

Anthropocentric Climate Change and Violent Conflict: Evidence Review and Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

Violent conflicts, freshwater related risks, mass migration, food and human insecurity, in vulnerable developing countries are among the key global threats posed by climate change, according to the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 2014 report. The admonitions concur with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2007) and Ban Ki Moon (2007) assertions that the conflict in Darfur was as a result of resource scarcity and climate change. This essay reviews the evidence in academic literature, newspaper, articles, journals, blogs, books which links climate change and violent conflicts and then proceeds to use evidence from Kenya, Nigeria and Rwanda to argue that current evidence linking climate change and violent conflict is counterfactual and filled with numerous disagreements. This signals the need for current policy debates to be informed by measured views of vulnerability to conflict, causes of specific conflicts and local responses to climate change rather than on simplistic, unsubstantiated gloomy assertions that prove no statistically significant link between climate change and violent conflict.

Keywords: Climate change; Violent conflict; Adaptation strategies; Climate change policies; Anthropocentric

Introduction

First, recent burgeoning literature on the correlation between climate change and violent conflicts, such as; Climate and Security: Evidence, emerging risks and a new agenda [1], Trend and triggers redux: Climate change, rainfall, and interstate conflict [2], has heavily inclined their focus on sensationalisation. In this vein, a drawback of this kind of studies is that they tend to single-handedly focus on linear models of conflict that presupposes environmental change leads directly to conflict [3], whilst sidestepping historical political conditions and regimes. Subsequently, they underscore and under-research the ability of people who are vulnerable to be able to influence the political economy and take advantage of shaping their vulnerabilities and securities.

Evaluating Evidence

With regard to the linear models of conflict, evidence presented by Robert Kaplan [4] argues that population growth leads to resource scarcity, famine as well as conflict is Malthusian in nature. These kinds of arguments are problematic in the view that they tend to stereotype Africa by suggesting it is more prone to violent conflict as opposed to other regions [5-7]. Furthermore, Jared Diamond's [8] controversial book Collapse: How societies choose to fail, or succeed, the case of Easter Island, illustrates rapid unchecked population growth as a model of conflict. However, statements used in the book such as, "problems of deforestation, water shortage, and soil degradation in the third world fosters wars there and drive legal asylum seekers and illegal emigrants to the first World from the third world," [8], are political and have ominous implications on climate policies like the securitization of climate change, in addition to significantly ignoring historical local adaptive mechanisms and political environments such as traditional justice systems that can help prevent conflict.

Turning briefly to the indirect models of conflict where the underlying assumption denotes climate change has implications on resources, and that conflict only occurs when opportunistic actors rupture the local formal as well as informal institutions, even in instances when resources are in abundance [3]. In their Rwandan genocide research, Percival and Homer-Dixon [9] present the hypothesis that

rapid population growth, environmental scarcity coupled with decrease in food production, increased the levels of aggression and frustration, weakening state institutions, enabling manipulation of ethnic identities by the elites thus leading to the genocide. Conversely, in their analysis of the relationship and surprisingly limited statistically significant links of resource scarcity and conflict, statements such as, "in developing societies, the regime usually lacks the support of a large share of the population: it represents the interests of specific ethnic, economic or military group," [9], are problematic in the view that they ignore the diversity of political formations in these countries and are perhaps strategically used to point political actors in triggering the Rwandan genocide.

A common contradicting inference is the evidence that cattle raiding in the dry lands of Marsabit in northern Kenya are less likely to happen in times of drought and water scarcity, interestingly, they tend to occur in wetter years when there is abundance [10]. It is almost certain that Meir et al. [10] coincide with the idea that there are no sufficient grounds that environmental scarcity leads to violent conflict. This is in line with Witsenburg and Adano [11] who argue that violence is not entirely linked to resource scarcity in Kenya's dry lands. Equally seen is the case of northern Senegal in 1998-2002 [12] where drought-led migration promoted institutions and shared knowledge on adaptation to resource scarcity through agricultural intensification.

A similar study on northern Nigeria, by Brown et al. [13] identifies conflicts only occur between agricultural communities and pastoralists' over fodder and water, but do not spread due to the available traditional conflict resolution mechanisms that evolve over generations. Arguably,

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this in a way contributes positively to the climate change policy and debates since it does not presuppose climate change will automatically lead to violent conflict, rather it advocates building on the significant role of local common property regimes, and environmental measures that can help prevent violent conflict.

Second, the generalizability of the mentioned studies and accounts that link climate change to violent conflict such as Jared Diamond's [8] implies that the management of environmental issues in vulnerable developing countries is intrinsically tied to politically "ungoverned spaces"- described as states that are lawless and characterized by terrorism and political violence. Strategically and politically biased, this sends hints on the need for military interventions as seen in the Pentagon's Climate Change Adaptation Road Map (2014) report, its involvement and portrayal of climate change as a threat multiplier as well as the establishment of the US military command for Africa (AFRICOM). Importantly, this is deservingly critiqued, in the view that, "playing the climate refugee and conflict card not only threatens to militarise climate policy, but also development aid," [14]. A much more satisfactory approach of development assistance would focus on developing the local adaptive capacity and means of addressing conflict rather than basing lots of emphasis on giving power to political agenda and interests that embody military control of development assistance, in this way unmistakably missing the crucial point.

Despite the usual caveats, analytical flaws combined with unsubstantiated evidence, studies on climate change and violent conflict continue to gain traction in policy circles making it very reasonable to question whether the bandwagoning [15] of these narratives are inherent to particular donor interests, possible funds or merely attention seeking. In fact, the evidence of pursued interests can be seen from 2009, where 12 states in the Pacific Island went before the UN General Assembly citing the Darfur case with a resolution that linked climate change to political instability in order for the council in charge of security to address their issues [16]. In particular, the conflict in Darfur is a classic example of how the narrative on climate change and conflict ignores the political economy of Sudan such as gross inequalities, forced migration of the Nuba farmers in the 1990s and how they were instrumental in triggering the conflict [14].

Third, the limitation of current debates on climate change and violent conflict is framing if there is or no causal relationship between climate change and violent conflict in most affected countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, India, Kenya, Libya, Maldives, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan as well as Vietnam [3]. Focusing on this alone drives away the much needed attention on deeper historical causes of violent conflicts thus presupposing the climate change inevitably leads to violent conflict. A key flaw in these debates is treating vulnerability as something new, rather than a state that has been created over time by different societies in processes of change [17]. As 196 countries meet in Paris (December, 2015) at the climate change summit, policy makers should rethink current evidence linking climate change leads to violent conflict and whether adaptation is a sustainable solution to societies affected by conflict noting that it needs political support and involves negotiations.

For instance, when Reuveny [18] argues that climate change makes people in vulnerable developing countries to migrate to developed countries, eventually exacerbating to conflict in the receiving countries, the argument is basic and ignores the multi-causality of migration such as forced migration, or moving to developed countries to look for better job opportunities. Furthermore, as seconded by Peluso and Watts, [19],

the argument does not factor in adaptation to climate change by these countries, or let alone the traditional institutions or common property regimes in place to address the issue of climate change and resource scarcity. These alongside forecasts by Norman Myers [20] on climate refugees by 2050, together with Lester Brown's [21,22] Malthusian rooted sentiments on environmental refugees ostensibly demonstrates a political shift that favors Western interests and a more parallel focus of the conflict debate that ignores the connection to discussions about local adaptation [23-29].

Conclusion: Recommendation for Current Policy Debates

In conclusion, current policy debates and research that link climate change and violent conflict need to advance it differently, with the view of allowing evidence to shape the kind of approaches and future strategies that are formulated. By considering the country specific causes of conflict, the political will and commitment to adaptation processes as well as resilience through innovation. Second, this essay shows that understanding histories of conflict even in instances of climate change as well as local existing institutions that can prevent spread of conflict. Future reasonable research approaches would be, not to focus research on violence or linear causality alone.

By having a detailed evidence-based analysis on the causes of specific conflicts in the current debates on climate change, it will be easy to move forward and address why certain communities engage in conflict as opposed to just basing them on climate change. A fine distinction of the link between climate change and violent conflict, that factors in traditional local motivations and innovative adaptive responses rather than scholarly, bandwagoning and journalistic approaches is arguably more strategic and helpful for determining local sustainable relevant governance of climate change, rather than just trying to attest that communities will resolve to violent conflict because of climate change.

It is worth commending that future policy debates on climate change and violent conflict draw reference to; the extent at which the evidence takes into account the local historical adaptive responses as opposed to just making assumptions on how they will react, the credibility of the data presented and how different policies, such as migration, climate or let alone security is affected by presented claims and whether they are or should remain valid.

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