Climate action in conflict and fragile settings: closing the implementation gap

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Catherine-Lune Grayson
Head of Policy, ICRC

Amir Khouzam
Research Associate, ODI Global Risks and Resilience

Communities in conflict-affected areas are direly impacted by growing climate risks and shocks. Over the last few years, political will to strengthen climate action in these settings has been growing. Commitments need to be urgently translated into tangible outcomes for communities – and avenues to do so exist.

In this post, and at the onset of COP29, Catherine-Lune Grayson and Amir Khouzam reflect on pathways to strengthen climate action in conflict settings.

A year ago, ahead of COP28, we *wrote* about the dilemmas of strengthening the response to climate risks in conflict settings. We welcomed the launch of the *COP28 Declaration on Climate, Relief, Recovery and Peace*, in which a large number of states and organizations – climate funds, multilateral development banks, humanitarian organizations, and others – would commit to strengthening climate action, supported by fit-for-purpose finance, in situations of conflict, fragility and severe humanitarian needs.

The Declaration demonstrated the growing political will to address a severe gap in climate action in conflict and fragile settings. This gap has real-life consequences, as communities and countries that are already less equipped to cope with risks and shocks due to the destruction that conflict brings are having to deal with more frequent, intense, and unpredictable weather events and patterns, jeopardizing their livelihoods and ways of life.

As always, political and high-level commitments need to be turned into reality to make a tangible difference in people's lives. For this to happen, there has to be a shared understanding of the very practical actions that are required to move forward. Over the years, we have had many conversations with governments, communities, and financial institutions in which a common challenge was raised: if additional support was going to be directed to these settings, more detail and granularity was needed with respect to the differences and commonalties across the spectrum of fragility and conflict, the specific obstacles that exist in these various situations, and the existing approaches that have proven affective.

This is a fair point: while many *compendiums of good practice* and *case studies* exist, it is still not always clear what exactly we mean when we say that across various situations of fragility and conflict, tailored action must be scaled up.

In responding to this challenge, we decided to look at specific situations, ranging from high institutional fragility to high intensity conflict, to reflect on constraints that characterize each environment and promising practices to address them. Ultimately, we concluded that in every environment, steps can be taken to strengthen people's resilience to growing climate risks.

Unpacking fragility and conflict

The umbrella notion of fragility and conflict refers to a variety of situations that range from institutional fragility, to protracted conflict, contested territories, and high-intensity conflict. These situations often coexist within the same country: some locations might be relatively peaceful and stable while others may face a low intensity conflict with periodic spikes in violence; some areas may be under the control of the government while others are under the full or fluid control of an armed group. What can be done in a location characterized by institutional fragility is ultimately very different from what can be done during a period of high-intensity conflict.

While this is all relatively clear theoretically, in real life the lines between situations can be blurry. Conflicts ebb and flow, armed groups gain or lose control, and institutions waver in their strength and reliability. The real, complex world cannot fit into a four-category taxonomy. This is reflected in the differing approaches to assessing fragility and conflict that various organizations take.

For instance, the *ICRC* classifies armed conflicts solely on the basis of facts and legal criteria established in international humanitarian law. For a situation to be considered an international armed conflict under IHL, no specific level of intensity is required. This is not true for non-international armed conflicts, where indicators of intensity such

as the number and intensity of individual confrontations, levels of displacement or number of casualties, among others, are necessary to classify the situation.

The annual list of fragile and conflict-affected situations from the *World Bank* identifies situations of conflict *based on a threshold* number of conflict-related deaths relative to the population, while a few factors can lead to a country being listed as fragile, such as levels of displacement, the presence of a UN peacekeeping operation, or a weak institutional capacity and policy environment. The OECD's index does not specify which countries are in conflict and does not consider fragility and conflict to be mutually exclusive categories, noting that "conflict-affected contexts tend to be fragile, but the bulk of fragile contexts are not in a state of war".

In practice, this means that a country can be considered in conflict by one given organization and not by another. Yet there is significant overlap between the various institutional lists and indexes – even though annual or biennial lists can not always capture the swift changes that are possible in unstable settings – and they do provide good indications on overall stability, strength of governance and institutions and levels of violence, which are important elements to consider in developing fit-for-purpose responses. And, relevant for our purposes, there is great overlap between the countries found on all of these lists, and those considered most vulnerable and least ready to adapt to climate change.

A few words on fragility, conflict, and climate risks

Although there are important differences between countries enduring fragility and conflict, they tend to share a limited capacity to cope with and adapt to a changing climate, resulting in exacerbated vulnerability to climate risks.

As conflict and fragility weaken the foundations of societies, they also reduce their ability to design and implement plans, laws and policies to manage current and future risks, and to collect and analyse data to inform their action. These weaknesses can *deter partner organizations from deploying staff, limit the capacity of local actors to ensure financial oversight, and dampen the investment appetite of development actors and the private sector*. The development deficit that characterizes a majority of conflict-affected and fragile countries further contributes to restricting adaptation pathways.

Conflict dynamics and the level of development in a given place significantly influence the nature of feasible action. In general, the greater the insecurity and instability, the greater the reluctance to intervene beyond the humanitarian and security sectors, and the narrower the menu of potential activities becomes. Yet what is clear is that tailored avenues to reduce risks exist even in the most complex environments. Such approaches are adapted to the context, risk-informed and conflict-sensitive, and do not reinforce or create inequalities. They encompass the capacities and activities of a wide range of actors, within civil society and the public and private sectors, from the local to the national, regional, and international levels. As situations of conflict and fragility tend to be dynamic and may require a swift adaptation to a shift in instability and violence, flexibility in programming and funding is core.

Last, it is key to recall that there remains uncertainty around projected climate pathways, and significant gaps persist in our overall understanding of climate change adaptation, from what may be effective or lead to maladaptation now and in the future. Gaps in understanding are particularly high in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Making it work in practice

Responding to the concerns we kept hearing in conversations with governments and others, we set out to *explore the extent to which programs that support communities anticipate, adapt, and respond to shocks can be implemented in all types of environments*. We did so by considering four types of interventions familiar to development, humanitarian, and climate practitioners – supporting access to basic services, people's livelihoods, social security and early

warning/early action. These interventions are rarely delivered in isolation, and are combined and packaged by governments, development and humanitarian actors into a continuum of responses that address systemic and residual risk, including climate risks.

The overall conclusion is unsurprising: The greater the instability and violence, the greater the challenges. Despite being characterized by financial and capacity constraints, competing and changing priorities, oftentimes unequal access to essential services and government infrastructure, situations of institutional fragility *offer a high potential for coordinated and comprehensive action across spatial and time scales.*

In situations of protracted conflicts, experience shows that a wide range of activities can be implemented to strengthen resilience, despite clear challenges. Depending on the type of infrastructure that exists, there might be potential to alleviate water stress by rehabilitating water systems, or to replace shallow wells that are increasingly drying up during the dry season by boreholes that tap into deeper aquifers without exceeding a sustainable yield. Emergency cash distributions can fill a gap, while measures are taken to either ensure that existing social safety nets reach conflict-affected areas and include displaced communities or to develop such safety nets. Periods of lower intensity violence also allow to plan for future shocks through the establishment of coordination and communication mechanisms, pre-positioning, trainings and drills.

For instance, in Tillaberi, in southwestern Niger, where food insecurity is chronically high, and people are highly exposed to droughts, irregular rains and crop diseases, a UN agency is strengthening livelihoods, social protection and the resilience of essential services. It combines cash or voucher transfers that provide access to food while rehabilitating agricultural infrastructure and supplies with targeted support during the lean season, support to schools, and efforts to improve smallholder farmers' access to markets.

The scope for action further reduces in situations of high-intensity conflict, which commonly result in severely reduced humanitarian access, destruction of critical infrastructure and services, and a halt in development activities. Action is most often limited to emergency relief to ensure people's survival through the provision of water, food, shelter, and primary health care. Areas near but not on the front line, often receiving displaced people, are typically insecure and unstable, but allow for a greater depth of action.

In these circumstances, rather than aiming to build long-term resilience, emergency responses can be designed to not hinder eventual recovery or "lock in" maladaptive approaches. As conditions allow and the situation transitions from high intensity conflict, the response can shift towards building resilience, which can then provide a lifeline during periods of high-intensity conflict – for instance, by enhancing the likelihood that services keep functioning, at least partially.

In territories under the full or contested control of a non-state armed group, the scope for action varies significantly. There is an overarching tendency to exclude such territories from responses that go beyond the provision of emergency relief. In some cases it may be the case that insecurity limits all action, but in others, access may be possible to rehabilitate key infrastructure, support people with their livelihoods, communicate early warnings, or provide emergency cash or food support. The lack of government presence can sometimes create space for local and de facto authorities, who may have an incentive to provide basic services in areas they control.

In August 2023, the Somali Red Crescent Society, with direct operational and forecasting support from the Red Cross, was able to prepare for and respond to flooding due to El Nino. In areas of the country controlled by both the government and Al Shabaab it proved possible to provide support (at a variable level) to 100,000 households by

protecting access to clean water, distributing hygiene kits, and pre-stocking health units. Radio and social media were used to provide regular warnings on the status of the flood.

We cannot afford the luxury of inaction

As the Declaration showed, and as we hear in all the meetings in which governments, communities, and others push for more granularity and detail, the political will to change the current reality of climate action in fragile and conflict settings – too little delivered too late, if at all – exists. The onus now is on operational and financial actors to demonstrate results.

The cost of inaction will continue to rise. While the challenges to implementing climate action in fragile and conflict settings are real, inadequate action only amplifies the deficit that exists in these settings, and as climate hazards become more severe, frequent, and unpredictable, exacerbates its consequences. Those consequences are severe, and result in human suffering and losses and damages. The longer we wait to act, the greater the costs – both human and financial.

Interventions that respond to climate action provide common goods and benefits. Building adaptive capacity by supporting people's livelihoods and access to services, strengthening social safety nets, and providing early warnings yields dividends to whole communities and countries, not only to populations receiving assistance. Thinking of climate action in this way can help reframe the costs and risks, and therefore strengthen the case for scaled up action in conflict and fragile settings.

Even in very complex settings, possibilities exist. Scaling up action starts with supporting, adapting, and expanding existing initiatives. Communities, authorities, development actors, and humanitarian organizations can help policymakers identify entry points and projects that could be adapted with additional support to more substantively address climate risks.

See also:

- Catherine-Lune Grayson, Amir Khouzam, *Responding to climate risks in conflict settings: in search of solutions*, November 23, 2023
- Alistair D. B. Cook, *Climate change, environment and humanitarian action in Southeast Asia*, March 28, 2023
- Namita Khatri, *Who gets what: how to get climate finance working for the people who need it most*, November 10, 2022

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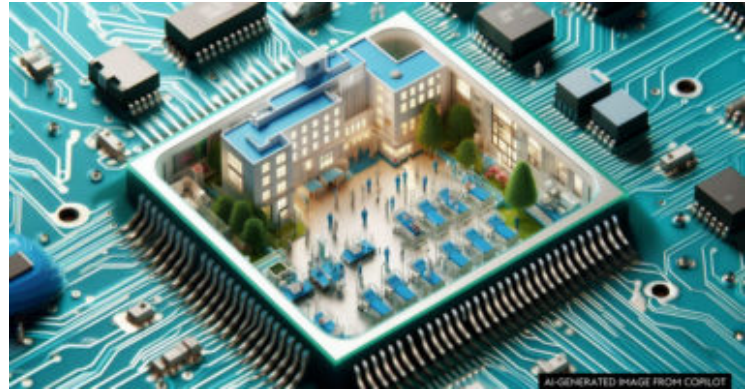
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