Concept Paper

Informal Disaster Diplomacy

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Abstract: This paper develops a baseline and definition for informal disaster diplomacy in order to fill in an identified gap in the existing research. The process adopted is a review of the concept of informality, the application of informality to diplomacy, and the application of informality to disasters and disaster science. The two applications of informality are then combined to outline an informal disaster diplomacy as a conceptual contribution to studies where processes of conflict, peace, and disasters interact. Adding informality into disaster diplomacy provides originality and significance as it has not hitherto been fully examined in this context. This exploration results in insights into disaster, peace, and conflict research through two main contributions. First, the paper recognises that informal disaster diplomacy has frequently been present in disaster diplomacy analyses, but has rarely been explicitly presented, accepted, described, theorised, or analysed. Second, by explaining the presence of and contributions from informality, the discussion assists in re-balancing much of disaster diplomacy research with depth from conflict research, peace research, international relations, and political science.

Keywords: cooperation; diplomacy; disaster risk reduction; disaster response; informality

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1. Informality in Disaster Governance

Governance for peace, conflict, and disasters involves multiple actors across all sectors [1–3]. While many of these actors are accepted and legitimised in some manner, people and organisations often choose to act in disasters, conflict, and peace irrespective of formal frameworks or formal involvement, which is the ethos behind, for instance, some disaster volunteerism [4] and private peace entrepreneurs [5,6]. The lack of formalised relationships in these contexts leads some authors to indicate the possible tenuousness and lack of understanding of these other forms of involvement [7–9]. A gap thus emerges in consolidating and analysing all these aspects and actions with respect to disaster governance.

Disaster governance includes diplomatic activities. Within international relations, diplomacy has been traditionally considered as mainly the realm of professional or accredited state-based actors [10]. Similarly, for disaster-related activities, Waddell [11] long ago warned that, “the appearance of a new generation of experts operating in a new field of specialization” (p. 76) leaves little room for non-experts or ad hoc involvement in an increasingly professionalised field (corroborated more recently by Raungratanaamporn et al. [12]).

However, formal diplomatic approaches are often constrained. In these instances, others can voluntarily step forward or are involuntarily thrust forward for the governance (including the diplomacy) of processes related to peace, conflict, disasters, and the intersection between these subjects. This might be necessary when a disaster affecting a place with violent or non-violent conflict kills many people and destroys institutions that

pursued the end or perpetuation of the conflict, as had occurred, for instance, in Aceh, Indonesia after the December 26, 2004 earthquake and tsunami. Before replacements are found, prospects exist for any actors to step into the gaps, no matter what their level of formality or lack thereof. Theories of formal processes are well-developed and extensively debated, as shown by the material cited throughout this paper.

What happens outside these formal processes is less theorised with respect to peace, conflict, and disasters, indicating a research gap in exploring them for disaster–peace–conflict intersections. Filling this gap would assist in advancing understandings of conflict, peace, disasters, and diplomacy beyond the formal and visible settings and actors. The definition and delineation of beyond formal processes remain nebulous. When considering what is not formal, the adjective 'informal' and the noun 'informality' are the most obvious. Many other non-synonymous phrases, sometimes overlapping and intersecting with formality and sometimes not, are at times applied, including non-formal, unprofessional, non-professional, voluntary, unofficial, non-official, and unorthodox. These are not the same, suggesting the importance of a deeper and broader examination of informality in disaster governance to fill in a gap which has thus far led to vague and scattered renditions of people's involvement that appears core to, yet is typically unrecognised in, disaster-related work, especially within the context of connecting with peace and conflict processes.

As one example of disaster governance, this study focuses on the field of 'disaster diplomacy' which connects disasters, peace, and conflict [13–15]. For disaster diplomacy, this article contributes to filling in the identified research gap of informality by examining the formal approach limitations that have emerged in several empirical case studies (e.g., Cuba–USA [13]; Greece–Turkey [15]; and North Korea–South Korea [16]). These limitations suggest a research problem and task of understanding possibilities and perspectives of informal disaster diplomacy (IDD) as an original and significant contribution to disaster research, conflict research, peace research, international relations, and political science.

In summary, disaster diplomacy investigates how and why disaster-related activities do and do not influence conflict and cooperation. Much of disaster diplomacy work has extensively drawn on disaster-related literature without fully engaging with diplomacy research, international relations, or political science. This paper is situated more within the latter than the former to help redress this imbalance, which has been a problem in disaster diplomacy research. It also ensures an original and significant contribution to all these fields, especially given disaster diplomacy's existing contributions to disaster research. Consequently, this paper: (i) develops a baseline and definition for informal disaster diplomacy in order to fill in an identified gap in the existing work; and (ii) enhances disaster diplomacy by extending it beyond the field's previous highlighting of disaster research. Adding informality to disaster diplomacy provides originality and significance as it has not hitherto been fully examined in this context, and thus this research gap exists to be filled.

The next section reviews the concept of informality, especially in governance, followed by two sections first applying the concept to diplomacy and then to disasters and disaster science. The concluding section combines these thoughts to position IDD as a useful conceptual advancement for studies and practices where processes of conflict, peace, and disasters interact.

2. The Concept of Informality

Defining 'informality' (and its adjective, 'informal') is challenging. Commonly, informality is simply considered to be the antonym of formality and can be defined as the absence of formality, i.e., acts that are not formal or official [17]. This binary view of formality versus informality extends to the following value judgments: good or bad informality; unstructured informality versus structured formality; informality as the embodiment of 'us' versus 'them', the poor or unresourced versus the rich or resourced; valid versus invalid; elusive versus perceptible; vague versus precise; or legal versus illegal [18–23]. This binary also conflates many terms that should not be joined, such as using 'formal' and 'official' as synonyms, sometimes inappropriately extended to 'professional', 'orthodox', and other terms.

Such conceptions of informality (and formality) are simplistic and thread the boundary between negative connotations and romanticism [24,25]. Disciplines in which the concept has made considerable headway defy these simplistic yet persistent dichotomies of informality and formality as separate, distinguishable concepts. Indeed, they are viewed as inaccurate and misleading, ignoring the complexities of informality (and formality); thus, they constitute obsolete conceptualisations [18,20,25–28].

Informality is more complex than just being the 'other', 'alternative', 'less professional', or 'less resourced' approach that is simply not formalised. Rather than a contrast or dichotomy, informality is a phenomenon across the informality–formality spectrum that represents "overlapping and intersecting relations between authorised and unauthorised, or between regulated and unregulated activities" [29]. These activities can have positive or negative connotations, though the latter are generally more pronounced [18]. Informality can be seen both as the problem (because it is unregulated) and as hidden power structures or other practices that entrench marginalisation, violence, poverty, and other deep-seated social issues. However, informality can also be understood as the liberation from that which is inflexible, stifling, hierarchical, and structured, and follows set norms and rules of 'doing'. 'Doing things informally' is perceived as a more 'relaxed' way of providing solutions [18]. Some consider informal practices as useful in the short term, but potentially counterproductive in the long-term as they may lack accountability measures or create unsustainable dependencies [30]. Whatever motivations compel informality, its notions and implementation vary and depend on a myriad of interrelated factors. Difficulties in measuring informality—due to its conceptual fluidity, the many different terms used interchangeably and/or imprecisely, and the complexity and character of unregistered and under-reported informal activities—augment the challenge of reaching a consensus as to its meaning.

What is implied in the above conceptualisation is a focus on informality as 'practices' to 'get things done', often conceived as 'solutions' to 'problems', with, without, in parallel, in spite of, or against formal systems, including legal structures and processes. 'Getting things done', especially in the realm of disasters and diplomacy, depends on informality being understood in two ways: first, as non-instrumental, e.g., small talk, gossip, tacit behaviour; and second, as instrumental, notably as "forms of interaction [in which actors enjoy] relative freedom in interpretation of their roles' requirement" [27] (p. 8). Informality is revealed as a suite of processes beyond the prevailing view of informality as isolated acts or as representing an actor's status [23].

Further, relationships—sometimes collaborative and at other times competitive—are a fundamental dimension of informality. This points to networks of complex underlying power dynamics among interdependent rather than independent actors, further blurring the ostensible lines distinguishing formality from informality [25]. For example, Lomnitz [31] draws on case studies in pre-1970 Chile, Mexico, and the (then) Soviet Union to show that informal activities in the formal sector "are not random or chaotic but are based on informal networks following principles similar to those in shantytown networks: patronage, loyalty, and conzanza (trust)" (p. 42). Hence, informality should not be viewed as a static condition [32] but as intentional or unintentional processes that bridge the informality–formality divide, creating a continuum, and these processes are underpinned by power relations. Viewing informality as a process "opens a new door towards conceptualizing it" (see also: [23,24]).

Additionally, Ledeneva's [18] approach suggests that informality is 'hidden' and simultaneously in plain sight, hinting at informality as 'every-day' usual or unusual practices that are conducted outside of formal structures, contexts, and protocols. In this regard, Kreibich [33] usefully distinguishes between informality "by exclusion", "by fragility", and "as anarchy" to illustrate its varying forms as and when informality becomes a strategy adopted in reaction to failure, weakness, or the absence of formal mechanisms. Conversely, informality is not just a process of reacting but also one of 'being'. Here, informal practices can refer to people's local, habitual, and/or natural modes of action which can either respond to or resist formalisation processes which they may predate [18,34].

The Albanian Kanun system [35,36] and the informality of how certain groups of countries operate at the United Nations [37] constitute examples of such intertwined formal and informal justice systems.

Legitimacy, power, and resources are therefore interrelated key aspects of (understanding) informality [38–40]. Legitimacy can refer to the legality/illegality of informality, though this too cannot be clear-cut. Different degrees of informality exist, as well as levels of acceptance of informality. Some informal actions may be illegal but may be viewed as entirely legitimate at a local level or be tolerated by virtue of the decision-makers' ambivalence towards them [24]. Thus, beyond the judicial sphere, legitimacy embraces all other drivers, meaning that informal actors and structures can flip existing formal relations and structures. They can transgress existing power structures and go beyond local or national borders, to which concepts of para-diplomacy are attested [41,42]. Thus, informality can be seen as a process based on continually renegotiated legitimacy.

This renegotiation of power takes on a larger meaning by virtue of other contemporary trends, predominantly rapid communication, (digital) connectivity, and social networks. As a result, private and public realms of (political) life increasingly overlap, ostensibly blurring informal–formal boundaries. Modern political and social theories especially highlight societal changes whereby empowered individuals and interest groups demand bottom-up co-action beyond passive cooperation, i.e., an active co-defining of issues, but also co-planning, co-designing, co-implementing, and co-managing. Despite a broad consensus that participatory governance frameworks are vital and that embracing "alternative systems of governance [has] the potential to achieve structural improvements", practical solutions as to how to incorporate this 'other path' are not always offered (Watson [43] is an exception in this regard).

Consequently, informality is neither the exception nor a fringe phenomenon on the 'other' side of the continuum [24]. Informality is embedded within the entire continuum of formal and informal actors and actions for governance, of which diplomacy is a subset. Böröcz [44] calls this the 'sea of informality', in which much of social action takes place, with the potential to shape whole societies' (including states') norms and "ways of doing" for generations to come, under even the most "regulated [...] regimes of collective behaviour" (pp. 351–353). The term is thus linked with understanding the social and cultural complexity as informality is tightly intertwined with concepts of 'us vs. them', non-conformity, resistance, and political opposition, and thus is linked with decoupling from prevalent power structures, or sociability and instrumentality.

Overall, seeking a universal definition for informality is an inherently flawed process; defining it may indeed not be possible, nor even the ultimate goal. Rather, it must be understood as a framework of strategic processes underpinned by perceptions, desires, and power relations while being dynamically influenced by relational, contextual, historical, and other factors. Instead of unequivocally defining who and what is informal, more focus is needed on the nuances of informality from across disciplines. Some academic fields have begun to unpack this supposedly enigmatic or ephemeral concept; disaster, peace, and conflict research could follow suit, as per this paper's contribution. Otherwise, the continued dominance of 'formal' narratives results in incomplete analyses of governance and hence of diplomacy.

3. Informality in Diplomacy

To ensure that informality is fully incorporated into analyses of diplomacy including disaster diplomacy, this section applies informality to diplomacy. Again, by being defined as what it is not, informal diplomacy is typically referred to as diplomatic activities that are not formally mandated, tending to operate with limited formality, systematisation, or structure. This phenomenon is not new and has been recognised through work aiming to categorize subnational actors, such as private and public, governmental and nongovernmental, or professional and nonprofessional.

Davidson and Montville [45] distinguish Track One diplomacy (meaning official diplomatic actors) and Track Two diplomacy (meaning unofficial diplomacy actors). Diamond and McDonald [1] expand into multi-track diplomacy, proposing nine separate categories: (i) government; (ii) nongovernment/professional; (iii) business; (iv) private citizens; (v) research, training, and education; (vi) activism/advocacy; (vii) religion; (viii) funding; and (ix) communications/media. While recognizing the blurring of the line between who and what might be formal or informal actors or processes, many long-standing phenomena with formal and informal elements exist:

- Para-diplomacy, micro-diplomacy, and proto-diplomacy: loosely defined as diplomacy conducted by non-sovereign government entities, such as municipalities, counties, provinces, states, and territories. The three terms overlap, although some theorists differentiate them; others are less concerned about delineating fundamental differences.
- Cultural diplomacy, arts diplomacy, sports diplomacy, and religious diplomacy: diplomatic activities carried out by people and organisations involved in these activities, such as performers, authors, artists, sports players, and religious leaders.
- Health diplomacy and science diplomacy: diplomatic activities carried out by people and organisations involved in these activities, such as doctors, nurses, researchers, and professors.
- Grassroots diplomacy: diplomatic activities carried out by people during their everyday, regular lives, such as through tourism, social media and online interactions, and daily work and community activities.

Jones [46] examined the importance of Track Two approaches and delved into how formal approaches often bypass or downplay informal approaches.

Specific examples of these theories have been evidenced as far back as antiquity [47] (p. 147). Application continued throughout the Middle Ages with, for instance, the religious practices of missionaries in foreign communities, the cultural encounters of explorers, merchants' trading networks, and the political networks of intermediaries [48]. Lehrs [5] provided a long history of private peace entrepreneurs and their role in drama and reality, demonstrating the widespread nature of private individuals engaging in diplomacy, often against the official advice and interests of their government. Similarly, Manela [49] discussed Cold War era informal efforts by the United States and the Soviet Union to cooperate on the World Health Organisation's Smallpox Eradication Programme, highlighting the role of health diplomacy and specialised non-state actors in an increasingly interconnected world.

In political science and international relations, the possibility of non-state actors being involved in the international scene was raised by Keohane and Nye [50], who introduced 'transgovernmental interactions' to refer to direct interactions between governmental subunits "of different governments where those agencies act relatively autonomously from central governmental control" and 'transnational interactions', which refers to the "interactions across the border in which at least one actor is nongovernmental" (p. 596). Recently, Lehrs [6] also highlighted informal non-state actors, especially in connection with state actors acting informally for three peace and conflict processes: the Provisional IRA and the UK, the African National Congress and South Africa, and Hamas and Israeli intelligence. Meanwhile, Tronvoll [51] explained how people on either side of the Ethiopia–Eritrea border overcame manufactured stereotypes by their governments to enact their own cross-border people-to-people diplomacy and post-conflict reconciliation.

Miles [52] reminds us not to treat states—and by extension any organisation—as monolithic actors, but to specify which parts "are being treated as actors [which may include] national executives, bureaucracies, legislatures, political parties, military organizations, and particular families and individuals". Although at the time such testimony of the importance of the individual on policy outcomes was relatively rare in the field of international relations, it was not new (e.g., [53,54]); however, the individuals considered were sometimes acting formally on behalf of governments. Nevertheless, despite allowing space in the international arena for other actors, the view remained that the state system,

which others either reported to, or were directed by, was the most important and influential 'actor'. Consequently, an inconsistency emerges: the scholars attest to the existence of actions of non-traditional actors in the international arena and their considerable influence on the national and international policies of their governments, while at the same time maintaining the primacy of state-centric models to "explain most of interaction which occurs [with merely] the adequacy of this model [being] tempered" [52] (p. 607).

Some aspects of this informality were brought into para-diplomacy and are defined as the "personal and parallel diplomacy complementing or competing with the regular foreign policy of the government" [55] (p. 13). This early definition seems to encompass what later work has been criticised for lacking: the inclusion of nongovernmental or societal actors. These were later discussed by Derian [56]. Discounting the Westphalian notion of diplomacy as limited to states, Derian's [56] discussion was influential in introducing the possibility of non-state actors as diplomatic agents who blur the territorial boundaries of inside/outside or domestic/foreign [57].

Global trends have supported a deeper theorisation of informal diplomacy beyond more formal constructs such as para-diplomacy, micro-diplomacy, and proto-diplomacy. The widening rich–poor gap has weakened existing power networks in society—especially those around the state—and created opportunities for non-traditional actors to enter diplomatic activity [58]. The same period witnessed both a trend and increasing calls for the decentralisation of state activity. Soldatos [59] described these changes in terms of the countervailing force of regionalisation, which he documented in Europe over several decades. Much of this literature retains a bias towards the nation-state as the central actor in the international domain. Kincaid [60], for instance, accused some early scholars of treating aspects of informal diplomacy as inferior to classical state-driven diplomacy and prefers the "neutral descriptor" of "constituent diplomacy" (p. 74). Instead of referring to a singular diplomacy form, Cornago [61] suggests 'plural diplomacies' being at play as the range of actors that are active in the international arena expands. These changes have been bolstered by technological progress. Without instantaneous communication technologies, powerful computers, the Internet, and satellite technology, the influence and coordination of informal diplomatic actors would be far diminished at the global scale (e.g., [62]).

Similarly, and in line with different forms of decentralisation [63], overlaps between informal and formal diplomacy start to be acknowledged when considering the multiplicity of diplomacy actors as expressed by multi-track diplomacy. Further examples are supra- or transnational regimes (e.g., the European Union and African Union), professional organisations, and terrorists or other criminal networks. The challenges in labelling each one as 'formal', 'informal', or 'both' thus become evident, exacerbated by these activities moving well beyond the 'elite culture' of diplomacy [64,65].

This work demonstrates the general terminological disarray concerning informal diplomacy. As the influence of the nation-state potentially wanes, with wider forms of devolution, autonomy, and territorialism taking hold, the lines of diplomacy become increasingly melded, requiring further analysis to decouple each one's level of influence. These denominational struggles and the plethora of terms used to describe informality in diplomacy may have hindered the recognition of its significance. Whether or not all the terms and notions should be reconciled and are reconcilable remains an open question, which is part of the ongoing investigations into informality in diplomacy.

4. Informality in Disasters and Disaster Science

Dealing with disasters is often assumed to be the responsibility of formal disaster governance (FDG) systems consisting of governmental and nongovernmental agencies, NGOs, or emergency responders (ambulance, police, and fire departments) [4]. Others emphasise informal disaster efforts and the importance of 'local', 'citizen', or 'community' actors as core aspects of disaster governance, leading to the recent development of informal disaster governance (IDG) [66]. This attempt to highlight informal approaches nonetheless has a long tradition, albeit informality is predominantly implied rather than explicitly

conceptualised. Particularly, earlier disaster science tackled informality in disasters through the concepts of 'self-help', 'mutual aid', 'convergence', 'volunteerism', or 'emergence' while also recognising that these are not necessarily the same, generally displaying overlaps with and divergences from each other. These activities can be conducted alone with the help of emergency resources from family or friends (thus contingent on pre-existing relationships) or with the help of others around the actor [4,67–70].

To exemplify, Puerto Ricans conducted intense personal and community efforts following Hurricane Maria in 2017 and more recently during COVID-19, when formal authorities would not come forward [71]. Parthasarathy [72] emphasised how marginalised informal actors played a central role during the 2005 Mumbai floods due to their access to key networks, industries, and resourcefulness, which enabled them to offer fast low-cost solutions necessary for the city's recovery. Not only were these actors the first on the scene, but in the absence of FDG efforts, they were vital to relief and recovery efforts in Mumbai's more affluent neighbourhoods. Parthasarathy [72] (p. 551) thus concluded that FDG needs to change to include "more imaginative disaster mitigation and management strategies that recognise the role of informal sector workers [actors] in post-disaster resilience".

However, Soto [71] cautions against reducing such informal disaster-related efforts to slogans about resilience or strength. Instead, informal efforts can entail demanding engagement with, and accountability for, the FDG: "these mutual aid efforts do not—and should not—replace the state's obligation to its people" [71] (p. 304). Informal efforts pushed to formal governance tiers may produce more equitable ways of dealing with disasters [72–75]. Particularly, informal efforts to press FDG entities to prevent disasters and reduce their impacts are of key importance; however, pressing for FDG action "to reduce disaster risks [is] a rarity and community-based organizations, particularly in resource-poor municipalities, generally respond to more pressing day-to-day concerns" [74] (p. 156). Local efforts, many of which are informal or are informally started, tend to be more successful in small municipalities, presumably due to closer interaction and relationships between non-formal and formal actors [74] (pp. 165–167).

Given the importance of pre-existing relationships, expectations of others are implied, including those in formal organisations, creating a nexus between "ordinary citizens' performance, [. . .] and by those who are formally constituted to deal with emergencies" [67] (p. 16). Form and Nosow [67] further point to formal organisations' lack of understanding of local realities and subsequent "inappropriate" disaster-related activities, which may disrupt self-help patterns rather than reinforce them (pp. 19–20). Young [70] provides an early example with respect to post-disaster shelter whereby peoples' overwhelming preference for staying together and family-based assistance/housing were ignored, and disaster-affected families were separated in the name of the formal 'women and children first' policies.

The principle of self-help and related denominations highlight active and pro-social disaster behaviour while challenging popular myths of disasters as scenes of passive victims, chaos, and disorganisation [69,76,77]. Subsequent disaster research has contributed valuable insights by distinguishing such informality into concepts such as convergence, volunteerism, and emergence, noting that all three also intersect with FDG. Convergence refers to the movement of external people, information, and goods to the disaster area that can be anxiety-, help-, curiosity-, or gain-motivated [76,78,79]. Disaster convergence can be seen as a valuable resource that requires FDG integration or can sometimes be seen as a "hindrance to organized relief efforts" [76] (p. 3)—for instance, by further overloading logistic, communication, and transportation infrastructure.

By extension, disaster convergence is related to the subsequent concept of disaster emergence [80]. According to Stallings and Quarantelli [69], emergent groups are characterised by informal structures and flat hierarchies and are likely to engage in tasks such as damage assessment, operations, or coordination. Whittaker, McLennan, and Handmer [4] noted that these groups' activities may pre-date disasters or exceed them, making the use of 'emergence', with its meaning being 'ad hoc and unorganised', problematic, at least in

cases of disaster-related activities which imply a certain anticipation and a priori (strategic) organisation. In response, formal organisations may reject, ignore, or attempt to incorporate the emergent actors and efforts into more formal disaster-related systems, which are sometimes labelled as disaster volunteerism. In their review of emergency and disaster volunteerism, Whittaker, McLennan, and Handmer [4] found common (Western) definitions of volunteerism, typically understood "as deliberately chosen and planned, long-term activities that are undertaken through formal organisations" (p. 361) to be restrictive and unable to fully encompass informal activities in disasters. Attempts to unpack volunteerism in disasters exist, pointing to the varied and contextual nature of actors, activities, and motivations (e.g., [81,82]). However, there is a tendency to define volunteerism in disaster contexts as "participation in the activities of state or other organisations with whom the volunteer is formally affiliated" [4] (p. 361).

Cultural underpinnings may challenge understandings of volunteerism. Current Western understandings of volunteering as activities 'by choice' sit uneasy with other cultures' realities [4] (p. 360). In Bhutan or for New Zealand's Māori population, for example, volunteering activities extend to citizens' intergenerational commitment or social contract—a responsibility by which these activities become essentially non-optional but culturally expected [83,84]. As such, they have clear culturally formal aspects.

The emergence of this variety of perspectives on informality has led disaster science to become filled with numerous concepts and discussions of (or at least related to) informal forms of disaster-related activities (see also [66]). Irrespective of the different foci that have developed across disaster science that deal with informality, there is a consensus amongst disaster science scholars that informal actors in disasters are not only prevalent but crucial to FDG success. Paradoxically, informal actors and action are still rarely incorporated into FDG [85], revealing the continued binary and purely functionalist view of IDG, as well as the prevalent narrative of IDG that is FDG-centred and upheld by dominant power structures.

5. Towards Informal Disaster Diplomacy

Throughout this paper, the dominance of the 'formal' narrative in both disasters and diplomacy has been discussed, including its limitations and critiques. Common to these critiques is the idea that disaster-related activities and diplomacy do not, and should not, only happen on the formal level. As previous sections have revealed, this statement is not new. However, despite the many varying approaches and concepts dealing with (elements of) informality in disasters and diplomacy, the dominance of so-called 'formal' actors and actions endures. Disaster diplomacy is an example.

Thus far, theoretical and empirical research on disaster diplomacy tends to use case studies involving formal actors, typically supranational actors such as the United Nations, national actors such as sovereign states and autonomous country governments, and subnational actors such as in para-diplomacy, proto-diplomacy, and micro-diplomacy. Other forms of multi-track diplomacy have occasionally been addressed, but rarely in detail and with limited theoretical backing from peace and conflict studies [86,87]. The perennial secondary status of 'informal' actors and action may be explained, in part, by the complex and often contradictory nature of informality. Formality, and by extension informality, simultaneously exist as artificially constructed statuses, as well as a fluid spectrum. Informal action and actors can be formalised, and informality is present within and between formal entities.

The absence of a clear and accepted definition for informality in both disasters and diplomacy may also play a role, as illustrated in the previous sections. Without conceptual clarity, informal actors and action lack a voice. Thus, we suggest the framework of informal disaster diplomacy (IDD) to encompass and streamline the many definitions discussed in the previous sections. IDD refers to individuals, groups, and actions that, despite not being officially mandated, engage in disaster risk reduction and response activities with direct or indirect diplomatic ramifications. Fundamentally, rather than being an opposite to 'formal', or simply what is not formal, IDD is about people developing their own roles

and pursuing their own actions with diplomatic consequences, irrespective of official, expected, or defined positions and mandates. We refer to IDD as a 'framework' rather than a concept to emphasize the need to connect between the many already existing concepts (long-standing and emerging), theories, and practices. This paper thus moves disaster diplomacy work forward and contributes to filling a gap in peace and conflict research by providing the needed foundation for IDD.

Conceptually, IDD entails going beyond the simplistic rhetoric of formal versus informal, of informal as non-formal, or of top-down versus bottom-up approaches for disaster diplomacy. Informality and formality do not represent discrete, separate bubbles. They sit on a continuum and overlap significantly with different levels of formality and informality interacting, rather than being either exclusively formal or informal. A formal entity can act informally; the status of an actor or action can change, and informal activities can have the power to affect formal structures. Thus, embracing the role of informality and the nuance that accompanies it 'completes' the picture of disaster diplomacy.

By applying this lens, instances of IDD research emerge, albeit not always being considered as such. Examples for which some literature exists include the disarmament and banning of landmines [88,89], the ultimately unsuccessful women's activism during World War I [90], and citizen efforts to "create positive human relations across the deadly boundaries of [Syria and] the Middle East" [91] (p. 137). Morrison [92] examined places of refuge for ships in distress and highlighted the need for further and alternative solutions, such as a regional approach—vis-à-vis traditionally national and international approaches—and similarly for pollution prevention, namely oil spills. In this context, the influence on international law of regional arrangements was discussed, blurring the lines between what is formalised and what is not [92].

Many of the case studies are interpreted as disaster para-diplomacy, but the constructs much more clearly coalesce as forms of IDD as well as informal–formal mixes. Concerning climate change, one recent example is the youth activists involved in the school strike for climate (or Climate Strike, Fridays for Future, and other incarnations (e.g., [93]) where individuals became prominent personalities, including at formal international climate change negotiations, yet were never seen to represent anything except for themselves [94].

Comparatively, Ker-Lindsay [15] described grassroots influences pushing forward Greece–Turkey relations after the 1999 earthquake; Glantz [13] argued that Cuba–USA connections for weather and climate occurred almost exclusively through informal scientific connections, often deliberately not informing formal channels so that the science diplomacy could succeed; Gong [95] provided examples of China supporting informal responses following disasters in the Philippines and Indonesia. IDD thus appears in the literature, but has never been systematically examined, leaving a gap in understanding the different ways in which peace and conflict are and are not affected by disaster-related work. This paper seeks to redress this research gap, particularly by drawing more on peace and conflict research, international relations, and political science than has been previously considered in much of disaster diplomacy work. In terms of originality and significance, this paper offers a baseline and definition for empirically examining informality within disaster diplomacy. The studies mentioned that use examples interpreted as disaster para-diplomacy indicate the empirical methods that could be used for investigating IDD examples. This empirical work should then, in turn, test and refine the baseline and definition provided here for IDD.

This approach and framing are needed as, for disaster diplomacy, states are becoming increasingly woven together in webs of interdependent relationships with other states, businesses, NGOs, interest groups, the media, and individuals. People without formal disaster-related or diplomacy-related positions often lead these initiatives, from online activism to street protests and other modes of collective action (e.g., [96] for the Pacific region). Global disasters illustrate events such as the closing of U.S. airspace to commercial flights after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the 2010 eruption of the Icelandic volcano stopping most European air traffic, and the COVID-19 pandemic starting in 2020.

All of these led to citizens becoming stranded elsewhere when their home country closed its borders, with consequent local-to-international responses to support them formally and informally. Decisions made by one country or within a wider region can affect a wide proportion of the world while non-state actors such as private philanthropists and multinational corporations deal with larger amounts of money than many countries. In 2020, individuals such as Keira Knightley and Greta Thunberg tried to drive the climate change agenda of many countries while Bill and Melinda Gates aimed to support coronavirus vaccine development. Trying to label such disaster-related efforts as exclusively either informal or formal diplomacy is fraught with difficulties and might not serve any useful purpose.

As a longer-term example from a health, peace, and conflict angle, since Fidel Castro's 1959 takeover of Cuba, the country has used medical and health diplomacy by sending trained healthcare staff worldwide [97]. They represent themselves as professional individuals for the ethos of providing healthcare to those in need, regardless of the recipient. They also represent the government of Cuba seeking allies, promoting its political ideology, and bringing income or goods back to Cuba. Formal and informal diplomacies mesh. Parallel situations are (informally) described by medical humanitarian workers in Afghanistan; they are locally asked to treat sick individuals associated with the Taliban, even travelling to areas deemed to be insecure. Their employer and/or their organisation's donors label the Taliban as terrorists, forbidding travel to the locations, instead telling sick people to come to the formal medical facility, typically located in a place out-of-bounds for the Taliban. Some medical staff nonetheless respond to the call to travel to the person requiring treatment, arguing that it is their duty to treat and that it might build friendly connections.

These 'networked polities' [98] affect the way formal disaster diplomacy operates, especially as states rely on networks to both enact and implement policy [99]. They might sometimes 'steer' the collection of actors in certain directions, rather than dictating a specific direction [100]. Informally involving multiple actors for disaster-related activities has further connections with practices developed for managing conflict resolutions [101]. Gradual incremental change involving support and investment by non-state actors or networks [91] can lead to results—including a combination of financing and facilitation by national governments, international bodies, NGOs, or private individuals—which again shows how informality and formality are on a continuum or spectrum rather than being dichotomies or opposites. These actors are informal and formal, raising two points with regards to the relevance of IDD.

First, representations and definitions of 'diplomacy' emerge. Communication and cooperation must represent the interests of a group of people to be considered 'diplomatic' or interested in 'diplomacy'. Otherwise, on whose behalf does the diplomacy occur, and between whom is the diplomacy being sought through disaster-related activities? Second, following on from communication and cooperation, diplomacy entails negotiation. For instance, much of the communication among different groups—including for disaster diplomacy—is the given value based on knowledge and information exchange, such as Kontar's [102] description of American and Russian disaster-related science diplomacy in the Arctic. Negotiation acts between two or more parties tend to imply both informal exchanges among individuals representing the parties simultaneously with some level of formalisation to determine, document, and finalise agreements (e.g., [103] for climate change), potentially obviating possibilities for both 'purely' informal and 'purely' formal disaster diplomacy.

Nonetheless, many disaster diplomacy cases are exactly the scenarios where diplomacy is forced to account for non-state actors. Irrespective of government-based rules, regulations, and guidance at any governance level, local people must be involved for disaster-related activities to succeed (e.g., [85,104]). Scott [105] demonstrated this point by analysing centrally designed and managed social policies, including for disasters and development. Scott [105] found that policies especially aimed at large-scale interventions can fail because they ignore local knowledge and rely on formal epistemic knowledge, which represents only a slice of local realities that interest the official or formal observers and actors. Meanwhile,

Heaslip and Barber [106] examined joint civil–military disaster responses, which led to questions about differentiating between civilians and military and ascribing formality or informality to them, especially in instances where paramilitaries and pro-government non-state actors are involved. These examples spanning disasters, peace, and conflict indicate how IDD can be used to bypass governments and other formal institutions which might have limited interest in disaster-related activities.

However, IDD and other informal mechanisms might support or cause problematic outcomes, such as the previously mentioned issue of governments trying to absolve themselves of responsibilities for assisting people because the people are 'resilient'. Informal approaches might undermine successful formal ones because a groundswell of support emerges for war—e.g., the ongoing situation in Syria [107,108]—or for denying post-disaster aid to certain groups. For the latter, Oliver-Smith [109] showed how disasters sometimes increase prejudice against some people, a process happening at the grassroots, informal level by the majority or dominant group.

Thus, informality cannot, and should not, be seen in the theological context of a panacea vis-à-vis 'dysfunctional' formal structures. Informal efforts are subject to 'dark sides', many of which are shared with FDG. Both are characterised by imbalanced distributions of power—a driving force in disasters—where survival, resource limitation, and competition can play an even greater role than in everyday life, testing loyalties and mandates [75]. Powerful players, even ministers within formal institutions of elected government, can have strong incentives to steer institutional design and actions towards higher levels of informality to suit their own vested interests. Personal friendship between the Greek and Turkish foreign ministers in 1999 may have assisted both countries in pursuing rapprochement in the wake of post-earthquake mutual aid [15]; however, what if their relationship had been hostile instead, steering the two nations towards conflict?

Any form of disaster governance, including disaster diplomacy, can produce unintended path dependencies or adverse impacts, implying that caution is inevitably warranted. Presenting these drawbacks is particularly important for informal action, as a lack of focused attention on the topic may not have resulted in the same countermeasures applied to FDG. Informality has as much potential as FDG to result in harmful or less positive outcomes and could benefit from lessons drawn from FDG and related formal mechanisms.

Issues of power and responsibility then start to emerge. How much responsibility for disaster diplomacy should lie within informal actors, and how much responsibility will formal actors permit them to have? In disaster science, scholars have long pointed to the importance of self-directed, local action [110]. People are described as having been, for the most part, responsible for coping for themselves in calamities, being supported by kin and community because local approaches are paramount [e.g., 85,104]. The development of FDG mechanisms aimed at shifting perceptions of disasters (and dealing with them) from being framed as acts of deities or nature to the realm of governmental and organisational responsibility.

Wolensky and Miller's [111] study of the role of citizens compared to local FDG viewed this tension as the root of disappointment. People can expect and wait for FDG action, but when FDG does not meet these expectations, perceptions of FDG ineffectiveness emerge. However, formal institutions cannot tackle all aspects of disasters themselves. Additionally, they might be involved for the sake of power rather than for helping people. Recognition is needed that formal (disaster) governance systems are not, and cannot be, the 'deus ex machina' they are sometimes expected to be [112,113]; therefore, it is a lesson that applies to formal disaster diplomacy as part of FDG. Whether or not FDG or formal diplomacy wants it, increased recognition of the importance of informality within disasters, diplomacy, and hence disaster diplomacy, is needed. IDD, both the positive and negative aspects, permit this consideration.

Some scholars worry that these attitudes—and any deliberate shifting of responsibility from formal to informal—increases the burden on disaster-affected populations while specifically absolving FDG from responsibility, including that of providing resources and

expertise [114,115]. Informal actors' level of involvement must be carefully augmented, or such a shift could problematically imply that people's failure to deal with disasters is exclusively due to their own or their community's failings, culture, or "attitudes of indifference" [116] (p. 347). People's wish to be active partners in disaster diplomacy should not translate into a refusal of equally active FDG leadership and responsibility [111]. A more balanced distribution of responsibility for disaster diplomacy needs to be further explored, particularly to avoid disproportionately shifting responsibility to either informal or formal actors. Rather, further mechanisms for working together and supporting each other through disaster diplomacy processes would be needed. Few studies explore the distribution of power and responsibility between formal and informal actors for disaster diplomacy, and even fewer do so from an empirical basis.

Quantitative analyses might be useful, for instance, for coding informal actors in disaster, peace, and conflict situations to map out their influences and compare these actors with the standard, coded formal actors; this would make it possible to ascertain the influence of different levels of informality and formality in disaster diplomacy instances, as well as their interactions. Svensson and Lindgren [117] provided an example of the methods and databases available that could be applied to both internal and external informal actors. Such work would complement the long-established qualitative disaster research, demonstrating that individual-level post-disaster violent activity such as looting, panic, and social unrest are the exception rather than the rule [77,118].

These approaches could apply, empirically test, and refine the conceptualisation and definition of IDD presented in this paper to understand, explain, and more clearly and more explicitly project the full suite of actors involved in pursuing or inhibiting disaster diplomacy processes. New actors might be brought to light who were previously hidden, or it might be shown that few avoid formality entirely. Comparisons between different levels of formality and informality in disaster diplomacy are important to see whether a tendency towards one or the other leads to more disaster-related pacifying or conflictual outcomes. Is informality such as through IDD important in its own right for influencing peace and conflict, or is it only important in comparison to formality including formal disaster diplomacy? Do disasters inhibit or destroy formal mechanisms more than informal mechanisms when people are killed and the infrastructure is destroyed? Does the balance of formal compared to informal mechanisms that have been affected then influence peace and conflict in different ways?

There is no doubt that informality in disaster diplomacy exists, has a major influence, and is documented in different forms. IDD has nonetheless not always been explicitly presented, accepted, described, theorised, or analysed. This paper fills in this gap by starting from the foundations of informality theories and exploring them in the context of diplomacy and then disasters, in order to bring them together to explain the presence, importance, and applicability of IDD. By doing so, it offers a baseline and definition for informal disaster diplomacy so that an identified gap in existing work can be filled. It also enhances disaster diplomacy by extending it beyond the field's previous highlighting of disaster research into a much deeper engagement with peace and conflict research, international relations, and political science. In doing so, it supports the concepts and practices of disaster diplomacy much better to set the stage for more exploration regarding the complicated interactions pervading disaster, diplomacy, and disaster diplomacy processes.

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