

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of the everyday practices of civil servants in disaster relief interventions in Malawi. Relief interventions regularly take place in this donor-dependent and disaster-prone country as it is exposed to the intensifying impacts of climate change. Operating at the heart of the humanitarian-development nexus, the Malawi government Department of Disaster Management Affairs (DODMA) is responsible for the coordination and implementation of both ad hoc responses to disasters and the annual humanitarian interventions to combat food insecurity. Dependent on funding and assistance from non-state actors, this access to international resources makes DODMA a highly politicised department, particularly in election years. Conceptualising the state not as an empirical entity but as instantiated relationally in daily practices, this thesis details the everyday governance practices of a district-based DODMA officer in a year when national tripartite elections and two large-scale relief interventions coincided. Wondering why the Malawi state is so central to disaster governance despite its lack of resources and actual capacity to deal with them, I explored how district-based civil servants instantiate the Malawi state in this context of dependency, destitution and disaster. How do they navigate the demands placed on them by colleagues, citizens and donors alike?

Drawing on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with civil servants, disaster-affected citizens and humanitarian actors, this thesis departs from understandings of disasters as 'natural' events and challenges linear conceptualisations of their occurrence and management (Chapter 1). Contributing to the anthropology of humanitarianism by focusing on civil servants of the disaster-affected state, this thesis expands the anthropology of the state by detailing how district-based bureaucrats without a dedicated budget line instantiated the state in a time of political turmoil and in the aftermath of Cyclone Idai. Each of the chapters focuses on a different characteristic of governance in Malawi; the centrality of numbers (Chapter 2), decentralised committee structures (Chapter 3), and collaborations with non-state actors (Chapter 4), ultimately suggesting that civil servants' sense of duty (Chapter 5) is central to making these work. In analysing the data production on disaster impacts and the functioning of decentralised disaster governance structures in the form of civil protection committees, I show how the state is instantiated and how both citizens and civil servants try to obtain access to scarce (state) resources. In a context where civil servants feel undervalued and outshined by non-state actors with more resources at their disposal, they continue to feel responsible and citizens continue to direct their calls for help to the state. By describing interactions with displaced citizens during displacement camp visits, food distributions and recovery interventions, I show how civil servants try their best to fulfil their duties under adverse conditions and sometimes at great cost to themselves. In sum, this ethnography thus throws the state itself into relief and shows how civil servants rely on their sense of duty to instantiate the state, which becomes more visible during times of disaster.