



## Roundtable report

# People's experience of conflict, climate risk and resilience

Geneva roundtable, 10 October 2019

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### About

This outcome paper was produced in support of the global series of policy-making roundtables and highlights the key areas of debate which occurred during discussions in Geneva on 10 October 2019. **The views represented in this paper are those of the roundtable participants and do not necessarily represent the views of the authors or their agencies.**

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## Introduction

In January 2019, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre and ODI launched a series of seven regional policy-making roundtables on ‘People’s experience of conflict, climate risk and resilience’. The roundtables took place over the course of 2019 and were supported by various regional partners, national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, the Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) programme, and Partners for Resilience.

The roundtables were supported by a background paper – *Double vulnerability: the intersection of climate and conflict risk* – which summarises the state of knowledge on the intersection of climate, conflict and resilience.<sup>1</sup>

This series of roundtables provided a neutral, non-political space for discussing the interaction between climate and conflict. The purpose of the series was to foreground the voices and experiences of people directly affected by conflict and climate risk, in order to inform operational decisions and global policy.

The primary objectives of the series were: 1) to ground international discussions on conflict and climate risk by listening to people’s lived experience; 2) to foreground humanitarian perspectives on the climate and conflict nexus; 3) to explore how climate finance can increase people’s adaptation and resilience to the double vulnerability caused by conflict and climate risks; and 4) to gain insights from key stakeholders in order to develop the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement’s knowledge of the conflict-climate nexus and to develop its networks and policies in this regard.

The seventh and final roundtable in the series was held in October 2019 in Geneva, Switzerland. It brought together 32 experts from 23 institutions to discuss five key themes arising from the intersection of climate and conflict: 1) people’s vulnerability to climate change and extreme-weather events in contexts affected by fragility and conflict; 2) the relationship

between climate and some of the known drivers of conflict; 3) barriers to climate finance; 4) security-centred perspectives in current discussions on climate and conflict; and 5) the implications of climate change and conflict for humanitarian systems.

## Theme 1: People living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

Participants drew attention to the fact that climate risks compounded existing risks and vulnerabilities, which were particularly acute in conflict-affected and fragile settings. Hence, the people most vulnerable to climate change may not always be in areas where exposure to hazards is the greatest, but in places where capacities – individual and institutional – to absorb and adapt to shocks are the lowest. Participants also pointed out the necessity of having a better grasp of the interplay between climate, conflict and displacement, and of the applicability and implementation of laws. The combination of climate risks and armed conflict may lead to displacement. Some experts noted that we must also develop our understanding of tipping points, and of the ways in which culture, tradition and humanitarian assistance influenced people’s decision to remain where they were or leave. Another question was raised on the extent to which helping people to stay where they were – by building their resilience to shocks – could create long-term problems. The question arose out of a concern that provision of such help might lead to people staying longer than they should in dangerously degraded environments. This led to a discussion about the importance of informing communities of current and future risks, in order to help them take informed decisions.

Participants stressed that people must never be considered in detachment from their environment. They also said that learning from people living in situations of conflict and affected by climate risk was essential: otherwise it would be impossible to design adequate responses or solutions that were culturally acceptable. The Marshall Islands were cited as

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1 See [www.odi.org/publications/11295-double-vulnerability-humanitarian-implications-intersecting-climate-and-conflict-risk](http://www.odi.org/publications/11295-double-vulnerability-humanitarian-implications-intersecting-climate-and-conflict-risk).

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an example: there, consultations were carried out at the national level on the consequences of climate risks and shocks; participants brought this up to highlight the importance and the feasibility of engaging with communities in a meaningful manner. It was also noted that nurturing dialogue between communities affected was essential for ensuring a positive impact. Some participants pointed out that while adaptive measures might benefit some people, they might also have adverse consequences for others. Adaptation might therefore entail having to arbitrate between some people's needs and other people's vulnerabilities.

## **Theme 2: Climate and the known drivers of conflict**

There was general agreement on how climate change compounded the effects of the known drivers of conflict. Participants felt that attention must be paid to risks resulting from transitions, as changes in migration patterns or employment trends could exacerbate tensions. Increased migration – internal and/or cross-border – was thought to lead to increased urbanisation and greater strain on urban public utilities. Participants also took the view that transition risks and competition over access to such utilities helped create a sense of social injustice and perhaps led to radicalisation as well, especially among young people. Participants acknowledged that the effects of climate change manifested themselves differently in different places; humanitarian organisations will therefore have to enhance their situational analyses and scenario-building capacities in order to develop suitable responses to emerging protection and/or adaptation needs.

Participants agreed that, to address such interconnected risks, humanitarian organisations must develop integrated, inclusive and community-based responses that involved humanitarian, development and peace actors. They were also of the opinion that humanitarian organisations would have to focus on localising their activities and strengthening the capacities of local actors, regardless of current challenges in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.

## **Theme 3: Access to climate finance**

Participants pointed out that fragile and conflict-affected states faced significant obstacles in obtaining climate finance, and that when such funds did become available they were sometimes held in capital cities and not disbursed elsewhere. Several obstacles were identified, ranging from donors' aversion to risk to institutional challenges in the countries concerned. It was noted that states with weak institutions might struggle to complete the procedures necessary to obtain climate funds and might also not be able to meet basic standards for minimising the risk of project failure. The fact that funding tended to be channelled through state structures, and might not be provided directly to civil society or communities, was identified as a major obstacle in those instances when governments were weak or had lost control over parts of their territory. Participants also mentioned the difficulty of directly attributing needs to climate risks in conflict-affected areas: this, they said, was yet another obstacle.

Ways to improve access to climate finance for conflict-affected countries and communities were discussed. Participants suggested that climate finance could be included in an integrated package to address needs in conflict settings. They also recommended that humanitarian impact bonds be used to absorb risks about which development actors or climate donors were wary. They wondered whether it might be in the best political interests of donor countries to invest in climate change adaptation and resilience building in conflict areas, and suggested that a stronger narrative on the current finance challenges should be developed. Finally, participants were emphatically of the view that waiting for conflicts to end before supporting climate adaptation was not an option, as conflicts could last for decades.

## **Theme 4: Security-centred perspectives**

As in the other roundtables, participants noted at the outset that the current debate surrounding climate and conflict was split into two schools of thought – one giving

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precedence to ‘hard’ security and the other to ‘soft’ security. Participants emphasised the necessity of ensuring that ‘soft’ security was also properly considered during discussions. Policies and responses should therefore be driven by concern for human security and not only by state security. It was also noted that the security sector – whose influence in areas such as civil security could provide an important catalyst for strengthening climate action – should not be ignored.

Participants agreed that climate-and-conflict remained a highly politicised issue at both the national and the international level. They acknowledged that even though space was beginning to open up for discussions, the topic was still treated gingerly by some United Nations (UN) member states, owing to their concern that the issue of climate change could be used to justify intervention by external forces, in violation of the principle of state sovereignty. One participant cited the recent UN Climate Action Summit, at which issues related to climate and security were deliberately not discussed because of the general feeling that these were highly politicised matters. Another example was given, this time of the way these perceptions operated at the national level: an international development organisation working in one country had been discouraged from using language suggesting that climate change could cause tensions and insecurity, as this could attract the attention of state security forces.

Participants felt that humanitarian actors had an important role to play in overcoming these barriers: first, because these actors were crucial for ensuring that the ‘human face’ of the consequences of climate change were at the forefront of discussions surrounding climate and conflict; and second, because they could help to de-politicise the issue by providing and protecting a de-politicised space for these discussions. Participants thought that it was critical to make the fullest use of these natural advantages in forums such as the Group of Friends on Climate and Security.

## Theme 5: Implications for the humanitarian system

Participants noted that climate change would exacerbate humanitarian needs in conflict-affected communities. They also said that it would have a direct impact on the humanitarian sector, as humanitarian financing may be redirected and extreme-weather events may disrupt humanitarian operations and supply chains. The need for more data and science-driven assessments of risks, resilience and vulnerabilities was reiterated throughout the discussions. Data sources should be chosen carefully and the information collected, properly understood: a number of participants stressed these points. Collection and analysis of data was identified as an area in which organisations could collaborate effectively. Participants hoped that the evidence collected by humanitarian organisations would lead them to strengthen disaster-prevention and disaster-preparedness efforts.

Some participants wondered about the ability of humanitarian organisations to ‘build resilience’, because, they said, building the resilience of societies requires not only technical capacity but also political will. The importance of focusing on emergencies, and on long-term solutions that build on local knowledge, was also emphasized – along with the importance of supporting existing coping mechanisms. Finally, the humanitarian sector was urged to contribute to mitigating climate change by limiting its carbon footprint. Some participants insisted on the importance of carbon neutrality. Others questioned its feasibility, pointing out that it would require humanitarian organisations to completely rethink the way they operate.

## Conclusions and next steps

The Geneva roundtable on conflict, climate risk, and resilience was the last of a series of seven. As in previous discussions, participants drew attention to the fact that for people enduring the consequences of armed conflict, climate risks added another layer of stress and could create new vulnerabilities, while exacerbating existing ones. This led to discussions about the importance of ensuring that humanitarian

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approaches and systems were fit for purpose and adapted to the needs of the most vulnerable, notably by incorporating a climate-related perspective and by being in tune with local realities. Participants identified various means that were critical for strengthening humanitarian responses: these ranged from expanding institutional knowledge to building institutional capacities. Collaboration across organisations and sectors – to collect data and conduct research on the consequences of climate change in situations of conflict and on the interaction between climate risks, conflict and other violence, and resilience in specific locations – was also promoted.

Using the information collected and the understanding acquired to develop humanitarian approaches that helped people adapt to growing climate risks in the short and longer-term – and translating this understanding into concrete programming decisions – were deemed critical. The importance of not attributing all environmental problems to climate change was emphasised, along with the importance of reinforcing sustainable and equitable management of resources and the environment within and

across borders, particularly in resource-scarce environments. As in previous roundtables, the necessity of removing obstacles to stronger climate action in situations of conflict – notably by addressing gaps in climate finance – was discussed. Participants were emphatic about the importance of ensuring that people already enduring conflict are not left to cope with a changing climate by themselves because of the risks attached to working in conflict-affected environments.

#### **About the roundtable series**

The first roundtable in this series was held in January 2019 in Nairobi, and it explored these themes from the Greater Horn of Africa perspective. The second roundtable was held in Abidjan in April 2019, with a focus on the West African perspective. A third took place in The Hague in May 2019, a fourth in Amman in June 2019, and further roundtables were held in Manila and Washington DC. The Geneva roundtable was the final in the series.



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