ISSUE BRIEF

PREVENTION OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM

UNDP Policy Brief

The climate security nexus and the prevention of violent extremism:
Working at the intersection of major development challenges

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Introduction

Many contexts which are highly exposed to climate change and possess the least capacity to respond, also suffer from conflict[1] and violent extremism.[2] While empirical evidence does not demonstrate a linear or direct causal relationship between climate and conflict,[3] or activity by violent extremist groups, there is an imperative to consider holistically the risk landscape and convergence, to avoid maladaptation. "Climate-related security risks" are understood as the adverse impacts of climate change on human security[4] - the freedom from fear and want, but also as they relate to the security of the state, and the maintenance of international peace and security, under the United Nations Charter.[5] The tackling of climate-related security risks represents, for UNDP, a strategic focus on delivering innovative and cross-cutting approaches to promote climate action and sustaining peace.

This policy brief explores initial lessons learnt from a climate security perspective of efforts to prevent violent extremism in politically and environmentally fragile contexts affected by climate change. It examines: (i) the root causes of violent extremism and how they intersect with climate vulnerability; (ii) climate change as a risk-multiplier in conflict-affected and fragile contexts; (iii) climate security as a strategic consideration for violent extremist groups; (iv) integrating climate change considerations into efforts to prevent violent extremism; (v) climate action as part of an integrated approach to increase the opportunity cost of recruitment; (vi) the different roles and needs of women and youth; and (vii) strengthening regional approaches and strategies to address climate security and prevention of violent extremism (PVE). It draws on recent country level examples and preliminary insights from UNDP's workstreams on climate security and PVE, as well as an online experts' consultation held on Tuesday 2 June 2020. Initial insights from programming including in Central Asia, Iraq and Sudan inform and reify the importance of adding a climate security lens to efforts to prevent violent extremism in terms of analysis, assessment, reintegration and livelihoods, in post-conflict recovery and peacebuilding contexts, and as a part of a broader prevention strategy. Finally, it identifies the need for policy and programming to be informed by cross-cutting climate-related security risks and stresses the importance of further research[6] and examination of good practices to address such risks.

[1] Grayson, C. L. (2019). When rain turns to dust: climate change, conflict and humanitarian action. *Humanitarian Law and Policy*, 5 December 2019. https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2019/12/05/rain-dust-climate-change-humanitarian-action/

[2] See United Nations and World Bank Group (2017). 'Pathways for Peace, Inclusive Approached to Preventing Violent Conflict', *World Bank Group*, 2017. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28337 and Dia, A. M. (2016). Addressing radicalization and violent extremism through climate action. *UNDP*, Marrakech, 14 November 2016 https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/blog/2016/11/14/Enfrentando-la-radicalizaci-n-y-el-extremismo-violento-a-trav-s-de-la-acci-n-clim-tica.html

[3] Adger, W.N. et al. (2014). Human security in: Climate change 2014: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Part A: Global and sectoral aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 755-791. Also see Busby J. (2018b). Taking stock: the field of climate and security. *Current Climate Change Reports*. 2018. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40641-018-0116-z; Burke, M., Hsiang S. M., & Miguel, E., (2015). Climate and Conflict. *Annual Review of Economics* 2015 7:1, 577-617, Vol. 7:577-617 (Volume publication date August 2015). First published online as a Review in Advance on May 13, 2015 https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-economics-080614-115430; Hendrix, C.S. (2018). Searching for climate–conflict links. *Nature Climate Change* **8,** 190–191 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0083-3 Lee, H. F. (2020): Historical climate-war nexus in the eyes of geographers, *Asian Geographer*, DOI: 10.1080/10225706.2020.1768571

[4] Ibid.

[5] UN (1945) Charter of the United Nations and International Court of Justice. *San Francisco,* 1945 https://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text/

I. The root causes of violent extremism and the intersection with climate vulnerability

In contexts where there is a geographic overlap in salience, climate change vulnerability, conflict and activity by violent extremist organizations can be mutually and negatively reinforcing dynamics. Many of the areas where violent extremist groups are most active suffer high exposure to climate risks, thus posing challenges for different contexts, including: prevention, peacebuilding, but also hard-won development gains and those also hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. These include parts of the Sahel, the Levant, the Horn of Africa, Afghanistan, Pakistan, southern Thailand and the Philippines.[7] The impacts of climate change can aggravate the root causes of violent extremism, contribute to push and pull factors for recruitment, and alter the broader strategic environment in ways that strengthen the power of violent extremist groups, giving them increased control or room to manoeuvre. In turn, extremist activity, and security operations to counter violent extremism, can increase the exposure and vulnerability of a population to climate hazards and in unstable environments, violent extremism can disrupt livelihoods, damage economic performance and limit the feasibility of measures which strengthen climate adaptation and resilience.

UNDP's (2017) 'Journey to Extremism' identifies the complex root causes and drivers of violent extremism to include: grievances, limited confidence in governance and the rule of law, rising inequality, a lack of public participation due to rapid social and cultural change, and lack of inclusive development.[8] All of these can create pockets of disillusionment, tension and exclusion, in which violent extremist groups can thrive. Climate change is a fundamentally different problematique which exerts profound attendant impacts on the natural environment people depend upon for their lives and livelihoods. A changing climate affects the quantity, quality and distribution of natural resources, and makes access to livelihoods dependent on them less predictable by increasing interannual variability and changing the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events.

Climate change can contribute to food and water insecurity, but also increase competition for essential resources, impair livelihoods and coping strategies to have disruptive effects on the life opportunities of young people. It can drive forced displacement and rural-urban migration as well as alter transhumance patterns, potentially fuelling social tensions between different communities and exacerbating the drivers of conflict and fragility. Investment in adaptation and resilience can offset some of these impacts, but not all.[9]

II. Climate change as a risk-multiplier in conflict-affected and fragile contexts

The cumulative effects of climate change can stress governance and institutions, presenting a significant challenge to weakened or overstretched government and institutional capacity, which may struggle to respond in a timely and effective manner. Weak responses further reinforce climate vulnerability, and if governments or institutions cannot meet the needs of communities as climate impacts occur, this may exacerbate grievances, undermine government legitimacy, and aggravate intercommunal tensions between affected groups, particularly over access to natural capital. Hence an indirect impact of climate change is an increased risk of tensions and insecurity, particularly in areas where there are already concerns about government and institutional capacity or a perceived lack of institutional legitimacy – which includes significant parts of the world that face increased climate risks. These indirect impacts on governance and social systems are an important consideration when examining the intersectional risks posed by climate change and violent extremism.

[7] Moran, A. et al (2018). The Intersection of Global Fragility and Climate Risks. *USAID*, September 2018 https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00TBFH.pdf

[8] UNDP (2017). Journey to Extremism - Drivers, incentives and the tipping point for recruitment. *UNDP*, New York, 2017 https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf

[9] Oppenheimer, M. et al. (2014). Emergent risks and key vulnerabilities. In: Climate change 2014: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability. Part A: Global and sectoral aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. *Cambridge University Press*, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA, pp. 1039-1099.

While not a direct trigger for conflict or violent extremism, climate change can exacerbate the drivers of both, acting as a 'risk multiplier'.[10] These include the complex interaction between historical, social, economic and political factors, compounded by climate change in the form of more frequent and intense extreme weather events, such as floods and droughts. Hard security responses to quell the fighting and the emergence of illicit economies can bring further hardship and suffering in such climate and security hotspots, which in turn can fuel recruitment, whether out of livelihood necessity or increased grievances.

Box 1. Sudan – Mainstreaming climate change into peacebuilding in Sudan

Efforts are ongoing by UNDP to mainstream climate security into country programming to better address the dual burden posed by climate change and conflict, including violent extremism. The degradation of the environment and natural capital, water scarcity, deforestation and climate change have exacerbated conflict over natural resources in areas where criminal networks are known to engage in trafficking and smuggling operate and where non-state armed groups actively recruit. Climate security has been integrated into the wider analysis conducted by the Country Office of tribal tensions, ongoing conflicts and grievances over natural resources, aggravated by climate change.

In Sudan's Darfur region conflict over natural resources evolved into a decade-long crisis in a region, that forms part of a major route for trafficking and smuggling of people and arms into Libya, where UNDP continues to monitor the degradation of natural resources and where entire dammed water reservoirs have dried up over the past decade, making it impossible to exclude climate change considerations from stabilization and PVE efforts. These dynamics are also observed across the conflict-affected southern states in Sudan and particularly in South and North Kordofan where a more holistic approach with tailored interventions addressing these additional security risks is needed. Based on conflict analysis, programming will focus on mainstreaming on climate security into community stabilization efforts.

III. Climate security as a strategic consideration for violent extremist groups

Fragile and natural resource-constrained contexts can provide fertile ground for violent extremist groups to flourish and extend their reach,[11] particularly, where governance and institutions are weak and may not be able to respond, the COVID-19 pandemic serving also to highlight gaps in response.[12] There are several examples where violent extremist groups have shown their ability to strategically gain control over scarce natural resources to boost recruitment and sustain illicit networks, also driving the destruction of natural capital and ecosystems, the effects of which may further be exacerbated by climate change impacts.

[10] United Nations General Assembly (2009). Climate change and its possible security implications - Report of the Secretary-General (A/64/350). 11 September 2009. https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/sg%20report%202009.pdf

[11] Crawford, A. (2015). Climate change and state fragility in the Sahel. FRIDE, ISSN 1989-2667 https://www.iisd.org/sites/default/files/publications/climate-change-and-state-fragility-in-the-Sahel-fride.pdf

[12] Hegazi, F. (2020). Climate change, disease and the legitimacy of armed non-state actors. SIPRI, 1 July 2020 https://www.sipri.org/commentary/essay/2020/climate-change-disease-and-legitimacy-armed-non-state-actors

One important recent case is that of the Islamic State which seized control of water infrastructure in Iraq to exert control in a power vacuum, where instability, severe droughts, tenuous water governance and climate change adversely affected fragility[13] and aided recruitment.[14] It wilfully cut-off and polluted the water supply to farming communities in central and southern Iraq and flooded government and military installations, and territories, including the city of Abu Ghraib, to punish political opponents, while supplying water and electricity to conquered territories to strengthen its control and legitimacy.[15] Its attacks on the energy sector have served as attempts to destabilize the government, with a resulting considerable environmental toll.[16] However and apart from this, the Islamic State's engagement in the black market oil trade, during its reign of terror, became a major income stream, through which it could payroll fighters and fund its operations.[17]

Similarly, in the Lake Chad region, the ascendance of Boko Haram has been assisted in part, by the effects of interannual climate variability, droughts, desertification, land degradation, and food insecurity, combined with rapid population growth and poor governance.[18] Apart from rent-seeking and the control of illicit economies around the lake,[19] Boko Haram has been able to mobilize new recruits, including from a young cohort who lack economic alternatives, coping strategies and access to essential resources; which heavily securitized responses can likewise serve to curtail.[20] Livelihood insecurity means that many returnees go back to their ranks, climate change impacts on which, need to be better understood in this regard.[21]

In Mali, the droughts of 1970's and 1980's, access to land and policy favouring sedentary farmers over nomadic herders has had lasting impacts on historic grievances. Although climate stressors and shocks have, prima facie, exerted increasing pressures on social cohesion,[22] the transformation of productive systems has increased agricultural yields in Central Mali in recent years and the introduction of boreholes have, in some instances, also led to increased competition and conflict between user groups.[23] Against the backdrop of low state presence, and deficits in local justice and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms,[24] Jihadist groups have attracted followers by offering a response to unresolved grievances over pasture, land and water.[25]

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[13] Hassan, K., Born, C., & Nordqvist, P. (2018). Iraq Climate-related security risk assessment. *SIPRI*, Stockholm August 2018. https://www.eastwest.ngo/sites/default/files/iraq-climate-related-security-risk-assessment.pdf

[14] Schwartzstein, P. (2017). Climate change and water woes drove ISIS recruiting in Iraq. *National Geographic*, 14 November 2017. https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/11/climate-change-drought-drove-isis-terrorist-recruiting-iraq/
https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2017/11/climate-change-drought-drove-isis-terrorist-recruiting-iraq/

[15] Von Lossow, T. (2020). The role of water in the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars, ISPI Commentary. ISPI, 26 February 2020 https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/role-water-syrian-and-iraqi-civil-wars-25175

[16] Tichý, L. (2019). The Islamic State oil and gas strategy in North Africa. *Energy Strategy Reviews,* Volume 24, April 2019, Pages 254-260 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esr.2019.04.001

[17] See Tichý, L. & Eichler, J. (2017). Terrorist Attacks on the Energy Sector: The Case of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Volume 41, 2018 - Issue 6, pages 450-473 https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2017.1323469 and Swanson, A. (2015). How the Islamic State makes its money. *The Washington Post,* 18 November 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/11/18/how-isis-makes-its-money/

[18] See Malley, R. (2020). Climate change Is shaping the future of conflict. Address given at UN Security Council's virtual Arria session on climate and security risks on 22 April 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/climate-change-shaping-future-conflict; and Samuel, M. (20) Economics of terrorism in Lake Chad Basin. *Institute for Security Studies.* https://issafrica.org/amp/iss-today/economics-of-terrorism-in-lake-chad-basin

[19] Daouda, Y. M. (2020). Poverty and living conditions with Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin: the case of southeastern Niger. *Review of African Political Economy* https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2020.1722086

[20] Maza, K. D., Koldas, U. & Aksit, S. (2020). Challenges of countering terrorist recruitment in the Lake Chad region: The case of Boko Haram. February 2020. *Religions* 11(2):96. 10.3390/rel11020096 https://www.adelphi.de/en/system/files/mediathek/bilder/Lake%20Chad%20Region%20-%20Climate%20related%20security%20risk%20assessment.pdf

[21] Vivekananda, J. & Born, C. (2018). Lake Chad region climate-related security risk assessment. *SIPRI*, Stockholm August 2018.

[22] Benjaminsen, T. A. (2016). Is climate change causing conflict in the Sahel? *Climate Home News,* 9 August 2016. https://www.climatechangenews.com/2016/09/08/is-climate-change-causing-conflict-in-the-sahel/

[23] ICG (2020). The Central Sahel: Scene of new climate wars? *The International Crisis Group* - Africa Briefing N°154, Niamey/ Dakar/ Brussels, 24 April 2020. https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/b154-le-sahel-central-theatre-des-nouvelles-guerres-climatiques

[24] Morland, A. (2018). Why some Malians join armed groups. *The New Humanitarian*, 25 January 2018 https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2018/01/25/why-some-malians-join-armed-groups

[25] Marquette, C. (2020). Maintaining peace and stability in Mali's Sikasso region strategies to contain land-related conflicts. *International Alert* 2020. https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Mali_MaintainingPeaceAndStability_EN_2020.pdf

Climate- and environmental-driven resource scarcity has also been an enabling force for recruitment in Somalia, by compounding grievances and marginalization. In the face of drought, internal displacement and chronic food insecurity, Al Shabaab has become an effective alternative service provider, strengthened its legitimacy by doing so and bolstered recruitment.[26] Its illicit activities have been sustained in part, by the illegal charcoal trade[27] which is subject to bans by the government, since 1969 and the UN Security Council resolution 2036 of 2012. Logging driven by charcoal production has in turn resulted in land degradation and deforestation,[28] increasing vulnerability and pressure on livelihoods and coping strategies, as the preferred hardwood feedstock, acacia bussei, is also depended upon by pastoralists as fodder for their livestock.[29]

These examples show that where governments are overwhelmed by socio-economic, demographic and political challenges worsened by climate change and are unable to perform key functions such as disaster response, or where the climate-affected context increases political exclusion and marginalization, violent extremist groups are often able to capitalise on these grievances and use them to support divisive narratives that drive recruitment. In some instances as abovementioned, violent extremist groups have been seen to be more agile and quick to manoeuvre in fast changing circumstances, including in their operational environments where climate change has contributed to increased environmental variability and unpredictability, to fill gaps in services and deliver responses not provided by state actors.

IV. Integrating climate change considerations into efforts to prevent violent extremism

Climate change is a systemic risk, with impacts on natural capital which are inter-scalar and compounded in and across socio-economic systems. Anthropogenic climate change has already contributed to 1°C in global warming above pre-industrial levels, the effects of which are already felt in many countries around the world and will persist, even if the most ambitious emission reduction goals are achieved.

Without rapid and drastic cuts in emissions to reach net zero in the near future and adaptation, far graver impacts on natural and socio-economic systems will continue to manifest.[30] These include more extreme droughts, storms, floods, wildfires and sea level rise. These changes will affect all levels of human, national and international security, from displacement due to rising sea levels and territorial loss, to challenges to the international rules-based order over contested maritime boundaries.

Forward-looking analysis and a better understanding of the future potential effects on human insecurity under different scenarios is needed by the international community, informed by the tenets of prevention, inclusion and resilience. With a growing understanding of the concatenation of risks that are faced in climate change, conflict and fragility, there is a greater realization that tackling bio-physical and social vulnerability through climate change adaptation and social cohesion can help ensure resilience and strengthen the capacity of communities to respond.

[26] Eklow, K. and Krampe, F. (2019). Climate-related security risks and peacebuilding in Somalia. SIPRI policy paper 53, *SIPRI,* Solna, October 2019. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/sipripp53_2.pdf
[27] Petrich, K. (2019). Cows, charcoal, and cocaine: Al-Shabaab's criminal activities in the Horn of Africa. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, DOI:10.1080/1057610X.2019.1678873
[28] Rembold, F. et al. (2013). Mapping charcoal driven forest degradation during the main period of Al Shabaab control Somalia. *Energy for Sustainable Development*, Volume 17, Issue 5, October 2013, Pages 510-514. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esd.2013.07.001
[29] Brown, O. (2018). How Somalia's charcoal trade is fuelling the Acacia's demise. *UNEP*, Nairobi, 21 March 2018 https://www.unenvironment.org/news-and-stories/story/how-somalias-charcoal-trade-fuelling-acacias-demise
[30] IPCC (2018). Summary for Policymakers. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty. *IPCC*, Switzerland, 2018. https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/10/SR15_SPM_version_stand_alone_LR.pdf

Box 2. Integrated assessment of climate-related security risks in Central Asia

UNDP partnered with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe (REC) and the EU under the Environmental Security Initiative to conduct a climate security assessment[31] of the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan, in 2017 which examined climate and environmental insecurity in a region where shared ecosystems sustain local livelihoods, bringing to bear the importance of the interconnection between environment, climate and security. The high mountain terrains are particularly sensitive to climate change and their hydrology has been altered, with retreating glaciers, melting permafrost and disrupted precipitation affecting hydropower dependent communities but also food security in lowlands which rely on water for irrigation.

Findings include that poverty, food and water insecurity, unemployment, and unrest created conditions for potential radicalization, and that fundamentalism has become a growing regional concern. One of the critical areas linking climate change and security in Central Asia is access to natural resources, including water, especially in cross-border areas. The joint analysis, assessment report and data visualization of climate-security challenges and hotspots have been important to communicating climate change and security implications in areas of concern, as well as priorities and recommendations to policymakers, state institutions and the public. Findings have informed the design of a proposal for Central Asia, with a focus on Ferghana Valley together with the European Commission.

V. Climate action as part of an integrated approach to increase the opportunity cost of recruitment

To effectively counter such dynamics, an integrated approach that reduces vulnerability, increases human security and strengthens climate-resilient livelihoods can increase the opportunity cost of fighting[32] for affected populations and, in certain contexts, weaken the case for joining non-state armed groups including violent extremist groups. For example, in the Sahel region concerted efforts by the UN entities with together governments, local communities, civil society and development partners are helping to strengthen local adaptation and resilience, through approaches including: dialogue, local governance, income diversification, rainwater harvesting and soil conservation.[33]