



## Responding to climate risks in conflict settings: in search of solutions

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*At COP28, states and organizations will adopt a Declaration on Climate, Relief, Recovery and Peace, committing to strengthen climate action and finance in conflict and fragile settings. Over the last few years, the ICRC has carried out analysis on reducing the impacts of the climate and environment crisis on people enduring conflict, notably captured in a new report, *Weathering the Storm*.*

*In this post, part of a series on Climate Change, Conflict and Humanitarian Action, Catherine-Lune Grayson and Amir Khouzam, co-authors of the report and respectively head of the policy team and policy advisor at the ICRC, reflect on dilemmas pertaining to strengthening the response to growing climate risks in conflict settings.*

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It is now commonly agreed that communities enduring conflict are among those most vulnerable to growing climate risks because of the devastating effects of conflicts on societies. By threatening people's lives, damaging essential services, disrupting institutions, the economy, and community cohesion, conflicts shrink people's capacity to cope with all types of risks. Despite their heightened vulnerability, these communities are routinely excluded from climate adaptation efforts, because of the volatility of conflict settings.

Since 2019, we have carried out case studies in a number of conflict-affected countries to document how weather extremes and variations are reshaping the lives of people, and how responses need to adapt. The latest ones, conducted between October 2022 and July 2023 in Gaza, Mozambique and Niger, are captured in *Weathering the Storm*. This new report documents some of our own efforts to help people be more resilient in the face of growing climate risks and stresses that it is possible to do better, and ensure that global efforts to strengthen climate action also reach people coping with the consequences of conflict and violence.

## Three dilemmas we grapple with

While we carried out this analysis, some fundamental questions with no clear-cut answers repeatedly came up. We will need to further think about these as we work collectively to strengthen our response to climate risks in fragile and conflict settings.

### ***First, how can we be sure that our humanitarian response does not ultimately lead to maladaptation, rather than adaptation? And if we are unsure, what is the right course of action?***

Even in stable environments, pathways to effective climate adaptation are often unclear, and adaptation initiatives have, at times, yielded unintended maladaptive outcomes. For instance, sea walls may protect parts of a community from floods, but increase flood risks for people living beyond the boundaries of the wall or cut off fishermen from their livelihoods. Such impacts are disproportionately felt by already marginalized people and can reinforce inequities and sources of vulnerability.

Challenges in identifying effective adaptation pathways are particularly acute in conflict-affected settings where data to assess long-term trends is often scarce, and where social and political dynamics are fluid and complex. This raises questions about how to ensure that our own humanitarian response does not lead to maladaptation for societies – or segments of societies. Some mitigating measures are rather obvious: responses need to be informed by an in-depth understanding of the context and the historical and socio-political realities that led to the marginalization and vulnerability of certain groups in the first place, as vulnerability “does not just fall from the sky”.<sup>[1]</sup> Our actions need to be adaptable to fluid security situations and conflict-sensitive to mitigate the risk of fuelling tensions.

But this does not address one key challenge: even though humanitarian action can form a valuable foundation for climate adaptation through measures to help people survive in the short term – for instance through incremental adaptations of their livelihoods and improving access to essential services – it cannot support transformative adaptation to make agriculture, food and energy systems climate-resilient or guarantee sustainable access to water for the foreseeable future. We know that incremental adaptation is unlikely to be enough for communities to adapt adequately. We also know that in some cases, preserving existing arrangements, with small tweaks, can yield negative impacts for people over time.

But predicting the potential long-term maladaptive outcomes of our work can be hard, as the lasting impact of an action on people’s lives and livelihoods, or on the dynamics of power and vulnerability, is not always obvious. For instance, should we help people have access to sufficient water now and for the next decades by drilling deeper – understanding that this is a matter of survival – even if this may reduce people’s access to ground water in the longer-term? Obviously, we should, but we should also be mindful of the need to enhance the sustainability of responses. When should we consider that helping communities adapt their livelihoods in their place of residence may, in fact, deter people from leaving environments that are becoming unliveable? What are the criteria to deem an environment unliveable? And if we are unsure, how should we manage the uncertainty, if we consider that inaction is not an acceptable option? Perhaps the answer lies in treading cautiously, intentionally avoiding decisions that lock communities into one course of action or another, preserving flexibility to respond as we observe trends and improve our understanding of them over time.

### ***Second, as there are never enough resources to address all needs, should we always prioritize the most vulnerable, or should other factors – such as the odds of having a sustainable impact in high intensity conflicts – be taken into account, and if so, how?***

We have been calling for several years for strengthening climate action in conflict settings. As much as there is a growing recognition of glaring gap, questions about the extent to which this is ultimately possible in volatile environments remain. Should we really invest in essential services and infrastructure that may be destroyed during conflict? This is a fair question, given the inherent challenges and risks attached to implementing longer-term responses in conflict settings, and given that global needs within and beyond conflict-settings surpass our collective means.

We do not advocate for pulling all efforts in the direction of communities enduring conflict. We advocate for rebalancing efforts so they are not completely neglected. There are things that can be done in conflict settings, and others that are out of reach. Our own action reflects that reality.

In most places, driven by the humanitarian principles of humanity and impartiality, we redouble efforts to ensure that we have access to the most unsafe places, so we can provide humanitarian assistance and protection to those who need it the most. Yet, most of our longer-term resilience building activities do not take place in the midst of the hostilities, but often in places that are in the vicinity of the conflict and are safe enough to allow for a longer-term and more intentional response. For instance, in Niger, our longer-term resilience-strengthening activities primarily take place in communities that have received people fleeing the conflict. This is also true in Mozambique. Despite being slightly more stable and safer, these are places that are often deemed too unsafe to work by development organizations – we all have a different assessment of risks, and a different risk threshold.

Is it fair to ask that all investment targets the most vulnerable in the most unstable environments? No. Communities who are slightly less vulnerable, but still vulnerable, do require support to ensure that they do not tip into greater vulnerability. How then do we strike the right balance given that the means to

address needs are never commensurate with the needs themselves? This is a difficult question without a clear answer, but what is certain is that the balance remains off despite the fact that we all rally behind the commitments to help the most vulnerable or leave no one behind.

### ***Third, does it make sense at all to distinguish between climate action and development in places where severe development gaps limit the potential for climate action?***

In most places where we work and where deficits in development are staggering, comprehensive climate action is intrinsically linked to inclusive development. It is virtually impossible to strive for effective adaptation without strengthening access to basic services, achieving higher levels of literacy and enhancing the potential for economic diversification. Circumscribing development and climate work in such environments therefore seems artificial and unhelpful.

Development-focused organizations are starting to embrace this reality. At its 2023 annual meetings, the World Bank Group updated its vision and mission statements to acknowledge the link between development and climate action, calling for an end to poverty and increased prosperity *on a livable planet*.

Yet, development initiatives are not always properly informed by current and longer-term climate trends (and in some cases directly contribute to the unsustainable extraction of resources, including fossil fuels) and the funding architecture remains relatively siloed. Climate adaptation, likewise, can have implications beyond development, involving profound social and political shifts in the relationship between people and their environment.

Do we risk diluting climate action – and the necessary focus on both reducing emissions and ensuring that we collectively adapt to the short and longer-term impacts of climate change – if we say that ultimately, everything boils down to a need for much greater investment in climate-resilient development? We surely need to continue repeating that reducing emissions is critical to our collective survival, just as we need to be mindful of the fact that development and climate action are inseparable.

## **Back to the future**

Over the years, as we carried out analytical work, we also worked closely with humanitarian organizations, researchers and development organizations, including development banks, to ensure that the particular vulnerability of people enduring conflict is recognized and that we collectively reflect on pathways to improve the response in such environments. We have seen some progress, as we no longer need to make the case that people in conflict need support to adapt to a changing climate: in fact, at COP28, a number of states and organizations will commit to strengthening climate action “in situations of fragility, conflict, or severe humanitarian needs”.

This is a welcomed step. What needs to come next is a leap, turning political will and commitments into tangible action. In doing so, we need to continue to collectively learn and reflect on some of these questions: how do we avoid maladaptation? How do we allocate limited resources as needs rise? And how do we intelligently link development and climate action? These are necessary questions for which there may be more than one right answer. It will take all of us to find them.

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