

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

Isabelle Desportes Ntombizakhe Moyo

Abstract

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.