This book focuses on how and why disaster-related activities do and do not yield diplomatic gains, looking mainly at disaster-related activities affecting diplomacy rather than the reverse (Kelman 2006a). It is an area of study that has emerged from the umbrella scholarship of disaster research in the 2000s. It has since then not only gained momentum within its mother field but also stirred interest across a wide range of disciplines including geography, political science, and international affairs. Furthermore, the increasing academic attention for disaster diplomacy has been spurred by a few high-profile cases that recently made the media headlines. These include the drought spanning the border of Ethiopia and Eritrea in the early 2000s, the 2004 tsunami and its alleged impact on conflicts and peace processes in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, and hurricane Katrina in 2005 and its effects on US relationships with “enemy” countries.

Ilan Kelman has been the main proponent of the disaster diplomacy research. This book summarises more than ten years of research and careful documentation of events, processes, and diplomatic outcomes that were, until the publication of this book, compiled only in isolated papers and on the disaster diplomacy website: www.disasterdiplomacy.org. This book is therefore a welcome academic synthesis of the state of our knowledge on how disasters affect peace and conflicts. It is meant to be both a reference volume for academic libraries and a document dedicated to help policy makers and practitioners in making science-informed decisions when dealing with disasters in a conflict-torn region.

The book is small (174 pages inclusive of references), easy to read, and straightforward in its argument. It includes 12 short sections that flow well and in a logical manner. It thus caters well to a non-academic audience while still capturing the attention of the scholarly readership by the rigour and thoroughness of the argumentation—Ilan Kelman’s trademark. The bibliography is rich and stems from an array of fields and subfields of research, although the author acknowledges a definite bias towards the “disaster” side of the topic at the relative detriment of its “diplomacy” counterpart.

The disaster diplomacy framework as presented in this book also neglects the broad field humanitarian studies, which would have provided interesting additional insights and theoretical framing. Many authors (e.g., de Waal 1997; Cuny 1999) have indeed addressed how long-term aid and short-term relief operations in time of famines or armed conflicts may exacerbate tensions or support peace. The Do No Harm approach suggested by Anderson (1999) may in fact very well constitute a proto-disaster diplomacy framework for policy makers and practitioners, which would deserve attention because it similarly draws upon a good range of case studies and empirical materials.

Still, this small book stands out by the comprehensiveness with which it addresses the topic under scrutiny. It provides the latest theoretical framing and interpretation of a large
set of empirical data. These include a significant range of case studies from all over the globe, which are all discussed in specific subsections. These examples cover a wide range of disaster diplomacy—international, intra-state, para-diplomacy, and environmental diplomacy. Some readers may regret that these case studies are not detailed but this lack of detail is the price to pay for a small and concise book that will likely speak to practitioners and policy makers who may not have the same appetite for details as academics.

In fact, the empirical materials supplied in this book provide ample evidence that the potential for disasters to foster peace should not be overestimated, nor it should be neglected. Kelman shows that disasters and post-disaster recovery offer a range of pathways for diplomacy but these are actually rarely pursued in the long term. Short-term gains in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, during relief operations, are indeed often overcome by long-lasting and structural social, economic, and political issues underpinning the conflict. In addition, when positive outcomes such as those following the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia have been observed, these are as much associated to pre-disaster negotiations as to the disaster itself. Disasters therefore serve as catalysts for diplomacy rather than key factors for initiating peace talks. In that sense, the present book debunks a myth often put forward by the media.

Disaster Diplomacy is not limited to the foregoing argument, which has, in fact, already been discussed in a series of papers by Kelman and others (e.g., Kelman and Koukis 2000; Kelman 2006a, b; Kelman and Conrich 2011). It advances the debate around disaster diplomacy by making concrete recommendations for policy and practice. Four key lessons that have already or may be taken into account for enhancing both disaster and aid policies and diplomacy are suggested. Those straightforward lessons include “be ready for assistance offers from enemies”, “all diplomacy tracks can be useful”, “disaster diplomacy operates at many levels” and “lessons should be implemented, not forgotten”. Kelman provides an insightful discussion for each of these lessons through concrete examples of existing policies, as in the case of New Zealand. Here, though, reference to, and maybe integration of, Anderson’s Do No Harm approach would have provided further practical insights for policy makers and practitioners providing aid in conflict-torn areas.

The book closes with a critical assessment of its limitations and those of the whole disaster diplomacy framework. Kelman notably confronts early criticisms raised by Yim et al. (2009, p. 291)—the lack of operational definition for disaster diplomacy, the difficulties in assessing success and failure, the absence of recommendations for policy, and training programme for practitioners. He suggests ways for overcoming some of these limitations, such as the use of quantitative approaches, while reflecting upon the actual shortcomings of the disaster diplomacy framework, especially its operational validity. In fact, the closing section of the book provides a clear and appealing agenda for further research to fill in these gaps in knowledge and practice. It particularly invites scholars of different disciplines as well as practitioners to engage in further research to overcome three main gaps: 1) to understand people’s motivations and decision making in cases of disaster diplomacy, 2) to make disaster diplomacy actually work, and 3) expand academic knowledge beyond the field of disaster studies.

In summary, Disaster Diplomacy is a concise but excellent and stimulating book that provides a very useful synthesis of our current knowledge in a new area of research.
within the field of disaster studies. Its format and scope further makes it relevant and helpful for policy makers and practitioners of disaster risk reduction, disaster management, humanitarian response, and international diplomacy.

References


