# A Climate of Conflict:
# Considerations for Climate Adaptation in Fragile States

**Wednesday, June 10, 2009**
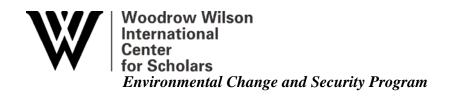Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars

*Edited Transcript—Dan Smith*

Thank you, Geoff, for a nice, warm welcome. And thank you, everybody, for being here. I think that one of the most interesting things about the Environment Conflict and Security Program here has been that it's tried to make links between subjects which are quite often kept distinctly separate. And one of the challenges, I think, of the moment is to understand that what we're talking about as we go into and out of the Copenhagen Summit in December this year, the climate summit that is to produce a new post-Kyoto treaty about how the world responds to global warming.

What we're talking about is not just about the environment in some drawer over there, and it's not just about development in some drawer over here, and it's not just about conflict in some drawer down there, it's not just about governance and constitutional rule and democracy and transparency and accountability. It's about all of these things together, and that's what makes it difficult sometimes to get to grips with. And I think that in places where the debate around some of these issues has been frozen for a period of time, this now becomes intellectually and policy-wise a particularly exciting moment for opening up a whole lot of these issues and moving forward on them on the basis of the connections and the interactions between them.

Geoff mentioned that International Alert, which is the organization that I have the honor to lead, is an international peacebuilding organization. We have programs and activities in about 22-23 countries and territories around the world, and we have offices in, I think, 14 of those countries. We're active primarily in trying to generate the social energies and the social cohesion that can underwrite peace processes in conflict-affected countries and different places. We also have a policy arm that does research and does advocacy, and we do this mainly not on specific countries but on cross-cutting issues, on questions of gender, the role of the private sector, community security, effectiveness of aid delivery, what good governance means, and so on.

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And it was just one of those moments:  A group of us were sort of sitting around thinking about big issues, as one does sometimes at the end of a working day, and we started talking about climate change.  And because of the background that I share with Geoff, where I got to know Geoff first because of my background in peace research, I said, "Well, you know, what's being done about the conflict dynamics, the conflict implications of climate change?"
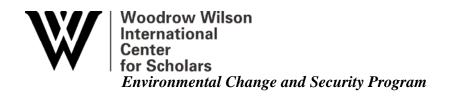
And there was this sort of anxious silence around the room.  So then we went to the sophisticated research tool that we all use when in doubt, Google, and, you know, there were precious few hits.  There really were.  You know, Google brings up anything—brings up millions of things which are only, sort of, half a percentage point relevant to the words which you put into the search in the first place, and really this was not an impressive moment for Google.  It didn't find much about climate and conflict that day when we pressed the button to find out.

And to me, it seems relatively obvious.  And so we did some work on it: We produced some ideas, we did some media briefings. And after the media briefings we realized, "Oh, God, we'd better do a little piece of solid research or at least something that looks like solid research so that we've got a report to wave, so that when we go along and act smart in different places, with any difficult question we can say, 'Well, you know, you can read this and find,' and we're fine."  So then we went into it more systematically, and we produced this report.

Now, it's an odd thing about the climate change debate, the global warming debate.  Over several years, up until the middle of this decade, I think that maybe because there was so much argument going on about the basic science, maybe because it was difficult even to get to first base in the argument and find consensus there, that in a funny way (although the reason, of course, why we're all worried and concerned about global warming is because of the impact on nature and on humans) actually not a lot was being done to explore what the nature of the human impact really is.  And that's essentially what this report and this work is about.

I want to hurdle over some points and more or less take them for granted.  Climate change is happening.  We are seeing the consequences unfolding now.  The pattern, the timing of monsoons in Nepal has changed dramatically.  The pattern of typhoons in the Philippines has changed.  The tropical glaciers are melting.  Those in the Andes will be gone; at the altitude of about 5,000 meters, they'll be gone by 2015.  There's photographic evidence that shows

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the retreat of the glaciers. I don't want to be getting into those kinds of arguments right now. What I want to be saying is that given that climate change is unfolding, we need then to look in a systematic and an inventive or creative way at what the human impact is, try to understand that, and think about what to do about it.

There is, of course, as we all know, a line of thought that has jumped too rapidly to the conclusion, which has gone straight to the punch line before telling the joke properly, and just says, "Climate change will cause conflict."

I've been researching peace and conflict for a good proportion of my adult life, and I'm too shy to say how long, how many years that really is. But it's a long time. I don't know of an armed conflict that has got a single cause, right? Armed conflicts are produced by the interaction of many different what we nerdy political scientists like to call variables, produced by the interaction of the economy, ethnic difference, the burden of history—such as the consequences of colonialism or the previous war, the way a country is run, who's in government, who's not part of government; who's included, who's excluded. All of these variables interact together to produce armed conflicts, and our argument is simply that climate change adds another major variable into that mix.

Some people like to think of this as being, in some cases, the last but an extremely heavy straw that breaks the camel's back. Some people use the vocabulary of "It's a threat multiplier." That's to say, you've got threats, you've got problems; climate change multiplies them. It turns up the volume of those problems. It doesn't really matter much how you think about it or how you express it, as long as you understand this important point about the interaction of the consequences of climate change with other features of the social, economic, political reality of a given country.

Think of a low-lying country, which could well be vulnerable to extreme weather events and sea-level rise. Just pin that thought in your mind. Try to think of a real country, which is very low-lying and might be vulnerable to sea-level rise and to the extreme weather events. If it's the Netherlands, you think they'll look after themselves pretty successfully. If it's Bangladesh, you think that although they have a lot of initiative and enterprise, they're going to need a lot of international assistance in order to be able to survive and adapt and cope with climate change. The difference between Netherlands and Bangladesh is not the natural consequences which they're facing, the difference is the difference between Netherlands and Bangladesh, right? The difference between a wealthy country with stable government that's

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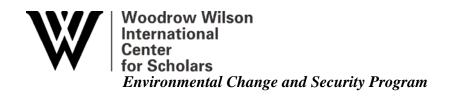environmental change & security program

transparent and accountable to the people, and a country like Bangladesh, which is poor, which has got democracy but it's a very iffy democracy—it's really still in a state of transition—and which does not itself have the resources to handle those problems. So Bangladesh may be a place where we might think that there could be great social pressure as a consequence of climate change. The Netherlands we would probably think that there would not be. And just thinking about those two simple examples takes one a long way towards thinking about what the problem is and where solutions might lie.

Now the variables through which the impact is going to be felt: the key one is water. When thinking about climate change, it's water. Is anybody in the audience of Irish extraction? I apologize. There's a law, which in British English is known as Murphy's Law—that's why I apologize—"What can go wrong will go wrong." Murphy's Law of climate change is that if you live in an area which has too little water you're going to have less, and if you live in a region where you get too much water, for example, in the form of floods and extreme weather events and rainstorms, you're going to have more. It doesn't matter what your current water-related problem is, it's going to be worse: Murphy's Law of climate change. That's going to affect food, food supply, food security. It's going to affect livelihoods, livelihood security. It's going to affect, in a way, the habitability of the human habitat in very many places around the world and in different ways.

In the northeast part of South Asia, the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system is partially dependent on monsoon rains and partially dependent on glacial runoff, and both those sources of supply for the river system are affected by climate change. Four hundred million people depend upon that river system for their daily needs, for industry and agriculture. So a very large number of people's livelihoods are going to be affected if water management in the Ganges-Brahmaputra area is not adequate to the task of facing up to the challenges of climate change.

Peru: something like 70 percent or more of the Peruvian population is dependent for their water on glacial runoff, and that's going. So first of all there's going to be a surplus of water, and then there's going to be a terrible deficit of water for those 70 percent of people. How water management is done will be crucial for deciding what kind of problems Peruvian society is facing in the very foreseeable future. As I said earlier on, the glaciers will essentially be gone by 2015.

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When the human habitat becomes less viable, as resources get narrower and scarcer, I think one looks for two major kinds of response, or two major risks in the response. One is that there will be conflict over those more scarce resources, and the other one is, whether in part because of the conflict or in order to evade it, people will move.

There are a lot of factoids and guesstimates being thrown around about how many people will migrate under the pressure of climate change, and I don't want to add to those. There are, at the moment, about 200 million people living outside the country of their birth. That's about three percent of the world population. If you think what I just said about the Ganges-Brahmaputra river system, that's 400 million people who are dependent upon it. It is reasonable to think that there is going to be migration on a scale that we haven't really previously experienced in consequence of climate change if water management fails.

And when people migrate, when they move—of course sometimes they move because of conflict or to avoid it, as well as moving because they see better opportunities elsewhere—very often unwittingly they become the vector of conflict themselves. I think most people who've been looking at this in the climate change context would more or less agree with the proposition that most of this migration is not going to be from the poor world to the rich world. It's either going to be migration within countries—within India, within Egypt, within Bangladesh—or it's going to be migration within the region, across the border but to neighboring countries. And whether it's internal migration or just cross-border migration, then a lot of that migration is going to be people moving from areas which are no longer viable to areas which are barely viable—indeed, where their arrival threatens the viability of the area into which they are moving. And then you simply start to find yourself replaying the original conflict scenario from the point of origin to the point of destination, which becomes a new point of origin of migration, and on it moves.

When we looked at this issue in this report, we thought that these kinds of problems were going to be too much for a number of countries, and that there would probably be conflicts which those governments and the local institutions, and the informal modes of handling conflicts as well as the formal modes, would be unable to manage, and that some of these conflicts would turn violent, and that some of them would transform, translate into open armed conflict, into warfare. And we thought that that risk, at its most serious of levels, we could identify it in 46 countries. And the combined population of those 46 countries at the time that we were doing the research was 2.7 billion people. The number is so high because

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it includes India.

And it doesn't mean to say that India would be engulfed by civil war. You need to understand something about developing countries, including large ones, and about armed conflict in the modern age in order to really understand what I'm saying, and to get it back a little bit, down, under control, and in its perspective. And 46 countries and 2.7 billion people: you freeze in front of that. But it's 46 countries in which 2.7 billion people are living.
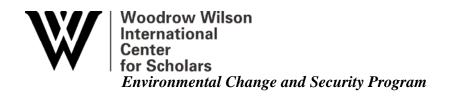
I lived in a country where was a civil war going on. That civil war was going on for 25 years, and mainly I couldn't see it. I remember seeing it one Christmas when shops in London were being closed because of IRA bomb threats, and I remember not seeing it but feeling it come very close to me about 1989 or 1990, when my wife and daughter passed through Victoria Station in London about an hour before an unwarned bomb exploded. But the war in Northern Ireland went on for 25 years without most people in Britain having any close experience of it.

I had friends who lived in Pristina, in Kosovo, while the civil war was going on—before the NATO bombing, but while the civil war was going on. They said the same thing was true there: you could live an ordinary life in Pristina without knowing that only—or without seeing that only—about 30 miles away a civil war was raging. So India, which is an extremely large country, already has many areas, essentially of anarchy and chaos, and what you could call armed conflict: the Naxalites, Nagaland, the Northeast, Bihar, the other areas. And it's that kind of conflict that one is talking about when talking about these 46 countries, home to 2.7 billion people.

We also thought that these kinds of problems would be enough to add to other problems and threaten the political stability of another 56 countries with a combined population of 1.2 billion people. And one of the things I think that struck people about this report was that we were dumb enough to actually list the countries, so that you can check out and see what you think. Sometimes these figures are thrown around, and you don't get a chance to see the basis of the calculation. But we list the countries, and we're talking about risk. We're not talking about prediction.

Now, that's the scenario of risk that we need to be thinking about. How do we manage? How do we respond to that? In 2007, when we were doing this, the international community

had an answer. It said, "Well, you've got to cut emissions, head for a low-carbon economy, and then, you know, global warming will slow down and stop, and things will be okay," and in a footnote at the bottom you could often find, "Adaptation will be required in the meantime."

What is really meant is that however good the Copenhagen agreement is, however wonderful its provisions are, however ambitious, and however magnificently it is implemented with total consistency and determination across the next two or three decades, during those two or three decades many, many countries will bear the brunt of the effects of climate change, and it is an iron law of these things that, of course, the poorest will bear the heaviest burden, and the poorest of the poor will bear an even heavier one.

That's why talking about climate change means one must be talking about development, and my arguments about conflict risk explain why, talking about climate change, one must also be talking about conflict and peace. It seems to me that the response which we need to take towards this—and Shruti is going to go into some details of this and try to unpack the term a little bit—but it's a combination of adaptation and peacebuilding. I want to say a little bit about the two, and then hand over to Shruti.

When people talk about adaptation, adapting to climate change—first of all, up until a couple of years ago I think, as I said, adaptation was a footnote, and a lot of the environmental NGOs and activists didn't want you to talk about adaptation very much. If you talk about adaptation, which is about coping with climate change, that sounds like too much of offering an alibi to rich, northern governments: "You don't have to do anything about climate change. Give the poor people some money, and they can cope with climate change. And meanwhile carry on driving your SUVs and flying everywhere you feel like." I think now there's a better and a more balanced view. However much we mitigate, however quickly we get onto a low-carbon pathway, there is still a problem there, and we've got to address that problem properly. And that problem is about coping.

There's a lot of discussion—Shruti will touch on it in her remarks—about the scale of adaptation, about the mechanisms for adaptation. There also needs to be more discussion than I see at the moment about the reality, the substance of adaptation. If adaptation, if coping with climate change is expressed as some barrages on the river, some sandbags, build the Dutch dykes higher, do whatever it is you need to do to the levees which should be around New Orleans, watch out for the North Sea surge if you're in Britain, better cyclone

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warning if you're Bangladesh, plus more floating farms and all of the other extraordinarily creative things that they've done—if it's seen purely in technical measures, we've got it wrong.

Adaptation is a social process that people need to buy into. People in their communities and villages and streets, in their houses, in their personal lives as well, as well as in who they vote for, need to understand what adaptation is about, why they need to do it, and then they will go along with it. If they do not understand about it, if the information campaigns which are carried out are dismissive, or are over-technical, or do not give room for people to ask questions and express their doubts, people won't buy into it and then it won't happen. It will be an alien imposition coming down on people, and that doesn't matter whether you think of it as being something that's imposed by the international community or by the national government. In the communities and in the villages it will feel alien, and people won't go along with it. So adaptation will only work if it is a bottom-up process as well as needing a top-down strategy and international funding.

I could almost withdraw the word adaptation from the sentences that I just spoke, replace it with peacebuilding, and make exactly the same point with exactly the same confidence and certainty and urgency. If peacebuilding is seen as being something that governments do for people it won't work. Where peace agreements go wrong, it's because the government and whoever—another government or the parties, the rebels—sign an agreement between themselves, but where they go wrong, it's because you don't get the social energy and the social basis coming in behind. And that social basis is, again, made up of people understanding what is happening, buying into it.

Rwanda is the toughest example to take because of the genocide. One hundred and twenty thousand people were put in prison for the genocide, and many of them are now being released. They've got to go live somewhere. They're going back to their villages. They're going back to where they did the murder, right? There's a film called "My Neighbor, My Murderer." We're working with some microfinancing projects in Rwanda. One of the women that we're working with is extraordinary. She decided to go into partnership with the man who killed her husband. Now that sort of triumph of the human over the abominable, that triumph of reconciliation seems to me to be part of what peacebuilding is about. You can't dictate that from government. You can't force that by giving grants or by giving money. It comes through from the bottom.

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So both peacebuilding and adaptation are these bottom-up processes which go hand-in-hand, and that was the the last conclusion of our report: that where you have a double threat of conflict and the burden of climate change, you actually have a unified solution because a community or a society which can recover from violent conflict, you can imagine that society being able to have the kind of discussions and conversations and participation which is needed for successful adaptation.

nd similarly, a society which can adapt so it becomes resilient to climate change, you can imagine that having the capacity to be able to handle and resolve conflicts as they arise. So being resilient against conflict and resilient against climate change are essentially the same thing. So, oddly enough, you look at the coming together of these threats of climate change and conflict, and the burden that they will place on people, and the obstacles they will place in the way of development; you look at those two problems for long enough, and you find grounds for optimism and for realizing that there are things that can be done and indeed will be done.

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