CLIMATE CHANGE
RESOURCES
MIGRATION

Securing Africa in an uncertain climate
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Campaigning rhetoric or bleak reality? Just how serious a security challenge is climate change for Africa?

Oli Brown
The emergence of climate change as a security issue

If economics is the original dismal science, then climate change could be its understudy.

Hardly a day goes by without a new scientific report revealing more worrying news about the rapid progress of climate change. Reports on climate change typically make for grim bedtime reading – full of worrying statistics and doomsday scenarios. Sometimes it feels like the only question left is whether the rising sea levels, tornadoes or forest fires will get you first.

As the meteorological picture comes into focus, campaigners have begun to argue that climate change holds potentially serious implications for international security. The basic argument is that climate change – by redrawing the maps of water availability, food security, disease prevalence and coastal boundaries – will reduce the available food and water, increase migration, raise tensions and trigger new conflicts.

Africa and conflict

Africa, though the continent the least responsible for greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, is almost universally seen as the continent most at risk of climate-induced conflict – a function of the continent’s reliance on climate-dependent sectors (such as rain-fed agriculture) and its history of resource, ethnic and political conflict (Brown, Hammill & McLeman, 2007).

The March 2005 Report of the Commission for Africa, which was chaired by the former Prime Minister of Britain, Tony Blair, argued that “Africa has experienced more violent conflict than any other continent in the last four decades” (Commission for Africa, 2005). Most of the 24 major armed conflicts recorded worldwide in 2001 were on the African continent, with 11 of those conflicts lasting 8 years or more (Human Security Centre, 2005). Indeed, at the end of the 20th century more people were being killed in wars in Africa than in the rest of the world combined.

Much has been written about the causes and nature of instability in Africa. For example, the 2005 Report of the Office of the Special Advisor on Africa (OSAA) on Human Security in Africa noted that: “Several factors account for conflict in Africa: remote sources, immediate causes, and factors that exacerbate conflict. The remote sources include the colonial heritage of authoritarian
governance and artificial boundaries; conditions of widespread extreme poverty, and scarcity of basic necessities of life. Immediate causes include competition for land, oil or other natural resources; support for internal conflicts by outside actors; government policy; and resource misallocations. Factors that exacerbate conflict can include arms imports, pressures of refugees or internally displaced persons and food insecurity. (OSSA, 2005).

That said, a number of analysts have pointed to positive longer-term trends in conflict in Africa – referring to both a reduction in armed conflict as well as the contribution being made by the new wave of engagement by Africans and the international community. Recent years have seen reduced levels of conflict, the improvement of Africa’s economic prospects, and progress in the quality of governance and the number and nature of democracies (Human Security Centre, 2005 & 2007). The African Union, through its security architecture, and the continent’s regional economic communities have developed into key players in the reduction of conflict in Africa.

A succession of new wars across Africa?

There is concern that climate change could reverse some of this progress. In fact, some argue climate change is already playing a role in existing conflicts. A June 2007 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) suggested that the conflict in Darfur has been in part driven by
climate change and environmental degradation. The UNEP report warned of “a succession of new wars across Africa” unless more is done to contain the danger of climate change. The report concluded that “Darfur ... holds grim lessons for other countries at risk.” In a 2007 Washington Post editorial United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-moon argued: “Almost invariably, we discuss Darfur in a convenient military and political shorthand – an ethnic conflict pitting Arab militias against black rebels and farmers. Look to its roots, though, and you discover a more complex dynamic. Amid the diverse social and political causes, the Darfur conflict began as an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change.” (Ki-moon, 2007).

In short, the issue of the security implications of climate change has caught the political imagination. This led to a Security Council debate in April 2007 and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Al Gore and the scientists of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) later that year, dozens of conferences and reports, and a resolution by the UN General Assembly in summer 2009. By graphically illustrating some of climate change’s most worrying scenarios, the “securitisation” of climate change has generated significant political momentum for action on GHG emissions.

There are perhaps two reasons for this. The first is self-evident: it is becoming increasingly clear that future climate change threatens to exacerbate existing drivers of conflict in a way that could roll back development across many countries. The second reason is more political: it is part of a clear process to galvanise the climate negotiations with a greater sense of urgency in the run-up to the December Ministerial meeting in Copenhagen. If there is to be any chance of stabilising and eventually reducing global emissions, it is widely seen that the United States and the large developing country emitters, such as China, Brazil, Russia, India and Mexico, will need to be part of a post-2012 arrangement (Najama, Huq & Sokona, 2003). Appealing to the hard security concerns of these countries raises climate change to the realm of high politics and creates the political space for serious concessions on GHG emissions.

At the unprecedented 2007 UN Security Council debate on climate change, Basile Ikouébé of Congo Brazzaville observed there is some irony that Africa, the region least responsible for global GHG emissions, is likely to be the worst affected by the “excess consumption and carefree attitude of the rich” (UNSCDP, 2007). Indeed, African nations, on both aggregate and per capita bases, are insignificant sources of emissions. On average each resident of sub-Saharan Africa produces less than a tonne of CO2 per year, as compared with

The conflict in Darfur has been in part driven by climate change and environmental degradation.
a European’s output of 8.2 tonnes of CO2 and a
North American’s 19.9 tonnes (World Bank, 2007).
Whether or not most sub-Saharan countries sign
up to a post-Kyoto deal will have little impact on
global emissions. However, cases such as Darfur
are being held up as cautionary tales for the po-
tential impact of climate change everywhere. In
other words, Africans are not really the intended
audience of the post-Kyoto debate, but they are
part of the evidence being used to make it.

**Plausible security threats**

It is a truism that environmental problems don’t
recognise borders. The imperative to reduce GHG
emissions and manage the impacts of climate
change demonstrate our global interdependence.

We are beginning to realise that the speed and
the scope of climate change – the way it threat-
en to affect where we can live, where we can
grow food and where we can find water – could
undermine the economic and political stability of
large parts of the world in the coming years. In so
doing climate change could become a “threat-
multiplier” that makes existing problems, such as
water scarcity and food insecurity, more complex
and intractable. For the past few years, the Inter-
national Institute for Sustainable Development
has been researching these linkages (Brown,
Hammill & McLeman, 2007; Brown & Crawford,
2009a & 2009b). There are four main dimensions
to the challenge.

Firstly, reduced water supply and growing de-
mand will, in some places, lead to increasing com-
petition between different sectors of society, dif-
ferent communities and different countries. Under
certain conditions, such as poor governance and
existing ethnic division, these stresses may turn
violent. Already one-third of all people in Africa live
in drought-prone regions. Using a range of mod-
els, the IPCC estimates that between 350 and 600
million more people in Africa will be at risk of in-
creased water stress by the middle of the century.
Water can clearly be a cause of conflict at a local
level, particularly where no formal rules or agree-
ments on the use of water have been agreed.

At the international level the UN has already
identified nine river basins in Africa where conflicts
could arise. The stakes can be very high. For exam-
ple, reductions of just 20% in the flow of the Nile
could make irrigation very difficult in the Egyptian
Delta. And Egypt has already threatened Sudan
with military action if it were to unilaterally divert
water (Brown & Crawford, 2009b).

Secondly, reductions in crop yields and increas-
ingly unpredictable weather patterns around
the world may lead to higher prices for food and
greater food insecurity, and increase the stakes
for control over productive agricultural land. Al-
ready roughly 230 million people in Africa are un-
dernourished. Most African farmers rely on the
rains for their crops, and when the rains fail people go hungry. According to the IPCC, climate change could mean that between 30 and 170 million more people could suffer from malnutrition as a direct result of climate change. Drops in food production locally and increases in the price of food globally could trigger regional food crises, causing political instability and further undermining the economic performance of weak and unstable states (Brown & Crawford, 2009b).

Thirdly, changes in sea level, increased natural disasters and the reduced viability of agricultural land may cause large scale and destabilising population movements. Already nearly a third of the world’s refugees and internally displaced people are found in African countries. Future estimates of the number of climate migrants vary but some analysts have estimated that as many as 200 million people will be forced to move away from their climate change could become a “threat-multiplier” that makes existing problems more complex.
homes and their communities by the middle of the century – a large percentage of who are likely to be in Africa. Migration itself is not inherently problematic, and indeed it can be an important way of adapting to climate change, but migration has been linked to violent conflict in both transit and destination countries, and large scale population displacement has already been recognised by the UN Security Council as a threat to international peace and stability (Brown & Crawford, 2009b).

The final dimension is that the cumulative impacts of all this, as well as more frequent natural disasters, and increases in diseases such as malaria threaten to increase poverty and to overwhelm the capacity of governments to meet the basic needs of their people. Fundamentally this could mean more fragile and more failed states.

**But don’t exaggerate**

It seems that there are plausible and very serious threats from climate change but we have to be careful not to oversimplify the relationship or to exaggerate the story. There are at least two important caveats we need to bear in mind.

Firstly, there are significant variations in the climate models. The impacts of climate change are not consistent across the continent and some areas are likely to be worse hit than others.

The second warning is that we shouldn’t assume that people will automatically fight when conditions get difficult. Experience shows that environmental stress can increase the severity, duration and the impacts of a conflict but it’s rare that environmental factors are ever the sole cause of violent conflict. Instead climate change seems like
to act as a “threat multiplier” that makes existing problems more pressing and intractable. Whether those problems develop into violent conflict depends on the specific context. It is poverty that puts vulnerable people in marginal situations, it is bad leaders that stoke ethnic divisions, and it is a failure of national, regional and global diplomacy that allows local problems to escalate into confrontation and war.

**Talking it up?**

The extent to which the climate change debate has become a debate about security presents both risks and opportunities.

First, the more dire predictions border on scare-mongering. There is a risk that this could lead to “climate change fatigue” among the general public – a sense of hopelessness and resignation in the face of an unbeatable challenge. Second, dire predictions about coming “climate wars” imply that climate change requires military solutions; to secure by force one’s resources or erect barriers to large-scale migration. But focusing on military response both raises the stakes and draws attention (and donor dollars) away from the very real, and current, development problems that already pose immediate threats to vulnerable societies, such as extreme poverty, access to education, HIV/AIDS and so on. Third, the international community needs to ensure that this does not become a northern, donor-driven agenda, perceived as yet another way for northern interests to interfere in southern affairs.

On the positive side, a “securitised” climate debate might just be able to marshal sufficiently compelling arguments to encourage the politicians
to do something about reducing emissions and investing (carefully) in adaptation. These are the sort of things that the international community should be doing anyway. So, if hanging the climate change debate on the security hook speeds their implementation, it may serve a useful purpose.

**Conclusions**

In fact, the recent focus on the “security” implications of climate change has been tremendously effective at raising the profile of climate change as an issue of international importance. The “security link” conveys added, and arguably necessary, gravitas to the debate on climate change, and an appreciation of the security implications of climate change could give new impetus to the climate change agenda.

However, it is clear that the picture is nuanced and the relationships are not necessarily linear. The impact of climate change in fragile states around the world may not be so much a case of entirely new security threats, but more of enhancing existing instabilities and threats. Fundamentally, climate change threatens to undermine governments’ ability to ensure security and stability. But there is no clear, mono-causal link between climate change and conflict.

The projected impacts of climate change for Africa and other regions do indeed hold the potential to reduce the reliability of food and water supplies, to increase the frequency and severity of droughts and storms, and to exacerbate flooding in low-lying coastal areas. In turn, livelihoods may be undermined, key resources may become scarcer, and violent conflict may result. However, we should be extremely cautious before assuming that a straight-line progression from scarcity to conflict will ensue. This is because the question of whether climate change helps tip fragile states into conditions of violence and conflict will be heavily influenced not only by the nature of the biophysical impacts of climate change, but also by a given area’s susceptibility to conflict and
the capacity of the population to adapt – factors that are determined in the first instance by non-climatic processes.

In fact, many factors influence the probability of violent conflict. Poverty and education levels, natural resource endowments, demographics, ethnic and religious fractionalisation, geography and prior conflict are all factors that constrain or facilitate conflict. Climate change is only one of the many security, environmental and developmental challenges facing Africa. It is non-climate factors (such as poverty, governance, conflict management, regional diplomacy and so on) that will largely determine whether and how climate change moves from being a development challenge to presenting a security threat.

References


The Heinrich Böll Foundation, associated with the German Green Party, is a legally autonomous and intellectually open political foundation.

Our foremost task is civic education in Germany and abroad with the aim of promoting informed democratic opinion, socio-political commitment and mutual understanding. In addition the Heinrich Böll Foundation supports artistic and cultural as well as scholarly projects, and co-operation in the development field. The political values of ecology, democracy, gender democracy, solidarity and non-violence are our chief points of reference. Heinrich Böll’s belief in and promotion of citizen participation in politics is the model for the foundation’s work.

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