

**„Climate change is a serious threat  
but humanity can be amazingly resilient too“**

**At a Hamburg conference about Climate Change, experts from all over the world met to analyze the implications of climate change for social stress and violent conflict.**



Oli Brown (34) is a senior researcher for the International Institute of Sustainable Development (Canada). He is responsible for the Trade and Investment program and the Environment Security programs. With a first degree in Social Anthropology and a Masters in International Relations, he previously worked for Oxfam GB and has completed consultancies for the UNDP, the International Organization for Migration and International Alert. He writes on a wide range of trade, environment and sustainable development issues. In Hamburg, he talked about the impact of climate change on the risk of violent conflict around the world.

**Question** Some authors warn of climate wars, others point out that environmental conditions have rarely led to violent conflicts. What is your opinion?

**Brown** We should certainly be concerned about the impact of the climate change because it has the potential to make existing problems of water, food, population and infrastructure more difficult. In so doing it could also lead to increased tensions between and within countries, and perhaps even conflict. But we shouldn't automatically assume that climate wars are going to happen. Conflict happens for many reasons. And there are many intervening factors like political decisions or the kind of power politics of a country which may be more important.

**Question** Which climate factors could make violent conflicts more likely?

**Brown** Typically, these factors are water scarcity, food insecurity and forced migration – all of which could contribute to an increase in the number of fragile states...

**Question** ...that is to say, exactly the kind of situations which are predicted to worsen because of climate change...

**Brown** Violent conflicts are not a product of weather, but the factors I mentioned may increase the possibility of violent conflict. The problem is that it is very hard to predict either the where conflict might happen or how the weather will change. So trying to use projections of climate change to predict future conflict is like trying to balance one crystal ball on top of another.

**Question** In one of your publications, you argue that conflicts associated with natural resources are twice as likely to relapse into conflict in the first five years after a peace settlement. If climate change increases the number of conflicts associated with natural resources, does that mean that we enter a vicious circle with an always increasing number of conflicts?

**Brown** Looking back over the last fifty or so years, there is a correlation between countries reliant on natural resources and countries experiencing conflict. And, statistically speaking, these kinds of conflicts are harder to resolve and more likely to relapse. At the same time we have become somewhat more effective in responding to certain types of conflict. What is needed in the future is to ensure that this experience is applied so that the conflict prevention and peacebuilding work of the international community can be more effective. Often, natural resources are ignored by peacekeepers and tend to be forgotten in peacebuilding programmes. If we are to prevent a vicious cycle of repeated conflict we need to find ways to improve the policy and practice of international intervention in fragile states.

**Question** But all this needs time we might not have.

**Brown** We have to work on it the whole time. Of course, we're not doing a perfect job at the moment. But the challenge is to deal with it more effectively.

**Question** Last year, we already heard about hunger marches and violent protests because of rising wheat prices. How probable are military reactions if there is more of this kind of protests in the future?

**Brown** Whether or not there is political repression as a result of, for example, problems of food security probably depends as much on the specific political system and how a government reacts than on the physical impacts of climate change. My central point is that, in some places, climate change will make some issues more difficult. Under certain conditions this could lead to political protest, instability and violence. Some governments may react with violence, but there are many examples where this does not happen.

**Question** What can be done to prevent violent conflicts because of climate change?

**Brown** There are quite a few things that can be done. One is cooperation: We have to work together. Another one is that the industrial countries should help poorer countries to adapt to climate change. And we should encourage better cooperation over issues that might be causes for conflicts in the future as transboundary water or the movement of people. There will be plenty places around the world which will experience more famines, wars and political instabilities. On both moral and self interested grounds, we have to try and address these problems.

**Question** Will states recover their influence over the private sector because of climate change?

**Brown** If we really want to deal with climate change, that involves a new role for government, I guess. We need stronger institutions at international and national levels, for example to allocate emission permits, to control companies that don't respect the rules or to enable cleaner technologies. But that does not mean that the state has to, or should, take over the economy.

In failing states, part of their problem is that there is typically a very ineffective government without the institutional ability to implement monetary rules, raise taxes or provide basic services,. So a core aspect of building countries' ability to deal with climate change is to make governments and governance more effective.

**Question** What are the most important measures to cope with the consequences of climate change?

**Brown** I think there are four categories. Firstly: conservation. That means using water and energy more efficiently. Secondly: cooperation about shared resources. Thirdly: mitigation. As far as possible we should try to avoid dangerous climate change in the first place. And finally: adaptation. We have to deal with the impacts that are not avoidable.

**Question** You have done a lot of studies about climate change. How do you personally feel affected by it?

**Brown** Our world is changing tremendously fast. Our children will experience a completely different world to us. The only thing we can guarantee is that in 30 years we will look back and say: We didn't see a number of new developments coming. Since I was born the world population has doubled. For me it is clear that the climate change has the potential to change all sorts of things. And the action we have on climate change will also change things. For example, if we manage to move away from our reliance on oil that will cause changes in the balance of power in the world.

But I am fundamentally optimistic: We have an amazing capacity to deal with all these challenges. Therefore, we need to be constantly looking at the horizon to see what problems are developing. And we need learning from experience to deal with them as best as we can.

*Interview by Mirjam Mahler.*