

# **Regional and ethnic favoritism in the allocation of humanitarian aid**

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International humanitarian aid is pivotal in the response to natural disasters suffered by low- and middle-income countries. While its allocation has been shown to be influenced by donors' foreign policy considerations, subnational determinants at the *recipient* level have not been addressed. This paper is the first to investigate the role of regional and ethnic favoritism in the formation of humanitarian aid flows. We construct a novel dataset containing the geographic distribution of ethnic groups within countries with a high number of natural disasters building on census (IPUMS) and Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) data. Using data on 5,189 rapid-onset natural disasters that have hit 38 countries over the 1964-2015 period, we investigate how ethnic and regional favoritism shape the allocation of aid. To address causality, we test whether disasters hitting regions that are currently not powerful but will become powerful in the near future receive similar treatment compared to disasters hitting currently powerful regions. Comparing these two types of disasters, any unobserved characteristics of powerful regions that do not vary over a very short time frame is controlled for. We find some evidence that the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) disburses more humanitarian aid when regions hit by disasters are populated by politically powerful or discriminated ethnicities. The results further strongly suggest that birth regions of the countries' leaders receive aid more frequently. Our findings imply that humanitarian aid is not given for humanitarian reasons alone, but also serves elite interests within the countries affected by disasters.

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