

No regrets

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Adaptation in the most exposed and vulnerable states must be an international task.



Refugees gather water from a stagnant puddle in Hargeisa IDP settlement, Somalia, 2006.

Prevention and mitigation must be priorities for action but, with global warming already a reality, there are some impacts for which adaptation is the only available and appropriate response. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stresses the importance of addressing climate change adaptation in vulnerable states, especially where these responses are so-called 'no regrets' measures – that is, measures that turn out to be of benefit no matter how or if the predicted climate change impacts materialise. Their report¹ notes that most analyses of adaptation propose that successful adaptations involve marginal changes rather than fundamental changes in location and development paths.

From environmental conflict research and migration/refugee studies, it is clear that addressing factors of conflict and forced migration can help prevent the worst impacts of climate change. Climate change has impacts that may trigger conflicts

but they need not rise to the level of violent conflict. The capacities needed to adapt successfully to climate change are similar and often the same as those needed for development in general and to reduce the risk of conflict and forced migration. Strengthening and improving state structures and capacities as well as economic and distributive justice are ways of adapting. In this way, conflict- and migration-sensitive climate change policies can actively promote development, and climate-proof humanitarian and development policies can be effective climate change adaptation strategies.

Although the responsibility for climate change and its impacts primarily lies with developed countries, vulnerable states also need to address the realities of forced migration and conflict. Protection of people on their territory is the primary responsibility of nation states. Adaptation is to a large extent a question of resources, information

and infrastructure but the role of the state, its institutions and other political and socio-economic factors is crucial in preventing conflict and displacement in the context of climate change.

In our globalised, privatised and free trade world it is increasingly difficult to isolate politics in one country and place blame on individual states alone. Much of the economy of vulnerable states is often largely controlled by western-owned, western-based transnational companies. These companies are motivated by profit and may even have vested interests in the malfunctioning of states as well as an inherent opposition to adaptation and mitigation measures. The trade in arms illustrates the role of large, transnational companies in contributing towards conflict and displacement. Attempts to control the illegal trade in small arms have failed several times because US arms manufacturers, in the name of market freedom and backed by their government, have rejected controls. The challenges facing developing countries must be seen in this larger context. If we want to deal with the causes of forced migration and conflict, we should also seek to locate them in the policies and practices of developed countries.

Climate change could foster a new and stronger sense of solidarity. It provides an opportunity for cooperation in addressing global issues such as conflict and displacement. Climate change reminds us how everything is connected. The world may be divided and people categorised in many ways but we all share and are part of the same Earth.

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1. www.ipcc.ch