

THE CLIMATE CHANGE CRISIS:

ENSURING INTEGRATION OF CONFLICT PREVENTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY AND DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

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Peacebuilding**



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Policy Brief

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The Climate Change Crisis: Ensuring Integration of Conflict Prevention and Climate Change in U.S. Foreign Policy and Development Assistance

The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) made up of more than 200 of the world's leading climate scientists began meeting at the end of July to finalize a report summarizing how Earth's climate has already changed, and what humans can expect for the rest of the century. But already we know the climate is changing and responsible [for more extreme and deadly weather patterns](#), evidenced by devastating forest fires, the hottest June in 100 years in the United States, deadly flooding in Asia and Europe, and extreme droughts in Africa. [President Biden said](#) "the signs are unmistakable, the science is undeniable, and the cost of inaction keeps mounting." The climate change crisis is an emergency for conflict-affected and fragile states because climate change, violent conflict, and fragile states are interconnected crises. In 2014, the Department of Defense labeled climate change as a "[threat multiplier](#)" that exacerbates the risks and consequences of violent conflict and fragility. Recently, U.S. Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks [stated](#) climate change threatens national security by increasing natural disasters, contributing to instability, and draining budgets through infrastructure resilience and adaptation costs. Conflict experts also believe the risks of both climate change and violent conflict [compound each other](#). Climate change can destabilize social conditions and hinder effective climate change response to climate adaptation and climate hazards. Integration of these sectors is critical to prevent and reduce violent conflict, build sustainable peace, and address the climate change crisis.

Background:

The World Bank estimates the effects of climate change could push an additional [100 million people](#) below the poverty line by 2030. Analysis predicts by 2050 if fragile states do not receive enough climate financing, [200 million people](#) will need humanitarian aid, while reports predict that over 50% of the world's population will be in water-stressed regions [by 2050](#). Over the past 40 years, over one third of global cropland has been abandoned due to erosion. Plus, [COVID-19 not only overshadowed the climate crisis](#), but also made it more difficult for governments to address climate change.

The world is also facing an urgent violent conflict crisis. Since 2010, the number of [major violent conflicts has tripled](#). In 2020, there were 220 violent conflicts and [40 full-scale and limited wars](#) recorded, an increase from 2019 when there were [196 violent conflicts](#) and 38 full-scale and limited wars. In 2021, 235.4 million people—[one in 33 people worldwide](#)—will need humanitarian assistance and protection, a major 40% increase from 2020. COVID-19 is also more than a health crisis and a humanitarian crisis; it is [stabilization in reverse](#). The devastating impacts of the pandemic could lead to an additional [13 countries experiencing conflict](#) through 2022.

Climate change, violent conflict, and fragility when combined compound threats and exacerbate risks. Of the 39 states with the highest or high fragility, 26 "have a large number of people or a large proportion of the population [facing high climate risks](#)." The same research found many highly fragile states contain extensive land with high or very high climate exposure and all states with high compound fragility-climate risks lack state legitimacy. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) notes [14 of the 34 countries](#) in food crisis "experienced the double burden of conflict and climate shocks in 2017." A seminal G7 report found climate change through interaction with "other pressures and contextual factors" can create seven "[compound risks](#)": local resource



competition, livelihood security and migration, extreme weather events and disasters, volatile food prices and provision, transboundary water management, sea-level rise and coastal degradation, and unintended effects of climate policies.

Climate change [impacts the distribution](#) of resources between groups, puts additional pressure on poorly functioning governance systems, and reduces institutional legitimacy and effectiveness that impairs countries from adapting, mitigating, and addressing climate risk. Environmental injustice, including climate change, also systemically impacts communities of color and low-income communities [in the U.S.](#) and [around the world](#). Studies show a rise of .5 degrees Celsius in local temperature is associated with a [10% - 20% heightened risk of deadly conflict](#). For example, [in Nigeria](#), increasing food insecurity and tensions between non-Fulani farmers and Fulani herders over land and water resources are driving violence in the Middle Belt. In the [Lake Chad Basin](#), climate-related water resource challenges are putting immense pressure on livelihoods, which enables armed groups and intensifies the humanitarian crisis in the region. Another example of this dynamic is in the Northern Triangle, where climate change is worsening droughts, decreasing crop yields, and intensifying storms—the fallout of which challenges governments already struggling with deadly [violence and corruption](#).

Additionally, conflict-affected and fragile states struggle to effectively respond to the impacts of climate change. Conflict and fragility can hinder states from building climate resilience by weakening governments' management of political, economic, and social processes. Weak governance prevents conflict-affected and fragile states from adapting to, managing, and mitigating climate change risks. For example, in [Mocoa, Colombia](#), displaced citizens and poor government resettlement and deforestation policies are increasing vulnerability to flood risks.

President Obama's [Global Climate Action Plan](#) proposed a reduction in carbon dioxide emissions, preserving forests, and encouraging the use of alternate fuels. However, the Trump Administration quickly canceled this Action Plan. Fortunately, the Biden Administration is reversing the former Administration's policies on climate change by appointing former Secretary of State John Kerry as the first [U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for Climate](#). This appointment affirms Biden's commitment to climate change as a priority foreign policy issue and ensures high-level coordination across the interagency. The Administration also announced Executive Orders including [Tackling the Climate Crisis at Home and Abroad](#) and [Planning for the Impact of Climate Change on Migration](#), which respectively called for centering the climate crisis in U.S. foreign policy and national security and requested an interagency report on climate change and its impact on migration. In addition, the Administration recently unveiled [new climate finance commitments](#), including plans to double annual public climate finance by 2024 and mobilize private finance internationally.

USAID's new [agency-wide Climate Strategy](#) scheduled for release in November 2021 represents a critical opportunity to integrate conflict prevention and climate change policies and assistance.

Recommendations:

1. USAID, the State Department, the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, and other key



U.S. agencies, along with the National Security Council, must elevate climate offices to promote whole-of-government strategic incorporation of climate principles into foreign assistance and national security.

Existing instruments like USAID's Climate Change Leadership Council and the State Department's [Office of Global Change](#) are critical, but comprehensive elevation of climate change in foreign and security policy within all sectors is a challenge. In many conflict-affected and fragile states, climate change is happening now with disastrous results.

The U.S. should integrate climate change into all foreign assistance programming through policy guidance and implementation plans that require cross-cutting programs and reporting requirements, particularly in conflict-affected and fragile states. Specifically, the U.S. should:

- Increase focus on climate mitigation and adaptation to address climate change's compounding effect on fragile states, including targeting strategies in food security that are critical to building the resilience of communities threatened by severe droughts, floods, and waterborne diseases, strengthening water infrastructure/water resource management and drought-tolerant agriculture in alignment with next year's renewal of the [U.S. Global Water Strategy](#), and monitoring and assessing agricultural greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation, including the impact of associated policies on fragile contexts.
- Require conflict, governance, and humanitarian assessments to integrate climate change risk and identification of adaptation opportunities where relevant.
- Incorporate risk-reducing conflict prevention programs into the global transformation strategy to ensure climatic hazards do not exacerbate violent conflict.
- Employ an intersectional approach, through deliberate consultation with local communities including women, youth, and other marginalized groups that are most at-risk for displacement, lost economic opportunity, violence, and others most at risk, to design and implement programs.
- Ensure a more rigorous adaptive learning, monitoring, and evaluation system to acknowledge the interconnected and dynamic nature of compound climate-conflict risks and to increase the density and quality of information flow to improve decision-making at all levels.
- Guarantee the U.S. budget is fit for purpose and as flexible as possible to ensure relevancy and effective response to country needs and priorities by streamlining existing budget directives, creating more flexibility in the budget and allocation processes to disburse funds, and by leveraging and incentivizing existing frameworks to prioritize participatory decision-making and community ownership.
- Emphasize indigenous approaches and solutions. If technology is added, local people



should own the technology.

- Assure governments do not misuse “climate change measures” to accelerate exploitation, division, and oppression.
- Address climate dimensions of cross-border conflicts through development and diplomatic measures.

2. The Department of Defense should develop a comprehensive measurable plan to reduce its carbon footprint and an environmental impact study before using military force and present those plans to appropriate committees of Congress.

A [recent study](#) from Brown University’s Costs of War project found the Department has a larger annual carbon footprint than most countries globally. These plans should include:

- Proactive measures to prevent or mitigate an intervention’s impact on climate change.
- Measures that assure civilians that the military will reduce carbon emissions so resources (e.g. forests) are not harmed.
- Waste disposal methods that do not contribute to climate disruption, groundwater contamination, and other forms of pollution.
- Established exit plans that will remove waste that will make the area vulnerable to future climate hazards.

3. Integrate conflict prevention into climate change programs.

Whether forming low emission development strategies and climate-smart infrastructure, protecting and restoring ecosystems, or increasing climate resilience, these programs must integrate conflict prevention where relevant. This means not only highlighting risks and threats, but also proactively finding opportunities to build resilience for high peacebuilding value for dollar. [Research](#) by Mercy Corps suggests peacebuilding and conflict prevention investments yield climate resilience.

The U.S. should ensure conflict risk assessments are integrated into the design, planning, implementation, and evaluation of climate programs. For example, the climate-smart market work of a [2015 USAID drought resilience program in Ethiopia](#) faced serious obstacles due to its lack of cross-border dialogues in contentious border areas. USAID then bridged the climate-conflict gap by explicitly incorporating conflict mitigation in the program’s next round of programming.

The U.S. should leverage engagement with domestic climate change planning processes in developing countries, specifically the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change’s](#) (UNFCCC) National Adaptation Plan (NAP) process. The NAP process represents a



good entry point for addressing the climate-conflict nexus through integrated research and systematic consideration of climate change and conflict prevention risks and opportunities for resilience building. For instance, both the [South Sudan](#) and [Timor-Leste](#) NAPs include a focus on the potential connection between climate change and conflict outcomes, but recognize that information and understanding about this nexus is incomplete.

The U.S. should use these NAPs to envision entry points for support of governments around the world. In doing so, the U.S. must support the integration of conflict-climate change research and action into national climate change planning processes and provide technical and material support for implementation and information sharing between countries. The Planetary Security Initiative's [recent review](#) of climate-security practices can also serve as a resource for ideas to support conflict-climate integration.

4. Recognize that successful integration of climate and conflict requires a community-driven, human rights-based approach.

Cases like the [murder of monarch butterfly activist Raúl Hernandez](#), along with the [disproportionate killing of indigenous people](#) supporting environmental activism, show the close connection between climate response and human rights. The association of [gender-based violence and poor conservation results](#) demonstrates social inclusion is necessary for cohesive, community-driven climate change adaptation and mitigation. Indeed, as noted in a [recent report by IFES](#), displacement caused by climate and conflict very often impedes political and electoral rights, such as the right to vote in elections.

The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the Department of State, along with USAID, should fund nongovernmental organizations that provide protective accompaniment to defenders of the environment like Raul Hernandez and Berta Caceres, plus those providing a protective presence in communities that are resisting corporate incursions.

The U.S. will also need to review systems and structures including laws and policies beyond grassroots activism and engagement and address national and subnational laws and policies around protecting freedom of speech and accountability to NAPs. Scaling this effort to the subnational, national, and international level through linkages with international frameworks can start to address system failures that lie at the root of climate security risks, including weak governance, social exclusion, and unequal power sharing. The U.S. should ensure its new strategy utilizes conflict prevention programs and strategies to prevent exclusion of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and other marginalized groups and mainstreams diversity and inclusion in climate change programs.

5. Both the climate and conflict prevention communities need to expand their knowledge to create a shared language.

For a thorough grasp of climate fragility risks, climate experts must understand how climate impacts and response programs influence power dynamics or even exacerbate vulnerability.



Conflict experts must understand the impact of climate-driven environmental change on local contexts and how the social, political, and economic dynamics of conflict influence climate resilience and adaptive capacities. For both sectors, it is essential to see both risk and resilience as integrated rather than siloed. U.S. policymakers should adopt a common, simplified climate security language with an evidence-based, cross-disciplinary definition including traditional security and human security dimensions of risk to spur strategic investments and seize the attention of policymakers.

Creating this mutual understanding between climate and conflict experts can help both fields understand, plan for, and act on risks they normally may not see and follow a more diligent “do no harm” principle that avoids unintended negative consequences. Indeed, while poorly planned conflict prevention work can create or exacerbate environmental tensions, non-conflict sensitive [climate change responses can spark conflict](#) or undermine social resilience.

The climate and conflict prevention communities can look to models like the [Weathering Risk Initiative](#), a global climate security risk and foresight assessment by adelphi, and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany. Disciplines like [critical geography](#), which examines the interactions between spatial relations and international politics, can also provide a relevant framework for this shared language. By crossing disciplines, policymakers can envision and address climate change not just as a threat multiplier, but as a “[risk multiplier](#)” within a multi-dimensional, systemic problem.

This cross-cutting, evidence-based analysis can translate climate security information in line with legislative priorities and tease out relevant questions or time frames. Most importantly, through both regionalization and localization of climate fragility assessments, it can bridge the gap between large-scale climate predictions that often focus on many possibilities for the entire globe and small-scale localized peacebuilding initiatives.

Climate change requires a focus on conflict geographies and transnational dynamics around migration and shared natural resources, evidenced by [climate migration](#) in the Sahel and transboundary [water management issues](#) in the Ferghana Valley due to increased droughts and floods. Policymakers must also understand the distribution of resources central to the carbon net-zero economy including copper, nickel, lithium, and cobalt, and how competition over those resources and value chains can spark conflict and drive inequality. Similarly, the U.S. should execute nature-for-climate conservation and carbon capture in an informed and conflict-sensitive way to avoid creating new challenges.

While many regions of the world will be devastated by climate change, others may be affected in more subtle ways and even derive benefits such as extended growing seasons. A nuanced, localized understanding of all risks and opportunities will prove essential to policymakers and program implementers.

6. Support governments (national and subnational), CSOs, NGOs, and communities to develop context-appropriate institutions and programming to anticipate and resolve climate-



driven and climate-enhanced conflicts.

Climate change adaptation and conflict prevention are rooted in local wisdom, innovation, and action. The U.S. must increase its focus on building up local institutions and capabilities within these two issues. In many contexts, there are NGOs and research institutions doing work on climate and/or conflict or running peacebuilding programs, such as the [Sudd Institute](#) in South Sudan. Local actors can receive training on the connection between climate and conflict and incorporate it into their existing conflict resolution programs or receive support to develop new locally appropriate programs, as in the [Peace Centers for Climate and Social Resilience](#) in Ethiopia.

The U.S. must reestablish commitments, wherever possible, supporting local actors, local solutions, and direct funding to local actors and ensure country partners and local actors are on more equal footing.

The connections between climate and conflict are likely moderated by a variety of factors, and therefore the formula for the climate-conflict nexus will vary from place to place. The U.S. should build up local capabilities to further understand place-specific relationships between conflict and climate change processes, in turn contributing to the iterative NAP process. For example, a system could be developed in which long-term projections and seasonal forecasts can monitor conditions associated with more conflict, enabling governments and other organizations to take anticipatory and preventive actions.

7. Take a people-centered approach to climate and conflict integration that brings immediate impacts and outcomes to balance long-term resilience with addressing acute humanitarian crises.

Conflict-affected and fragile states often face extremely pressing and successive humanitarian crises, which can shorten people's problem-solving timeframes as they focus on the immediate emergency. These circumstances make it difficult to call attention to medium-term or long-term climate concerns, but balancing these longer-term threats is also essential.

The U.S. must prioritize efforts from programming through a people-centered approach that delivers not only sustainable change but also near-term benefits that improve people's lives. With delivery of more immediate benefits, people are motivated by the lived experience of change and can better understand the real-world connections between climate-conflict integrative approaches and safety, security, livelihoods, and health outcomes.

The U.S. can also view conflict and fragility as an opportunity to build back better, enhance overall resilience, and address the fundamental impacts of a changing climate without always needing to use the term "climate" or to center programming approaches in the climate sector. For example, framing the benefits of transitioning to renewable energies and building more sustainable and efficient water infrastructure in terms of economic advantage can achieve climate mitigation and adaptation objectives effectively, for mutual sector benefit and without



the politics-laden cadence of “climate” as an isolated phenomenon. The U.S. must always assure adequate conflict sensitivity, especially in promoting climate-sensitive technology and a transition to a low carbon economy, which can inadvertently ignite competition and conflict over natural resource use and management with critical minerals and land.

8. Climate and conflict prevention experts need to establish a shared, overarching long-term strategy.

A shared, overarching long-term strategy will create a clear picture of the “end game,” with an ideal collective outcome supported by yearslong mandates including measurement metrics looking 5, 10, and 50 years into the future. Through this strategy, both conflict prevention and climate principles can be integrated and mainstreamed from the design phase, to the implementation phase, to the evaluation phase, and into cross-cutting programs led by multi-sector teams. This approach can extend beyond climate and conflict to address the layered, dynamic, and intertwined multi-sector needs and opportunities facing policymakers.

Re-conceptualizing policy, budgeting, and programming time frames will also be essential. Peacebuilding and climate programs need to move beyond acute crises and consider long-term trends and analyses. Climate disruption indicators, for example, could serve as early warning and response mechanisms for humanitarian emergencies. Congress should make long-term commitments through appropriations so agencies do not rely only on annual budgets.

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