

Intercross the Podcast

Episode #117 Climate: The invisible front line in conflict zones

Show Notes, Key Takeaways and Resources

World leaders have converged on the Scottish city of Glasgow for COP26—the United Nations climate change conference.

The stakes could not be higher.

Sea levels are rising. Heatwaves, droughts, floods, and wildfires are more frequent, more intense, and threatening the survival of humanity.

In a brand-new episode of Intercross, we hear from our communications colleague in London, **Sam Smith**, who's been closely following this story for the past year, writing about the very real human impacts of climate change in a conflict zone.

He starts in Somalia with ICRC's **Abdikarim Abdullahi**. Three decades of conflict have weakened the country's institutions and left some 2.9 million people internally displaced. Somalia is ranked as one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change when it comes to its ability to improve resilience. The recurrent nature of climatic shocks, such as droughts and floods, and the instability created by conflict, meaning herders and pastoralists—several of which share their stories—have little chance to recover and build resilience.

Sam then turns to Mali. Since 2012, armed conflict has profoundly disrupted the lives of Malians, spreading from the north to central regions, causing death, displacement and economic failure. At the same time, Mali is becoming hotter and drier, while the Sahara Desert, which already makes up two thirds of the country, is expanding. He speaks with **Dr. Catherine-Lune Grayson**, ICRC's Policy Advisor and author of the recent report, *When Rain turns to Dust*, to learn why the countries affected by conflict are among those deemed to be the most vulnerable to climate change. They discuss what exactly about insecurity that undermines states ability to help their communities adapt to climate and the main commitments ICRC is hoping to come out of COP26.

Key Takeaways:

Somalia

- Three decades of conflict have weakened the country's institutions and left some 2.9 million people internally displaced. Somalia is ranked as one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change when it comes to its ability to improve resilience. This makes life complex for pastoralists.
- The ICRC has supported more than 11,000 families who were left in a precarious situation following the prolonged dry season in 2021, with emergency assistance and resilience programs. The recurrent nature of climatic shocks, such as droughts and floods, and the instability created by conflict, mean herders have little chance to recover and build resilience.

Mali

- Mali is a country battered by nearly a decade of conflict. Since 2012, armed conflict has profoundly disrupted the lives of Malians, spreading from the north to central regions, causing death, displacement and economic failure. At the same time, Mali is becoming hotter and drier, while the Sahara Desert, which already makes up two thirds of the country, is expanding.

Climate Change & Conflict

- Of the 25 countries deemed most vulnerable to climate change, 14 are mired in conflict. This is not to say that there is a direct correlation between climate change and conflict. Rather, it suggests that countries enduring conflict are less able to cope with climate change, precisely because their ability to adapt is weakened by conflict. People living in conflict zones are therefore among the most vulnerable to the climate crisis and most neglected by climate action.
- Climate change does not directly cause conflict, but scientists generally agree that climate change does not directly cause armed conflict, but that it may indirectly increase the risk of conflict by exacerbating existing social, economic and environmental factors.
- Insecurity limits people's ability to cope with climate shocks
- Adapting to climate change can be relatively simple, but it tends to be complicated. Concerted efforts to adapt tend to be limited in times of war. In a conflict situation, authorities and institutions are not only weak, but also preoccupied with security priorities.
- The natural environment is frequently a casualty of conflict. Too often, the natural environment is directly attacked or damaged by warfare. Attacks can lead to water, soil and land contamination, or release pollutants into the air. Explosive remnants of war can contaminate soil and water sources, and harm wildlife.
- International humanitarian law (IHL) provides protection to the natural environment. As early as 1977, states afforded the natural environment protection against widespread, long-term and severe damage through Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions.
- Humanitarian action must adapt. The climate crisis is altering the nature and severity of humanitarian crises. Humanitarian organizations are already struggling to respond and will not be able to meet exponentially growing needs resulting from unmitigated climate change. Major efforts – in the form of significant systemic and structural changes, political will, good governance, investment, technical knowledge, a shift in mindsets – are needed to limit climate change. Humanitarian organizations must collaborate to strengthen climate action.

More Resources for this Episode:

- [“If your animals die, you die with them” – Somali herders defenseless against the climate crisis](#)
- [When Rain Turns to Dust Report](#)
- [7 things you need to know about climate and conflict](#)
- [Mali’s invisible conflict](#)
- [When conflict and climate change collide – ICRC warning ahead of COP26](#)