Addressing the politics of the climate–migration–conflict link

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Understanding the role of national governments is crucial to designing more effective policy and programmatic interventions to address the causes of resource scarcity and displacement.

Researchers and policymakers have long claimed a direct link between climate change, migration and conflict. However, policy and programme strategies based on this link have neglected the important role of national governments in creating the conditions for natural resource scarcity that are exacerbated by climate change.[1] In both the cases of Yemen and Darfur, where environmental changes have been cited as key push factors behind migration and conflict, climate change was a necessary but not sufficient condition to explain forced displacement and conflict. Rather, it was the policies and actions – or inactions – of the Yemeni and Sudanese governments that were critical factors in creating the conditions for scarcity that led to prolonged displacement.

Climate change is often framed as a 'push' factor or threat multiplier for increased migration and conflict. One prominent theory linking environmental changes to migration and conflict posits that there is a constantly declining pool of natural resources available to a growing population and that environmental shocks caused by climate change could create instability and spark migration or local competition over resources. This creates particular vulnerabilities for segments of the population that directly rely on resources for subsistence, but also for those who use resources indirectly to generate livelihoods. Relatedly, some researchers and policymakers have claimed that migration flows caused by environmental changes may also exacerbate tensions and spark conflict between 'climate migrants' and host populations over political, social or ideological issues, in addition to perceived competition over resources.

However, these theories are often oversimplified to the point of erasing the political dimension of how climate change may impact migration and conflict. Recent literature has shown that the type and strength of government institutions are often more important than a country's level of natural resources or vulnerability to climate shocks when understanding resource-related displacement and conflict.[2] This article takes the examples of Yemen and Darfur to illustrate how the role of the national government is critical to mitigating – or exacerbating – climate-related migration and conflict.

Yemen

More than half of Yemen's population did not have access to clean water even prior to the current conflict, and groundwater – critical to sustaining agricultural livelihoods – is being depleted more quickly that it is being replaced. Prolonged desertification has led large segments of the rural population to migrate to urban areas, doubling the population of cities over the past 15 years. Now, between 70–80% of all rural conflicts in Yemen are over land or water. In urban areas, competition over land between internally displaced people (IDPs) and the host community has deepened political divisions in the current civil war as many IDPs migrate from the North to the South, which has exacerbated the perception of northerners taking resources from the South. However, although climate change was a necessary condition to spark migration and conflict, weak central governance combined with elite capture of resources was what exacerbated the scarcity of resources and left the population at risk of climate-related conflict.

In the 1990s, Yemen's national government – with the help of UNDP – established the High Water Council to address water scarcity, but the Council was ineffective because of rivalries with other ministries and the inability of the central government to enforce regulations beyond urban centres.[3] Later attempts at resource management, such as the National Water Resources Authority and the National Water Sector Strategy Investment Program (both championed and funded by the World Bank and other international donors), also focused primarily on technocratic solutions and failed to address the political aspects of resource management. The national government has also been plagued by competing political interests that prevented the proper implementation of climate mitigation policies. For example, from 1990 until the outbreak of the civil war, Yemen's government relied heavily on providing patronage to its political power base, part of which was composed of large agricultural landowners who opposed most resource conservation and land use policies, resulting in the over-exploitation of agricultural land with water-intensive crops.

The combination of weak implementation authority of the central government and the competing political interests of elites ensured that the policies intended to mitigate the effects of climate change through resource management were ineffective. This led to scarcity for much of the population and created the conditions for vulnerability to many of the climate shocks occurring today.

Darfur

Earlier arguments for the direct link between climate, migration and conflict in Darfur emphasised the decrease in rainfall and desertification prior to 2003 that drove increased migration and sparked conflict over land and resources.[4] According to this argument, the drought sparked mass migration of segments of the population that relied on agriculture or adjacent sectors for their livelihoods towards South Darfur, where the drought had been less severe, and that this increased social tensions among the groups. This resulted in a rise in low-intensity, localised conflict among communities over resources, which eventually escalated into civil war.

Research has since highlighted the role of governance and resource politics to challenge this direct climate–migration–conflict link. Due in large part to the colonial foundations of the Sudanese State, Sudan maintained deep social divisions that determined much of the resource allocation and created long-standing tensions between Khartoum (as Sudan's 'core') and Darfur (as part of Sudan's 'periphery'). Sudan's central government has since garnered political loyalty through the distribution of land and resources, which almost never went to Darfur. The central government and its political and economic elites also sought control over agricultural and mineral resources to sustain their spending patterns, which resulted in over-reliance on unsustainable land use practices and – with the support of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – large farms that directly increased their vulnerability to environmental changes.[5] This exacerbated migration flows out of unusable agricultural areas and stoked ethnic tensions, specifically between Arab and non-Arab groups. Furthermore, when localised disputes over resources occurred as a result of drought and famine, the traditional dispute mechanisms in Darfur were absent because of the central State's deliberate restructuring of the local administration, eliminating its traditional institutions of governance. Conflicts that would normally be easily resolved continue to fester.

Applying the lessons

What do these conclusions mean for policymakers and practitioners looking to address climate-related migration flows and conflict? By viewing climate migration and conflict as a result of government actions – or inactions – and policies, rather as a result solely of climate change, it becomes critical to focus on the political economy of climate change mitigation and adaption.

However, initiatives such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction and the Platform on Disaster Displacement remain

focused on how international coalitions of States and States themselves should be the primary actors in addressing the effects of climate change by emphasising the need to 'build national capacity' for climate mitigation and adaption. As demonstrated in both Darfur and Yemen, this approach is often ineffective when States themselves are creating the conditions for vulnerability to climate shocks. The World Bank, the IMF and numerous international State donors have previously implemented capacity-building programmes to support climate adaption in both Sudan and Yemen, all of which failed because they did not take into account the country's political interests and structure.

Donors should instead focus programming on 'second-order' climate resilience strategies, such as strengthening dispute resolution mechanisms and developing local land use policies. Rebuilding local dispute resolution mechanisms that have been eroded by central government is critical to de-escalating tensions that result from increased migration and conflict over resources and/or heightened identity-based rivalries. This can also be supported by working with local community leaders to develop land use strategies that can be tailored to the local context. In Tanzania, for example, where environmental changes and weak land management practices have led to migration and conflict, the Sustainable Rangelands Management Project has worked with villages to develop land rights for shared grazing lands, which has reduced conflict.[6]

For international frameworks that do focus on the State as the primary actor for climate mitigation and adaption, it is critical to conduct a country analysis that examines how political interests influence government ministries, what the government's political base of support is, and the level of influence the national government has over local authorities. Furthermore, donors should be willing to be creative in terms of which government agencies are the lead implementors in the climate change response. Although environmental or resource ministries may seem like the most competent agencies, they can often be heavily influenced by specific economic or political actors, as seen in Yemen.

These recommendations provide a starting point for how to address climate mitigation and adaption in contexts where the national government actively creates the conditions for climate vulnerability. The response ultimately requires significant reliance on traditional development and peacebuilding strategies to address the consequences, plus close coordination with policymakers and international organisations to demonstrate to national governments that effective climate mitigation is, in fact, in their political interest.

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1. For research on this topic, see, for example, Daoudy M (2020) *The Origins of the Syrian Conflict: Climate Change and Human Security*

2. See, for example, Fearon J (2005) 'Primary Commodities and Civil War', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* issue 49; Mehlum H, Moene K and Torvik R (2006) 'Institutions and the Resource Curse', *Economic Journal* issue 116 (1).

3. For further research on this, see Helen Lackner (Ed) *Why Yemen Matters: A Society in Transition*

4. See, for example, Ki-moon B (2007) 'What I Saw in Darfur', UNSG bit.ly/KiMoon-2007-Darfur; Popovski V (2017) 'Foresight African viewpoint: Does climate change cause conflict?' Brookings Institution https://brook.gs/3sKZhWT

5. Oxfam (2014) *We No Longer Share the Land: Agricultural Change, Land, and Violence in Darfur* bit.ly/Oxfam-Darfur-2014

6. Blocher J and Kileli E O (2020) 'In Relatively Peaceful Tanzania, Climate Change and Migration Can Spur Conflict', Migration Policy Institute bit.ly/MPI-Tanzania-Nov2020