TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

CONFLICT AND CLIMATE: A RISK FACTOR FOR AFRICA?

A June 2019 article published in *Nature* examines the relationship between armed conflict and climate change. Risk factors including increasingly scarce natural resources, lack of security, and low state governance capabilities will worsen the already challenging conditions faced by the most vulnerable communities. To counteract the fallout, global, political and individual action will be critical.

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An explicit linear relationship between climate change and the risk of armed conflict has not yet been established; thus far, causal linkages or an unambiguous association between the two phenomena, including in terms of inter-African conflicts, have also not been ascertained.

Even so, under some circumstances climate-induced changes can undoubtably exacerbate risk factors for armed conflict, thereby leading to new outbreaks and/or worsening existing situations. For example, water scarcity and droughts, as well as other extreme weather phenomena including hurricanes and floods, can negatively impact food security, particularly that of the most vulnerable families and communities. And the increasing scarcity of natural resources such as forests and grazing land can spur unbridled local competition which, in the absence of appropriate governing mechanisms, may in turn trigger uncontrollable effects in terms of domestic migration, social unrest and worsening public health; we have already seen the latter phenomenon in Somalia and Nigeria[1].

With their histories of violence and chronic poverty, the most fragile African nations are the most susceptible to such situations. The Climate Vulnerability Index (CVI), which assesses the climate change vulnerability of communities, shows that all but one of the world's ten most vulnerable states are in Africa, including South Sudan, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo[2].

As a recent article in *Time* points out, the climate vulnerability of these countries goes hand in hand with some of the world's highest population growth rates, a combination that could further fuel existing phenomena such as mass migrations and refugee crises[2]. By 2050 the number of people living in the most at-risk country, the Central African Republic, is projected to grow 77%, with more than 600,000 people already displaced since 2013 and some 3 million in need of humanitarian assistance.

A valuable summary study by a panel of experts and published in *Nature* magazine[3] provides an assessment of the relationship between climate and conflict. The experts agree that while climate affects armed conflict in vulnerable settings, others drivers including lack of security, low state capabilities and social and economic inequality are significantly more influential. They also suggest that unless appropriate measures are taken, climate change will likely amplify the risk of armed conflict in the future, estimating a 13% probability in the event of a global mean temperature increase of 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels and a 26% probability in the event of an increase of 4 degrees Celsius.

The impact of climate change is certain to grow, with consequences that are difficult to predict but clearly significant enough that we should not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead.

What can be done, then, to lower the risk of conflict? Possible interventions should take place on two separate but parallel planes. At the global level we need to work to reduce inequalities and promote peace processes by strengthening local institutions, consolidating education and healthcare welfare networks, developing social and economic capabilities on the ground and, last but not least, preventing and mitigating the environmental impact of climate change. At an individual and local level, we need to actively commit to a serious, concrete climate change agenda. Indeed, according to the World Bank, while the average inhabitant of sub-Saharan Africa produces around 0.8 metric tons of CO2 a year, the average European produces 6.4 and average U.S. citizen 16.5. We must do better.

REFERENCES

1 Jean-François Maystadt, Olivier Ecker, *Extreme Weather and Civil War: Does Drought Fuel Conflict in Somalia through Livestock Price Shocks?*, American Journal of Agricultural Economics, Volume 96, Issue 4, July 2014, Pages 1157-1182.

2 Ciara Nugent, *The 10 Countries Most Vulnerable to Climate Change Will Experience Population Booms in the Coming Decades*, TIME July 11, 2019. https://time.com/5621885/climate-change-population-growth/

3 Mach K.J., Kraan C.M., Adger W.N. et al., *Climate as a risk factor for armed conflict*. Nature 571, 193–197 (2019) doi:10.1038/s41586-019-1300-6.