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Climate change and conflict: Conflict-sensitive climate change adaptation in Africa

By Professor Pius Yanda and Salomé Bronkhorst

UN Photo/Albert Gonzalez Farran



A child holds up bullets collected from the ground in Rounyn, a village about 15 kilometres from Shangil Tobaya, North Darfur. Controversially, the conflict in Darfur is argued by many to be the first war driven by climate change.

Introduction

In preparation for COP17 (17th Conference of the Parties) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) in Durban, held a two-day expert seminar to identify issues and recommendations for ensuring that adaptation to climate change is conflict-sensitive. Practitioners and scientists presented new research on the linkages between climate change and conflict in Africa, and analysed various tools, policies and approaches to ensure that conflicts arising from climate change are addressed and climate change adaptation measures are conflict-sensitive.

Key considerations and outcomes from the discussion and papers presented at the seminar are outlined in this brief. The first section reports on the scientific evidence for the linkages between climate change and conflict. The second section discusses what it means to have conflict-sensitive climate change adaptation – hereafter referred to as ‘conflict-sensitive adaptation’ – drawing on the research and discussion outcomes from the seminar. The third section outlines key considerations for conflict-sensitive adaptation. The final section includes recommendations for continental, regional and national bodies on conflict-sensitive adaptation.

This Policy & Practice Brief forms part of ACCORD's knowledge production work to inform peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Climate change and conflict: what do we know?

Climate change is any change in climate over time caused by natural variability or human activities.¹ The weight of scientific evidence indicates that the climate is changing, largely as a result of human activities, and that these changes will result in severe global consequences.

Numerous scientific studies assess the actual or potential impact of climate change on conflicts in Africa and beyond.² Compelling results show that the pathways through which climate change may cause or contribute to conflicts are complex and highly context- and time-specific; leading to significant scientific debate on the matter. However, the majority of researchers broadly agrees on issues that provide impetus for conflict-sensitivity in climate change adaptation. The first is that climate change can cause scarcities of resources, which can lead to competition use in resources and consequently contribute to conflicts. The second is that climate change can exacerbate existing threats to peace and security.

Climate change causes scarcities that can cause or contribute to conflicts

There is a general consensus that climate variability and change exacerbate the scarcity of natural resources on the African continent, where the majority of people depend on land, water and the oceans for their livelihood. This scarcity happens through sudden climate events or through slower changes and variability, such as changes in temperature and rainfall. Increases in extreme or sudden events – such as flooding or prolonged droughts – reduce the availability of arable land, water, food and fish stocks. Slower, insidious changes and variability in temperature and rainfall patterns – that cause desertification, water and land shortages – are no less hazardous, as they place long term stresses on already vulnerable communities.

On land, it is well documented that climate change has altered and will alter rainfall patterns and further reduce freshwater availability, by as much as 20 to 30% in certain regions.³ Water scarcity and droughts, in particular, have the potential to cause civil unrest and to lead to significant economic losses through effects on agriculture, even in robust economies.⁴ Coupled with other climatic changes, declines in agricultural productivity will lead to, or worsen, food insecurity and unsustainable increases in food prices across the least developed countries. The impacts will be greater in areas with high or dense populations and weak institutions.

People living along Africa's estimated 40,000 km coastline – whose survival depends on ocean life – are facing another form of projected scarcity: the decline of fish and fisheries as a result of ocean warming⁵ and ocean acidification.⁶ While ocean warming critically affects marine biodiversity, ocean acidification – caused by the absorption of high levels of carbon dioxide emissions from the atmosphere – is projected to disrupt the ecosystems of fish, shellfish and seaweed. Oceans will become more acidic, which is projected to disrupt ecosystems of fish, shellfish and seaweed. This

in turn will have a serious impact on coastal communities who depend on ocean life for their livelihoods. The sum total of these and other impacts, such as the effects on competition over resources and migration, have already lead to conflict or are projected to contribute to new conflicts in the future.⁷

Climate change is a 'threat-multiplier' that can cause or contribute to conflicts

The other issue, on which there is broad scientific agreement, is that climate change is a 'threat-multiplier' that may intensify existing social, economic, political and environmental problems that communities are already facing. It also exacerbates grievances; overwhelms coping capacities; and, at times, spurs forced or proactive migration. On its own, climate change as a stress factor is unlikely to cause conflict. But, it will once it interacts with the socio-economic and political systems being affected and affecting governance. Very often the quality and strength of the political system, governing institutions, and even the actions of political elites – from grassroots to national levels – will determine whether nations or communities are able to manage the additional stress of climate change on the economy and social system.⁸ It stands to reason that the threat of conflict is greater in areas where there are pre-existing governance problems, such as poor natural resource management policies or governance, or in semi-democracies, and low institutional capacity to respond and manage resources.⁹ Moreover, the impacts of climate change could also diminish the capacity of a government to provide essential services (public safety, health and nutrition, and education), increasing the likelihood of grievances that could lead to violence. The inability of governments to respond adequately to climate-related challenges may lead to further reductions in perceived government legitimacy,¹⁰ affecting peace and security.

Conflict-sensitive adaptation is concerned with optimising the positive impacts of climate change and of adaptation, not only avoiding or mitigating the negatives

While cumulative environmental degradation and other stresses on systems and governance are not likely to trigger conflict immediately,¹¹ a steady build-up of environmental problems coupled with the aforementioned weaknesses and on-going social, political, and economic challenges – or a dramatic and sudden environmental shock – may trigger instability and mobilisation.¹² If the relationship between climate change and violent conflict is not addressed, there will be a vicious circle of failure to adapt to climate change, worsening the risk of violent conflict and, in turn, reducing further the ability to adapt.¹³

To meet these challenges, it will be necessary to significantly expand the political scope of action for adaptation measures and substantially increase capacity on a national and regional level. This is also already reflected at the United Nations (UN) level, with the report by the UN

Secretary-General in 2009 stressing not only that climate change may serve as 'threat-multiplier' but also that adaptation to climate change can serve as a 'threat-minimiser'.¹⁴

Considerations for conflict-sensitive climate change adaptation

What is conflict-sensitive climate change adaptation?

Adaptation refers to the adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli, or their effect, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities.¹⁵ In other words, it is a change in processes, practices, and structures to prevent or address damages, or to benefit from opportunities associated with climate change. Adaptation will differ from place to place – varying according to the system in which they occur, who undertakes them, the climatic stimuli that prompts them, and their timing, functions, forms, and effects. The ability to adapt depends greatly on the adaptive capacity or adaptability of an affected system, region, or community to cope with the impacts and risks of climate change. Thus, adaptive capacity is the ability of a system to adjust to climate change, climate variability and extremes, to moderate potential damages, to take advantage of opportunities, or to cope with the consequences.¹⁶

Under some complex conditions – actual climatic conditions aside – climate change is likely to contribute to or cause conflicts. Purely technical approaches to adaptation will fail to address the plethora of socio-economic, political and other variables that scientists argue could contribute to conflict.¹⁷ Therefore, conflict-sensitive adaptation is about more than technical responses (such as the building of dams or sea walls), but does and should include multi-disciplinary projects (e.g. socio-economic development and peacebuilding) to build comprehensive resilience against the impacts of climate change.¹⁸ In light of this evidence, and given that adaptation funding is already being made available and adaptation projects are already under way (especially in least developed and fragile countries), there is a need for climate adaptation to be conflict-sensitive. But what is conflict-sensitivity?

Conflict-sensitivity refers to approaches and measures that display a cognisance of how:

- climate change can cause conflicts;
- climate adaptation projects themselves can cause or contribute to conflict;
- adaptation measures would operate in conflict zones.

Conflict-sensitive adaptation is about more than technical responses [...], but does and should include multi-disciplinary projects [...] to build comprehensive resilience against the impacts of climate change

Moreover, conflict-sensitive adaptation is concerned with optimising the positive impacts of climate change and of adaptation, not only avoiding or mitigating the negatives. Positive impacts of climate change may include more rain in certain places, while in adaptation, positive impacts and

objectives – besides conflict prevention – could be peacebuilding and sustainable development. Conflict-sensitive adaptation should allow planners and decision-makers to address current vulnerabilities and development priorities, while aiming to ensure long-term sustainability and peace through a basic understanding of future projections. In other words, adaptation also presents the opportunity to improve what is already being done (development, peacebuilding, environmental management), to address non-climate challenges and to aim higher than just seeking the prevention of conflicts.

The majority of researchers broadly agrees on issues that provide impetus for conflict-sensitivity in climate change adaptation. The first is that climate change can cause scarcities of resources [...] the second is that climate change can exacerbate existing threats to peace and security

This type of holistic thinking will need a step-wise approach, leading from analysis to action. This will require, inter alia, an understanding of how adaptation could contribute to conflict, and especially being cognisant of contexts and localities. For example, ways that adaptation could contribute to conflicts include: a lack of coherency of adaptation with other political processes – such as poverty reduction – as well as cross-sectoral approaches; focusing on national level, while failing to address and incorporate local and trans-boundary initiatives (such as in the water sector); low participation by affected stakeholder groups; adaptation strategies that reinforce inequities or 'set-up' distinct groups as competitors; and decision-making processes that are not perceived as legitimate.

In terms of contexts and localities, one consideration is that the grassroots level is where the impacts of climate change are likely to be felt and visible first. It is therefore important that the contextual knowledge base and data on communities are expanded, and that local narratives about climate change and conflict are considered in research, policy development and practical interventions. In addition, conflict-sensitive adaptation will be especially critical in areas where there is high dependence on natural resources and in already fragile politically, socially, economically or environmentally contexts. Therefore, analyses should reflect an understanding of the context in which one is operating, working and intervening; understanding and anticipating the interaction between one's own intervention and the context; and building the capacity to act upon this understanding to avoid negative impacts and maximise the positive.

Clearly, if the science of climate-conflict linkages is complex, adaptation that is conflict-sensitive should be reflective of that complexity. This complexity does not only result from different socio-economic, political and environmental factors combined to cause conflicts – and those need to be understood – but also because dynamics differ across time and space. Conflict-sensitivity is, therefore, a holistic, or multidisciplinary, multi-scaled and multi-sectored approach to

adaptation. This will entail scaled approaches in research, policy development and intervention, and modelling of complexity and inter-linkages will be crucial.

Critical areas and considerations for adaptation policy, practice and science that is conflict-sensitive

How people make their living and how resources are managed

Despite the complexity, and the apparent difficulty pinning down how conflicts can happen, a key theme that underlies much of the scientific literature is livelihoods. In particular, it is the way livelihoods and the management of natural resources in Africa are linked to climate change and to conflicts. For adaptation projects to strengthen coping capacity and resilience of communities, they need to recognise vulnerable groups (such as women and pastoral peoples, and nations) against climate change and conflicts. The way people make their living and obtain their food and income needs to be protected and strengthened. An important way to do this is to improve the management of natural resources by adapting practices for fairly and equitably managing resources (such as land, water and coastal regions) and to introduce new, sustainable ways for people to make a living. Strengthening governance and rights-based approaches can be an important part of this. In order to prevent conflict, natural resource management cannot be a top-down approach, but will rather need the inclusion and consultation with communities. This will mean tapping into, documenting, and learning from the wealth of traditional knowledge regarding the management of resources and conflicts at a community level. In Africa, where people have adapted to climate changes and dealt with conflicts for thousands of years, this knowledge and experience needs to be captured to improve the management of resources and conflicts and to feed into early-warning systems.

Forced and proactive migration and mobility are closely related to livelihoods and natural resource management, and can be seen as a positive or negative form of adaptation. Migration can bring development and other benefits in sending communities through the receipt of remittances, or it could cause conflict in receiving communities by placing increasing stress on already scarce resources. In Africa, people have adapted to climate changes for thousands of years, through migration and mobility, and by following pastoral/nomad livelihoods. As a result of scarcities and changing conditions, however, these livelihoods are under threat and new forms of migration and conflict are emerging. For example, pastoralists have every right to pursue mobile livelihoods, but especially in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, they are under threat from climate change and other factors, including poor natural resource management. This has led to widespread, but more localised, conflicts between and within pastoral and farmer groups. Conflict-sensitive adaptation requires institutions, legal frameworks, land tenure regimes – especially communal land and natural management institutions – in order to prevent and resolve conflicts between mobile and

sedentary groups. One option is to use human rights standards as a threshold for decision-making and as a normative basis for building consensus. Climate change-induced migration is often seen as a security threat. However, migrants in African countries play an active role in building resilience to climate change in their home communities. Migrants' knowledge of the environmental, cultural and political conditions in their home communities gives them an advantage over external intervention programmes. The social, cultural and financial capital acquired by the migrants in the countries of destination offer opportunities for local governments for conflict-sensitive adaptation.

Cross-border challenges present threats and opportunities

A particular challenge, which also relates to livelihoods, will be the range of cross-border issues that need to be considered as part of conflict-sensitive adaptation. Climate change impacts have no political boundaries and, as noted, may include voluntary and proactive migration as a result of climate change and conflicts. The future of people who practice mobile or cross-border livelihoods, such as pastoralists, coastal communities that share common resources across borders (the oceans and fish) and those who share trans-boundary fresh water resources, such as rivers, is at risk. For this reason, responses to climate change should ideally have no political boundaries either – bilateral, regional and continental cooperation will be essential in order to address cross-border issues and manage resources in a conflict-sensitive manner. More so, there is significant potential for actors in government, civil society, academia and the private sector to collaborate across borders to build sustainable livelihoods and peace – through the development and sharing of new technologies, early warning systems that track vulnerability to climate change, and research, among others. The opportunities for sharing the benefits of common property resources, that are well managed, are additional prospects that should be considered.

The grassroots level is where the impacts of climate change are likely to be felt and visible first. It is therefore important that the contextual knowledge base and data on communities are expanded, and that local narratives about climate change and conflict are considered in research, policy development and practical interventions

The good news is that climate change has led all nations to collectively work together to address the challenge, thus, providing opportunities and potential institutions for cooperation and peacebuilding. Such cooperation on climate change challenges has been extended to regional and sub-regional levels, whereby solutions to the challenges are sought collectively. Examples of such initiatives are the management of trans-boundary climate-sensitive resources, such as shared river basins, and peace parks.

Conclusion – who should be responsible for conflict-sensitive adaptation?

Climate change and climate-related conflict are at once a challenge to livelihoods, for natural resource management and for peacebuilding. Conflict-sensitive climate change adaptation is and should remain at the core of existing and future work in the fields of sustainable development, the environment and peace. Given that the linkages between climate change and conflict are complex, and operate at different scales across time and space, there is a need for different scientific disciplines to work together on research; including local knowledge from communities who have already shown resilience.

Policy makers across different ministries, and even between countries and regions, need to work together to develop plans and institutions for adaptation that is conflict-sensitive. Research, policy development and practical work in development, the environment and peacebuilding, cannot operate in silos. These fields of work are already highly interconnected – yet, need to become more so – if conflicts resulting from climate change or adaptation can be prevented. Funding for climate change adaptation should be situated at the core of the environment-development-peace triangle, where issues of livelihoods, conflict resolution, natural resource management, human rights and gender are situated.

Recommendations

For the African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs)

- Establish peace and conflict assessments for adaptation projects that go beyond a purely technical understanding of adaptation. Sectors critically affected by, and vulnerable to, climate change – such as pastoralism – must be identified through systematic assessment at all levels.
- Significantly expand the political scope at an AU level of action for conflict-sensitive adaptation measures and substantially increase capacities on a national and regional level.
- Build robust governance structures and institutions linking local, national and regional levels, especially for natural resource management.
- Build coalitions with civil society, Diaspora networks, academia and the private sector to consolidate the AU Continental Early Warning System with other early warning systems on climate change and vulnerability.
- Promote the integration of climate change into research and practice on mediation.

For the UN and the International Community

- Enhance capacities and promote regional cooperation, to improve the abilities for early warning, analysis & response.
- Ensure funding for adaptation demands for conflict-sensitivity in programme design, both at country and at project levels, which also recognises the multi-disciplinary, multi-scaled nature of interventions required to address climate-related conflicts.

- Strengthen multilateral leadership to promote global climate security and to ensure a successful post-2012 agreement on climate change.
- Cooperate with developing countries to commence dialogue, create awareness, share analysis and cooperatively address climate change and conflict challenges.
- Improve the information base on climate change and conflict by conducting scaled assessments from grassroots to continental levels.
- Institutional support at AU, REC and national levels, needs to be strengthened to effectively undertake conflict-sensitive adaptation.
- Offer institutional and financial support to transnational Diaspora networks in projects contributing to climate change adaptation. This contribution, for example, in form of co-development, needs to be further evaluated, recognised and supported in order to move the migration debate beyond the threat-victim dichotomy.

For Governments and Civil Society Organisations

- Respect and protect human rights, including water and food security, that underpin livelihoods and well-being in the development of adaptation strategies.
- Use rights based approaches in decision-making to avoid strategies that reinforce vulnerability of some groups.
- Identify risks and formulate strategies and programmes to raise awareness and win acceptance for transformative, conflict-sensitive measures. These should be based on consensus principles, and are more inclusive and participative, including multi-stakeholder initiatives bringing local communities together with NGOs and government institutions.
- Involve the private sector in conflict-sensitive adaptation, given its expertise, capital, resources, reach and innovation capacity. However, determine under which conditions and criteria the private sector should be involved and how they are to be held accountable.
- Mainstream climate change adaptation in conflict-prone contexts should applying conflict-sensitive approaches.
- Promote traditional authorities and mechanisms for conflict resolution and natural resource management. Issues that contribute to scarcity and conflict need to be addressed for successful adaptation. This requires overall frameworks of policy, legislation, implementation and administration.
- Develop mechanisms to channel the contribution of the Diaspora into climate adaptation by facilitating the transfer of knowledge, social capital and investments.
- Issues that contribute to scarcity and conflict to be addressed for successful adaptation. This requires overall frameworks of policy, legislation, implementation and administration.

About the Climate Change & Conflict Expert Seminar

Papers were presented by staff from the United Nations Environment Programme; the African Union, the University of Dar Es Salaam; the University of KwaZulu-Natal; ACCORD; the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC); University of Nairobi; Deutsche Welthungerhilfe; Refugee Law Project (Uganda); the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT); the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy; Uppsala University; International Alert; Stockholm Environmental Institute; George Mason University; University of Melbourne; CLISEC at the University of Hamburg; University of Bonn; adelphi Research (Berlin); and the Center for International Conflict Resolution at Columbia University. Experts and consultants on human rights, environmental management and climate change adaptation facilitated sessions. Papers presented at the seminar will be published in 2012 as an edited volume by ACCORD.

Endnotes

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- 16 IPCC. Ibid.
- 17 Tänzler, D., Maas, A. and Carius, C. 2010. Climate change adaptation and peace. In: *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews Climate Change*, 1(5), pp. 741-750.
- 18 See Tänzler et al., Ibid. for a rigorous consideration of international approaches to conflict-sensitive adaptation, with a focus on the UNFCCC process, and broader non-technical considerations.

The Authors Prof Pius Yanda is the Director of the Institute of Resource Assessment at the University of Dar Es Salaam. He is a Professor in Physical Geography and has 24 years of experience in climate-related studies in the region as well as in Tanzania. Between 2005 and 2007, he was one of the international experts in the panel that made a scientific review of the state of art on climate change in the globe. He was one of the Lead Authors for Chapter 9 (Africa Chapter) of the Working Group II of the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report (AR4). Email: yanda@ira.udsm.ac.tz. Salomé Bronkhorst is a Senior Researcher in the Knowledge Production Department at ACCORD. In her role, Ms Bronkhorst identifies and implements practice-oriented research for ACCORD's intervention programmes. Her research areas presently include African natural resource conflicts and development, with a particular focus on human security, climate change, land and pastoral conflict, communal conflict, water-related conflict and climate change adaptation policy as it relates to conflict prevention. She has published scholarly work on elections in South Africa, on mediation in the African Union and on environmental conflict in Africa. Email: salome@accord.org.za

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Private Bag X018 Umhlanga Rocks 4320 South Africa, Tel: +27 (0)31 502 3908, Fax: +27 (0)31 502 4160, Email: info@accord.org.za
www.accord.org.za

