Climate change and conflict risks – what do we know, what should we do?

A summary of a Sida working paper on the interlinkages

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Will climate change lead to violent conflict? Will there be resource scarcity and unmanageable competition? Will coastal populations become climate refugees when they move away from the rising sea into new areas, triggering tension beyond control? This thematic brief summarizes a Sida working paper from August 2017 on the interlinkages between climate change and conflict risks, and possible implications for the work of Sida.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A CAUSE OF CONFLICT

Climate change effects are primarily expressed as rising temperatures, changes in the distribution and availability of water, increased intensity and frequency of extreme weather events and rising sea levels. These influence natural, social and economic systems that may generate complex and unpredictable chains of events. Growing evidence on the relationship between climate change and the risk of violent conflict is relatively straightforward – a *direct* causal relationship cannot be identified and there are no examples of conflicts between countries with climate change as a main cause. But research is quite clear when it comes to the *indirect* relationship between climate change and conflict risk, i e climate change influences other causes of conflict. Natural resource scarcity in societies that are directly dependent on natural resources, with small margins and little resilience, leads to increased competition and a deterioration of livelihoods. When conflicts result, they are primarily local but may become linked to larger and more extensive conflicts. The risk is particularly high in contexts with a history of conflict where there are no, or weak, institutions for conflict resolution.

In fragile states and conflict-affected societies there is a particularly strong relationship between climate and environmental change and the destructive impact of natural disasters. Fragility and severe natural disaster impacts coexist with a low capacity to receive investments. But fragile states are given little space and attention by international mechanisms for disaster risk reduction, environment and climate change.

New interest in climate change as a security threat risks leading to an exaggeration of its role in causing violent conflict if the complex and contextual underlying factors are simplified or ignored.

Photo: Erik Vågberg, 2017

Children catching the last surviving fish. This region in northern Cameroon usually has water all year around but is now hard hit by drought and activities from violent extremist groups.

Climate change signals will become increasingly stronger and manifested over a very long time, leading to unpredictable events. The preparedness of countries and communities, as well as development planning and practice, must have this perspective.

THE EXPERIENCE OF SWEDISH DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Like for many other donors, the experience of Swedish development cooperation in managing climate change impacts is growing, particularly when it comes to the potential risk of violent conflicts. Sida has however had a significant climate portfolio with a focus on adaptation since 2009 and has during recent years provided more than 2 billion SEK annually in climate finance, to adaptation, mitigation and cross-cutting action, to countries, regional and global institutions.

Since the new environment/climate and conflict perspectives were introduced in 2015 they are explicitly referred to in several bilateral and regional development cooperation strategies. But they are more often referred to as *parallel* rather than *integrated* perspectives. Most explicit references to links between environment/climate change and conflict risk can be found in new strategies for Latin America, particularly Colombia. Sida has begun to apply the new perspectives but methodology for linking environment/climate and conflict analyses has yet to be introduced.

Based on what we know about the indirect links between climate change and conflict risks, there are two *specific* areas that are highly relevant and where Sida has extensive experience: (1) securing the right to natural resources – land, forest and water – including mechanisms for resolving conflicts around them, and (2) managing transboundary water resources.

In addition, it is important to build *general* resilience through health, education, financial services and social protection, on a foundation of good governance, human rights and gender equality. These are all areas where Sida has significant experience and that form part of robust adaptation support

ORGANIZATION AND WAYS OF WORKING

An organization tasked to manage planning, investments and contributions in a situation of growing climate impacts and uncertain contextual change must both be able to continuously monitor events in its environment, and revise and make new decisions when called for, particularly if the ambition is to reduce the risk of violent conflict.

Since climate change affects natural, social and economic systems, information gathering and analysis cannot be limited to a few sectors. A holistic view across sectors and the ability to identify emerging and dynamic events will be critical.

When change is the main feature characterizing the environment, staff need to apply an adaptive and iterative way of working, with the ability to learn as a key feature. The complexity of aid and its environment require that the assumptions of theories of change must be continuously tested and revised, It is not always possible to predict what a program will lead to in any detail, even if objectives are clear, nor always possible to define in advance the indicators that tell us if a program is on track. It will not be data giving a static, one-off picture that is relevant, rather the signs of a new process, behavioural change or movement in a certain direction.

This way of working benefits from monitoring and evaluation which are close to program implementation, where it is possible to directly use and apply its results. Experience shows that such systems do not need to compromise on independence and integrity but can readily be combined with external evaluations.

FINANCING

Sida has come a long way in giving implementing partners space and flexibility to manoeuvre, through framework agreements, core support and non-earmarked funding. This is an approach that Sweden actively promotes as part of aid effectiveness in accordance with OECD-DAC principles.

Climate change makes this approach even more important. Climate related impacts are local and contextual. For aid to be relevant, timing is critical. Decentralization and autonomy should be accompanied by access to financial resources that can be easily employed based on new information. Investments should favour credible, competent and adaptable implementing partners, rather than specific projects or programs.

Climate finance needs to include unstable contexts with a high degree of fragility, requiring the design of instruments that are fit for purpose.

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