



Roundtable report

People's experience of conflict, climate risk and resilience

Nairobi roundtable, 17 January 2019

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About

This outcome paper was produced in support of the global series of policy-making roundtables and highlights the key areas of debate which occurred during discussions in Nairobi on 17 January 2019. **The views represented in this paper are those of the roundtable participants and do not necessarily represent the views of the authors or their agencies.**

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Introduction

In January 2019, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) launched a global series of policy-making roundtables on ‘People’s experience of conflict, climate risk and resilience’. The series has also been supported by regional partners, Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies, the Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) programme and Partners for Resilience.

The roundtable series is accompanied by a background paper, *Double vulnerability: the humanitarian implications of intersecting climate and conflict risk*,¹ which summarises the existing state of knowledge at the intersection of climate, conflict and resilience.

The roundtable series, running throughout 2019, will include seven regional events providing a neutral, non-political space for discussions on the interaction between climate and conflict. The purpose of the series is to foreground the voices and experiences of people directly affected by conflict and climate risk, in order to inform operational decisions and shape global policy.

The primary objectives for the series are: 1) to ground international discussions on conflict and climate risk by listening to people’s lived experiences; 2) to foreground humanitarian perspectives of the climate–conflict nexus; 3) to explore how climate finance can increase people’s adaptation and resilience to the double vulnerability of conflict and climate risk; and 4) to gain insights from key stakeholders to develop the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement’s knowledge, networks and policy on conflict and climate risk.

The first roundtable in the series, held in Nairobi, Kenya, was jointly organised with the International Center for Humanitarian Affairs and the University of Nairobi. It convened 38 experts from different institutions in the Greater Horn of Africa to discuss five key themes at the intersection of climate and conflict. Salient points from these discussions are summarised below.

The discussion in Nairobi centred on five key themes: 1) people’s vulnerability to climate impacts in contexts affected by fragility and conflict; 2) the relationship between climate and some of the known drivers of conflict; 3) barriers to climate finance; 4) security-centred perspectives in current discussions on climate and conflict; and 5) the implications of climate and conflict for humanitarian systems.

Theme 1: People living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

The ability to manage the consequences of climate change is highly unequal around the world and largely determined by the socio-political-economic and environmental conditions in which people live. Those most vulnerable to climate change are not necessarily living in areas exposed to the greatest hazards, but rather where individual and societal capacities to anticipate, absorb and adapt to those changes are lowest. Situations of armed conflict significantly reduce people’s adaptive capacity by limiting effective protection, crisis management and the equitable distribution of resources. In short, the most vulnerable populations face the worst impacts of climate change and are poorly served by international approaches to (and financing systems for) adaptation.

Experts noted that conflict itself makes people vulnerable. This vulnerability is compounded by poverty and climate change, which exacerbate inequalities and unpredictability and put pressure on existing systems, such as health systems. They further noted that fragile and conflict-affected contexts are less able to support their populations in climate change adaptation, and may not have integrated adaptation in national development plans, and that such populations tend to lack information about climate risk and preparedness. This is in part due to ineffective systems and infrastructures, but also to the mobilisation of state resources to restore security, leaving limited resources to support climate change adaptation. There was also a common concern that humanitarian systems could be compromising traditional coping and resilience mechanisms.

1 Available at www.odi.org/publications/11295-double-vulnerability-humanitarian-implications-intersecting-climate-and-conflict-risk

Experts agreed on the importance of better engagement with communities to understand and document their coping mechanisms and the dynamic nature of their adaptation, and to ensure that humanitarian responses are adapted and do not further exacerbate community tensions and vulnerabilities. The importance of supporting community preparedness through sharing relevant information on climate variability and forecasting was also stressed.

Theme 2: Climate and the known drivers of conflict

The causal relationship between climate change and conflict is complex and contested. While early studies based on quantitative research focused on proving or disproving a direct link, more recent research has moved towards exploring how climate change acts as a ‘threat multiplier’ through its interaction with known drivers of conflict.

Roundtable discussions highlighted key drivers of conflict, including interactions between different livelihoods, marginalisation in development and policies, environmental concerns, access to resources, education and governance systems. All experts strongly agreed that climate change is indeed a threat multiplier for these drivers of conflict. A common thread was that there is less land for more people. At the same time, the land is changing as the climate changes, and practices such as deforestation increase the level of aridity, thereby reducing the land’s carrying capacity. The result is often population movement from one place to another, and sometimes back again – as was the case for some communities in northern Uganda. This can trigger conflict, particularly over the management of scarce resources such as grazing areas and water, which may also be influenced by governance systems that create marginalisation. In other words, the relationship between climate and conflict appears complex and non-linear.

The complexity of interactions means that ‘business as usual’ humanitarian interventions cannot meet the challenges posed by the

climate–conflict nexus. Humanitarian actors need to engage with long-term, ‘big picture’ issues, rather than only short-term interventions. This requires addressing not just the face-value problems, such as access to water and food amid drought and insecurity but, more critically, understanding and influencing the dynamics around the drivers of conflict and climate change.

Theme 3: Access to climate finance

In 2015, signatories of the Paris Agreement committed to ensuring that climate finance enables adaptation of the most vulnerable. In practice, however, access to climate finance in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is very limited. In order to increase finance flows, experts stated a need for simplified access processes for conflict-affected contexts. This should be coupled with strengthening recipient countries’ capacities as needed, including in financial management, staff and programme management, technical capacities and infrastructure for programme delivery.

The private sector is key to strengthening the economic security, and thus resilience, of people to a variety of climate- and non-climate-related shocks. To catalyse private sector investment, there is a need to strengthen incentives as well as mechanisms to share risk. In addition, climate finance mechanisms need to be redesigned to allow civil society access. This was cited as especially relevant in situations where national governments, faced with a variety of constraints, may not be able to effectively lead adaptation efforts.

In situations where a government is party to a conflict, the equitable disbursement of climate finance to the most vulnerable is a concern. It is crucial to ensure that climate finance is not skewed towards one side in a conflict, resulting in disproportionate impacts or opportunity costs for people living in areas on an opposing side. Similarly, such cases make it extremely difficult for humanitarian actors to access climate funds through current mechanisms (which rely on partnerships with government) without jeopardising their independence, neutrality and ultimately access to people in need

of humanitarian assistance. In order for climate finance to effectively reach the most vulnerable, experts agreed that a balance must be struck between the importance of national government ownership, as outlined in the Paris Agreement, and the challenges that arise in conflict settings.

Experts also described problems surrounding corruption and accountability, including the reduced volume of finance reaching people in need in contexts of corruption. They also discussed the role that ‘corruption perception’ plays in limiting the research community in East Africa from pursuing context-relevant research. Some participants felt that accountability frameworks to manage instances of corruption need to be strengthened, while others felt that systems have become impractical and cumbersome and need to be simplified.

Finally, experts cited a global imbalance between finance for mitigation and finance for adaptation and resilience. The current, relatively low level of adaptation and resilience finance disproportionately impacts the people most vulnerable to changing climate risks in Africa, and especially those in places affected by conflict.

Theme 4: Security-centred perspectives

Since it first appeared on the UN Security Council agenda in 2007, climate change has been increasingly framed as a security issue. Internationally, there is general acceptance that climate change impacts present a security threat, though there are those who continue to question the validity of such framings. Criticism has focused on what is seen as an oversimplification of the links between climate change and conflict and security, and on the failure to provide practical solutions for dealing with negative impacts. Securitised climate narratives often emanate from those closest to the security sector, resulting in messages which ignore lived experience. This gap provides an opportunity for other actors – including humanitarians – to enter the debate and champion ‘pro-poor’ messages for tackling climate impacts in conflict contexts.

While it may be difficult to separate climate change from matters of security in conflict-affected contexts, experts noted that the security

of vulnerable communities should be a priority. On several occasions the point was raised that securitised narratives – such as those related to migration – can obscure humanitarian and development needs. The needs of vulnerable groups must be better represented in such debates, to ensure that their lived experiences are heard at the regional and international level.

Experts also raised the importance of grounded evidence that helps to advance understanding of the climate–security nexus in practice. Without such evidence, influencing policy in pro-poor ways will remain a challenge. While experts noted that climate change may interact with known drivers of conflict, structural factors – such as governance – were still viewed as more fundamental. In addition, experts drew attention to the influence humanitarian responses to climatic shocks can have on local conflict dynamics, as aid involves a transfer of resources.

Important entry-points for humanitarians include interventions that assess local capacity based on local feedback, and recognise the specific vulnerabilities of different societal groups. ‘Localisation’ was emphasised, including the need to remove obstacles to local actors accessing funding.

Theme 5: Implications for the humanitarian system

The convergence of a changing climate and mega-trends – such as demographic pressures, mega-cities and armed conflict – will place increasing strain on the humanitarian system. The intersection of these threats presents challenges in terms of how to finance more complex risk profiles, and in terms of how the system functions – is it ready to deal with complex risk? Critiques of the humanitarian system have questioned its ability to meet such challenges in its current form. There have also been calls for the humanitarian system to address longer-term development aims – including climate change adaptation and resilience-building – to prevent crises, rather than just respond to them. However, for some this represents a radical shift in humanitarian practice; obstacles to change include mandates, institutional resistance and limits to existing financing models.

Experts discussed whether humanitarians should or could be drivers of radical change. Some argued that, as the United Nations has stated that all agencies should address the Sustainable Development Goals, a focus on relief was tantamount to addressing the symptoms of crisis rather than underlying drivers. Throughout discussions, the importance of local communities addressing underlying drivers and providing relief was emphasised. Moreover, local solutions should be bolstered, not replaced, by humanitarian approaches to addressing climate and conflict impacts. Localisation remains important for ensuring sustainability and for increasing the possibility of appropriately designed and, in some cases, conflict-sensitive interventions. Many experts also felt that the localisation approach helped to reduce the risk of creating a dependency system, which could undermine traditional coping strategies.

Contributors to the discussion also highlighted the operational challenges presented by the reorientation of the humanitarian system to long-term development aims. While there was some agreement that humanitarians have solutions to offer, the institutional and financial arrangements of the humanitarian sector hamper longer-term programming. Experts frequently argued that donors are willing to fund emergency response but not more developmental activities.

Arguably more fundamental, the shift towards long-term development goals also raises questions around neutrality and the humanitarian imperative. Work that is more developmental in nature – including aspects of climate change adaptation – requires engagement with government actors, and accompanying issues of power and politics, which is problematic for many humanitarian agencies.

Finally, humanitarian actors need to be aware of how their interventions contribute to the dynamics in the contexts where they work. To do this, humanitarian actors must learn to listen carefully to what is at play, so as to design holistic solutions that will last and build agility into crisis response.

Conclusions and next steps

Climate affects some of the known drivers of conflict, and people living in conflict-affected places are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of changing climate risks due to the erosion of the individual and societal ability to anticipate, absorb and adapt to shocks. Humanitarian systems are increasingly strained due to climate change and other megatrends, and humanitarian actors also have an imperative to assist conflict-affected populations to adapt to changing climate risks. Such assistance should bolster local solutions and avoid jeopardising the humanitarian mandate by carefully managing aspects of neutrality and independence. In this regard, mechanisms to access climate finance in situations of conflict need to be carefully considered in order for humanitarians to be meaningful partners in achieving the global goals outlined in the 2015 Paris Agreement. It is also clear that the voices of the most vulnerable, as well as considerations of the humanitarian community, need to be amplified in security-centred discussions on the nexus of climate and conflict.

Finally, the international community needs to recognise the resource constraints affecting fragile and conflict-affected states, and put in place simplified mechanisms to access climate finance, coupled with appropriate training and capacity-strengthening initiatives. This is a crucial step in ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable are addressed, and the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement met.

About the roundtable series

The second roundtable in the series was held in Abidjan on 4 April 2019, where these topics were further explored from a West African perspective. A third took place in The Hague on 3 May 2019. Subsequent roundtable discussions will be held in Amman, Manila, Washington and Geneva. A report of insights gained from the discussions will be prepared after the series concludes.



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