

Diplomacy in Times of Disaster: Management through Reputational Capital

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Abstract : The 6.6 magnitude quake event that occurred in 2003 (Bam, Iran) made it impossible for the Iranian government to handle disaster relief efforts domestically. In this extreme event, the Iranian government reached out to the international community, and this created a momentum that had to be carried out by trust-building efforts on all sides, often termed 'Disaster Diplomacy'. Indeed, the circumstances were even more critical when one considers the increasing political and economic isolation of Iran within the international community. The potential for transformative political space to be opened by disaster has been recognized by dominant international political actors. Despite the fact that Bam 2003 post-disaster relief efforts did not catalyze any diplomatic activities on all sides, it is suggested that few international aid agencies have successfully used disaster recovery to enhance their popular legitimacy and reputation among the international community. In terms of disaster diplomacy, an actor's reputational capital may affect his ability to build coalitions and alliances to achieve international political ends, to negotiate and build understanding and trust with foreign publics. This study suggests that the post-disaster setting may benefit from using the ecology of games framework to evaluate the role of bridging actors and mediators in facilitating collaborative governance networks. Recent developments in network theory and analysis provide means of structural embeddedness to explore how reputational capital can be built through brokerage roles of actors engaged in a disaster management network. This paper then aims to structure the relations among actors that participated in the post-disaster relief efforts in the 2003 Bam earthquake (Iran) in order to assess under which conditions actors may be strategically utilized to serve as mediating organizations for future disaster events experienced by isolated nations or nations in conflict. The results indicate the strategic use of reputational capital by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs as key broker to build a successful coordinative system for reducing disaster vulnerabilities. International aid agencies rarely played brokerage roles to coordinate peripheral actors. U.S. foreign assistance (USAID), despite coordination capacities, was prevented from serving brokerage roles in the system.

Keywords : coordination, disaster diplomacy, international aid organizations, Iran

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