



Climate Change, Conflict and Fragility

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Summary

The consequences of climate change are making themselves felt daily, and will impact on the poorest members of society. Fragile states are afflicted by not only by persistent poverty but also by political instability and the effects of armed conflict. In the context of the Copenhagen climate summit in December 2009, attention to the security implications of climate change is increasing among politicians and strategists in the developed world but specialists in climate change are not generally well-informed about security, and development specialists have not resolved how to deal with the issue of fragile states in climate negotiations.

social, economic and political landscape, there is a high risk of political instability and violent conflict.

The Copenhagen climate summit in December is the 15th Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). It is their monumental task to come up with the next global deal on mitigating global warming and responding to climate change. The complex and highly political preparatory negotiations have become heavily polarised between rich and poor states over developed countries' targets for reducing greenhouse gases and their commitments to fund adaptation and provide technical support for poor countries. Rich and poor governments now appear to be further apart than ever.

Understanding the linkages

Attention to the security implications of climate change is slowly increasing among politicians and strategists in the developed world but the issue remains the elephant in the negotiating chamber. Specialists in climate change are not generally well-informed about security and, although development specialists universally agree that the poorest will be worst hit by climate change, they have not resolved how to deal with the issue of fragile states in climate negotiations.

The consequences of climate change are making themselves felt daily. As they sharpen, their impact on human well-being, peace and security will worsen, especially for the poorest members of society. Many of the worst affected live in fragile states where under-development is intractable. They are afflicted not only by persistent poverty, poor infrastructure and lack of access to the world market, but also by the fragility of state institutions, political instability, and the effects of recent armed conflict or the threat of looming violence. In many countries, as climate change interacts with other features of their

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It is essential to address this issue, but necessary to do so carefully. The potential conflict implications are among the most compelling arguments for rich states to take action against climate change. But there are three notes of warning.

First, there is the risk of over-stating the conflict dimension in an attempt to persuade a sceptical, even disaffected or merely ill-informed public to support cuts in carbon emissions. Fuelling fears¹ that climate change will generate threats like terrorism and mass immigration will lead to oversimplified and inaccurate perceptions of the security angle. In the political debate, exaggerated positions will inevitably be vulnerable.

Secondly, securitising the issue runs the risk of a damaging response that overlooks cost-effective and sustainable options in favour of high cost and probably ineffective military ones. The point here is that policy responses must be based on a thorough understanding of not only the reality of the conflict risk but also of how it is shaped. Effects of climate change such as more frequent natural disasters, long-term water shortages and food insecurity could combine with other factors and lead to violent conflict. The reason why this can happen lies in the context of poverty, weak governance, political marginalisation and corruption. These factors limit the capacity to adapt to climate change and simultaneously drive conflict. Policy responses need to look not only at the immediate risk of violence, for example by reforming the security sector, and not only at the specific environmental impacts, for example by taking steps to reduce the risk of disaster, but also at the broader context of failures of governance.

Thirdly, climate negotiators have not paid attention to fragile states and conflict risks. Most negotiators are climate and legal experts whose remit does not extend beyond the talks. They have neither the incentive nor the expertise to deal with the complex web that links climate, conflict, governance and development.

Shaping balanced responses

Nonetheless, to be effective, the global agreement must make it possible to address these linkages. This means taking the discussion beyond the question of how to raise climate funds for adaptation

and mitigation, into thinking about what to spend the money on and what governance and institutional changes are needed so spending can be effective. One characteristic of both analysing problems and proposing solutions in this context is this focus on inter-linkage. We are not looking at climate change alone, nor conflict or governance alone, nor at issues of poverty and livelihood alone, but at each in combination with all. A measure that addresses a specific physical vulnerability related to climate change – improved water management, for example – must be shaped by the understanding that water can be managed so that all have equal access, or managed in such a way that the rich have access and the poor do not. Thus a scheme for improving water management could, depending on its characteristics, exacerbate conflict in a poor country. Recognising this, those who are planning water management should aim to draw everybody who stands to lose or gain, including marginalised groups, into a discussion about the best way forward. Such an approach goes against the political grain in fragile states so it will need effort, coordination and determination to make it work. Simply throwing money or force at the problem is not a solution.

As well as inter-linkage, a second particularity of discussing climate change is uncertainty. There is uncertainty about the precise physical effects, their scale and geography; there is further uncertainty about the knock-on social consequences; and there is a third dimension of uncertainty in the lack of clear and tested policy prescriptions to guide the response. It is in this challenging context that the next steps on an uncertain road need to be designed.

1. For example, see the US public education campaign on climate change, September 2009 <http://www.secureamericanfuture.org/>