

8. Exploring the links between climate change and violent conflict

Overview

The security challenges posed by climate change are multifaceted and simultaneously affect human, community and state security. Climate change also results in short-, medium- and long-term impacts, which makes the adopted time perspective key. In addition, the impacts of climate change on for instance food or water security are closely dependent on socio-economic conditions, which means that the same impact might have diverse consequences depending on the context. Hence, climate change creates additional pressures on current vulnerabilities for people and societies across the world, with particularly adverse effects in already fragile contexts.

One class of security challenges in relation to a changing climate focuses on the increased risk of violent conflict. A large body of research has in the past decade examined the climate–conflict link and its influences on policymaking, most notably in foreign policy, defence and development. This chapter reviews this literature with a focus on the mechanisms that link climate change to violent conflict.

East Africa has been the subject of a number of studies examining the climate–conflict link, which makes it a particularly noteworthy case for a systematic investigation of linking mechanisms (section I). A focus on one region ensures minimal cross-study comparability in terms of climate conditions and history of violence. Four mechanisms are identified in section I: (a) worsening livelihood conditions; (b) migration and changing pastoral mobility patterns; (c) tactical considerations of armed groups; and (d) exploitation of local grievances by the elite. While the first two mechanisms deal mainly with causes of conflict, the latter two deal with changing conflict dynamics. This difference illustrates that the mechanisms both interact with and complement each other; a phenomenon that needs to be taken into account in the development of policy responses to mitigate climate–conflict risks.

The study of weather-related disasters has recently become more prominent as a way to analyse mechanisms that link climate change to violent conflict. By focusing on the deadliest extreme weather events between 2000 and 2016, including the tropical cyclone Nargin in Myanmar in 2008 and the heatwaves in the northern hemisphere in 2010, it is possible to identify not only mechanisms that link extreme weather events to violent conflict, but also mechanisms that enable growing pressures to be resolved peacefully (see section II). Four

mechanisms are identified. The first two—competition over scarce resources and failure of conflict management institutions—are linked to increased risk of violent conflict. The third mechanism, however, illustrates how extreme weather events in areas plagued by conflict sometimes facilitate social coherence building and enable cooperation rather than deepen ongoing conflicts. The fourth mechanism emphasizes the social dynamics following a disaster, which in the selected cases lack a clear direction in terms of increasing or reducing the risk of violent conflict after an extreme weather event.

Overall, this chapter contributes to furthering knowledge on the climate–conflict link and discusses some of the policy implications of its findings. This discussion centres on the importance of mitigating the negative effects of climate change on livelihoods and the need for adequate conflict resolution mechanisms. Importantly, the chapter shows that climate change does not deterministically lead to violent conflicts. Instead, human agency permeates every step in the chain from climate change to violent conflict. This provides a foundation for investigating how peace can be upheld and shaped despite vast pressures, including those of climate change. Moreover, it stresses the importance of comprehensive approaches to meeting the challenges resulting from the links between climate change and violent conflicts, such as policies and activities to contain climate change, prevent violent conflicts, reduce the impact of disasters and foster social development. Some important first steps have been made, for instance with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations in September 2015, the Paris Agreement on climate change in December 2015 and the commitments of the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016. The growing evidence of the challenges posed by climate change as well as the opportunities to avert the adverse consequences demonstrate the usefulness of a more focused intensification of such efforts.

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