

Climate Change, Social Stress and Violent Conflict
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Abstract

**Climate change, conflict and fragility:
policies for development, adaption and peacebuilding**

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A recent think-tank report asserts that ‘Climate change is set to transform the security environment’. It further argues that ‘state failure and sometimes collapse will be a highly visible feature of the international security landscape,’ and sets alongside this the role of massive global poverty and inequality in fuelling violent conflict. These linked concerns direct our attention towards vulnerability, its role in conflict, and the discourse on state fragility. Violent conflict and state fragility can each be a cause and a result of the other; the balance of which causes what varies from case to case. Both are shaped by poverty and inequality and are themselves parts of what shapes that broader development context. The consequences of climate change add further active ingredients to this already potent brew.

The physical effects of climate change vary from region to region. In most places, they combine to make the human habitat less habitable - marginally in some places, significantly in others to the point of non-viability. These impacts of climate change will play upon and exacerbate the vulnerability of ordinary people to extreme disruption, weakening confidence in the social order and its institutions, and damaging their resource base. In these circumstances, urgent grievances and sharpening conflict can be expected. The risk is greater and the conflicts will be more intense if particular ethnic, caste, religious or regional groups lose out in resource disputes and others do relatively better.

Both the increasingly frequent and intense impact of climate related stresses and the associated increase in conflict risk place rising demands on state capacity to protect citizens. The state needs to organise itself to adapt to the pressure of climate change and to manage conflicts so they can be resolved peacefully. Where state institutions have limited capacity, these tasks are likely to be too much, ordinary people will be left unprotected, and the potential grows for grievance to fuel the escalation of conflict. This could itself absorb the energy of the state in such a way that it has even less capacity available to adapt to climate change. Thus, in situations of state fragility, climate change both demands more of limited state capacity and threatens to diminish it.

To unravel these strands and identify entry points for policy requires further analysis of the nature of the causal processes underling conflict escalation and state fragility in the climate change context. This paper aims to set out the problem of the interaction between climate change, state fragility and conflict, in a way that offers guidelines for how to address it.