list was replaced by a DA/party list (village resident #12, 4 December 2018).

Neutrality

Reviewing the principles of independence and impartiality suggests that 'neutrality' comes closer to siding with the GoZ than to taking no side at all. Many non-state actors,

including funders, highlighted the need for total transparency towards the government to avoid the label of ‘regime changer’. One IO staff member (#2, 26 November 2019) underlined how her organisation was seen as ‘neutral and impartial’ by the GoZ, because they were a ‘long-term friend’ (IO #2, 26 November 2019). Another highly placed IO staff member (#8, 31 January 2019) put this ‘friendship’ in a different light: according to him, that same IO was ‘quite embedded with the government. There are government informers inside’.

Exercising self-discipline by acknowledging to the GoZ that ‘it has the power’ and making sure it ‘feels comfortable’ (INGO #5, 31 January 2019) involved important compromises, such as aid targeting according to politicised ZimVAC figures or remaining out of peri-urban areas, and often silence. This is evident in the story of the trust staff member (#8, 29 November 2018) recounted above, where she reported her organisation calling on the state to distribute its internationally sourced aid as a way to get it onboard. According to a ZNGO representative (#1, 10 November 2018), challenges could be discussed ‘without being at loggerheads with authorities’ during multi-actor meetings by asking them for ‘advice’, treating them as ‘the saviour’. Here, power relations were clearly unequal and generally unchallenged, whether through frank discussions or advocacy. Accountability is first to the government.

Humanity

Within the peri-urban community, the absence of both state and non-state support for the already marginalised groups had far-reaching implications. Community participants had suffered chronic food shortages since 2016, although they emphasised that this was not comparable to the more severe drought in 2008. In early 2019, most households had only enough resources for one meal per day, usually eaten in the evening because ‘it is better you spend the day hungry and drinking water, so that you sleep at night after a proper meal’ (resettled resident #4, 20 March 2019). Older and HIV (human immunodeficiency virus)-positive adults and children were particularly vulnerable. A lack of proper nutrition made them less resistant to disease and reduced children’s concentration in school. Domestic violence increased during this period.

Households felt that they could do little to cope with the drought. For some, old age, fatigue, and illnesses presented limitations. For those who could work, landholdings were too small to produce enough food for the year, extensive water cuts were enforced by the municipality, and irrigation was impossible. There was also a context of broader economic decline and political instability, which additionally hampers collective drought prevention and response approaches. According to one resettled VIDCO member (#7, 20 March 2019), scant information sharing and knowledge of community governance structures led to ‘people always complaining because they do not understand how things work’.

Consequently, most people adopted survival-oriented activities, which were frequently self-destructive. Coping strategies included unsafe artisanal gold mining, sand

poaching, scavenging for food at a dump site, returning to informal settlements in town to work odd jobs, and children skipping school to engage in small-scale trade of vegetables, grass brooms, or firewood. Other actions framed as coping strategies included drinking and drug abuse, transactional sex, marrying off teenage girls for dowry payments, low-level theft and reselling items in town, and sending remittances home after forced migration. The participants detailed how these strategies destroyed lives, families, and the community. For instance, young girls engaging in transactional sex stopped going to school and risked sexually transmitted infection and teenage pregnancy. Petty crimes led to jail sentences and disrupted community cohesion as neighbours fought and as even friends stole from each other. The illegal behaviour of collecting firewood resulted in tensions with local authorities, leading a resettled community member (#2, 19 February 2019) to note: ‘We only survive using the means unacceptable to the City Council’.

Clearly, the drought and how it was handled had psychological impacts in addition to physical ones. Hopelessness, tied to deep-seated feelings of abandonment by state and non-state actors, pervaded nearly all community-level exchanges. The most disadvantaged residents (mostly in the resettlement area), as well as a few better-off residents (actively mobilised through civil society organisations and/or the MDC), linked their present situation to the Gukurahundi massacres of the Ndebele people in the 1980s, the economic structural adjustment policies of the 1990s, and the forced Murambatsvina relocation of 2005. These violent events had left them in their present vulnerable state:

Gukurahundi took away everything from us: we were left as no people, not even identity cards, and for most of us we did not recover from its effects. As we were trying to do so, we became victims of Murambatsvina. All this makes us realise that the government really wants us dead (resettled resident #6, 20 March 2019).

This participant shared the view of many resettled residents: his exclusion from food aid was just the latest step in a long history of neglect.

Non-state actors rarely addressed these physical and emotional impacts, as was clear at the community level, at humanitarian headquarters, and in an Oxfam report (Feeny and Chagutah, 2016). At the community level, no one except a community-led volunteer anti-crime brigade seemed to act on these issues, which ultimately fall under the realm of protection. A high-ranking IO actor (#2, 26 November 2018) said that the GoZ’s instrumentalisation of food aid was considered outside of the humanitarian community’s mandate. Protection was drastically underfunded, partly because of problematic and dangerous reporting:

It is very difficult to find evidence that things are linked, so to find the resources. Like all the prostitution etc. that happened. . . . I think in 2016 only six per cent of the fund went towards protection. . . . The staff go and ask questions. Of course, that can also be intimidating. And it can put the person who reported in a dangerous situation (IO #2, 26 November 2018).

Conclusion

This paper has analysed why and how non-state actors depoliticised the drought response from 2016–19 in Zimbabwe, as well as the implications of this depoliticisation. Non-state actors argued that, given the restrictive context, depoliticisation was a legitimate way of defusing politically sensitive issues and collaborating with those who would otherwise be considered enemies (strategic depoliticisation) and of remaining safe (coerced depoliticisation). Next to strategic and coerced depoliticisation, we observed instances of less reflected upon ‘routine managerial depoliticisation’. Yet, importantly, in the thus created space, certain areas (such as peri-urban areas), population groups (for instance, already marginalised people) and issues (for example, protection) could not be targeted. The depoliticisation practices further undermined independent information management and monitoring, accountability, advocacy, and protection, and hence, ultimately, the upholding of the humanitarian principles.

These findings should be nuanced by type of disaster response actor, drawing out patterns in relation to power:

- The GoZ, which is often conflated with ZANU–PF and state security bodies, emerged as the most powerful actor dictating the rules of the Zimbabwean humanitarian system. Diverse participants’ accounts, corroborated by secondary data and existing literature, highlight drought response as interlinked with a party control agenda, and food aid as a tool of exclusion and coercion. The GoZ’s political influence is built into the seemingly depoliticised system. This is exemplified by the involvement of the CIO and Politburo in the drought response system.
- For established international actors and ZNGOs, adopting a non-threatening technical approach enabled them to carry out their operations as part of what they referred to as ‘the system’. Routine depoliticisation, such as funding the ZimVAC as standard procedure in the region, emerged most frequently within this group.
- Less powerful non-state actors, including community farmers and trusts, most strongly conveyed the idea of being forced to self-discipline within the system for self-preservation. This coerced depoliticisation resulted in patterns of exclusion and inability to support the communities they wanted, as they wanted.
- In the study location, peri-urban community participants, marginalised by their ethnic, political, socioeconomic, and/or geographical position in society, had little power. They generally perceived information and aid intermediaries as biased and saw boycotts as one of their few leverage options. Household coping strategies had destructive effects on individuals’ bodies and minds, community cohesion, and broader relations with authorities. These grievances cannot be blamed fully on the drought response and often destructive coping strategies, but community exchanges on drought impacts and response were nearly always overshadowed by feelings of hopelessness and abandonment.

Theoretically, there are three points in the depoliticisation literature, including this case of disaster response in an authoritarian LIC context, that should be used to

inform humanitarian studies. First, scrutinising the ramifications of seemingly technical processes such as information management exposes the illusion of an ‘apolitical’ disaster response in a deeply polarised state-controlled context. The ZimVAC proceedings, already criticised from a predominantly technical perspective (Scoones, 2013), demonstrate that technocratic and political repertoires are not mutually exclusive and show the far-reaching implications of what ultimately remain political choices.

Second, actors’ depoliticisation motivations and the extent to which they perceive or describe the depoliticisation implications as problematic depend on their position of power. Powerful actors with the most influence over the humanitarian system have the least to lose, and probably something to gain, from operating in a humanitarian system with unquestioned power relations and a routine way of doing things. What one actor interprets as a justifiable reason for depoliticisation may be highly problematic for another. The different legitimations for depoliticisation are thus in tension, with this strain most intensely felt at the bottom of the power structure.

Third, our findings stress how humanitarian space results from ‘repeated transactions’ with actors at different levels and is a domain for ‘negotiation, power games and interest-seeking between aid actors and authorities’ (Allié, 2011, pp. 2–3). This is ultimately political. The present case shows how humanitarian space evolves as a result of: (i) the state applying authoritarian practices to the drought response process; and (ii) non-state actors engaging in little political negotiation or transformative action to deal with processes of control and marginalisation. It underlines how depoliticisation constitutes another form of politics.

Organisations engage with politics differently, and those avoiding less-tolerated practices such as advocacy must be aware that their humanitarian action does not exhibit ‘defiance and solidarity’ with those suffering from discriminatory and repressive policies (Pringle and Moorsom, 2018, p. 284). While difficult compromises are unavoidable, one should ensure that depoliticisation practices really are strategic and do not cause harm. Pictet argued that ‘one cannot at the same time be a champion of justice and charity’ (Leebaw, 2007, p. 227), but surely charity need not come at the cost of justice.

In addition to open advocacy, this study has identified lower-profile areas where increased vigilance is beneficial: information collection; analysis and valuation; monitoring and accountability mechanisms; and protection. Attention should also be paid to ‘blind spots’ such as the peri-urban areas and marginalised populations excluded from food aid because of a lack of official identification documents. Donors have a key role to play in determining which ostensibly technocratic (state) endeavours to fund, which information to recognise as valid, and how much funding to provide for independent data collection and maintaining a substantial ground presence. Finally, this study stresses the importance of scholars, who are at least relatively free of entanglement in the humanitarian meshwork of power, scrutinising the (technical) processes through which disaster responders may pursue their political agendas.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Their understanding goes beyond politics as the ‘assertion of fundamental differences’ in moments of antagonism to include the ‘apparatus of order and consensus’ through which uneven socioecological relations are reconfigured daily (Mouffe, 1995; Rancière, 1998; Swyngedouw, 2013; Beveridge, 2017, p. 595).
- ² Statements drawn from interviews or focus-group discussions are presented with information on the type of actor and the date.
- ³ We were able to speak to two people (trust member #8, 29 November 2018, and INGO #6, 31 January 2019) who had previously worked as ZimVAC enumerators. Besides allegations of subsequent data manipulation, reported commonalities were unrealistically long questionnaires, little training for enumerators, and enumerators being picked from government circles predominantly.

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