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About the author

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Introduction

This paper looks at the climate change – conflict – migration nexus. Specifically, it explores how climate change drives conflict which subsequently causes human displacement, and what protections exist for people who are displaced in this way. This topic is of the utmost importance since human displacement causes global insecurity and can be a catalyst for a vicious circle of conflict, with climate change as the initial trigger.

Climate change as a driver of conflict

Climate change drives social tension resulting in community conflict. In the north of Vietnam, theft of crops has been documented between neighbours farming cardamom, driven by the spice's recent scarcity under changing climatic conditions (Ives, 2020). There is much debate surrounding the mechanisms by which climate change plays a role in local-level conflict. Roche et al. (2020) argue that climate shocks can *reduce* community conflict since the potential yields of attacks are reduced. However, this is highly context-specific; in northern Vietnam, the value of cardamom has risen due to climate change (Ives, 2020), making theft more profitable, which in turn drives community conflict. Environmental factors thus encourage conflict at the micro level (Maretti et al., 2019:153), while "research confirms that environmental stress and conflict are correlated, and shows that drought and resource scarcity interact with displacement and migration in complex chains of causation" (Foresight, 2011:116).

Case study: Attributing the Syria conflict to climate change

Almost since the outbreak of civil war in March 2011, debates have raged over whether climate change sparked the unrest and subsequent displacement of millions of Syrians. The debate stems from the fact that parts of Syria suffered drought and high internal migration immediately prior to the outbreak of war, although sources differ over the length and severity of the drought, the scale of rural-urban migration pre-conflict, and the role of internal migrants in the civil unrest which prompted the first government crackdowns in 2011.

Although many studies agree that climate change contributed to the drought that affected northeast Syria for several years prior to 2011 (e.g. Gleick, 2014; Kelley et al., 2015; Fröhlich, 2016), a meta-analysis by Selby et al. (2017) found "no convincing evidence" that the drought could be attributed to anthropogenic climate change (p. 233). However, Selby et al. concede: "This finding… does not prove that climate change and northeast Syria's drought were not factors in its civil war, only that the existing claims to this effect do not stand up to close scrutiny" (p. 241).

This discord in the literature on Syria demonstrates the wider difficulty in ascribing causality to any particular weather- or climate-related event (e.g. Cramer et al., 2014). However, anthropogenic climate change likely increased the probability of a serious, prolonged drought occurring in northeast Syria (Kelley et al., 2015). Fröhlich (2016) describes how this "'century drought' entailed consecutive crop failures, considerable loss of livestock, the demise of whole villages and a distinct increase in internal migration" (p. 38). Gleick (2014) notes that these factors: "led to very significant dislocation and migration of rural

communities to the cities" (p. 333). However, Kraler et al. (2020) have criticised such 'maximalist' findings as alarmist and deterministic, noting that they overlook "existing migration dynamics" (p. 29). Moreover, climate change was not the only cause of water scarcity in northern Syria: studies also highlight water mismanagement and wastage, and reductions in fluvial flow from Turkey and Iraq (e.g. Fröhlich, 2016).

Proving a link between water scarcity and internal migration in Syria is complicated by other factors, including government policies that marginalised rural populations, high unemployment, rising fuel prices, and traditional seasonal migration (Saleeby, 2012; Fröhlich, 2016). The link between internal migration and the popular uprising is also debatable (Saleeby, 2012; Fröhlich, 2016; Selby et al., 2017). The various commentators *do* nevertheless agree that there were multiple causes for the Syrian civil war and subsequent refugee crisis, and that climate change may be among the catalysts for the conflict.

Climate-related conflict as a driver of migration

Studies of the relationship between climate, conflict and migration have increased significantly since about 2008, with Syria and Darfur among the most cited examples.

An estimated 2 to 3 million people were displaced during the crisis in the Darfur region of Sudan, which began in 2003, and which the then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described as "an ecological crisis, arising at least in part from climate change" (Ban, 2007). Yet multiple studies have since delinked the Darfur conflict from climate change or drought (e.g Kevane & Gray, 2008; Verhoeven, 2011), finding other historical, social and political factors to be more relevant.[1]

In Syria, the potential for unrest caused by drought was predicted in 2008, three years before the outbreak of civil war. A confidential cable from the US Ambassador in Damascus to the US State Department, published by WikiLeaks, describes how a Syrian UNFAO representative warned that "economic and social fallout from the drought was 'beyond our capacity as a country to deal with.'" (Connelly, 2008). The UNFAO representative appealed for US government assistance, warning of "social destruction [that] would lead to political instability" if drought assistance was denied. The US Ambassador's closing remarks on the cable "question whether limited [US Government] resources should be directed toward this appeal at this time." (Connelly, 2008; see also Gleick, 2014).

Prescient as the UNFAO representative's appeal appears to have been, analysts have since questioned whether the conflict-climate-migration connection is legitimate, either in Syria or elsewhere (see box above). Abel et al. (2019) aimed to "establish a causal path from climate change to violent conflict and cross-border migration" (p. 240). They concluded that, globally, climatic conditions leading to drought only played a "statistically significant role" for the period 2010-12, specifically in asylum-seeking outflows from countries affected by the Arab Spring (notably Syria) "as well as flows related to war episodes in Sub-Saharan Africa" (p. 246). The authors concluded:

"Climate change thus will not generate asylum seeking everywhere but likely in a country undergoing political transformation where conflict represents a form of population discontent towards inefficient response of the government to climate impacts." (2019:246).

However, Abel et al.'s study has two key limitations. First, the UNHCR data used to measure migration only counted people who made an asylum application. There are multiple reasons why an individual may not apply for asylum, or may be delayed in doing so, sometimes for

[1] For a more detailed discussion, see Adger et al., 2014:773.

years (UNHCR, 1979; ILPA, 2002). The asylum figures also do not reflect internally displaced people (some of whom may later migrate internationally) and may therefore be a vast underestimation of the numbers displaced by climate-related conflict. Considering the existence of "significant quantitative and qualitative data on past displacement associated with natural hazards and disasters" (UNHCR, 2015:5), there exists an opportunity for a wider study of climate-conflict displacement encompassing other categories of people on the move, in addition to asylum-seekers.

Second, Abel et al.'s climatic focus was, like many studies, based solely on rainfall using the Standard Precipitation-Evapotranspiration Index (SPEI), which measures one specific impact of climatic change: drought. Although the study aims to explore the link between climate-related conflict and migration, the narrow focus on rainfall discounts all other potential climatic causes of conflict and migration globally, particularly creeping impacts such as vector-borne disease, salination of arable land, and failures of fisheries (e.g. Cramer et al., 2014). Human (in)security may be affected by numerous climate-related phenomena, depending on the resilience/vulnerability and adaptive capacity of populations and individuals. Other studies have taken a similarly narrow view by looking at temperature change as the key variable when seeking causality between climate, conflict and migration (e.g Kelley et al., 2015; Breckner & Sunde, 2019). Again, widening the focus to other variables would give a more rounded picture.

Precipitation as a variable may still provide useful insights, however. Changes in rainfall can be devastating, whether the result is flooding, drought, or unpredictability in rainfall patterns that prevent farmers and smallholders from maximising yields. Several chapters in the IPCC's fifth assessment report assert that climate change will affect water availability (Burkett et al., 2014; Jiménez Cisneros et al., 2014; Adger et al., 2014). In the Americas specifically, Silva Rodríguez de San Miguel et al. (2021) found evidence that water insecurity and water-related disasters drive internal migration, and Gleick (2014) references historical conflicts in the Levant caused by water shortages, which may have parallels in climate-related conflict today.

Moving the climate change-conflict debate forward may require further qualitative, empirical studies, or as Mayer (2013) observed: "*more* research is not needed, but rather *better* research is needed" (p. 90, emphasis in original). This may entail moving away from a reliance on purely meteorological and refugee flow data and instead capturing the motivations of displaced individuals. In one such study, Fröhlich (2016) interviewed 30 refugees in Jordanian camps, finding climate change to be "one of several reasons for internal migration prior to the [Syrian] conflict" (p. 39).

Protection for climate-conflict "refugees"

The widely used legal definition of "refugee" comes directly from the 1951 Refugee Convention, in which a refugee is somebody who:

> "owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality" (Article 1(a)(2))

People fleeing environmental disasters and climate change are not covered by this definition. Therefore they are not automatically entitled to protection under international law. Protection and humanitarian support is at the discretion of individual nations and relief agencies, and is frequently denied. UNHCR (2015) states that people displaced by disasters are only entitled to its support if the disaster *subsequently* triggered armed conflict or persecution which then caused the displacement. UNHCR therefore adheres to the 1951

Refugee Convention definition, as per its mandate, to the exclusion of people with often desperate humanitarian needs. For people displaced by natural or manmade disasters who do not meet this definition, “there are at present no widely accepted principles or rules governing their entry and stay in another country” (UNHCR, 2015:9). This creates human suffering and desperation, potentially resulting in criminality, localised conflict, political upheaval and global insecurity.

People who have fled their homes but have not crossed a international border are also not considered to be refugees. They remain the responsibility of the country in which they reside. However, these countries are frequently struggling to meet the needs of the sedentary population, and cannot provide sufficient assistance to people who are displaced. UNHCR and others do step in to provide emergency relief, but longer term resettlement of internal migrants and rehabilitation of destroyed landscapes and livelihoods is uncommon.

Policy recommendations: the role of the Armed Forces

1. **Preventing conflict and displacement**: Mass migration is a security issue. The protection gap for climate migrants means there are currently millions of people worldwide – both internally displaced and on the move between countries – with no right to protection in law as refugees. However, these individuals still have human rights, which the international community has a legal obligation to uphold. The UK Armed Forces can play a humanitarian role in ensuring the human rights of climate migrants are met, which would help prevent instability and future conflict with host communities. Moreover, by supporting climate adaptation, disaster response and training, the Armed Forces can prevent local conflict and stop people becoming displaced in the first place. People do not leave their homes simply due to climate change or conflict, but because of a range of push-factors that include political, economic and social drivers. Preventing conflict and subsequent displacement means tackling each of these areas.

2. **Upholding international law**: The grey area of climate-conflict refugees (who may meet the “persecution test” contained in the 1951 Refugee Convention) must be clarified to ensure that adequate protection is provided for those fleeing conflict whether at the community, regional or national level. These individuals are entitled to refugee status under international law, but are frequently mislabelled as economic migrants. The UK Armed Forces can support refugee processing, resettlement and, where appropriate, repatriation.

3. **Supporting planned relocation**: Migration is now considered a legitimate form of climate change adaptation, particularly in locations that will be rendered uninhabitable by climate change (such as small island states) or where livelihoods are at grave risk. Planned relocation allows communities to move in a regular, safe and orderly fashion, reducing human rights abuses and conflict with host communities. Planned relocation schemes, conducted in full consultation with affected communities, could be supported by the UK Armed Forces both at home and abroad.

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