

Environmental Security and the Global Fragility Act

To inform the implementation of the Global Fragility Act, the Wilson Center's Environmental Change & Security Program hosted a roundtable discussion in August 2020 for U.S. Government Representatives on the connections between environmental security and fragility. This summary document distills the key takeaways, recommendations, and illustrative case studies shared in the meeting.

Key Takeaways

Takeaway 1: Issues related to the environment directly shape the drivers of fragility, as expressed in indices like the Fragile States Index. Even though environmental security issues are nominally included (i.e., under demographics), they show up more implicitly throughout the index, which is not always recognized in analyses of state fragility and recommended responses.

Takeaway 2: Conflict and fragility are not necessarily the same. Fragility increases when stresses exceed the ability of institutions to respond. Rapid onset environmental change can overwhelm existing vulnerabilities and contribute to increased fragility and conflict. Conflict often occurs when perceived inequalities are not addressed. In both cases, governance plays a crucial role in preventing negative outcomes.

Takeaway 3: Natural resource management and environmental issues should be included in the development of responses to fragility and conflict for the following reasons:

- Effective management of natural resources can play a critical role in restoring basic livelihoods and providing opportunities for economic growth.
- Restoring access to basic services, including access to clean and safe drinking water, sanitation, energy, and healthcare is essential to public health, state legitimacy, and livelihoods, all of which are necessary components of increased stability.
- Environmental issues can provide the means to facilitate broader and sustainable peace by strengthening social cohesion and building trust, embedding basic practices of conflict resolution by convening stakeholders, and providing a critical entry point to bringing conflicting parties together.
- It is difficult to build sustained peace in the absence of reliable, affordable access to natural resources, especially food, water, and energy.
- Natural resources, such as mineral wealth, can be a destabilizing influence in a variety of ways, including by contributing to state illegitimacy and supporting violent extremists and terrorist organizations.

Recommendations

On the selection of priority countries:

1. Assess the economic dependency on natural resources (e.g., water, extractive industry, agriculture), not just in terms of monetary value but in relation to livelihoods.
2. Assess the vulnerability of the region to extreme weather events and other aspects of environmental change that could compromise the resource base, including the exploitation of resources by armed groups.
3. Assess the institutional capacity of the country to respond to environmental stresses, especially those related to livelihood dependence.
4. Consider the potential for regional or even geopolitical effects of instability in the country, as well as its importance for U.S. foreign policy goals, which include protection of human rights and promotion of democracy.

In developing responses:

1. Consider the role of natural resources in providing livelihoods and promoting economic growth.
2. Leverage dialogue and cooperation on environmental issues to increase trust among stakeholders and facilitate broader cooperation.
3. Recognize USAID as an engine of change that needs to be bolstered and revitalized. (E.g., the Lake Chad case study illustrates the need for development and livelihood-focused responses to effectively counter increased fragility, insecurity, and to build social cohesion and peace)
4. Integrate expertise on environmental change (including climate change) into decision-making processes and bureaucracy to ensure a “seat at the table” in the development of strategies and responses. Ensure high-level support and elevation of environmental issues.

Illustrative Case Studies

CLIMATE-FRAGILITY RISKS IN THE LAKE CHAD BASIN

The findings of a [two-year climate-fragility risk assessment](#) provides valuable insights into the connections between environmental degradation, livelihood security, and conflict. Conducted as part of the risk assessment, a hydrological study of the basin found that, in contradiction to the more common narrative that Lake Chad is shrinking, the lake is not shrinking—it is, however, experiencing increasing variability in precipitation patterns. The increasing unpredictability of rainfall patterns has undermined local livelihoods which had evolved to be adaptable to seasonal patterns. The risks posed by environmental degradation in this fragile region, then, are less about scarcity and more about the unpredictability of precipitation.

Increased environmental vulnerability, combined with poor governance and poverty, has led to the following climate-conflict risks in the Lake Chad Basin:

1. **Conflict and climate change dynamics undermine livelihoods.** Climate variability undermines predominantly rain-dependent livelihoods, while conflict undermines the ability of communities to adapt and cope with the changing climate (e.g., displacement due to conflict and restrictions on movement by the military in response to the insurgency have eroded people's adaptive capacity).
2. **Increased competition over natural resources.** A major influx of displaced individuals, coupled with restricted access to resources and diminishing availability of productive land means that more and more people are dependent on fewer and fewer resources. At the same time, previously relied upon governance and restitution measures traditionally used to manage disputes over land and natural resources have been disrupted, leading to more violence.
3. **Recruitment and retention into armed opposition groups.** Armed opposition groups offer financial incentives and social cohesion and security for communities dependent on increasingly uncertain livelihoods (90 percent of the population around the lake relies on rainfall-dependent livelihoods).
4. **Heavy-handed military responses to the violence are undermining communities' resilience and ability to adapt to climate change.** The responses have lacked sensitivity to livelihoods, climate coping strategies, and other needs of local populations. For example, in Niger, the military has curbed fishing and growing peppers near the lake in the belief that profits are used to support armed groups, depriving people of a vital alternative livelihood source if rains fail.

WATER STRESS IN PAKISTAN

Natural resource crunches and climate vulnerability, coupled with demographic dynamics and political volatility, underpin the [dangerous nexus between environmental stress and fragility](#) in Pakistan. The country experiences cyclical flooding and drought, monsoons, soil erosion, and deforestation. Because its economy relies heavily on agriculture, extreme drought and flooding causes high levels of displacement and economic damage. Natural resource scarcity—especially water stress—heightens conflict risks, both domestically and regionally. Pakistan's main surface water source, the Indus River, has diminished significantly, and simultaneous demographic dynamics, poor resource management, and exploitative agricultural practices have further exacerbated environmental degradation and served to undermine livelihoods. Water stress is exacerbating and heightening disputes from the provincial level to the international.

At the provincial level

Between water-secure Punjab and water-insecure Sindh, water management is a tense point of contention. These water tensions are further exacerbated by bitter political rivalry; the two provinces are governed by opposing political parties. As climate change further impacts water availability, prospects for water-related tensions will go up.

There is a long-running separatist insurgency in Balochistan, which is Pakistan's most water-insecure region. Islamabad's inequitable exploitation of freshwater resources has greatly fueled this insurgency, as well as China's industrial intervention through the Belt and Road Initiative. The grievances of resource scarcity and mismanagement have indirectly fueled militant attacks on the Pakistani state and on Chinese targets.

Water in the crosshairs of international tensions

There are major water tensions in the India-Pakistan relationship, especially with regards to Kashmir. Pakistan regularly accuses India of water theft and aggrieved extremist groups exacerbate these tensions as well. India-Pakistan water tensions will likely rise in the future for three reasons: (1) increasing water insecurity; (2) the vulnerable Indus Water Treaty, which does not account for demographic and environmental indicators; and (3) contentious India-Pakistan relations. Water—its scarcity, management, and allocation—is caught in the crosshairs of the difficult India-Pakistan relationship.