

Environmental Justice and Climate Change – Priorities for Copenhagen 2009 Humanitarian Response, Conflict-Sensitivity and Climate Change

The Issue

Climate change is accelerating the adverse impacts of environmental degradation leading to an increase in climate-related natural disasters and sometimes exacerbating violent conflicts. Countries party to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will be meeting in Copenhagen in December 2009 to establish legally-binding commitments to address climate change. In Copenhagen, climate change adaptation funds, mechanisms, and agreements must consider conflict sensitivity and include provisions to fund humanitarian response activities.

Key Messages

1. Climate change is increasing the intensity and frequency of humanitarian disasters such as floods, droughts, and cyclones. These disasters are not just “natural” or environmental events, they are human disasters. Poverty, political marginalization, and economic vulnerability influence not only the extent to which environmental hazards cause devastation, such as the loss of lives and livelihoods, displacement, and disease, but the ability to cope when confronted with crisis. Climate justice is social justice.
2. The humanitarian community must be prepared to prevent and respond to increased disasters. Disaster prevention and preparedness is a critical component of responding to climate change by increasing the resilience of vulnerable communities to cope with crisis before it strikes. Financing for climate change adaptation must include funds for disaster risk reduction (DRR) to minimize the human impact of climate change.
3. Climate change is an additional hurdle for conflict-affected states with weak governance capacity. In countries experiencing conflict, particularly over natural resources, climate change can further strain state capacity to prevent environmental degradation and manage natural resources equitably. The ability of vulnerable women and men to cope with the harmful impacts of climate change, in addition to conflict, also compromises the resilience of communities. The dual challenge of conflict and climate change requires that conflict-sensitivity and peace-building approaches be integrated into climate change adaptation strategies, funds, and mechanisms.

Background

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 70 percent of disasters are now climate-related. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies estimates that 250 million people annually are affected by “natural” disasters. Most of these disasters (droughts, floods and cyclones) are climate-related. The close to 80 percent of the world’s population that lives in the developing world faces more than 90 percent of disasters according to the United Nations Environment Program. The OCHA reported that approximately 20 million people, in 2008, were displaced by sudden-onset, climate-related disasters such as floods, cyclones, and storms.

Least Developed Countries in sub-Saharan Africa and south and south-east Asia are confronted with the simultaneous challenges of poverty, conflict, and humanitarian crisis. Women, children, the elderly, the disabled, and the politically and socio-economically marginalized are most vulnerable to the harsh impacts of climate change. Climate change is exposing the face of injustice, poverty, and marginalization around the world.

Humanitarian response has traditionally focused on saving lives, with the severity of disaster measured in the numbers of dead, injured, displaced, diseased, and the livelihoods lost. Decades of experience in humanitarianism has demonstrated that responding to disasters is not enough – preventing disaster and being prepared when disasters strike is equally important. Humanitarian agencies have been placing greater emphasis on disaster risk reduction (DRR) focusing on reducing human vulnerability to hazards, like droughts, floods and cyclones, by increasing the resilience of communities.

Humanitarian organizations are calling on environmental groups and climate change negotiators to ensure financing and frameworks for climate change adaptation explicitly include funding for humanitarian response and disaster risk reduction. Humanitarian organizations are also working to ensure that their policies and programs include specific consideration of environmental impacts, including climate change.

Conflict-affected states especially Least Developed Countries and those in sub-Saharan Africa and south and south-east Asia will face the triple challenges of poverty, conflict, and climate hazards. In just one year, a country in these regions could face two or three types of hazards such as floods, drought, and cyclones. These states are likely to be too overstretched in their institutional capacity to adapt quickly and effectively to climate change.

The resilience of vulnerable communities in conflict-affected states can also come under more pressure because of the degradation of needed environmental resources, such as freshwater supplies, agricultural land, forests, and fisheries. In states with weak governance, conflict and social tensions can escalate or be compounded by the impacts of climate change disasters and environmental degradation.

In conflict-prone fragile states, climate change adaptation strategies should consider the additional element of conflict-sensitivity. Adaptation strategies must not, inadvertently, contribute to social tensions, instability and conflict. Funding for climate change adaptation should ensure that programs explicitly consider conflict dynamics and peace-building capacities of the state and local communities.

Recommendations

1. In fragile states, climate change adaptation should be integrated into policy frameworks for poverty reduction and peace-building, including in National Adaptation Plans of Actions and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers.
2. Adaptation policy frameworks at international, national, and local levels should include conflict-sensitive analysis and integrate disaster risk reduction goals as outlined in the “Hyogo Framework for Action: Building the Resilience of Nations and Communities to Disasters”, agreed by 168 Governments in Kobe, Hyogo, Japan in 2005.
3. Peace-building and early recovery policies and programs should consider climate change impacts on vulnerable women and men, and work to strengthen the adaptive capacities of states and local communities.
4. Humanitarian, development, and climate change communities must work together to ensure a consistent approach in climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.