Climate change poses a major threat to human security in Africa. The risk emanates not from climate change per se, but from how climate-related stressors interact with socio-economic, environmental and political factors. To address these risks, climate action through investment in socio-economic resilience and a rethinking of climate governance and diplomacy is required. This policy brief explores the broader nature of climate risks facing Africa and discusses the need to strengthen climate governance.
Key findings

- There is currently limited evidence and understanding of the security risks that Africa’s regions and countries face due to climate change.

- Climate change, human security and development are not isolated issues for the continent. Integrating these allows employment and livelihoods to be protected from climate risk and vulnerability. It also sees employment growth from investments in climate-friendly technologies.

- Caution must be exercised in attributing sources of conflict to the biophysical impacts of climate change without considering the political, economic and historical contexts that define an area’s susceptibility to conflict, and people’s ability to adapt to these impacts.

- The risks from climate change to human security are amplified where there is already a confluence of risks such as governance deficits, lack of basic infrastructure and services, and poor development, that marginalise communities and exclude them economically.

- Water management and water security are likely to be one of the main pathways through which climate security risks manifest in Africa. Where climate change-driven water scarcity interacts with non-climate-related drivers such as water pollution, inefficient use, water-related disputes, and institutional and governance failures (both national and transnational), it could fuel socio-economic and political instability and insecurity, and even conflict.

Recommendations

- Addressing climate security risks requires building a common and broader language for climate security in Africa.

- Addressing human security risks arising from climate change necessitates that climate change is not treated simply as an issue of emissions reduction or environmental vulnerability and risk. It should be placed at the heart of the continent’s development and sustainability agenda.

- There is an urgent need to change the narrative on climate change from one of losses and vulnerabilities to the benefits of adapting to and mitigating climate change.

- Climates governance and diplomacy on the continent should try to move away from dealing with climate change only under United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change processes. It should put climate change at the forefront of all national and multilateral platforms, such as the G7, G20, the World Trade Organization and the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement.

- There is a need to increase awareness and understanding on all levels of decision making on how human security goes beyond conflict, and how climate action can be a tool to realise Africa’s socio-economic goals.

- African countries need to rapidly move from pledges and nationally determined contributions (NDCs) to implementation. The NDCs need to be used as an opportunity to promote economic diversification and build social resilience.
Introduction

In 2009, the Secretary General of the United Nations (UN) identified climate change as a ‘threat multiplier’ because it exacerbates existing threats. Since then, the issue has gained traction in the UN Security Council.

The discussions have become more frequent in recent years, with an increasing number of Security Council members hosting dedicated events during their monthly presidencies on the council, and setting up dedicated forums on climate-related security risks. These discussions are increasingly framing risks in more holistic terms: going beyond peace and conflict and into human risks emerging from the socio-economic impacts of climate change.

Of growing focus in these discussions is the climate-security nexus in Africa. Africa will bear the brunt of climate change and faces disproportionate climate change risks despite contributing to only 3.1% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Climate-related human insecurity and other emergencies have already emerged as key amplifiers to conflict and crises across Africa, prohibiting sustainable development and resilient livelihoods. The Security Council has included references to climate security risks in resolutions related to Darfur, Lake Chad Basin, Mali, Somalia, and West Africa and the Sahel.²

Understanding the nature of the risk

Climate change poses a major threat to human security in Africa, where livelihoods are mainly based on climate-dependent resources. The risk emanates not from climate change per se, but from how climate change-related stressors interact with economic, social, environmental and political factors (see Chart 1). These interactions are not new, but climate change is likely to intensify them.

Chart 1: Emerging and potential climate security risks on the continent

- Increased local tensions linked to access to land, water and fishery resources.
- Degradation of local food sources and increasing food prices that lead to greater food insecurity and a decline in health and nutrition.
- Degradation of natural assets that puts sectors such as agriculture and tourism, and jobs dependent on these sectors, at risk.
- Displacement and forced migration due to loss of livelihoods and food sources, loss of housing and shelter from extreme weather events, environmental degradation, rising sea levels and coastal erosion.
- Risks of vector-borne diseases and increased stress on healthcare systems that are inadequate or stretched.
- Rising costs of responding to disasters and climate change that reduce national budgets and spend towards socio-economic development.
- Increasing demand for water leading to pressure on existing water governance arrangements that can complicate political relations, particularly in transboundary basins, some of which are already affected by tensions.

Africa will bear the brunt of climate change and faces disproportionate climate change risks

The three rotating non-permanent African members at the UN Security Council, known as the A3, are increasingly using their terms on the council to build awareness of the links between climate change and conflict, and of climate security. The African Union Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) held a meeting at the end of 2021 to discuss climate change and peace and security within the construct of the climate security and development nexus.

This policy brief explores the broader nature of climate risks facing Africa and discusses the available evidence for understanding and strengthening climate governance in Africa. It is based on the hybrid workshop organised by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) on this topic in February 2022 in Pretoria.²
Climate change is already having a range of knock-on socio-economic effects on the continent. It is disrupting harvests, depleting fisheries, creating more volatile food prices, and increasing competition over natural resources. In many regions, climate change phenomena are already harming critical systems, such as water security (see Chart 2), food security and health. Impacts such as loss of livelihoods and climate-induced displacements are being felt while other impacts such as infectious diseases resulting from malnutrition or water shortages will unfold over time.
Lake Chad has decreased in size by about 90% since the 1960s due to a confluence of factors. These include overuse of water resources, poor enforcement of environmental legislation, lack of integrated water resources management at both the national and regional levels, climate change and extended drought.

Consequently, the 30 million people dependent on the lake are now competing for its rapidly depleting resources. The depleting natural resources and grazing lands are understood to have increased farmer-pastoralist conflicts. The lake’s environmental degradation has been complicated by the Boko Haram insurgency that began in 2013.

The Lake Chad Basin is shared by Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria, and extends as far as Algeria, Libya and Sudan. The lake provides not only drinking water but supports economic activity and livelihoods through irrigation, fisheries and livestock for over 30 million people in the region.
The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that these factors had together led to the displacement of around three million people by March 2021. Over three million people were food insecure, and close to half a million children were suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

Where poverty, resource scarcity and weak rule of law intersect with climate change, they can create a path to instability and conflict. Examples already exist in Africa. In Nigeria, conflict between farmers and nomadic herders over land due to climate-induced degradation of pastureland fuelled intercommunal violence that claimed six times more lives in 2018 than the Boko Haram insurgency, the International Crisis Group estimates.4

Loss of livelihoods in the context of poverty and lack of income-generating opportunities can increase the propensity of generally young men and sometimes young women to join armed and militant groups or turn to violence. Evidence shows that the large gaps in service provision left by inadequate responses by Somalia’s authorities to drought, chronic food insecurity and internal displacement were filled by al-Shabaab.5 Not only did this strengthen the group’s legitimacy, but also increased its recruitment.6

Farmers harvest maize, cabbage, lettuce, potatoes, and beans in Kongoussi, Burkina Faso.

Source: Olivier Girard/CIFOR

To this end, climate change is a risk multiplier to conflicts and a threat to sustainable peace and security in Africa. Research suggests that a 0.5% increase in local temperatures increases the risk of armed conflict by 10% to 20%.7 Indeed, as Africa embarks on implementing the Silencing the Guns initiative, it has become imperative to incorporate climate-related disaster risk reduction, early warning activities, and post-conflict peacebuilding activities.
Yet it is important to exercise caution in drawing direct causality between climate change and conflict and violence. The direct link between climate change and conflict is not easy to quantify.

It’s also simplistic to attribute sources of conflict to the biophysical impacts of climate change without considering the political, economic and historical contexts defining an area’s susceptibility to conflict, and people’s ability to adapt to these impacts. The nature and severity of the conflict also depend on the region. Where fragile contexts face vulnerability in relation to environmental change and natural hazard-related disasters, the threat is high.

**Climate risks and human security as an entry point for development**

To address human security risks arising from climate change, the latter should not be treated simply as an issue of emissions reduction or environmental vulnerability and risk. It should be an ‘integral part of the development conversation and agenda’ because climate investment can help build economic and social resilience.

There is a two-way link here. First, creating stability is crucial to addressing the impacts of climate change and accelerating Africa’s economic development. Second, climate action can address the underlying drivers of fragility and conflict.

For example, the energy transition away from fossil fuels to renewable energy that’s decentralised and cheaper would not only enable better access to basic services such as clean water, education and healthcare, but also power local economic development. Investing in climate-friendly technologies, goods and services can create a range of opportunities for “greater economic diversification, new sources of employment, renewed industrial activity” and greater socio-economic resilience.

**Tarfaya wind power plant, Morocco**

Source: TEDxTarfaya
At the same time, investments in weatherproofing infrastructure and sectors such as agriculture, tourism and wildlife, and coastal development would ensure that “key areas of economic activity and assets are protected from climate vulnerability.” These sectors are the backbone of the African economy. Lower levels of industrialisation in many African countries can be used as an opportunity to leapfrog development pathways and implement climate-resilient infrastructure.

To address climate-related risks, efforts to stabilise climate change must be just and equitable in their distribution of risks and responsibilities.

Clearly, climate-related risks coexist with opportunities at all levels. While these opportunities are often known and have been harnessed at local levels at small scales, they remain largely disconnected, undocumented and therefore untapped. Harnessing the climate agenda as “both a risk and an opportunity” can lead to economic diversification and enhance economic resilience on the continent, thereby building the systemic ability “to manage diverse shocks, including that of climate vulnerability.”

Human security as an entry point for climate action and just transition

To address climate-related risks and build resilience, efforts to stabilise climate change must be just and equitable in their distribution of risks and responsibilities. This involves avoiding actions that shift risks from one set of actors to another. Maladaptation can exacerbate long-term vulnerability. There’s a need to consider not only how livelihoods are affected by climate change, but also how they’re affected by climate change mitigation that sees the transition away from a fossil fuel economy to a low-carbon future.

For this reason, the discussion on climate security must account for both the need to transition away from fossil fuels (a large sector of several African economies), as well as the high vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change.

For Africa to address climate-related security risks, it requires a balance between reduction of emissions and legitimate needs of sustained development and the just transition. At the same time, the just transition away from fossil fuels can deliver socio-economic and political stability, improved health, environmental regeneration and economic diversification, among other benefits. Therefore the just transition will go a long way in addressing climate risks for human security.

Governance of climate security

Addressing climate security risks requires a rethinking of climate governance and diplomacy in Africa. The policy architecture at the national, regional and
While new governance approaches and mechanisms are needed at all levels, this is a particularly pressing need for Africa. The degree to which climate change acts as a driver of risks for the continent in the future depends on two factors: global emissions trajectories, and the continent’s own decisions on energy investments.

While new governance approaches and mechanisms are needed at all levels, this is a particularly pressing need for Africa

However, the climate governance structure for the continent is not delivering results. In the absence of a radically different structure and approach to climate governance and diplomacy, the climate security risks for Africa are unlikely to be addressed with the required urgency. More importantly, the governance mechanisms for climate change need to shift away from addressing climate crisis to a climate investment approach.
Immediate needs

To address climate security risks, a common and broader language for climate security must be built in Africa. This requires broadening the knowledge base on climate risks and human security, building capacity for policy and programmatic engagements to enhance responses to climate-related security risks, and greater awareness.

The continent’s immediate needs are to:

Strengthen the evidence base

- There is currently limited evidence and understanding of security risks faced by Africa’s regions and countries as a result of climate change. This hampers national and continental efforts to respond to climate security risks in a comprehensive and coherent manner. Addressing climate security risks in Africa must begin with an assessment of the compound character of human security risks faced by different regions and countries due to climate change.

- Geographic scale is important when talking about both risks and solutions. It is therefore important to understand the context of climate change vulnerability and the interaction between socio-economic and political factors to understand the nature and degree of risks.

Enhance climate finance flow

- For climate security risks to be addressed, climate finance must reach those who are most at risk and those in the most vulnerable contexts. It’s therefore necessary to examine climate finance flows to the continent, and their destinations and recipients. Evidence to date shows that the climate finance flow to developing countries has been insufficient. When this finance is divided among all developing countries, Africa gets much less than what it needs.

- At the same time, climate finance needs to support Africa’s economic growth needs and economic diversification, protect vulnerable sectors such as agriculture, expand the agricultural base, and build socio-economic resilience. To this end, African countries must advocate for a shift away from climate finance to flow of finance that has climate objectives.

Reframe climate change from an environmental issue to one of economic resilience and economic diversification

- The framing of climate security risks and the way engagements around it are constructed will determine the developmental agenda and future for Africa. Climate change, human security and development are not isolated issues for the continent. Integrating these issues allows the protection of employment and livelihoods from climate risk and vulnerability as well as growing employment from investments in climate-friendly technologies.

- Discussions on Africa’s energy transition tend to focus on the jobs that are at risk. This discussion tends to ignore the opportunities presented by the transition. For the continent to reframe climate change into a developmental issue, the narrative needs to change from the losses to the benefits of adapting to and mitigating climate change.
Climate governance and diplomacy in Africa must be at the forefront of all national and multilateral platforms

The 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27), which is being called Africa’s COP, is an opportunity for the continent’s voice to be heard. Africa is experiencing the most adverse effects of climate change in the world, even though it’s the least responsible for these impacts.

COP27 is intended to achieve meaningful progress on the global goal on adaptation. However, there are several terminologies and differing ideas on what meaningful progress means. African countries could base meaningful progress in the lens of climate security.

African countries should also target discussions around technology transfer under Article 10 of the Paris Agreement. Clean technologies are critical to African’s socio-economic development.

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Notes
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