# CLIMATE CHANGE, CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Why consider climate change, conflict and humanitarian action?

Exploring the relationship between humanitarian action, conflict, climate and environment has never been more urgent. The humanitarian sector is stretched to the limit. It is struggling to meet the growing demands posed by climate change, the changing nature of conflict, the increasing severity of disasters and the protracted nature of crises. Currently, over 125 million people require humanitarian assistance and over 60 million have been displaced. The prospects for the future show no abatement, with climate change only projected to increase the number and intensity of catastrophes.

The ill-fated Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) experience showed that failure to tackle the drivers of conflict and crisis inhibits development progress. The current climate emergency means that more people than ever before are affected by climate-related humanitarian risks – especially in already fragile contexts. Science shows that extreme weather events - which drive humanitarian needs - are set to increase. As a result, more countries are slipping into fragility, further reducing their ability to cope when the next disaster strikes. Meeting Agenda 2030 targets therefore requires learning from the missteps of the MDGs. It requires a thorough understanding of the two-way relationship between climate and conflict risks and for this to be reflected in a new way of working on humanitarian response and sustainable development.

How do climate change and conflict affect humanitarian need?

Humanitarian need is increasing because crises are becoming more complex through the interactions between climate change, disasters and conflicts. Not only are humanitarian crises on the rise, but the nature of crises are changing, largely due to climate change-driven extremes such as floods, droughts and typhoons. Over 90% of disasters are believed to be related to climate. Increasingly, climate change is converging with other pressures such as population growth, widening inequality, unplanned urbanisation, less food and water, and political instability, with complex results. The diagram on left outlines seven pathways through which climate change and conflict interact. These pressures are more likely to transmute into humanitarian crises in
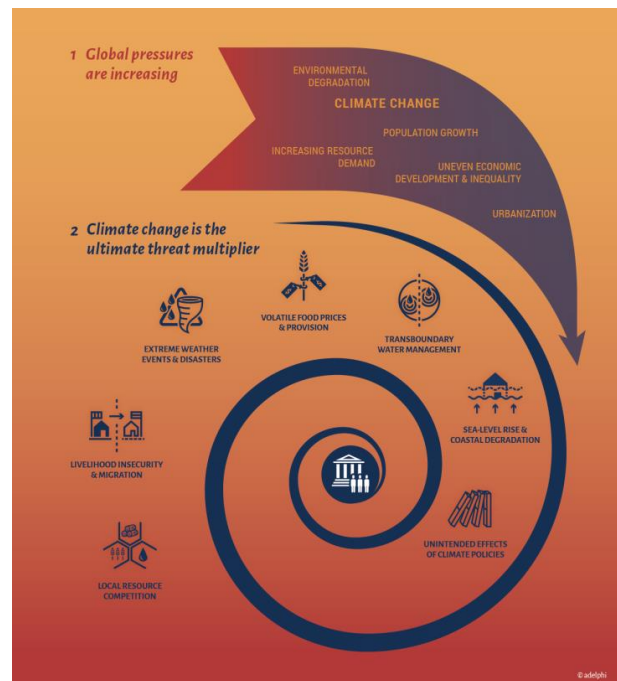
Seven compound climate-fragility risks threaten states and societies © adelphi

fragile contexts since they are less able to cope when disasters, extreme weather events and internal and external shocks converge. More than 50% of people affected by disasters between 2005 and 2009 lived in fragile and conflict-affected areas.

Challenges for addressing climate, peacebuilding and humanitarian action

1. Misperceptions about sequencing conflicts between climate, peacebuilding and humanitarian action

A common hindrance to the application of the various existing tools and approaches to address climate and environmental risks in humanitarian programming is the mistaken view about timing. The misperception is that climate or environmental considerations are longer term issues which come later, after the immediate humanitarian imperative to save a life has been met. In times of crises, interventions all too often fall into traditionally sequenced programming (first stabilisation and humanitarian assistance, and then everything else). Experience in Lake Chad shows that this is not the case, and indeed failure to consider climate change in humanitarian programming has increased people's exposure to the crisis (see example below). There is increasing evidence from the field that effective responses to crises need to address security, humanitarian, development and climate risks together. Recognising that humanitarian engagement in protracted crises settings will continue for years if not decades, ongoing humanitarian programming needs to be planned alongside scaling up recovery, peacebuilding, resilience and development efforts.

2. Siloed approaches

All too often, national and international institutional architectures for dealing with conflict, climate and environment run in parallel. This prevents joined-up policy on the interconnection between vulnerabilities, risks and opportunities associated with the climate, conflict and environment nexus. Concepts such as resilience have helped bring the idea of 'interconnectivity' to the fore. An increasing number of donors are integrating or mainstreaming individual issues across their policy, programmes and funding decision making processes. Environment has been considered a cross-cutting issue for several decades, largely because of the well-established and evidenced links between biodiversity, land use, water quality and poverty. Climate change has increased in prominence over the past decade in line with growing confidence and public awareness of climate science but conflict remains a relatively discrete policy and programming area – in part because of the misperceptions about sequencing outlined above, and also due to complicating links with politics and foreign policy.

3. Identifying individual, context-specific responses

The IPCC AR5 (2014:3) states that "[p]oorly designed adaptation and mitigation strategies can increase the risk of violent conflict." The same can be said of humanitarian engagement which doesn't consider climate or conflict risks. Operationalising climate-fragility resilience into programming on-the-ground requires deep understanding of the context and integrated approaches to programme design. This necessitates understanding the risk landscape that individuals and institutions face, the different layers of risks and the interaction of risk factors across these layers. Whilst at face value, this may seem too much detail for humanitarian actors to gather in advance of an engagement, the nature of engage-

ment – increasingly over long-time spans- often means that much of this knowledge of the risk land-scape already exists and simply needs to be integrated into future programming cycles.

4. Unintended consequences of humanitarian action

Conducting disaster relief/humanitarian aid without adequate climate-fragility risk analysis runs the risk of increasing vulnerabilities and causing harm in the long-run. The following examples illustrate how humanitarian responses increased future risks through failure to consider climate and environmental impacts:

- In the **Lake Chad** region, to fend off an impending famine, food aid was provided to IDP camps. But the failure to provide fuel to cook the food provided lead to extensive deforestation around the camps for fuel wood. This deforestation undermined the capacity of camp inhabitants' to cope with climate change; leading to inundation when the rains came, a loss of buffer trees to protect the camp and surrounding crops from dust storms in the dry season. The flooding caused severe damage to the camp, the dust storms ruined the next harvest and the loss of tree cover meant insufficient shade for grazing livestock, together rendering the camp unviable.

- UNEP assessment of post-tsunami aid to **Aceh** showed that the lack of environmental and climate considerations in post-tsunami aid programming – for example through contamination of groundwater, use of unsustainable building materials and inadequate siting of housing – undermined the sustainability of interventions and the long-term resilience of communities (UNEP, 2007). Though conflict did not result in this case, in many fragile contexts there is a very real risk that inappropriate aid interventions, which negatively affect scarce resources such as clean water, can increase the risk of conflict or instability.

- **Darfur, Sudan**, serves as an example of the kinds of conflict which many believe will become more common as climate change intensifies resource scarcity. Desertification and land degradation were drivers of this conflict. Yet timber latrines constructed in IDP camps as part of the humanitarian response lead to further deforestation of already scarce forest, contributed to further desertification which was a driver of the conflict.

Woman collecting fodder at an IDP camp in Darfur © UN Photo/Fred Noy

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

How can humanitarian responses in climate and conflict affected contexts be improved?

Do no harm
Inappropriate humanitarian disaster responses can inadvertently do more harm than good.

Be climate sensitive
Failure to consider the links between disaster responses, environmental resources and climate change can increase the risk of conflict by damaging the natural resource base that communities rely on.

Conflict responses must be 'disaster smart'
Disaster-blind conflict interventions, such as poorly planned resettlement programmes, can reinforce disaster risks.

Distribute aid equitably and avoid exacerbating inequalities
Humanitarian responses can exacerbate pre-existing inequalities or create new ones by unequally distributing aid.

Don't assume responses are politically neutral in fragile situations
By assuming that humanitarian efforts are immune to political manipulation, aid workers may inadvertently cause harm, exacerbating grievances in places where state–citizen relations are already fragile.

Humanitarian responses: How to 'do no harm' © adelphi

Do No Harm: Applying a conflict-sensitive approach to humanitarian responses will minimise harm and can assist in managing conflict risks

Applying a conflict-sensitive approach to humanitarian responses can minimise harm and assist in managing conflict risks in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. Humanitarian agencies cannot prevent violent conflicts or disasters from occurring. However, they can inadvertently contribute to the escalation of conflict. For instance, they can affect conflict dynamics negatively through the targeting of beneficiaries, the choice of local partners, the distribution of resources, service delivery or the resettlement of displaced people in ways that fuel existing grievances or create new one. But through well designed interventions humanitarian agencies can improve trust between different groups, enhance social cohesion and help build resilience. By applying a 'do no harm' approach, they can contribute to a reduction of the risk of violence. This is not through changing 'what' is done, but by changing 'how'

Institutional reform to be 'fit for purpose'

Meeting climate, development, humanitarian and peacebuilding goals needs more than tools and policy processes. It requires transformation of the very institutions that are tasked with delivering on these promises. To be effective, the UN, bilateral donors and implementing agencies need to reform the silos created by institutional mandates and financial structures. They need to move beyond short-term, project-driven responses and work towards collective, strategic outcomes. Humanitarian organisations are fully cognisant of the need to work more closely with development and peacebuilding organisations, particularly in cases of protracted crises, where more complex and longer-terms approaches are needed. However, progressing beyond the innumerable pledges and compacts to bridge the humanitarian-development divide cannot simply depend on good intentions. It requires top-down incentives, from donors mandating joint programming and funding calls downwards, to senior management of organisations institutionalising such practice and creating pragmatic incentives for change in practice, for example through embedding requirements for collaboration into individual job descriptions and performance goals.

Financing mechanisms that allow integrated responses can help achieve the triple dividends of conflict prevention, climate adaptation and development

Humanitarian funding – although at a high and growing – is insufficient to meet burgeoning demand. The funding that is available needs to be deployed more effectively. Though donors acknowledge the crucial nature of humanitarian assistance, it is unlikely that the available pot of money will grow substantially. This further underscores the importance of re-designing funding architecture such that it is better integrated and better able to address the multiple dimensions of vulnerability. Effective responses through integrated financing can be achieved by:

- Creating and prioritising hybrid funding streams that are not strictly humanitarian or developmental
- Enabling more and better cross-sectoral work
- Providing flexible, accelerated and risk-tolerant funding
- Creating financing mechanisms that take account of different needs and timeframes particularly in protracted crises

Learning from each other to truly understand risk and build resilience

The inter-linked nature of risks requires enhancing capacities to undertake joint risk analysis. As climate change, disasters and conflicts are interlinked, so too must be responses. An important first step is improving the understanding and analysis of local contexts and the nature of risks. Joint analyses can help determine a common understanding of the context, needs and capacities of government authorities, humanitarian, development, peace and security sectors. It can drive the development of complementary, system-wide strategies. However, tools that reflect complex realities and help identify multi-dimensional and interconnected risks are largely missing. A recent study found that out of 66 risk assessment tools, only three looked at the issues of conflict, climate and environment together, and none of these three did so very effectively. Risk analysis is also not enough. Capacities to translate this analysis into conflict- and climate-sensitive responses are equally important.
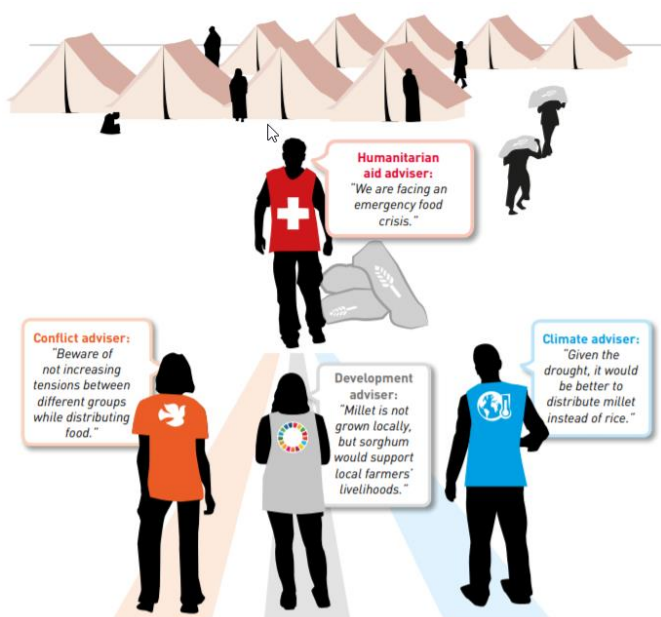
Joint analysis to better understand complex risk © International Alert

Literature

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