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Climate Change and Security

Perspectives from the Field

by Adam Day



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Introduction

Within the UN and beyond there is a growing recognition of the impact of climate change on the risks of violent conflict.¹ The UN Security Council has recognized that climate change is one of several factors affecting the stability of countries and has called for more in-depth analysis, reporting and risk assessments on the links between environmental shifts and insecurity.² The 2020-2022 strategy of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) includes climate change as a factor driving conflict risks, while UN regional approaches increasingly reflect an understanding that conflict prevention must take environmental changes into account.³ Increasingly, the common country assessments produced by UN offices around the world include reference to the impacts of climate change on their work, including on humanitarian, development and political engagements. Reflecting the priority of the issue, a Climate Security Mechanism was established in late 2018 across three UN entities tasked with integrating climate risk considerations across the UN system.

These trends have created a growing demand for climate-security empirics, for analysis that will illuminate the complex links between increasing global temperatures and risks of instability. Much of the analysis to date has been conducted outside the UN, by a range of scientific and policy experts who have already contributed significantly to our understanding of how specific settings are being impacted today.⁴ However, as

climate-security has begun to be mainstreamed into UN policies and practices, the organization has also produced significant research of its own, while non-UN researchers too have turned their focus on how the UN might benefit from climate-security findings.⁵

This policy brief examines the issue of climate-security primarily from the perspective of UN field offices around the world. It draws principally on a set of 10 forthcoming case studies commissioned by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) Oslo Governance Centre through the UNDP-DPPA Joint Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention. They were commissioned on the occasion of the fourth cohort of the Peace and Development Advisors (PDAs) Fellowship on climate-related security risks and sustaining peace that was organized in Stockholm in December 2019 in partnership with the Folke Bernadotte Academy. These studies were produced by PDAs and other field-based advisers deployed in Bangladesh, Chad, the Caribbean, Jordan, Guatemala, the Maldives, Nigeria, Tunisia and UN officers in regional hubs in Nairobi and Dakar.⁶ The brief aims to capture common themes and lessons across these studies, also identifying areas where further work might help bolster future UN policies and practice. This brief complements the Climate Security Mechanism's global quick scan of UN efforts to address climate-related security risks and can be used by practitioners to inform new research and programming.



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I. Common themes and trends

The case studies varied significantly, both in terms of the approaches they took to climate-security and as a result of the very different contexts they described. Nonetheless, there were several areas of general overlap, as well as themes that emerged across the studies that are worth highlighting here.

1 CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER

None of the cases claimed that climate change was having a direct impact on the risks of violent conflict. Instead, they tended to explore how environmental changes were affecting socio-economic dynamics in-country, which in turn played into the risks of violent conflict. The Bangladesh study, for example, examined underlying conflict dynamics over land and natural resources in the Chittagong Hills

Tract, exploring how extreme weather was exacerbating existing tensions. The Nigeria and Chad studies similarly analysed how changing rainfall patterns were affecting competition over land in areas with long-standing farmer-herder conflicts, finding that issues like crop failure and shifting transhumance patterns were playing a role in heightened violence levels in recent periods. The Tunisia study pinpointed some of the most direct impacts of climate change on insecurity, arguing that climate-driven water and arable land shortages had led to violent clashes. Broadly, the cases tended to see climate change through a human security lens, examining how social and economic issues were affected by environmental shifts, with knock-on effects on conflict risks. This accords with the bulk of scientific research into climate-security, which uses some form of “risk multiplier” as its principle approach.⁷



2 RESOURCE GOVERNANCE AND MALADAPTATION

Most of the cases suggested that natural resource governance was a central issue when it came to climate-related security risks. The Caribbean study, for example, described how coastal communities were being affected by land erosion and extreme weather, destroying livelihoods and pushing a greater number of people into illicit trafficking and violent criminal networks. According to the study, the government responses had, in fact, further marginalized these communities, potentially creating greater risks. Several of the other case studies took similar lines, highlighting how governments' disaster response and development approaches may have been increasing risks. Examples include Jordan's attempts to increase water supplies in parts of the country, Chad's largely absent regulatory frameworks for addressing farmer-herder tensions, and Bangladesh's weak systems for addressing the risks posed by environmentally-driven urbanization and migration.⁸ In Nigeria, the Government's attempts to pass laws that would limit herding in some agricultural areas was seen as exacerbating tensions.

3 THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS ENTRY POINT

One of the common themes across the cases was "leave no one behind," drawn from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Agenda 2030. In describing how the UN had developed its common country assessment in Tunisia, for

example, the case study highlighted that the UN had combined a leave no one behind analysis with a climate change one, exploring how climate change was exacerbating pre-existing divisions and vulnerabilities. In fact, several of the case studies largely ignored security implications altogether and focused exclusively on how climate change was inhibiting countries' capacities to achieve the SDGs. This points to the fact that the SDGs appear to offer a clear and relatively uncontroversial entry point for the UN to work with host governments. It may also indicate that the bulk of data produced by the UN system and national actors is more related to the SDGs than to other issues.

4 INEQUALITY

Related to the issue of leave no one behind is the strong focus of inequality across the case studies. Here, climate change is often described as exacerbating vertical and horizontal forms of inequality, particularly poverty, access to resources, and tensions amongst ethnic groups. The Jordan case study, for example, notes that older people, those with disabilities, women, poor, and socially marginalized are not being sufficiently considered by national responses to climate change. Instead, the Government's overriding focus on climate-proofing hard investments tends to funnel resources to wealthier and more privileged populations, driving greater inequality rather than addressing it. The Guatemala case study describes how inequality is one of the driving factors behind conflicts over land and other resources, and finds that national policies to address the environmental effects on resources have failed to address deep divisions across class and social

strata. Studies on Bangladesh highlights rising inequality levels as related to conflict risks and points to several ways in which climate change may be driving greater inequality.⁹ While few of the cases make specific reference to the UN and World Bank *Pathways for Peace* report, their focus on inequality as a key driver of conflict risks reflects a growing recognition across the UN system that inequality is a crucial determinant for violent conflict.¹⁰

5 GENDER INEQUALITY

The impacts of climate change are not felt evenly across populations and the climate-security field is one requiring an especially sharp gender lens.¹¹ The relative lack of coverage of gender in some of the case studies points to the often unseen effects of climate change on the livelihoods and vulnerabilities of women, possibly as a result of poor national data. The Guatemala and Jordan cases studies highlight that women are often disproportionately affected by climate change, including limited access to resources and decision-making mechanisms, limiting their capacity to recover from economic shocks. The Caribbean case study notes that the forced displacement of coastal communities aggravated by climate change may increase the risk of women and girls being subjected to sexual violence and exploitation. Here, a UN University (UNU) case study on Nigeria based on interviews with the field has demonstrated that farmer-herder conflicts (which have experienced an uptick in part as a result of changing climate) have a unique impact on women, often leaving them without breadwinners or social protections in a highly patriarchal society.¹² A UNU case study on Bangladesh highlights the Government's Climate Change and Gender response of 2013, but notes the relative lack of gender-disaggregated data as inhibiting a better understanding of how issues like credit shortfalls and land ownership might be affecting women differently. It will be important that climate-security research going forward more systematically includes a gender-sensitive lens.¹³

6 PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Several of the cases described how climate change was either causing population displacement or contributing to new patterns

of human mobility. One of the most common trends was urbanization: the combination of erratic rainfall, extreme weather, and increasing temperatures has rendered huge tracts of land unusable for agriculture and/or washed it away via riverine or coastal erosion. Facing an abrupt loss of livelihoods, millions of people are leaving rural agricultural zones and relocating to cities. Some of this is of course driven by other factors—changing forms of mechanized agriculture, greater economic opportunities in urban areas, and state development concentrations in cities—but there is strong evidence that environmental change is playing a role. The Bangladesh case study notes that 400,000 people arrive in Dhaka every year, nearly 90 per cent of whom cite environmental factors as the cause of their relocation.

Climate change is also playing a role in large-scale population movements across national borders. The Chad, Nigeria, Guatemala and West African cases note that long-standing transhumance routes are being affected by desertification and shifting crop patterns, affecting the migration routes of pastoralists and bringing them into often violent contact with farming communities. The UNU Bangladesh case study found evidence that the migration of Bangladeshis into the Assam region of India was at least partially climate-influenced, noting also that tensions between the two countries had increased as a result.¹⁴

7 CRIMINALITY

As most case studies adopt a human security lens, they tend to take a broad view of violent conflict and often consider increases in criminality within their climate-security analysis. The Caribbean study, for example, notes that coral reef bleaching has meant a loss of tourism and a consequent increase in illicit trafficking to meet livelihoods. In Guatemala, loss of livelihood may be linked to a rise in organized crime. Several studies also note that climate-driven urbanization has created sprawling slums with high crime rates amongst underserved populations. This view of security has a basis in academia, as the 2016 States of Fragility report by the OECD has highlighted: violent criminality often increases the risks of other forms of conflict.¹⁵



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II. Challenges for UN climate-security analysis

The case studies also point to a number of challenges facing the UN in terms of building a better evidence base for climate-security responses. Perhaps most visible is the **lack of a model for conducting climate-security analysis**, which results in widely varying products, both in terms of form and substance. Not only does the lack of a common model inhibit cross-case comparison, but it also means the UN system will struggle to manage new information in a useful manner. Here, the common country assessment (CCA) framework may offer the beginnings of a structure for climate-security analysis; several of the case studies had already embedded their research into the CCA for their respective country, helpfully linking their findings to a broader dataset across the UN family. Several UN agencies – including United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and International Organization on Migration (IOM) –

already include climate-security in their policies, which could provide models for other UN bodies. Additionally, the Climate Security Mechanism has developed a “toolbox” which offers several guidance documents, including a conceptual approach to the integrated analysis of climate-related security risks, that could help build towards a common model within the UN.

Related to the lack of models is the **relative absence of a common vocabulary** in the climate-security realm. This manifests in a discord between the climate science language (which draws from the hard sciences and tends to be quantitatively driven) and the language of conflict analysis (which is far more qualitative and imprecise in scientific terms). An example of this from the cases is the use of the term “risk,” which in the climate science realm is a precise term relating to a combination of vulnerability, likelihood and severity. The much looser use

of “conflict risks” in conflict analysis, when combined with the equally imprecise usage around “human security risks” can make for confusing reading.

The cases also point to a chronic challenge for the UN in the climate-security arena and beyond: **the need to combine local, national and regional data**. Across the cases, climate change was having an impact well beyond national boundaries, often at the regional or even global level. For example, in Bangladesh, increased riverine erosion is the result of glacial melting in the mountains well beyond Bangladesh's territory, while severe weather across the Bay of Bengal was linked to larger weather systems. Similarly, regional effects are seen across the Sahel as desertification and erratic rainfall affects dozens of contiguous countries. At the same time, the effects of global temperature rises are felt differently at the local level; in Nigeria, for example, southern regions are at risk of flooding from sea level rises, while the northern areas are experiencing severe desertification. And even across northern Nigeria, communities are affected differently depending on their geographic location, their political status in-country and their means of livelihood. The need for transnational information presents a particular challenge for the UN, which tends to operate within national boundaries and with national data.¹⁶ Some of the cases pointed to the need to increase support for data and analytics, particularly in regional bodies.

One challenge still is **host governments' fears of “securitizing” their development and humanitarian arenas**, resisting attempts to link the two via climate-security analysis. This reflects longstanding issues around sovereignty – governments do not wish to be seen as at risk of instability and potential need for intervention and tend to protect their development funding against what they may see as competing interests. It also may indicate a lack of understanding of the term “climate-security” as governments may think of military

responses rather than the broader set of issues referred to in UN parlance. The SDG entry point, which reflects near-universal acceptance by all countries, offers a less threatening starting point for climate-security analysis, while still allowing the UN to highlight how vulnerabilities and risks may be deepened by environmental changes. This may explain why the case studies gravitated so strongly towards the SDGs rather than a more direct discussion of insecurity in-country. Some of the cases also employed “human security” as a framing device, which may provide a non-threatening route to working with governments.

Finally, the separate challenges of **time and timeframes** strongly affect the UN's climate-security research agenda. The case studies referred to in this policy brief were typically conducted by PDAs, UN staff deployed to support Resident Coordinators across the breadth of UN programming in-country. PDAs have become crucial to many UN offices worldwide, providing analysis that synthesizes information from areas typically kept separate. In interviews with PDAs in a range of settings, it became apparent that they were often overutilized, at times expanding their functions to respond to the needs of overwhelmed Resident Coordinators. In some cases, it was extremely difficult for them to find time to research climate-security, given the day-to-day pressures on their schedule. And as importantly, their role in urgent matters requiring immediate attention may mean the issues of climate-security research (which are often expressed in multi-decade terms though certainly having an immediate impact) seems like a distant issue. The increasing number of countries with a PDA team, where a National PDA, Seconded or UN Volunteer works alongside the PDA, is helping address some of these challenges as it provides extra capacity for analysis and in-depth understanding of the country context.¹⁷ However, how to link long-term environmental changes to near-term security risks is an extraordinarily difficult task, as is scenario-based planning in the area of climate change.



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III. Looking forward

Some of the case studies include specific proposals and/or highlight emerging good practice in the field of climate-security. These offer a sense of where the climate-security agenda may move in the coming period.

Some of the cases (as well as the Global Scan) point to emerging practice linking resilience work with climate change. UNEP's work in Sudan and Nepal are highlighted as good examples of efforts to ground programming in a more solid environmental evidence base, as is the UN Country Team's (UNCT) support to the Pacific Islands, including the UNDP-IOM joint programme on Climate Security in the Pacific, the first Peacebuilding Fund project dedicated to tackling climate-related security risks.¹⁸ The SDG Climate Facility: Climate Action for Human Security,¹⁹ an inter-agency initiative between UNDP, UN-Habitat, UN Environment Finance Initiative (UNEP-FI), the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and the World Food Programme (WFP), in partnership with League of Arab States and the Arab Water Council focuses on the nexus between climate

change and human security at regional, national and subnational levels, building resilience and adaptive capacity in conflict-affected contexts including Yemen, occupied Palestinian territory, Iraq and countries affected by the Syria crisis, like Lebanon and Jordan. UNEP, UN Women, DPPA and UNDP have published lessons from research and programming experience for understanding how gender, climate and security are linked as well as assessing entry points for integrated action.²⁰ There are also field projects linked to this joint programme in Sudan and the Sahel.

The case studies made a strong argument in favor of **including climate-security within the CCA** of the UN. In some instances, such as the Tunisia and Bangladesh cases, the research was, in fact, contributing to their respective CCAs. Incorporating a climate lens into the CCA is important for several reasons. First, it demands that the entire UN system within a country adopt a climate-sensitive approach, meaning that development, humanitarian, human rights, and politically-oriented UN entities will have a common baseline for their programming. This



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“cross-pillar” thinking helpfully reflects the way climate change tends to impact issues indirectly, shifting entire systems rather than discrete issues. As the Tunisia case study emphasized, “systems thinking” is the appropriate approach for climate change. Going forward, it is likely that the UN will aim for more systematic inclusion of climate in the CCA.

One of the cases included a specific proposal for including **climate change indicators in regional conflict early warning systems**. Pointing out the limitations of current early warning and response, this proposal would see modern global mapping and geodata systems employed to capture issues like land use, soil-erosion, freshwater supplies, flood events, harvest potential, deforestation and sea level rises. This evidence could be then used to detect shock events that could cause instability, such as crop failure, human displacement, large-scale land erosion and other environmental-induced crises.

While the case studies reviewed for this paper represent merely a snapshot of information available to UN field offices, it is abundantly clear that the UN system as a whole has an enormous amount of data that could be brought into the climate-security research agenda. Agencies like WFP, UNHCR, UNICEF, and UNDP (among many others) gather staggering amounts of information about the social, political, environmental and economic dynamics in their

respective countries. Often, this data is used for agency programming but is not systematically brought into the UN system as a whole. **Better knowledge management** would not only allow the broader UN system to benefit from agencies’ information, but would also help move from research findings to more holistic programming, turning data into interventions that address the broader conflict prevention agenda.

Finally, it is worth noting again that the PDAs who produced the bulk of this analysis are some of the most overworked staff in the UN system and have particularly ambitious responsibilities bridging political, peacebuilding and development work. At the same time—and through no shortcomings of themselves—they are not typically climate experts and must learn “on the fly” for much of their research. The particular value PDAs bring in this context is their capacity to promote integrated analysis and leverage key expertise and perspectives from across the UN system and with national partners. Some understanding of the climate-related security risks is thus important, and was one of the rationales behind the Fellowship programme that generated these case studies. If the UN system is to advance the climate-security agenda more comprehensively across its work in the field, investment in dedicated climate-security expertise—at least at the regional hub level, but also in countries with urgent climate-driven issues—would be a highly worthwhile use of resources.

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