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Double vulnerability

The humanitarian implications of intersecting climate and conflict risk

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Key messages

- Climate change is already affecting risks globally, including in areas of conflict.
- People in areas of conflict are often especially vulnerable to changing threats, shocks and stresses, for instance due to the lack of government protection and support, as well as limited and unequal access to resources. These pressures in turn may fuel further insecurity.
- While attention for the climate–security nexus has been growing, there has been relatively limited attention to the humanitarian implications of these changing risks.
- This is relevant not only for effective humanitarian assistance, but also in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement and the commitment for significant financial support to help the most vulnerable to manage changing risks – support which currently hardly reaches the most fragile contexts where vulnerability is most acute.

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This is a background paper for a global series of policy-making roundtables on 'People's experience of conflict, climate risk and resilience'.

The paper presents selected secondary evidence and seeks to set the scene for the first roundtable event on 17 January 2019, Nairobi, Kenya. This background paper will be updated as the roundtable series progresses.

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Contents

1 The impacts of conflict and climate risk: here and now

'Climate change is making humanitarian work harder, less predictable and more complex.' This observation by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC, 2018) is a direct reflection of the fact that climate change is making millions of people more vulnerable to changing shocks and stresses, especially in areas of conflict. Changing patterns of conflict, displacement, urbanisation, disease and natural hazards mean vulnerable populations and humanitarian agencies are struggling to cope.

This paper summarises current knowledge and analysis of the interactions between climate and conflict to set the scene for discussions at a global series of roundtables on 'People's experience of conflict, climate risk and resilience' jointly convened by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and local partners. The roundtables will focus on people's lived experience of conflict and climate risk in different parts of the world, and explore how humanitarian organisations and their partners can best support people's efforts to survive, adapt and thrive.

People's experiences of compounding conflict and climate risk are already a reality. The Lake Chad region represents a case in point, where the interplay of armed conflict and climate change is undermining water governance, creating displacement and entrenching poverty. The crisis in the region has received high-level attention at the UN Security Council, and on the ground has created what UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohamed has called a 'dire' humanitarian situation, with 11 million people in need of urgent assistance in 2018.

The role climate change plays in crisis is highly context-specific, and shaped by the risk profile of a specific context, including the capacity of the society and government to manage climatic shocks and stresses. People's vulnerability determines the pattern of humanitarian crisis. The most severe impacts of climate change are not necessarily in areas exposed to the greatest changes in climate, but in places where people's capacities to cope with these changes are lacking. The same level of drought may be manageable in Australia – a peaceful and well-resourced society – but catastrophic for much poorer, conflict-affected countries in the Sahel. Climate scientists agree the outbreak and persistence of armed conflict significantly affects individual adaptive capacity (Adger et al., 2014).

The intersection of conflict and climate risks puts additional pressure on local and national systems, frequently with devastating impacts on the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of already poor communities. This vulnerability to weather and climate shocks has been demonstrated in recent years by the impacts of droughts and floods in a range of conflict areas, including Yemen, South Sudan, northern Nigeria and Somalia. These pressures in turn may fuel further insecurity. As President Maurer of the ICRC put it recently, 'It's very obvious that some of the violence we are observing is directly linked to the impact of climate and changing rainfall patterns … when I think about our engagement in sub-Saharan Africa, in Somalia, in other places of the world, I see that climate has already made a

massive impact on population movement, on the fertility of land' (Davidson, 2018).

It is becoming increasingly clear that the humanitarian community must be ready to respond to climate-induced crises, recognising that it has a role to play in supporting climate change adaptation pathways for people in these highly fragile contexts (e.g. ICRC, 2018). This includes being mindful of its own carbon footprint.

1.1 Looking to the future: a warning

While we are already facing a more volatile climate today, these challenges will only grow in the coming decades. In 2018, IFRC President Francesco Rocca warned that, 'In a 1.5°C-warmer world, more extreme-weather events will affect everyone. But it will be especially cruel for communities that are already struggling to survive because of conflict, insecurity or poverty' (IFRC, 2018). As of 2017, global average temperatures had increased by about 1°C compared with pre-industrial levels (IPCC, 2018). In the coming decades, the increase is set to reach at least 1.5°C, and significantly more unless much more ambitious action is taken within the next few years to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (ibid.).

While this may seem like a small increase, it represents a significant shift in global climate systems. It translates into much larger changes in temperature over some areas, as well as changes in rainfall patterns and weather extremes, from heatwaves and extreme rainfall to more intense storms and storm surges driven by higher sea levels. These changes are likely to have a negative impact on key areas of development, such as health, livelihood security, water security and economic growth (IPCC, 2018). All of these risks will increase further as average temperatures continue to rise (ibid.).

What does this mean for humanitarians? According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (2018), 'Climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5°C and increase further with 2°C. Populations at disproportionately higher risk of adverse consequences of global warming of 1.5°C and beyond include disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, some indigenous peoples, and local communities dependent on agricultural or coastal livelihoods (high confidence).'

Climate changes do not happen in a vacuum. So-called 'megatrends', including changes in climate, demographics, technology and science, economics, political power and conflict, interact in complex and unpredictable ways (Ferris, 2011). These megatrends affect not only patterns of climate impact but also how the humanitarian system is financed and functions (ibid.). If current predictions are realised, climate change, including potentially catastrophic change, will bring new challenges to the humanitarian community and fundamentally alter the context in which responses operate (Clarke and de Cruz, 2015). For example, we are already seeing a disaster crunch between two megatrends: increased exposure and vulnerability to climate-related disasters in rapidly growing megacities. This is creating new environments in which humanitarian responses are required (Munslow and O'Dempsey, 2010). Changing patterns of urban violence and armed conflict will pose further challenges to response operations, creating a complex mix of intersecting threats and megatrends. On the other hand, better management of the rapid urban development in vulnerable regions could also significantly reduce the risks facing populations concentrated in towns and cities.

1.2 The Basic Disaster Model: understanding climate, conflict and disaster risk

Vulnerability is 'produced in and by society' (Ribot, 2014). Climate and disaster risk is the product of a hazard, exposure to that hazard, and vulnerability and linked concepts of coping and capacity, or lack thereof (see e.g. Wisner et al., 2003; IPCC, 2012; 2014). Climate and disaster risk are therefore largely determined by the socio-political-economic and environmental conditions in which people live. As such, they are neither 'natural' nor conflict-neutral (Peters, 2018).

Those most vulnerable to climate change are not necessarily living in places where exposure to changing hazards is highest, but rather where individual and societal capacities to anticipate, absorb and adapt to those changes are lowest (Bahadur et al., 2015). These include contexts where governments may not be providing the necessary protections to citizens, where institutions and governance mechanisms do not enable effective crisis risk management and where power-holders and duty-bearers do not support equitable distribution of resources (Harris et al., 2013).

International discussions on risk reduction, such as those around the Paris Agreement on climate change (UNFCCC, 2015a) and the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR, 2015), have traditionally focused on contexts with stable governance. However, it is increasingly recognised that issues of violence, conflict and security should be part of the conversation about how to reduce natural hazard-related climate and disaster risk (Peters, 2018). This is necessary not only to reduce climate and disaster risk but also because a failure to consider the dynamics of conflict may lead to the promotion or operationalisation of technocentric approaches that 'fail the resilience challenge' (Levine et al., 2014).

Issues of conflict and politics have been largely absent in considerations of the design of disaster risk reduction (Peters, 2017) and climate change adaptation and mitigation projects (Tanzler et al., 2013). This may lead to inappropriately designed interventions that could do more harm than good, as seen in Aceh, Indonesia, and East Africa (Levine et al., 2014).

2 Climate change, crisis and the dynamics of conflict

Past decades have seen increasing discussion on climate change, initially among those concerned with environmental sustainability, and subsequently in the context of development and humanitarian response. More recently, climate change has also come to be regarded as an issue of national and international security, accompanied by a proliferation of terms such as 'tipping points', 'hotspots' and 'threat multipliers' (see e.g. Smith and Vivekananda, 2007; Munslow and O'Dempsey, 2010; Rüttinger et al., 2015).

In 2015, the independent *New climate for peace* report highlighted the risks posed to states that lack the capacity to absorb additional shocks initiated by a changing climate. It identified seven 'climate fragility risks' where climate change acted as a 'risk multiplier' interacting with other social, economic and political pressures: local resource competition; livelihood insecurity and migration; extreme weather events and disasters; volatile food prices and provision; transboundary water management; sea level risk and coastal degradation; and the negative unintended effects of climate policies (Rüttinger et al., 2015).

The evidence base on the causal relationship between climate change and the dynamics of conflict is complex and contested, and often context-specific. Nordas and Gleditsch (2007) argued that, given the 'potential' impact of climate change on the 'physical environment', there are a 'large number of possible paths to conflict', but that these mechanisms have 'rarely been substantiated with reliable evidence'. Gleiditsch (2012) found 'only limited support for viewing climate change as an important influence on armed conflict', warning that securitising climate change could 'possibly influence the perceptions of actors and contribute to a self fulfilling prophecy'.

The IPCC's assessment of the relationship between climate change and armed conflict found little agreement on direct causality. However, factors linked with the onset of armed conflict, such as 'low per capita incomes, economic contraction, and inconsistent institutions' are also factors that are 'sensitive to climate change' (Adger et al., 2014). While no conflict has a single motivating cause, climate change is believed to *interact* with other social, economic and political factors to heighten the risk of political instability and violent conflict (Peters and Vivekananda, 2014).

Dominant discourses for understanding the climate–conflict relationship have been widely criticised for using quantitative large N studies that focus on proving or disproving causal relationships. In addition, much of the analysis and academic debate has centred on a few specific cases, such as the extent to which climate change played a contributing role in armed conflicts in Darfur and in the Arab Spring (for a review of evidence see Peters and Vivekananda, 2014), and in the past few years in the Lake Chad Basin (Vivekananda and Born, 2018).

More recent research has shifted away from trying to determine a direct causal link between climate change and conflict to one that tries to understand its role as an intermediary factor (Peters and Vivekananda, 2014). Factors such as adaptive capacity, institutions and governance have all been identified as important (Gilmore, 2017). For example, studies relating to drought responses have found that institutional and economic functioning

and adaptive capacity are critical in terms of making conflict more or less likely (Feitelson and Tubi, 2017). This is useful as it provides a practical means by which to avert potential negative impacts, through climate change mitigation measures and by strengthening adaptive, resilience and risk management capacities.

In sum, climate does have an impact on some of the known drivers of conflict by acting as a 'threat multiplier' in conflict settings rather than as an outright cause of conflict in itself. In places like northern Nigeria and Lake Chad, the complex relationship between climate change and variability, livelihoods and incidents of conflict is receiving increased attention, including in policy spheres.[1]

2.1 The securitisation of the climate challenge: help or hindrance?

The convening of a UN Security Council meeting on climate change in 2007 prompted a fierce academic and political debate on the potential security implications of climate change (von Lucke et al., 2014). These debates were initially dominated by arguments making the case for greater international action on climate change and better understanding of its impacts on migration and displacement, food and energy security and the military's contribution to carbon emissions (Rüttinger et al., 2015). Academic attention centred on whether this constituted a securitisation of climate change – a policy turn that takes climate change from being a purely environmental and developmental issue to being one that warrants the attention and action of security actors and apparatuses (Peters and Mayhew, 2016). Most commentators do not deny the potential security implications of the impacts of climate change but see 'securitisation' primarily as a useful political tool in attracting attention to climate change, notably giving greater political weight to the climate agenda in advance of the Paris Agreement (Brauch, 2008).

This narrative should be treated with caution. Dominant climate security narratives have been criticised for drawing on Malthusian theories that attribute population growth as a prime driver of poverty, conflict and other societal ills, or criminalise young African men as a 'security threat' (Hartmann, 2014). Such framings have also been criticised for failing to articulate practical or policy recommendations for managing the climate security 'threat' and neglecting the experienced disaster risk reduction community of practice, which is adept at reducing disaster risk to better manage climate-related disasters (Peters, 2018).

Military actors have long considered the impact of climate change on strategic threats and likely operations, but the security and foreign policy community has only recently started to identify concrete actions to manage the 'climate security threat'. The Hague Declaration on Planetary Security is one example.[2] Climate security risk assessments are another example. These are used to identify climate risk management strategies in contexts where climate change may affect rainfall patterns and environmental stress, exacerbating pre-existing violent conflict and security risks – as in the Lake Chad Basin (Vivekananda and Born, 2018).

The 'solutions' to climate change impacts in conflict-affected contexts will not be found in the security sector alone. The UN Secretary-General's prevention agenda, which seeks to strengthen links between actors in the humanitarian, development and peace spheres (Guterres, 2018), may have a role to play here. While discussions around the climate–security intersection have been led primarily by foreign and security policy-makers – especially European and US agencies and think tanks – it would be helpful to hear a stronger voice from humanitarians and others who can share local lived experience to expand the evidence base and help avoid an overly simplistic formulation of the links between climate change and conflict. Doing so may also help develop a pro-poor narrative to the challenge.

1 Climate change has been considered in UN Security Resolutions, including for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (UNSC, 2018) and Lake Chad (UNSC, 2017).

2 For more information, see www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org.

3 Adapting humanitarian response to compounded climate and conflict risk

Critics of the humanitarian sector as currently constituted question its ability to meet new challenges, such as an increase in frequency and length of humanitarian crises and the 'changing nature of conflict' (Bennett et al., 2016). It is clear that the sector needs to change and adapt. The UN Secretary-General's sustaining peace agenda puts renewed emphasis on preventive actions to avert or minimise the likelihood and impact of crisis through more integrated strategic partnerships with development and peace actors (Guterres, 2018). The humanitarian sector has also been exploring new means to act early and build resilience, through tools, innovations and ideas such as forecast-based finance, shock-responsive programming, resilience-building, preparedness, cash transfer programming and insurance (Peters and Pichon, 2017).

This operational shift, though not always explicitly framed as such, points to greater recognition of risk management, including deliberate risk reduction, as part of a broader agenda spanning humanitarian, development, climate and security actors. For example, an effective emergency preparedness system encompasses actions conventionally thought of as more developmental in nature (legislation and policy enforcement) and actions conventionally more humanitarian (stockpiling of goods and search and rescue capabilities) – and much in between (Kellett and Peters, 2013). Emergency preparedness requires humanitarian and development actions, putting in place risk management systems to deal with climate and conflict risk. However, the question remains as to whether incremental changes will be enough to meet the climate challenge. Some argue that transformational change is required and this – as currently envisaged – is characterised by a focus on resilience, disaster risk reduction and early warning (Marin and Naess, 2017). By extension it has been purported that humanitarian approaches in the context of climate change adaptation could be regarded as opportunities for upstream crisis prevention (ibid.).

There are real barriers to linking humanitarian action and climate change adaptation, including institutional inertia or resistance and the limits of existing finance models. More fundamentally, addressing climate change impacts requires acknowledging and addressing the root drivers of vulnerability. This necessitates action on issues of politics, power and inequitable resource distribution (Peters and Peters, 2018).

3.1 Climate adaptation, poverty and power

In recent years, interest in climate change adaptation has grown dramatically, partly because of growing realisation of the significant impacts of a changing climate on the world's poorest people (e.g. Hallegatte, 2016). More practically, the significant financing commitments set out in the Paris Agreement – at least $100 billion annually from developed to developing countries – include a significant share for adaptation (UNFCCC, 2015a; b).

Adaptation is scientifically defined by the IPCC as 'a process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects, in order to moderate harm

or exploit beneficial opportunities' (IPCC, 2012). In the context of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), adaptation was initially seen as 'second-best' to efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to prevent dangerous climate change altogether. Once it became clear that climate change was already underway and would continue for several decades, adaptation became the political answer to the challenging reality that greenhouse gas mitigation was not happening fast enough, and that some of the countries that had contributed the least to emissions would be worst affected. The idea was that effective adaptation would prevent or reduce the impacts of climate change on societies.

This notion was initially constructed around a perception of climate change as a gradual and long-term process. The classic example of adaptation was to add 10 cm to a sea wall in anticipation of a 10 cm expected sea level rise, so levels of safety would remain exactly the same. More recently, however, it has become clear that climate change will not express itself in such a gradual way, and that many impacts are likely to be felt through changing extremes (e.g. IPCC, 2012). It is also clear that such extremes cannot be entirely managed proactively – it is simply not economically possible to prevent every threat stemming from relatively infrequent events. Instead, a risk management approach will be required, with many similarities to previous experiences in disaster risk reduction (IPCC, 2012; 2014).

Ability to manage changing extremes is highly unequal around the world. In the context of the previous example: the Netherlands may be able to afford adding 10 cm to an existing sea wall but for Bangladesh, where large parts of the coast do not have sea walls to meet even current storm surge risks, there is no easy engineering fix for rising sea levels. In practice, this means the most vulnerable populations face the worst impacts, and are also poorly served by international approaches to (and financing systems for) adaptation. Formal knowledge about climate change is also often limited in places that are most vulnerable, owing to the absence of long-term climate data and scientific capacity to develop and test models for these regions.

Partly in response to these challenges, there has been a growing emphasis on complementing the 'top-down' assessment of potential climate impacts – going from climate change scenarios in physical climate models to impact models to implications for society – with 'bottom-up' approaches rooted in local assessments of risk and capacities to manage those risks (e.g. van Aalst et al., 2008). Recognising that adaptation needs to reflect local realities and political constraints, it has also become clear that the original technical definition of adaptation, which implies that it is a linear and apolitical exercise, is far removed from the actual political economy of adaptation processes (Tanner and Allouche, 2011). This applies especially in conflict contexts.

Understanding adaptation as a socioeconomic and political process through which society manages both environmental and social change lends itself to consideration of the ways in which power is reproduced – intentionally and unintentionally – through adaptation processes (Eriksen et al., 2015). In practice, adaptation has been largely operationalised through separate projects financed by distinct adaptation financing mechanisms. More recently, there has been a growing focus on the integration of adaptation into other areas of work, including mainstream economic planning and add-ons to investments. In both cases, there are important questions about what adaptation needs to be done, by whom, through what incentives and with what additional support (financial and technical). A key challenge is of course that existing power dynamics may not best serve those most vulnerable to climate change.

In that light, what does humanitarian action in support of adaptation pathways look like? And is it compatible with current humanitarian principles, approaches and mandates? Principled humanitarian action will need to find ways to work within the politics of a given conflict and within the wider climate politics surrounding it.

3.2 Transforming humanitarian work: climate-compatible humanitarian action

Emerging humanitarian 'solutions' to changing climate risks – especially in relation to weather- and climate-related shocks – include instruments such as pre-financed emergency preparedness plans (Clarke and Dercon, 2016); forecast-based financing mechanisms, with predefined actions initiated on the basis of agreed triggers (Coughlan et al., 2015; Costella et al., 2017); and crisis modifiers, which enable early action in combination with longer-term vulnerability reduction (Peters and Pichon, 2017). Depending on your perspective, these could be considered an extension of current practices or a radical shift in ways of working within a humanitarian system that is primarily response-driven. Some argue there needs to be a reorientation of humanitarian actors towards development aims – such as climate change adaptation – and that this requires fundamental shifts in financial and political frameworks to enable a move from fixed measurable results in specific sectors to longer-term vulnerability reduction (Eriksen et al., 2017). Humanitarian action focused on sustainable impacts can also support resilience and adaptation to climate risk, as it is attempting to do in protracted conflicts.

The increasing likelihood of dramatic impacts from climate change has led to a growing call for 'climate-compatible action' in the development, humanitarian and security domains. Climate-compatible approaches would seek to encourage the humanitarian system to manage climate impacts and adapt to future changes (Clarke and de Cruz, 2015). Doing so could also help ensure actions do not exacerbate climate vulnerabilities or lead to maladaptation (Rüttinger et al., 2015). An independent report commissioned by the G7 highlights how development programmes are increasingly being 'climate-proofed'. Humanitarians could look to do the same (ibid.). This might include using climate risk assessments to better identify vulnerabilities, and aligning humanitarian response with climate adaptation plans, national economic development plans and (where they exist) post-conflict recovery plans (ibid.).

3.3 (Re)directing climate finance

Climate finance is often described as an instrument through which to support those most vulnerable to climate change impacts. In practice, access to and use of climate finance is very limited in fragile or conflict-affected contexts. The eligibility criteria for accessing climate finance dissuade policy-makers from using it in contexts without functioning democracies and where institutional performance is low (Halimanjaya, 2016; Betzold and Weiler, 2017; OECD, 2015). As a result, contexts with 'weak' governance have received relatively low levels of funding (Rahman and Ahmad, 2015; Peters, 2017). Of the 30 countries 'least ready' to receive and utilise climate finance (according to the GAIN Readiness Index), 19 also appear in the top 30 of the Fragile States Index for the same year (Peters and Budimir, 2016: 14). In other words, the countries that need climate finance most are least likely to receive it.

The distribution of climate finance – including to contexts classified as fragile or conflict-affected – varies across different mechanisms. The Adaptation Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund have disbursed funding in so-called 'fragile states', including to help increase government capacity to manage funds effectively (Peters and Budimir, 2016; Schalatek et al., 2017). However, while stringent fund allocation practices guard against corruption and financial mismanagement, they also present significant barriers for countries with low institutional functioning (Halimanjaya, 2016, in Peters, 2017). The current mismatch between eligibility for climate finance and the need for climate finance is a policy puzzle that needs to be resolved urgently.

4 Agenda 2030, the Adaptation Goal of the Paris Agreement and the humanitarian imperative

There is clear recognition that several global objectives, such as the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, will be achieved only if we focus more of the global effort on challenging contexts, in particular fragile and conflict-affected countries. This is reflected, for instance, in the growing focus of several multilateral development banks on contexts of fragility and even conflict. In the same vein, the Adaptation Goal of the Paris Agreement commits the parties to 'enhance adaptive capacity and resilience' and 'reduce vulnerability, with a view to contributing to sustainable development', to ensure an 'adequate adaptation response in the context of the goal of holding average global warming well below 2 degrees C and pursuing efforts to hold it below 1.5 degrees C'. It is clear there will be no 'adequate response' without a particular focus on conflict-affected contexts where people are most vulnerable to climate shocks and stresses.

These political agreements in principle mandate an increased focus on conflict-affected areas, although this has been hard to put into practice, certainly for climate action. By contrast, humanitarian action is needs-based and focuses its efforts on the most vulnerable. In principle, humanitarian actors will continue to address the urgent needs of people in these contexts. However, in the face of changing risks, rising humanitarian budgets and rising pressures on the humanitarian system, it would make sense to consider if the humanitarian system can also adapt and contribute more consciously to efforts to manage changing risk profiles. If the places where humanitarian organisations operate are also the ones facing the highest climate risk, yet getting the least support, it would make sense to deploy humanitarian delivery mechanisms, first of all simply to help people in those places cope with the risks they already face today but also to support them to be more resilient in the face of changing risks. This would address the double vulnerability of climate and conflict, and may even contribute to reducing some of the pressures that could contribute to future tensions and conflict.

The answers to these questions are becoming urgent as climate risk becomes more visible in humanitarian contexts, where conflicts and climate impacts collide. This requires responses partly from the world of climate policy and financing, including the major donor countries. But it also requires reflection by humanitarian organisations on their mission and mandate, alongside a practical and grounded assessment of what adaptation and resilience mean in terms of operational practice in these highly challenging contexts.

It is a logical extension therefore that space be provided for humanitarian actors to engage with the implications of intersecting climate and conflict risk. The roundtables convened by the ICRC, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre and ODI are an initial contribution to this endeavour.

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