GLOBAL CENTRE
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POLICY BRIEF

Climate Change and Mass Atrocities

Climate change has been recognized as one of the defining issues of our time due to the existential threat it poses to the environment and inhabitants of our planet, as well as its ability to exacerbate tensions between communities and multiply the threat of conflict and mass atrocity crimes. The crises and challenges arising from climate change – including the dramatic widening of inequality caused by climate emergencies, resource scarcity, environmental degradation and the political manipulation of access to resources – all pose a threat to vulnerable societies. Rising temperatures, droughts, destructive floods and desertification have already increased or exacerbated resource-based conflict and atrocities in the Central Sahel (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), the Lake Chad Basin (encompassing Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad) and elsewhere.

Through extensive research and work across multiple fields, as well as annual discussions at the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the international community has developed numerous mechanisms to adapt and respond to current and future climate threats, including the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Secretary-General's Climate Action Acceleration Agenda and the Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change, among others.[1] Nevertheless, discussions on atrocity prevention and ways to respond to climate-related atrocity risks have been largely absent from these initiatives.

As the international community examines how to slow environmental degradation and confront climate threats, it must also consider how to prevent and respond to atrocities driven by climate emergencies. This policy brief provides an overview of climate-related atrocity risks, as well as describes and assesses several existing national and multilateral initiatives — across the humanitarian, development, finance and security sectors — that can be adapted and used to mitigate and address the growing threat of climate-related atrocity risks and crimes. The brief builds upon an event hosted by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and the European Union on 24 January 2024, during which experts on the intersection between climate, human rights, security and resilience discussed strategies to ensure international efforts more holistically protect populations from atrocity crimes and climate vulnerabilities.

CLIMATE CHANGE AS A THREAT MULTIPLIER

Climate change has been recognized as a "threat multiplier" for conflict and atrocity crimes because of the potential to create enabling conditions within specific contexts that increase the likelihood of the commission of such crimes.

For example, resource-based conflicts can be exacerbated by the destructive impacts of climate change, such as desertification and extreme weather events, including severe flooding and droughts. Climate extremes can also amplify the risk of food and water shortages, which at times result in the loss of livelihoods and increased competition for resources, a possible trigger for violence. Likewise, the adverse effects of climate change have become a significant driver of displacement. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), approximately 80 percent of people internally displaced by conflict come from countries that are also highly climate-vulnerable environments.[2] In some contexts, atrocity crimes may also contribute to or expedite environmental degradation as the natural environment may be directly attacked or damaged by warfare.[3]

This brief provides an overview of the different ways climate vulnerability and climate change can compound atrocity risks by examining the situations in Yemen, the Central Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, with a particular

Ralph Bunche Institute
for International Studies
CUNY Graduate Center
365 5th Ave., Suite 5203
New York, NY 10016 USA

info@globalr2p.org
T: +1 212-817-2104
F: +1 212-817-1565

www.globalr2p.org

focus on Nigeria. The cases presented in this brief are therefore representative, rather than exhaustive.

Yemen

Following nearly a decade of conflict and likely war crimes and crimes against humanity, Yemen is one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with more than 18 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. Yemen is also one of the world's most water-scarce nations, with the UN estimating that more than half of the population does not have access to sufficient, safe and acceptable water. Conflict over water and other resources was a long-standing issue within Yemen prior to the outbreak of hostilities in 2015 and remains one of the primary drivers of local-level conflict. Over the last decade, warring parties have weaponized Yemen's lack of water by strategically destroying critical water infrastructure – including water tanks, pumping stations, pipelines and other vital facilities – through airstrikes, ground attacks and the use of landmines and other explosive devices. Years of such unlawful attacks have impeded the effective functioning of water management and municipal governance structures, while ongoing hostilities inhibit the capacity of local water agencies to access, repair and operate infrastructure due to risks surrounding movement and restrictions on essential commercial imports. Furthermore, parties to the conflict have weaponized civilians' access to water, particularly in Taizz governorate. Four out of five water basins in Taizz are under the control of Houthi forces or on conflict front lines, while the majority of the Taizz population lives in Taizz City, which is under Yemeni government control. The Houthis have blocked water from basins under their control from flowing into Taizz City, while forces affiliated with the Yemeni government have previously sold public water supplies for profit.[4]

Access to clean water in Yemen is further compounded by the destructive impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events and severe flooding. While flooding in Yemen is not a new phenomenon, the increase in the frequency and severity of the floods has had dire consequences, as flood waters devastate arable land, destroy critical infrastructure and contribute to the mass displacement crisis in the country. Additionally, explosive remnants of war, namely unexploded ordnance and landmines, which have been used in multiple Yemeni provinces, pose significant threats to populations as weather patterns shift and during rainy season. For example, following a period of heavy floods in August 2022, displaced Yemenis in Marib reported that landmines, which had been placed around the al-Juba district by the Houthis in October 2021, washed onto peoples' land, rendering the land unusable and posing an extremely high risk to civilians who would come across them unknowingly.[5]

Climate-driven migration to cities such as Marib, which already hosts more than 1 million internally displaced persons, puts additional pressure on local infrastructure to adequately meet the basic needs of a growing population and challenges the social fabric of host communities, potentially fostering tensions and compromising social cohesion.

Central Sahel

Escalating and recurrent violence perpetrated by armed actors across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger threatens populations with violations that may amount to crimes against humanity and war crimes, while climate change has intensified existing vulnerabilities and humanitarian needs, including loss of livelihoods, displacement and food insecurity, across the region.[6] According to UNHCR, relentless conflict and the worsening effects of the climate crisis have forcibly displaced over 3.3 million people.[7] Furthermore, sites for displaced people are disproportionately concentrated in areas among the most exposed to climate hazards.[8]

The UN has called the Sahel a "hotspot of climate change" due to rising temperatures, droughts and destructive floods.[9] Climate shocks are becoming increasingly common in the Central Sahel, where an estimated 78 percent of the labor force depends on agriculture and herding. Changing weather patterns and climate shocks have forced populations to abandon their fields and livelihoods, putting pressure on host communities and, at times, increasing competition for natural resources. Likewise, the erosion of traditional land use arrangements due to climate stress, or the lack of regulations on land use, have inflamed farmer-herder disputes and sometimes resulted in violent clashes amidst a proliferation of arms throughout the region. Furthermore, populations living in the peripheral areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have been economically and politically marginalized for decades, which has fomented grievances due to the lack of economic opportunities and political inclusion. In central Mali, al-Qaeda linked Katiba Macina, an armed group previously implicated in atrocities, has exploited historical grievances that are exacerbated by climate hazards, such as land rights and social equality for herders, to build local support and recruit fighters.[10] Although climate change is not a direct driver of recruitment into armed

groups, it exacerbates the conditions that heighten the susceptibility of individuals to join these groups, such as protracted marginalization.[11]

Noting the increase in violent extremism, as well as the frequent clashes over resource control between herders and agriculturalists, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has argued that addressing the root causes of the crisis in the Central Sahel requires not only that the transitional governments comply with human rights obligations during counterinsurgency operations, but that they also invest in "redressing environmental threats."[12] While Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger each face distinct challenges, these states share structural vulnerabilities, including poor governance and political marginalization of populations living in peripheral areas, which has limited the development of adaptation and mitigation measures to combat climate change and prevent atrocity crimes, as well as at times the failure or mismanagement of natural resources, including water and land.

Lake Chad Basin – A Focus on Nigeria

The crisis impacting the Lake Chad Basin is the result of a complex combination of factors, including conflicts with myriad non-state armed groups and, in some instances, extreme poverty, lack of infrastructure and environmental degradation, among others, which together have triggered significant displacement.[13]

In Nigeria, recurrent violence between herding and farming communities, rooted in competition over scarce resources, has escalated in the central and north-west states since 2011. Historical grievances and disputes over land and resource allocation are worsened by the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, including soil erosion and growing desertification, which devastate agricultural land and destroy livelihoods. Changing weather patterns have resulted in the loss of grazing land in the north-east, forcing many ethnic Fulani herdsmen, who are mainly Muslim, to migrate southward into areas farmed by predominantly Christian settled communities. Competition over the use of land and other scarce resources has led to widespread inter-communal tensions and, coupled with the circulation of arms in transhumance areas, has triggered violence in the Middle Belt, as well as other parts of Nigeria in recent years.[14]

Armed extremist groups have also been emboldened by climate related insecurities. Boko Haram, for example, has exploited the impact of climate change in north-east Nigeria to recruit fighters and seize territory abandoned by populations forced to migrate due to the impact of the shrinking of Lake Chad.

NATIONAL AND MULTINATIONAL RESPONSES TO CLIMATE-RELATED RISKS

Through concerted efforts by experts across numerous fields and regions, the international community has explored ways to address climate risks and mitigate the inevitable impact on communities.

This section will highlight various frameworks, declarations and tools at the nexus of security, finance and climate change that were raised by the expert panelists during the event on 24 January, as well as other new and existing architectures at the national or multilateral level related to the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change that can be harnessed to prevent the commission of atrocities.

The Responsibility to Prepare and Prevent

In recent years the international community has increasingly acknowledged the impact of climate change on security issues. However, there remains a notable gap in the capacity of multilateral institutions, states and regional organizations to effectively mitigate the complex security threats driven by the rapid pace of climate change, as well as to understand how climate threats heighten atrocity risks.

In response to this gap, the Center for Climate and Security developed the Responsibility to Prepare and Prevent framework.[15] The framework aims to engage various multilateral actors beyond the environmental or natural resource sectors to identify current climate-related risks and common gaps in climate governance and propose strategies to manage these risks and bridge the global governance gap.

The Responsibility to Prepare and Prevent derives from the same concept of sovereignty as responsibility that is reinforced by the Responsibility to Protect principle. It is predicated on the idea that the international community's unprecedented foresight about climate change and the risks associated with it, as well as our collective ability to monitor, model and analyze climate-related conflict, security and violence dynamics, must

compel urgent action and preparation for new and unfolding risks.

The Declaration on Climate, Relief, Recovery and Peace

In 2023 the Declaration on Climate, Relief, Recovery and Peace was introduced at COP28, representing a significant step towards addressing the intertwined challenges of climate change, fragility and conflict. This declaration aims to accelerate climate adaptation, particularly in states threatened or affected by fragility or conflict, or those with severe humanitarian needs, which are often excluded from essential climate funding and mitigation efforts. The Declaration stresses that "an ambitious, immediate scale up of enhanced support is urgently needed in such situations, including financial resources; technical and institutional capacities; local, national, regional partnerships; and data and information, recognizing the importance of complementarity and predictability."[16]

While the declaration underscores the urgency of mainstreaming support to those most vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, it fails to directly address how climate change can amplify atrocity risks in these already vulnerable environments, as well as how ongoing atrocity risks can further complicate the disbursement of climate finance and escalate environmental degradation.

Discussions at COP and collaborative commitments – such as the Declaration on Climate, Relief, Recovery and Peace – present a crucial opportunity to address the root causes of conflict and fragility, which are exacerbated by climate change, however, these actors need to integrate the atrocity prevention lens. By acknowledging the interconnectedness of climate and atrocity risks, states can take meaningful steps toward fostering resilience, mitigating climate threats and preventing atrocities.

Climate Finance

In countries facing heightened fragility, there is often less climate finance available as funders are risk averse. Financing in conflict-affected and fragile states necessitates increased resources to navigate risks and obstacles, such as the risk of violence and weak governance structures and financial management processes. A report by the UN Development Programme details the glaring disparity in funding allocations, finding that, "between 2014 to 2021, extremely fragile states received $2.1 per person in climate finance compared with $161.7 for those in non-fragile circumstances (including Small Island Developing States)."[17]

Amidst these challenges, the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) can serve as a critical tool for advancing climate adaptation efforts in states at risk of, or experiencing, atrocity crimes. The PBF utilizes a well-conceptualized model for risk, which can be analyzed through joint conflict assessments and accounted for in approval processes, thereby ensuring flexible funding. Over the period from 2017 to 2021, the PBF financed at least 74 projects across 33 countries, specifically targeting climate security dynamics and integrating environmental peacebuilding approaches.[18] One such project addressed farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel by working with local communities to produce joint assessments that identified shared risks, laying the groundwork for reconciliation and sustainable peacebuilding efforts.[19]

Likewise, the integration of crisis modifiers into funding mechanisms offers an additional layer of resilience in states vulnerable to extreme weather events. Crisis modifiers are defined as "contingent funds built into development and resilience programmes to flexibly respond to shocks and emerging crises that would otherwise jeopardize the delivery of programme."[20] By allocating a portion of funding to a crisis response, these modifiers increase the capacity of climate finance to adapt rather than terminate funding projects entirely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Multilateral Institutions

1. Improve coordination across sectors, including peacebuilding, development, security, finance, conflict and atrocity prevention to further advance discussions and strategies that account for the intersections between climate change and atrocity prevention.
2. Develop partnerships with local governments and other local actors to identify strategies to combat the effects of climate change, address root causes of conflict and explore paths for climate-resilient, environmentally sustainable livelihoods and new economic opportunities that adapt to changing weather patterns and resource competition.
3. Ensure that Public Development Banks (PDBs), International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and other multilateral development institutions and banks are

sensitized to local, escalatory dynamics that may compound ongoing or future atrocity risks. Specifically:

- Develop strategies aimed at addressing issues of climate-driven poverty, competition over scarce resources and/or effective management of natural resources sensitive to how inequality and scarcity drives competition and inter-group tensions, which could result in violence, human rights abuses and the commission of atrocity crimes.
- Integrate issues of climate, fragility and atrocity prevention into discussions around reform of multilateral development institutions and banks to ensure that these institutions can effectively respond to rapidly evolving situations and climate realities.
- PDBs and IFIs should undertake human rights assessments, particularly with a lens of assessing atrocity risks, to determine if and how their activities may create or worsen existing human rights concerns or atrocity risks, as well as identify mitigation strategies.

4. Provide additional support at the local level, particularly in contexts where a state is absent or not functioning, to ensure affected populations are empowered and their needs and concerns are understood and accounted for within climate change adaptation efforts and programming.

For State Actors

1. Develop national strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change, including by supporting and accelerating regional initiatives aimed at restoring environments affected by drought and desertification.
2. Fully implement the commitments outlined in the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees related to the impacts of climate change on refugees and other migrants.[21] Full implementation could include:
   - Adopting provisions to adapt, prepare for and manage the risk and consequences of climate change in domestic laws and policies addressing internal displacement issues.
   - Applying existing international refugee and human rights law, where relevant, to grant international protection to people displaced across borders in the context of climate impacts and disasters. Consider granting temporary or other rights to individuals to remain in another country on humanitarian grounds, when applicable, in situations where people displaced across borders are not eligible for refugee status.[22]
3. Support progress toward a more flexible international migration and displacement system to ensure increased mobility for populations fleeing conflict, atrocities and climate hazards, and provide support to receiving communities to prevent the escalation of tensions between migrants and those hosting migrant populations.
4. During conflict, refrain from weaponizing humanitarian resources and immediately cease all indiscriminate and direct attacks on civilians and civilian objects, including critical infrastructure and other resources indispensable to livelihoods, namely those which further exacerbate climate-related atrocity risks and vulnerabilities.
5. Review and, if necessary, strengthen domestic legislative and regulatory frameworks to improve local capacity to adapt to the effects of climate change, mitigate water management issues and rehabilitate existing infrastructure, particularly in countries where infrastructure has been damaged or destroyed due to conflict.
   - Address and resolve any social, legal or economic barriers that hamper the meaningful participation of marginalized communities, who often face the disproportionate impacts of climate change and conflict, through reforms that ensure greater inclusivity, equity and representation of affected populations in planning, decision-making and implementation processes.
6. Enact policies to strengthen community-level natural resource management and provide increased resources to these institutions to effectively manage local resource competition and mitigate conflict. Specifically:
   - Implement land conflict mediation programs that are sensitive to the drivers of atrocities to mitigate tensions between communities that arise from disputes over resource scarcity.[23]
   - Support the establishment of pastoral development policies that recognize the land use rights of traditional institutions and actors and clearly articulate customary land administration roles and responsibilities, notably for the establishment of grazing and farming lands. [24]
   - Improve measurement and monitoring of social resilience relating to poverty, inequality, health, education and food security to enhance the capacity to identify groups vulnerable to atrocities at the local level.[25]

For Donors

1. Consider how to best incorporate conflict-sensitive approaches across a funding project cycle to help ensure climate action and finance avoid aggravating new or existing grievances, respects the human rights of all people affected and reinforces social cohesion.[26]
2. Commit to breaking down internal and bureaucratic barriers to investment in fragile and conflict-affected states and garner increased support for investment in climate adaption projects in at-risk countries.[27]
3. Integrate operational flexibility into guidelines and protocols surrounding funding in states at risk of or experiencing atrocity crimes to ensure projects are adaptive to the highly dynamic nature of climate change, conflict and atrocities.
4. Provide direct and more flexible funding mechanisms by investing in local banks and grassroots civil society organizations which can mitigate and respond to risks in contexts where climate vulnerability and atrocity risks are mutually reinforcing, allowing for investments in contexts in which financers may consider "uninvestable," such as in areas with large refugee populations.[28]

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