

Climate Change and Conflict: Moving Beyond the Impasse

The debate on the relationship between climate change and conflict has reached an impasse. Two dominant narratives state that either climate change causes conflict or that contemporary conflicts have political and institutional causes. The preoccupation with proving or disproving a correlation between climate change and conflict is not helpful. It is time for a more measured view of vulnerability to climate change and a better understanding of the causes of conflict. Narratives of particular conflicts and local responses to climate change are a better guide for policy than generalised models showing simple chains of causality between conflict and climate change.

Introduction

There is no single, dominant view of how climate change and conflict interact but the perspective that scarce natural resources drive conflicts features prominently in policy and reportage on contemporary conflicts. Policymakers are rightfully seeking clearer evidence of the role of climate variability in conflict, and practitioners require analytical tools to better understand complex conflict situations – taking into account how global climate change may alter the distribution of vulnerability, risk and wealth. These tasks are made very difficult by uncertainties around the precise impacts of climate change and the many competing theories on the causes of conflict and the institutional requirements for transitions to peace and stability.

Competing perspectives

The two most prominent perspectives on the correlation between climate change and conflict are causing an impasse.

Perspective 1: Climate change is worsening resource scarcities and generating new conflicts and security challenges.

This perspective argues that climate change will cause conflict through intermediary impacts such as the breakdown of social relations and institutional failures. Events such as the severe drought that affected the Horn of Africa in 2009, and the localised violence and grim humanitarian consequences that followed, contributed to a narrative that climate change is worsening resource scarcities, leading to conflict and social breakdown (Sachs, 2008).

Perspective 2: Climate change does not cause conflict. The effectiveness of governance and institutions to respond to climate shocks and variability will determine the likelihood of conflict and/or collaboration around resources.

Despite growing concern that climate change will lead to instability and violent conflict, the evidence substantiating this argument is thin. Rainfall in Darfur did not decline significantly in the years prior to the outbreak of violence in 2003 and exhibited a flat trend in the thirty years preceding the conflict (Kevane and Gray, 2008). A recent assessment of the linkages between climate change and conflict concluded that 'climate change factors do not cause violent conflict, but rather merely affect the parameters that are sometimes important in generating violent conflict,' including a decline in livelihoods, unfulfilled aspirations of the young unemployed, and state weakness (Barnett and Adger, 2007).

“ It is time for a new approach that shifts the focus of research to the power relations, negotiations and rights that influence competition and cooperation in different risk situations. ”

Moving beyond the impasse

A major limitation of current debate is its very framing in terms of whether or not there is a close correlation between climate change and conflict. This directs attention away from the wider structural and deeper historical contexts in which both the causes of vulnerability and violence lie.

It is time for a new approach that shifts the focus of research to the power relations, negotiations and rights that influence competition and cooperation around resources in different institutional settings and situations of risk. A key flaw in the current debate is the treatment of vulnerability as something new and only just emerging in relation to future climate change, rather than a state created over time by multiple and overlapping processes of change. There is rightful concern over the social impacts of global climate change and it is true that climate change will make some people more vulnerable given the power relations in which they currently find themselves. However, instead of focusing on external pressures and shocks that create new vulnerability, analysis should focus on the structures, including the role of development and policy processes, which have made certain groups and individuals more vulnerable over time.

Climate change shocks will overlay existing variability and stresses and some individuals and groups will be more resilient to these shocks than others. A clearer understanding of institutions will improve predictions of who will or will not be able to adjust their livelihoods and productive activities. This will require

understanding the ‘rules of the game’ as well as regularised patterns of behaviour that determine the use, access to and ownership of resources. This includes forms of conflict such as dispute, social violence, and predation as well as cooperation like reciprocity, sharing and exchange relations.

It is highly uncertain how institutions will function and change in response to global climate change. It is certain that climate change will alter the frequency, magnitude and characteristics of shocks and stresses. Yet we can learn something from past responses – including adaptation and innovation – to shocks and longer-term changes in the physical environment. A historical perspective may show cases where societies have adjusted to climate pressures leading to greater productivity, new cooperation and improved livelihood outcomes. It may not be correct to assume that climate change will lead to institutional failures and social breakdown. It is equally possible that it could lead to innovations in how societies organise the use of resources as well as changes in access structures that ultimately help to reduce vulnerability.

Strengthening debate

To move beyond the impasse, researchers and policymakers must frame the debate differently – allowing new thinking and evidence to emerge and shape approaches and strategies concerning the relationships between climate change and conflict. This section outlines three suggestions for taking the debate forward.

1. There is no smoking gun. Instead there are complex relationships between phenomena and context-specific interactions.

The current debate on the connections between climate change and conflict demonstrates a perceived need to identify a single ‘cause’ of conflict (a ‘smoking gun’) that, once removed, will hasten a return to peaceful and stable conditions. The basic observation that there are many sources of conflict and that these can and do often change through time is often lost in discussion of whether and how climate change may ‘trigger’, ‘cause’ or ‘sustain’ armed violence.

Conflict is an inherent characteristic of many political contexts. It is often a myth that there is even a peaceful and stable state to return to. There is therefore a need for a better understanding of the role of conflict in development and related processes of political, economic and social change.

The understandable desire to identify a clear causal path between climate change and conflict misses the point that each is a complex phenomenon in its own right. Conflict and collaboration occur in many different forms. They are not at opposite ends of a spectrum and they often co-exist. Similarly, the impacts of climate change will vary between different bio-physical environments and governance contexts and for different social actors and groups. The multifaceted nature of climate change reduces the effectiveness of using predictive modelling and grand theory to frame policy. Instead, there is a need for detailed empirical analysis of particular contexts of conflict

“ The understandable desire to identify a clear causal path between climate change and conflict misses the point that each is a complex phenomenon in its own right. ”

and collaboration in a changing climate. Political analysis that is sensitive to these complexities should be inherent in policy processes that address climate change and conflict. This analysis needs to move beyond assumptions of climate change driven resource-scarcity and related social and institutional breakdown.

2. Adaptation is an inherently political process

The tendency to treat climate change as an environmental issue requiring technical fixes is constraining the debate. It has led many to assume that what is needed is more support to communities to help them adapt to climate shocks, which it is hoped will help reduce future conflicts around increasingly scarce resources. Yet within policy debates on climate change, adaptation is often narrowly defined as a linear process involving the incremental transfer and adoption over time of new knowledge and technologies. There is a belief that adaptation will happen in a more or less straightforward manner if there is political will and commitments of financing from leading industrialised countries.

However, adaptation is highly politicised – both at the level of global climate change negotiations and within the local and national governance systems and power structures that determine the space for people to negotiate for their interests, needs and rights. A political economy approach provides an analytical focus to understanding how people assemble their livelihoods and respond to climate stress and uncertainty alongside many other pressures. This approach seeks to understand vulnerability as the

outcome of intersecting political and economic structures and processes involving multiple actors.

The political economy perspective has important implications. Current thinking promotes adaptation as a way to build peace – suggesting that it is something that involves collaboration around mutual interests and shared goals. It is an error to consider adaptation as a panacea that will prevent conflict relating to climate variations and stress, since adaptation is a political process involving its own struggles, conflict and uneven power relations. As with other types of aid, external assistance for adaptation will involve intervening in political struggles and negotiations between various actors and groups. Strengthening people's adaptive abilities to manage multiple and overlapping processes of change is a political endeavour. Power will be a central component.

3. Resilience through innovation

It is useful to look beyond current thinking that emphasises the need to improve resilience by helping actors and groups to adapt to the impacts of climate change – and that such adaptation might promote peace – to also consider resilience in terms of innovation. Innovation here refers to the transfer and adoption of new knowledge and technologies as well as to a host of less formal changes in social organisation, gender norms, resource uses and customary tenure structures, including new types of reciprocity and sharing, relations across ecological/social borders (including dialogue) and marketing and trade.

It is worth repeating that climate change is not just about worsening scarcities of natural resources or deteriorating social relations. A focus on innovation provides a useful analytical lens to understand the individual, group and institutional adjustments that help people to strengthen livelihoods in a changing climate. For example, pastoralist innovations in the Horn of Africa are enabling herders to gain access to high value fodder in spite of multiple constraints, including more frequent, severe and longer droughts. These innovations include new cooperation with farmers who sell hay to herders and permit livestock to graze on crop residues left on drought-stricken fields.

Little is known about these innovations except by the people who are innovating. Besides mapping the innovations that help individuals and societies to live better with the consequences of a changing climate and benefit from any opportunities that arise, research must also identify and explore their outcomes. Innovation will lead to the emergence of new patterns of vulnerability, wealth and risk. The nature and outcomes of people's innovations at all levels – from local/household or institutional policy responses to the delivery of basic services – will have uneven impacts. A political economy perspective may term these as 'winners and losers' and there is a need for more insight into the subtleties of specific innovations as they impact on, and possibly transform, existing power relations and livelihoods.

Climate Change and Conflict: Moving Beyond the Impasse

“ A political economy approach provides an analytical focus to understanding how people assemble their livelihoods and respond to climate stress and uncertainty alongside many other pressures. ”

Implications for research, policy and practice

- **Detailed analysis of particular conflicts will help to move research on climate change and conflict forward**
Grand models showing causal pathways between climate change and conflict have little predictive value. Rigorous research on situations of conflict can tease out the nuances and specificities of how societies adjust to climate variability and the role of conflict and collaboration within this.
- **Policy should rethink the idea that adaptation is a route to building peace**
Adaptation is a political process involving struggles and negotiations around the allocation of resources and rights that people require to adjust their livelihoods. Adaptation is not automatically a form of peace-building. It is time for a different outlook that puts power relations and negotiations at the centre of understanding.
- **A focus on innovation that promotes people's resilience in a changing climate – alongside adaptation – will improve current practice**
Innovation focuses on the possibilities of living better in a future of new and uncertain risks and opportunities resulting from global climate change. There is an urgent need to support learning from innovation happening in household livelihoods and local and national institutions. These will provide a more useful guide for policy and practice than prescribed technical fixes.

Further reading

- Barnett, J. and Adger, N. (2007) 'Climate change, human security and violent conflict' *Political Geography*, 26: 639-655
- Kevane, M. and Gray, L. (2008) 'Darfur: rainfall and conflict' *Environmental Research Letters*, 3. www.iop.org/EJ/article/1748-9326/3/3/034006/erl8_3_034006.pdf?request-id=afca05bc-b269-4da1-8dc5-bff749ba9944. Accessed December 21, 2009.
- Sachs, J. (2008) 'Land, water and conflict.' *Newsweek*. July 7-14. Available at: www.newsweek.com/id/143700?tid=related
- Scoones, I. and Adwerwa, A. (2009) 'Pastoralist innovation systems' *Future Agricultures Consortium*. Available at: www.future-agricultures.org/pdf%20files/OP-ST01_Pastoral_Innovation_Systems.pdf
- O'Brien, K. (2006) 'Are we missing the point? Global environmental change as an issue of human security' *Global Environmental Change*, 16: 1-3

Credits

This *In Focus Policy Briefing* was written by **Jeremy Lind**, **Maggie Ibrahim** and **Katie Harris** in the Climate Change and Development Centre at the Institute of Development Studies. The editor is **Joanna Glyde**.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IDS or any of the other institutions involved.

Readers are encouraged to quote and reproduce material from issues of *In Focus Policy Briefing* in their own publications. In return, IDS requests due acknowledgement and quotes to be referenced as above.

© Institute of Development Studies, 2010, ISSN 1479-974X