Battling the Elements:

The security threat of climate change

An IISD Commentary

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Commentary

The success or failure of COP 15 will affect us all. Whether or not we are successful in stabilizing climate change will have momentous consequences for our environment. But addressing climate change is about more than Arctic ice and biodiversity. It is becoming increasingly clear that action on our emissions now may shape our security in the future.

We are beginning to realize that the speed and scope of climate change—the way it threatens to affect where we can live, where we can grow food and where we can find water—could undermine the economic and political stability of large parts of the world in the coming years. In so doing, climate change could become a threat multiplier that makes existing problems such as water scarcity and food insecurity more complex and intractable. For the past few years, the International Institute for Sustainable Development has been researching these linkages, and we see four main dimensions to the challenge.

First, reduced water supply and growing demand will in some places lead to increasing competition among different sectors of society, different communities and different countries. Already, one-third of all people in Africa live in drought-prone regions. Using a range of models, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that between 350 million and 600 million more people in Africa will be at risk of increased water stress by the middle of the century. Water can clearly be a cause of conflict at a local level, particularly where no formal rules or agreements on the use of water have been agreed on. Under certain conditions, such as poor governance and existing ethnic divisions, these stresses may turn violent.

Second, reductions in crop yields and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns around the world may lead to falling agricultural production and higher prices for food, which could trigger regional food crises. This would lead to greater food insecurity, causing political instability, increasing the stakes for control over productive agricultural land and further undermining the economic performance of weak and unstable states.

Third, changes in sea level, increased natural disasters and the reduced viability of agricultural land may cause large-scale, destabilizing population movements. Migration itself is not inherently problematic and indeed can be an important way of adapting to climate change. But migration has been linked to violent conflict in both transit and destination countries, and large-scale population displacement has already been recognized by the UN Security Council as a threat to international peace and stability.

The final dimension is that the cumulative impacts of all these factors, combined with more frequent natural disasters and increases in diseases such as malaria, threaten to increase poverty and overwhelm the capacity of governments to meet the basic needs of their people. Fundamentally this could mean more fragile and failed states.

In summary, climate change presents very real development challenges, which under certain circumstances may well contribute to the emergence, spread and longevity of conflict. However, violent conflict as a result of climate change is not inevitable. There are significant variations in climate predictions and vulnerabilities among and within continents, and the risk of conflict varies accordingly. Also, we should not assume that people will automatically fight when conditions get difficult.

If we want to work toward an end to conflict in Africa, the Middle East, and other regions marked by tragic legacies of conflict and faced with future climates that are hotter, drier and less predictable, then we need to address these issues. These threats are just over the horizon; being aware of them puts us in a better position to prevent them.

This is a shared challenge, beyond the capacity any one country to tackle on its own. The imperative to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and manage the impacts of climate change illustrates, in the starkest manner, our global interdependence. Thankfully there is room for intervention and prevention—we have the opportunity to avoid dangerous climate change in the first place, adapt to its impacts, and better use and conserve our scarce resources. We can harness the best available technology to generate clean energy and grow enough food to feed the world's population.

It may even be that the shared challenge of climate change could encourage new cooperation between hostile countries. As Margaret Beckett, former foreign secretary of the United Kingdom, once memorably said, "Climate change can bring us together, if we have the wisdom to prevent it from driving us apart."