The Need for Conflict-Sensitive Adaptation to Climate Change

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Humans and cattle have to walk several kilometers to their water supply in Kongwa, Dodoma region of Tanzania. Courtesy of flickr user BCClimateChampions, http://www.flickr.com/photos/bcclimatechampions.

CLIMATE CHANGE WILL HIT HARDEST the nations with the lowest capacity to adapt in the decades to come. Impending shifts in our climate will likely heighten social tensions and conflict potential in these countries. Institutions in fragile states may prove to be particularly unprepared or unequipped to cope with climate change impacts, such as food and water shortages, severe weather events, and mass migrations. In turn, these institutions' inability to adapt may accelerate the onset of national or regional destabilization and possibly even trigger violence (WBGU, 2007; Carius et al., 2008). The UN Security Council (2011) highlighted this risk, stating that climate change impacts represent "a challenge to the implementation of Council mandates."

Nevertheless, it is important to avoid one-dimensional causal explanations when assessing whether natural resource competition and population movements may lead to an increase in violent conflict. Climate change alone will not likely generate conflict. Instead, it will more likely serve as a threat multiplier that exacerbates pre-existing issues, such as weak rule of law or social and economic injustice.

At the same time, populations affected by climate change could use environmental cooperation as a tool to build confidence between former antagonists and strengthen peacebuilding efforts (Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Feil et al., 2009). However, climate change's potential for catalyzing cooperation and transcending enmities depends largely on the design of conflict-sensitive adaptation policies. This article aims to shed light on the prospects for such policies by examining the elements shaping the rapidly expanding arena of adaptation policy.[1]

Approaches to Adaptation

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defines climate adaptation as an "adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities" (UNFCCC, 2007). Adaptation has also become a focal point of debate over the security implications of climate change, given that greenhouse gas emissions have already triggered irreversible global warming.

The UN has called attention to the need for adaptation in the context of global security, particularly in the 2009 UN Secretary-General's report on climate change and security (UN General Assembly, 2009). However, these summons to action have remained somewhat vague about how adaptation policies might be designed and implemented, thus preventing countries from taking concrete action. One reason for this situation may be that most security policy discussions and deliberations over adaptation take place in separate political arenas, with minimal exchange between the two fields. Another potential explanation is that different conceptual perspectives on adaptation have made it difficult for policymakers to form a consensus, especially when it comes to addressing adaptation needs in conflict-prone countries.

Adaptation is commonly viewed as a primarily technical challenge. Seen through this lens, adaptation reduces climate change's negative impacts by sharing technology and building better capacity for natural resource management. Yet to avoid negative impacts, it is necessary to anticipate the potential social and political implications of such adaptation measures. By applying the "do no harm principle," it becomes clear that adaptation measures raise not only technical and financial questions, but political questions as well, especially when such measures are implemented in fragile states (Anderson, 1999).

Designing conflict-sensitive adaptation measures could be a tool for socio-political transformation. Climate change is projected to induce major changes in individual living situations, as in the case of small island states such as the Maldives, whose very existence is threatened by rising sea levels. In such contexts, adaptation measures represent no less than a fundamental redistribution of the resources of an entire society. In principle, such adaptation policies foster opportunities to build a more sustainable society. However, depending on how they are designed and implemented, they can also contribute to the erosion of established societal structures and induce instability within and between states.

Adaptation measures may generate friction or resistance, predominantly from those who profit from the

Dhaka, Bangladesh. Courtesy of flickr user Michael Foley Photography, http://www.flickr.com/photos/michaelfoleyphotography.

status quo or who are interested in diverting adaptation-related funding for other purposes. Thus, adaptation measures may also potentially be a direct cause of conflict. When two or more states share the waters of a transboundary river, for example, climate change adaptation measures may increase the likelihood of confrontation between upper and lower riparians, especially if the policies reduce water supply in the downriver states (Wolf, 2007). In some areas, conflicts may occur as a result of efforts to adapt to decreasing water availability. In Kasese, Uganda, tensions arose due to competing demands for available water supplies. Efforts to provide communities with additional water taps also stirred tensions, as an initial effort only placed a tap in the Rukoki area, causing anger among the Mahango people. In the future, the planning, design, and implementation of new water access policies would benefit from greater involvement of district water officials and representatives of communities competing for the same water supplies (Saferworld, 2008b).

Adaptation measures could potentially spur cooperation instead of conflict. For example, nations may be able to use non-violent conflict resolution tactics to help implement necessary but unpopular adaptation measures, such as resettling populations and negotiating suitable compensation packages. It is quite possible that as those nations increase their ability to adapt to climate change, they will also increase their social resilience and thus improve their capacity to achieve peaceful conflict resolution and conflict transformation in other areas of society. Successful climate change adaptation could empower countries to better withstand various social and economic stressors, while avoiding the destabilization of their governing institutions and societal structures. If adaptation processes are participatory, they can also give marginalized groups a voice to integrate their concerns in building resilient communities. To this end, mechanisms for consensus-building, public dialogue, and coordination among different government branches and stakeholder groups are needed (Saferworld, 2008a; Ruckstuhl, 2009).

Adaptation in the International Climate Debate

To date, international debates on climate protection have been characterized mainly by attempts to mitigate climate change by reducing the level of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. For instance, in its 4th assessment, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

A girl rides on a cart carrying her family's salvaged belongings in Khwas Koorona Village, Pakistan. Courtesy of flickr user UNICEF Canada, http://www.flickr.com/photos/unicefcanada.

(IPCC) recommended a 25 to 40 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions for industrialized countries by 2020 (IPCC, 2007). However, going forward, it is much less clear how building a sustainable adaptation structure can be measured by performance goals.

Progress in establishing a robust, internationally acceptable framework for implementing adaptation measures has been slow. The adoption of the Marrakesh Accords by governments in the course of negotiations in 2001 helped support adaptation policies in developing nations by establishing a number of funding streams—the two most important being the Adaptation Fund and the Least Developed Countries Fund—to design and implement concrete adaptation projects and programs in developing countries. But these funds' financial impact has been modest, at least in comparison to the estimated tens of billions U.S. dollars per year deemed necessary by some to enable a comprehensive adaptation system (IIED, 2009). The Adaptation Fund, which receives two percent of the income generated from the sale of emission certificates linked to Clean Development Mechanism projects, might help close the gap. In addition, key financing decisions made during negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009, Cancun in 2010, Durban in 2011, and Doha in 2012 offer new opportunities for immediate adaptation activities. "Fast-start financing" for both mitigation and adaptation measures should amount to a total of US$30 billion between 2010 and 2012. However, in the first year, only 8 percent of this money was spent for adaptation projects (Caravani et al., 2011).

These financing pledges have been linked to the establishment of a Global Green Fund that aims to coordinate USD$100 billion a year from 2020 onward. As a result of the 2011 Durban climate negotiations on adaptation, there is an increased focus on a long-term supporting structure, leading to the establishment of an Adaptation Committee for further high-level policy guidance, as well as the initiation of a process to formulate National Adaptation Plans with a medium- and long-term perspective (Nassef, 2012). In addition, the adaptation governance framework is complemented by a work program to address loss and damage arising from climate change. To guide the implementation of the work program, the most recent climate negotiations in Doha decided to establish appropriate institutional arrangements until the end of 2013 (Bickersteth et al., 2012).

However, the quality of an international framework for funding climate change adaptation measures should not be measured solely by the amount of money it generates. It is also critical that when financial support is provided, it is accompanied by administrative capacity-building to avoid any misappropriation of funds.

In the absence of such capacity-building, an influx of cash for adaptation programming could strengthen the influence of corrupt elites and exacerbate pre-existing conflict dynamics in target countries (Transparency International, 2011).

Adaptation Efforts in Conflict-Prone Regions

Existing adaptation activities have already made some headway: As of the end of 2010, for example, 45 National Action Plans for Adaptation (NAPAs) for least developed countries had been submitted to the UNFCCC. Twenty-one plans were developed in countries considered to be at high risk of destabilization, and 19 in countries at increased risk of destabilization (Fund for Peace, 2011). Hence, fragile states have been influenced by international support to initiate adaptation plans.

The sectoral approach of NAPAs enables countries to analyze risks in different areas impacted by climate change. In the case of water resources, for example, NAPAs make it possible to identify the most urgent priorities for improving urban and rural water-supply infrastructure, enhancing water storage, and stemming water pollution. Similar analyses identify priorities for improving food security, such as by changing traditional cultivation patterns or diversifying agricultural goods. As a result, the method by which NAPAs are created generates not only a list of national priorities for adaptation but also sensitizes different groups of stakeholders to pending climate change challenges, allowing countries to more effectively develop responses. Still, the slow pace of deployment for adaptation projects reveals that insufficient funding remains an issue, as well as a lack of appropriate governance structures. But with more than 70 adaptation projects under the Least Developed Countries Fund now underway, there are signs of concrete progress (GEF, 2012).

The pressure to integrate adaptation processes into ongoing development initiatives and poverty-alleviation campaigns is increasing. A United Nations Development Program (UNDP) assessment of the importance of fresh water resources in NAPAs, for example, shows that greater integration has already begun, with countries such as Bhutan, Rwanda, and Sudan integrating adaptation measures into their poverty-reduction strategies to ensure overall coherence of policy planning (UNDP WGF, 2009). Nevertheless, integration can often prove superficial. To ensure that adaptation measures are compatible with larger political processes, it is crucial that states establish good governance structures to help manage such programs.

Adaptation programming's rigid demarcation into sectoral tasks can fall short when it comes to conflict, however. A more systematic, integrated approach is needed to meaningfully incorporate existing conflict dynamics—as well as overarching socio-political and economic conditions—into the design of adaptation measures.

Even in industrialized countries with adequate administrative capacity, coordinating various political processes can be a major challenge. In post-conflict societies, the difficulties of coordination are disproportionately greater. Institutionalizing responsibility for the coherent implementation of adaptation policies by assigning those measures to a specific state institution or inter-ministerial body could help. National Implementing Entities, which are currently established in select countries (including Rwanda, Senegal, and Kenya, among others) to facilitate the direct access of a country to the Adaptation Fund, may be appropriate to serve this purpose.

Thinking Beyond National Borders

Adaptation programs often lack a regional focus. NAPAs typically do not emphasize transboundary environmental issues, since anticipating the scale of future climate change impacts across boundaries remains difficult. Further, the conventional, state-oriented focus of the UNFCCC makes it challenging to develop regional adaptation policies.

Nevertheless, this problem must be overcome. Limiting NAPAs to a national perspective ignores the transboundary nature of resource scarcity, especially with regard to water supply. In a worst-case scenario, an isolated national approach to adaptation can trigger new

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conflicts in neighboring states. Furthermore, adaptation programming that doesn't take neighboring states into account wastes a potentially valuable opportunity for cross-border trust-building and collaboration.

One step in this direction may be to build on processes of regional integration. In Africa, the policy continuum linking the African Union, Regional Economic Communities, and national policies may offer interesting entry points for dialogues that could also involve civil society and research organizations in joint exploration of options for guiding regional adaptation processes (Comardicea et al., 2011; Yanda & Bronkhorst, 2011; Tänzler & Mohns, 2013).

Conclusions: Building Conflict-Sensitive Adaptation Strategies

Fragile states are at a heightened risk of suffering from the debilitating effects of climate change in the future, but states regarded as stable are also likely to face severe challenges to their water and food security. To stave off destabilization in different types of countries, adaptation measures should be implemented to bolster states' social, political, economic, and environmental resilience. How can we maximize the chances for positive outcomes? One approach would be to follow the three main principles of conflict sensitivity:

- Understand the context in which an organization operates;
- Understand the interaction between it, its activities, and the context; and
- Act upon their understanding of this interaction to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive ones (Saferworld, 2008a).

By applying these principles of conflict sensitivity to the field of climate change adaptation, the following measures can be formulated to guide adaptation processes in both stable and unstable states, but with special attention in conflict-prone settings:

1. **Identify the sectors of society critically affected by climate change** and the roles they play in national and regional policy, which will help ensure coherency and coordination at the national level. If necessary, additional peace and conflict assessments can be used to reduce the risk of maladaptation.

2. **Work together with stakeholders both inside and outside the government** to formulate strategies and develop programs that help

raise awareness among the general public about the potential impacts of climate change. Doing so will make it easier for states to win public support for the steps needed to secure future food and water supplies and improve disaster preparedness.

3. **Ensure institutional support.** National steering committees should be responsible for monitoring the progress of adaptation programs, coordinating public authorities and external stakeholders (such as donor organizations), and establishing mediation bodies. The creation of National Implementing Entities is a step in the right direction.

4. **Integrate adaptation measures into countries' development initiatives and poverty-reduction campaigns.** Embracing a systematic, integrated approach to creating National Adaptation Plans will lead to more conflict-sensitive adaptation measures.

5. Through the UNFCCC Conferences of Parties, **adopt a broader framework for adaptation** to enhance the international financial architecture for fighting climate change.

6. **Strengthen regional cooperation** to meet the challenges of adapting to global climate change.

7. Develop methods to **enable civil society and decision-makers in fragile states to design and implement conflict-sensitive adaptation strategies,** starting with formulating guidelines for donors and implementing agencies in the partner countries.

In the years ahead, the international community must make substantial financial and political commitments to ensure that climate change does not exacerbate preexisting social and economic injustices. Policymakers, development practitioners, and environmental ministers in states around the world will also have to maintain an open dialogue to create and successfully implement innovative, conflict-sensitive adaptation programs. While the prospects for success remain largely unknown at this time, adaptation policies could bolster human security in the face of a changing climate—and nowhere more so than in the world's most fragile states.

Note

1. This paper is based in part on "Climate Change Adaptation and Peace," by Dennis Tänzler, Achim Maas, and Alexander Carius (2010), and published in *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews*, and updated with the results of the research project "Adaptation, Security and Peace" (FKZ 3710 41 142) commissioned by the German Federal Environmental Agency. Achim Maas co-authored this paper while Senior Project Manager for adelphi.

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