

CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT

A CENTER FOR CIVILIANS IN CONFLICT POSITION PAPER

Dan Mahanty and Stefan Bakumenko¹

This paper provides CIVIC's perspective on the relationship between climate change and the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Through this paper and its nascent program of work on climate and the protection of civilians, CIVIC does not aim to supplement existing evidence for the relationship between climate change and conflict, nor to argue that climate-related violence is a new phenomenon. Nor do we suggest that all threats to civilians or communities result from the impacts of climate change. Rather, CIVIC's aim is to understand how and where threats, vulnerabilities, and capacities are meaningfully affected by climate impacts, and to adapt protection strategies – including those we and others support - accordingly. By doing so, we not only hope to improve the response to the contemporary protection challenges wrought by climate change, but also to anticipate and address those that may arise in the future.

Introduction:

The relationship between climate change and conflict is increasingly clear: while climate change does not predict where and how violence or conflict will occur, climate change almost certainly contributes to, or exacerbates various underlying conflict dynamics through various climate-conflict “pathways”. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has identified displacement, local resource competition, armed actor incentives, and elite exploitation as consequences of climate change with a bearing on the likelihood of violence, whereas others have added economic uncertainty, food insecurity, and community relocation.² When combined with other factors, the risk of violence can increase from both the greater prevalence and increased intensity of sudden onset hazards (i.e., floods, cyclones, and forest fires) and slow onset hazards (i.e., desertification, sea-level rise, and temperature rise). The first conclusion to be drawn from this insight is that more civilians will be exposed to the effects of conflict, in new places, and at the same time - requiring more attention to the protection of civilians as a global priority.

- 1 Dan Mahanty is the Director of Research, Learning, and Innovation at CIVIC. Stefan Bakumenko is a research consultant at CIVIC. The authors are grateful to Dianna L. English and Beza Tesfaye for their contribution to the underlying analysis for this paper. Neither have endorsed its contents, and the views expressed here do not necessarily reflect their own. The authors are also grateful to many of the CIVIC staff from our country offices in Nigeria, Ukraine, and Yemen who provided examples from their experience, and others who offered their expertise, including Marc Linning, Wendy MacClinchy, and Annie Shiel.
- 2 See, for example: Sebastian van Baalen and Malin Mobjork, “Climate Change and Violent Conflict in East Africa: Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Research to Probe the Mechanisms,” *International Studies Review* 20, no.4 (November 2017) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320994410_Climate_Change_and_Violent_Conflict_in_East_Africa_Integrating_Qualitative_and_Quantitative_Research_to_Probe_the_Mechanisms; Halvard Buhaug, “Climate change and conflict: Taking stock,” *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy* 22, no.4 (2015): 331-338, <https://www.prio.org/publications/9322>; Marwa Daoudy, “Rethinking the Climate–Conflict Nexus: A Human–Environmental–Climate Security Approach,” *Global Environmental Politics* 21, no.3 (2021) <https://direct.mit.edu/glep/article-abstract/21/3/4/101031/Rethinking-the-Climate-Conflict-Nexus-A-Human?redirectedFrom=fulltext>; Katherine Mach et al. “Climate as a risk factor for armed conflict,” *Nature* (2019) 193-197, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-1300-6>.



At the same time, while more conflict creates greater demand for more protection generally, the increased risk of violence or conflict may not carry any immediately apparent implications for the effects of war on civilians that are not broadly true of other predicates of conflict such as great power competition, territorial disputes, or internecine rivalry. What matters to the interest of protecting civilians is understanding whether and how vulnerabilities and threats are *different* due to the impact of climate change, and how the agenda for addressing them through policy, practice, and maintaining and building local capacities and resiliencies should change.

A growing body of evidence, to include the experience and direct observations of CIVIC staff globally, now shows that climate-related impacts can affect the extent or character of the protection risks faced by civilians and communities, and place stress on the mechanisms available to communities to adapt. Similarly, climate-related factors can stress the capacities of state security forces and other security actors with a mandate to protect (including peacekeeping forces) to address or respond to protection needs, or even introduce novel protection challenges that security actors may be less prepared to address. Finally, “green” initiatives and conservation measures taken by governments and private entities to protect the environment can also alter the risks faced by civilians and communities, and place novel demands on state security institutions that lack specialized expertise and guidance.³

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The Effects of Climate Change on Civilian and Community Vulnerabilities:

Climate-related impacts not only exacerbate the risk of conflict but can affect the vulnerability of civilians who live in conflict-affected areas. With an estimated 20 million internally displaced by climate hazards each year, the nexus of conflict and displacement leads to constantly evolving protection environments.⁴ International Crisis Group documented the experience of South Sudanese Dinka herders who migrated from Jonglei to Equatoria, in part to escape historic flooding, and faced threats of violence by criminals and armed actors throughout their journey.⁵ The vulnerabilities that displaced civilians face both in transit and in host communities requires equally adaptive, multi-sectoral protection efforts.⁶

The social and economic dislocation from powerful and/or repeat climate hazards stresses communities wherever they may be. Any resources that could be invested in protective networks or more proactive climate adaptation end up being devoted to immediate basic human needs after devastating natural disasters. Communities that have developed protection mechanisms through years of conflict face a new mixture of gradual and sudden climatic pressures that undermine the networks they spent years building.⁷

3 While this paper does not explore the effects of conflict on the natural environment, the authors commend to the reader the work of the ICRC and PAX on the impact of conflict on the natural environment.

4 “Climate Change and Displacement,” UNHCR, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/environment-disasters-and-climate-change/climate-change-and>.

5 “South Sudan,” International Crisis Group, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://southsudan.crisisgroup.org/>.

6 In many cases, the vulnerabilities of the communities that are hosting displaced populations also rise during such situations.

7 Ken Conca and Anita van Breda, “Report Launch: The Environmental Dimensions of Sustainable Recovery - Q&A with Ken Conca and Anita van Breda,” Wilson Center, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/report-launch-the-environmental-dimensions-sustainable-recovery-qa-ken-conca-and-anita?collection=35031>



The effects of climate on livelihoods and essential infrastructure have differentiated effects on vulnerable populations. For instance, as part of a field visit to South Sudan, CIVIC researchers heard about the effects of flooding on physical access to education. Children become particularly vulnerable to recruitment and exploitation by armed actors when natural hazards deny them both the safety and socioeconomic benefits of educational facilities. Concurrently, the elderly and civilians with disabilities face complex challenges to basic movement and survival without the physical infrastructure and support services they need.⁸

Lastly, vulnerability can be influenced by the strategies civilians adopt to cope with climate-related changes to the natural environment. For instance, in numerous locations, such as Nigeria, women are largely responsible for collecting firewood, which serves not only as a crucial source of fuel for households, but also a source of income.⁹ Droughts and floods can alter the distance or locations for gathering firewood and other essential resources, thereby forcing individuals to venture further away from protective networks and exposing them to increased risk of attack and sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV).¹⁰ Climate impacts can similarly affect behavioral patterns associated with fishing, cattle grazing, or even shopping in local markets, exposing civilians to explosive remnants, extortion, sexual exploitation, or attacks by armed groups, criminals, or rival communities.

The Effects of Climate Change on State Protective Capacities:

Governments have an obligation to protect people within their sovereign territory from acts of violence, and to refrain from violating human rights through their own efforts to provide security. Effective protection by state security forces thus requires the capacity and presence to interrupt threats of violence to civilians, along with the incentive, resolve, and capabilities to sufficiently constrain the use of force. In many places—particularly OECD countries—climate security is seen increasingly as a national security concern, which directly implicates the engagement of security actors.¹¹ In other countries, while climate change may not be explicitly part of security or defense strategies, security actors are often engaged as first responders in the event of disasters and internal resource-based conflicts.

Many governments in conflict-affected countries that wish to protect civilians from physical threats of violence, for example from armed opposition groups, already face capacity challenges – and many others beside operate with too little restraint. If a government's response to climate-related disasters draws on state security forces, fewer forces may be available to project a legitimate protective or deterrent presence. Involving the national guard to assist civil authorities after a hurricane in one part of the country may limit the availability of forces to deter threats to civilians in another. Climate-induced disasters, or the increased prevalence or intensity of disasters, may also introduce access challenges or change the environment in ways that require different capabilities and equipment.

8 “The Impact of Climate Change on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/climate-change/impact-climate-change-rights-persons-disabilities>.

9 United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Gender and Natural Resource Management: Peacebuilding Approaches,” accessed July 12, 2023, https://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/UNEP_UN-Women_PBSO_UNDP_gender_NRM_peacebuilding_report.pdf.

10 “In Darfur,... women and girls were regularly attacked when venturing out of IDP camps to collect firewood”: United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), “Greening the Blue Helmets: Environment, Natural Resources, and UN Peacekeeping Operations,” accessed July 12, 2023, https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/8840/UNEP_greening_blue_helmets.pdf?sequence=3&%3BisAllowed=:

11 E.g., Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), “ODNI Releases National Intelligence Estimate on Climate Change,” accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/press-releases-2021/item/2252-odni-releases-national-intelligence-estimate-on-climate-change>.



Security forces may find it harder to reach threatened civilians if roads or runways are impaired or even disabled entirely by water or sandstorms.¹² NATO recently acknowledged that “greater temperature extremes, sea level rise, rapid changes in precipitation patterns, and an increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events... impair the effectiveness of our capabilities, and may create harsher conditions for our military operations and missions.”¹³

Involving military or internal security forces in the response to climate-related disasters, such as flooding or wildfires, can also invite overreach or the risk of human rights concerns, whether due to capacity gaps or pervasive flaws in oversight and accountability. If disasters become more prevalent, especially in conflict-affected places, states may be compelled to draw upon less experienced or less professional forces, which can increase the risk that forces will use excessive force for lack of appropriate oversight or training. In others, existing patterns of abuse by predatory security forces may be further exacerbated by climate-related scarcity or instability. The role that security actors play in such situations—whether positive or negative—depends on how they are governed. As Marie-Gabriela Manea argues, “the security sector is an intervening variable in the climate security nexus,” and poorly governed forces in fragile states, “will increase the likelihood of the disruptive potential of climate change leading to security crises or amplifying existing ones at all levels.”¹⁴ If security actors are required to play a greater role in responding to climate-related security crises, greater accountability and oversight is required to ensure that the rights and needs of civilians are protected.¹⁵

The Effects of Climate Change on Civic Space and Civil Society:

Building an environment conducive to the protection of civilians can significantly benefit from the contributions of a diverse array of local, national, and international civil society organizations. Civil society – including faith-based organizations, trade unions, grassroots organizations, and non-governmental organizations - can conduct advocacy, participate in public policymaking, support communities with protective capacities (technical and material), and represent the interests of civilians and communities affected by conflict. Yet in a growing number of places, the civil society organizations that play these and other roles already face a range of challenges and restrictions, from limitations on the ability to engage on security matters to legal restrictions on activities and funding. Perhaps not coincidentally, many of the most restrictive places for civil society have also seen greater levels of violence and conflict. As during the global COVID-19 pandemic, when faced with natural disasters or climate-change-induced crises, many governments may further restrict civic space, along with the protected rights to free expression, assembly, and association that can be crucial to achieving better protection of civilians outcomes.¹⁶ For example, after Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, becoming the fifth deadliest cyclone on record, the military barred coverage and discussion of the cyclone’s damage, even imprisoning 21 activists for providing various humanitarian services to victims.¹⁷ These and other, similar responses almost certainly constrain the ability of local

12 For more information about the importance of security sector governance and climate change, see “Climate Change and Security Sector Governance and Reform”, <https://www.dcaf.ch/climate-change-and-security-sector-governance-and-reform>

13 “NATO Climate Change and Security Action Plan”, NATO, accessed July 29, 2023, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_185174.htm.

14 Manea, M.-G., “University of Geneva - GGPB N2-2021,” accessed July 12, 2023, https://www.ceje.ch/files/5116/1960/0577/University_of_Geneva_-_GGPB_N2-2021_-_M.-G._Manea.pdf.

15 See also Janssen, Maarten et al., “Fears of Militarisation of Climate Change,” Clingendael - Netherlands Institute of International Relations, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/fears-militarisation-climate-change>.

16 See both Apodaca, Clair, “State Repression in Post-Disaster Societies” (New York: Routledge, 2017), accessed via Routledge, <https://www.routledge.com/State-Repression-in-Post-Disaster-Societies/Apodaca/p/book/9781138286092>, and Paul, Diane L., and Benjamin L. Read, “Assessing Human Rights Impacts in Corporate Flood Responses,” *Journal of Human Rights and the Environment* 7, no. 1 (2016): 77-102, accessed via JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26363897>.

17 “Cyclone Nargis: One Year On, 21 People Imprisoned for Helping Victims,” Amnesty International, May 4, 2009, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2009/05/cyclone-nargis-one-year-21-people-imprisoned-helping-victims-20090504/>.



organizations to support community self-protection or to monitor the conduct of security forces in a disaster-affected environment, for example.

Environmental Degradation and Conservation Policies:

Conflict can both cause and be exacerbated by environmental degradation, as some types of environmental degradation, such as deforestation, can worsen climate change (e.g., by reducing carbon sinks). At the same time, state efforts to address environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources and wildlife through conservation and “green” policies can themselves carry important implications for the protection of civilians.

Some extractive industries such as oil, gems, and timber, which degrade the natural environment, have been commonly associated with conflict economies, labor exploitation, and violence against civilians. While a shift to green policies and industries may reduce some of these industry-specific risks, competition over other natural resources, including rare earth minerals and metals, may have a similar effect, exposing civilians in different locations – including many where the state lacks protective capacity or impulse - to the effects of conflict. Additionally, without the provision of alternative sources of income, communities reliant on extractive industries will face higher protection risks since they likely lose some pre-existing capacities to self-protect while their vulnerability to violence, exploitation, and recruitment by armed groups who were often running the mines, camps, and refineries to begin with remains.

Meanwhile, certain efforts to preserve the environment - such as protection of wildlife and forests - have included the development or deployment of security institutions which have at times used excessive force to carry out their mandate, “militarizing” conservation efforts in ways that raise human rights and protection concerns. For example, armed park rangers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) have partnered with state forces to directly attack civilians and burn villages in the name of protecting forests from illicit mining and logging.¹⁸ The Malian Forest Service has systematically extorted and harassed civilians for chopping firewood or rearing cattle in Mali’s Centre region.¹⁹ In India’s northeast Assam region, the Ecological Task Force has been accused of militarizing conservation in a conflict environment and a region with historically disenfranchised minority groups.²⁰ In Colombia, measures taken to interrupt illicit logging activities have resulted in instances of excessive use of force and harassment of local communities by security forces.²¹ Many of the issues raised by the role of security forces in conservation efforts rightly fall within a scope of concern traditionally reserved for the protection of human rights, but in some cases, they can further exacerbate existing protection risks in conflict-affected environments. Furthermore, the proliferation of military and military “like” forces in conservation at least invites

...efforts to preserve the environment - such as protection of wildlife and forest have included the development or deployment of security institutions which have at times used excessive force to carry out their mandate.

18 Robert Flummerfelt, “To Purge the Forest by Force: Organized violence against Batwa in Kahuzi-Biega National Park,” Minority Rights Group International, 2022, https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MRG_InvRep_DRC_EN_Apr22v3_1.pdf.

19 Tor A. Benjaminsen, “Why did Mali fall into jihadist hands?” Peace Research Institute of Oslo, 2019, <https://blogs.prio.org/ClimateAndConflict/2018/02/why-did-mali-fall-into-jihadist-hands/>.

20 Anwesha Dutta, “Forest becomes frontline: Conservation and counter-insurgency in a space of violent conflict in Assam, Northeast India,” *Political Geography* vol. 77 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.102117>.

21 See, e.g. “Broken Canopy: Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia,” International Crisis Group, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia/091-broken-canopy-deforestation-and-conflict-colombia>.



consideration of those complementary concepts and approaches that have been taken to protect civilians during military operations, provided that they adhere to the appropriate international legal framework.

Implications of Climate Change for the Protection of Civilians:



Anticipate, prevent, and protect: The ability to forecast the severity and location of climate-related impacts (for example using the Notre Dame's GAIN Index) provides an opportunity to identify links with protection risks and protection gaps, especially in fragile states and states with notable security governance deficits.²² Meanwhile, all governments, but especially in states most vulnerable to climate impacts, should commit to adopting national policy and legal frameworks and implementing mechanisms for the protection of civilians, as called for by the Secretary General. Where feasible and appropriate, donors and partnering states should support these efforts. (CIVIC has developed a comprehensive overview of steps all states can take to strengthen the protection of civilians).²³ Regional bodies such as ASEAN can also call on their members to take steps to institute or strengthen policies and practices to prevent harm and to protect civilians from the effects of violence, even those not currently affected by conflict. Investments of time and resources in preventative action and peacebuilding at the community level may pay dividends when protection risks arise in the most climate-vulnerable locations. Donors (especially those from states responsible for carbon emissions or the consumption of products that derive from environmental degradation), should increase funding for prevention and protection, including support to vulnerable communities.



Understand climate-related impacts to inform protection strategies: Understanding the near- and medium-term impacts of climate change on the threats, vulnerabilities and capacities of civilians and communities through protection analysis can improve local and national protection strategies. Doing so will also further inform a broader shared understanding of the impact climate change has on the protection of civilians, including in places not currently affected by conflict.



Shape the role of security institutions in climate adaptation: Given the potential for overreach (especially in states with weak security sector governance or transitions within the security sector), abuse, or unpreparedness, states should limit and channel the role of military forces in national climate adaptation plans and conservation, and where they have an appropriate role, ensure they prioritize protection of civilians and human rights, have appropriate training and resources and are subject to appropriate oversight and accountability. States should also take steps to anticipate and address the risk of human rights concerns in disaster preparedness and response, and engage actively with independent, national, and regional human rights organizations in developing adaptation and disaster response plans.



Protect and conserve: A variety of natural and man-made threats to natural resources and wildlife have stimulated a powerful and energetic conservation movement, which in turn has advocated for an active role for security forces. Conservation movements and organizations

²² "Country Index," Global Adaptation Initiative, University of Notre Dame, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/>.

²³ The Framework for Evaluating PoC Policy and Practice is available at <https://civiliansinconflict.org/tools/toolkit-advancing-protection-of-civilians-in-conflict/>



should consider the potential impacts of enforcement activities, especially in conflict-affected areas, and integrate the protection of civilians and the protection of human rights in advocacy and campaigns.



Expanding partnerships and networks: Climate change has cross-cutting implications for the protection of civilians, human rights, peacebuilding, and humanitarian action. Organizations will need to work together, and across sectors, to identify and address the gaps in protection and rights created or aggravated by climate-induced hazards at the local, national, and global levels.



Consider the protective impact of triple-nexus programming: As the effects of climate-change affect the protection risks of civilians and communities in conflict, climate-adaptive humanitarian, peacebuilding and development programming, such as conflict-sensitive food distribution or alternative livelihoods programs, may help to mitigate threats and vulnerabilities while strengthening capacities.

CIVIC is actively seeking opportunities to collaborate on research, programming, and to exchange knowledge. Please contact Dan Mahanty, Director of Research, Learning, Innovation at dmahanty@civiliansinconflict.org



Addendum

CLIMATE VULNERABILITY, FRAGILITY, AND CIVIC SPACE

Variables that lead to state fragility and conflict often interact with those that create vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, which can in turn create challenges for the protection of civilians when conflict occurs. Where civic space is also constrained, civil society may face impediments to promoting protection through advocacy, oversight, or improved services. While the overlap between and among these variables is most visible across Africa, the benefits of preventative action warrant consideration in many more climate-vulnerable places in Asia and the Middle East.

Countries listed among the 30 most vulnerable to climate change, according to the ND-GAIN Index¹, and also within top 50 fragile states, according to the Fund for Peace Fragile States Index². Civic space ratings according to the CIVICUS global monitor (last updated July 2023).³

Country	Climate Vulnerability (ND-GAIN)	Fragile States Index	Civic Space (CIVICUS)
Somalia	1	1	Repressed
Chad	2	9	Repressed
Niger	3	24	Repressed
Guinea Bissau	4	31	Obstructed
Eritrea	7	19	Closed
Sudan	8	7	Repressed
Liberia	9	33	Obstructed
Mali	11	13	Repressed
Afghanistan	12	6	Closed
Central African Republic	13	8	Repressed
Uganda	14	26	Repressed
Democratic Republic of the Congo	17	4	Repressed
Burundi	19	20	Repressed
Mauritania	20	37	Repressed
Madagascar	21	49	Repressed
Guinea	24	14	Repressed
Ethiopia	25	11	Repressed
Yemen	27	2	Closed
Malawi	28	43	Obstructed
Burkina Faso	29	21	Obstructed
Bangladesh	30	41	Repressed

1 "Country Index," Global Adaptation Initiative, University of Notre Dame, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://gain.nd.edu/our-work/country-index/>.

2 Fund for Peace, "Fragile States Index Global Data," Fragile States Index, accessed July 23, 2023, <https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/>.

3 CIVICUS, "CIVICUS Monitor," accessed July 23, 2023, <https://monitor.civicus.org/>.