Addressing climate change–related security risks: The experience of a regional special political mission

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Background

The United Nations Security Council is increasingly addressing aspects of peace and security related to climate change. West Africa and the Sahel region have been at the centre of many of these debates.

The United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) is a regional special political mission with a mandate to enhance the contributions of the United Nations towards the achievement of peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel.

In 2018, the Council requested more analysis from UNOWAS on the impact of climate change on security in West Africa and the Sahel. In August 2019, it further encouraged UNOWAS "to integrate information in its activities about the adverse effects of climate change, among other factors, on the stability of the region" (S/PRST/2019/7).

This year, in renewing UNOWAS' mandate for the period 2020-2022, the Council further requested the Office to "take into consideration the adverse implications of climate change, energy poverty, ecological changes and natural disaster, among other factors, including by assisting the governments of the region and the United Nations system in undertaking risk assessments and risk management strategies relating to these factors."[1]

This paper examines UNOWAS' response to the Council's requests. It outlines the challenges and opportunities for a regional special political mission in addressing climate change-related security risks.

Climate change and security

How climate change impacts security is the subject of ongoing debate. Suffice to say that many scientists agree that there is an indirect relationship between climate change and security; the climate-security nexus is complex and intertwined with multiple political, economic, social, ethnic, demographic and other factors. It is also highly contextual and determined by the interplay of three main elements: the level of *exposure* to climate pressures and shocks; the *vulnerability* of societies to these hazards; and, their *adaptation capacity* and resilience.

In the Lake Chad Basin, for example, climate change has been referred to as a "risk multiplier," a factor that amplifies armed conflict in an already volatile region beset by terrorism. Climate-induced drought, along with population growth, overexploitation of the lake and mismanagement of natural resources, have left farmers, herders and fishing communities struggling

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1   See: https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/85

for survival. Such hardship is said to have contributed to young people joining Boko Haram.[2]

In West Africa, climate-related security risks are often associated with *human security*,[3] as opposed to national security. The impact of climate change on the livelihood and survival of the individual is more pronounced, especially in places where the state is absent and lacks capacity to respond. In large parts of the Sahel, for example, communities are left to fend for themselves to adapt to climate change and resolve conflicts exacerbated by it.[4] Hence, a greater burden is placed on the individual, both as a victim of climate change challenges and as a first responder to them.

Conversely, in the United States and Europe, climate-related security risks are primarily the subject of national security; there, the state is the first responder to and protector against climate change. Climate-related security issues are also increasingly a focus of the military in developed countries. Extreme weather events triggered by climate change destroy military bases globally, affecting the safety of military installations and personnel. Climate change is a threat to national security at home and abroad. Attesting to this development, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS) and its partners created a new International Military Council on Climate and Security (IMCCS) during the Planetary Security Conference in the Hague in February 2020.[5]

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other scientific bodies, extreme weather, severe droughts, sandstorms, erratic rainfall and higher temperatures are having more severe impacts in West Africa than in many other places. The Sahel region is especially vulnerable given its harsh ecological environment. IPCC notes that temperatures in the Sahel will increase 1.5 times faster than the global average.[6] It estimates that temperatures will increase by 3 to 6 degrees in the Sahel by 2100. This is especially worrisome as 70 percent of its population depends on rain-fed agriculture and livestock rearing for their livelihoods. The impact of climate change means less availability of food and water, more acute flood risks, forced migration, loss of fishery and overall biodiversity, and greater competition over scarce water and land resources.

When we refer to the link between climate change and security, we are talking about how climate change intensifies poverty, reduces fundamental human rights and slows attainment of the sustainable development goals. This rarely happens in a vacuum. The impact of climate change on security is most acute where natural resources are few and badly managed, governance is weak or absent, livelihood alternatives are limited, climate change resilience is low, and communities have suffered recurrent climate pressures and shocks. Political and economic interests and brewing ethnic and religious tensions often underpin some of these situations. In these contexts, climate change negatively affects human security by exacerbating conflict within society and between society and the state. This can take the form of community conflict, civil unrest, criminality and organized crime.

The impact of climate change on security in West Africa and the Sahel is highly contextual. It can differ from one country to another and within one country. As might be expected, climate change as a driver of conflict is most manifest in hot spots and conflict zones that are already adversely affected by harsh ecological pressures.

Moreover, a successful approach to addressing the adverse effects of climate change on security in the region must consider ways to link local, national and regional efforts. Regional and national policies must resonate with traditional and indigenous knowledge, climate change adaptation practices, and local dispute resolution mechanisms, drawing on the voices of men, women and children. In the same vein, links must be established between regional regulations and national policies to ensure harmonization or complementarity. As a regional political mission, UNOWAS has a unique role to play in coordinating, harmonizing and advocating for greater linkages among local, national and regional efforts, which international partners can then support in a coherent and complementary fashion.

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2   The Lake Chad Basin region is a much-studied example of a region caught in a conflict trap of mutually reinforcing dynamics exacerbated by climate change. However, while climate change remains an important factor, a recent study by Adelphi negated the widespread discourse of a permanently shrinking lake. Hydrological data, the study notes, show that the amount of surface water in the lake has remained stable in the last 15 years. Conversely, groundwater, which is not accessible on the surface, has increased and comprises 80 percent of total water storage.

3   As noted in General Assembly Resolution 66/290, "human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people." It calls for "people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people." https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/66/290

4   Climate change can be seen to exacerbate resource competition, but other factors, such as political manipulation and economic mismanagement, are also important.

5   https://www.planetarysecurityinitiative.org/news/international-military-council-climate-and-security-announced-hague

6   Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, "Special report: Global warming of 1.5 °C" (October 2018). The report addresses the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty. https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/#:~:text=Global%20Warming%20of%201.5%20%C2%BAC,and%20efforts%20to%20eradicate%20poverty.

UNOWAS' engagement on climate change and security

UNOWAS is currently responding to the Security Council's requests for more analysis and risk assessments regarding the impact of climate change on security in West Africa and the Sahel. A strong partnership has been formed with other UN entities to make this happen, including with the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Food Programme (WFP), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and UN Women. A partnership has also been established with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to consider options for supporting the latter's Member States to integrate a conflict-sensitive approach to national climate change adaptation plans and programmes. In 2020, this partnership will be extended to other regional bodies, including G5 Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) and the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS). Consultations are also ongoing with the World Bank, a broad range of independent experts and think tanks, and with the West African Science Service Center on Climate Change and Adapted Land Use (WASCAL).

The most substantive output to date is the analysis produced by UNOWAS and UN Country Teams (UNCTs) in 2019. Joint risk assessments were carried out in Senegal, Niger and Mauritania on the impact of climate change on human security. Communities were interviewed about the effect of climate change on their livelihoods in the last decade, based on a questionnaire modelled on the WFP's household survey. Additional assessments are planned this year, culminating in a report with recommendations for action and policy development.

In sum, the initial fieldwork has shown that climate change may be seen to heighten security risks in three ways, by:

- exacerbating farmer-herder conflicts;
- increasing social tension (reducing social cohesion); and,
- contributing to rural-urban migration, violence and delinquency.

With regard to conflicts between farmers and herders, West Africa and the Sahel have experienced a spike in deadly clashes between these two groups in the last few years. While many interlinked political, economic and security issues underpin this trend, one common denominator exists: competition over access to water and grassland, resources that are diminishing as a result of climate change. While mismanagement of natural resources is also to blame for this competition, the real impact of climate change cannot be denied. This was confirmed by all interlocutors participating in the UNOWAS-UNCT focal group discussions in northern Senegal, south-eastern Niger and south-eastern Mauritania. Of the three countries, Niger was the most affected by an increase in localized farmer-herder conflicts as a result of water scarcity due to rainfall invariability. In Senegal, such conflicts were less pronounced in the villages visited, in part due to a steady sedentarization of the people residing there. Herding as a practice seemed to be concentrated among a few wealthy families. Yet, interlocutors noted that tensions between herders and farmers are common elsewhere in Senegal, including in Dakar and other big cities, as herders today travel longer distances in search of pasture for their animals.

Climate change also seemed to have an impact on social cohesion in all three countries. Community members interviewed in Senegal, Niger and Mauritania said that with the recurring patterns of soil erosion, desertification and the reduction in arable land, many of them were struggling to survive on subsistence farming. In Senegal, for example, interlocutors said they had been forced to reduce their food intake to one main meal per day. They spoke of increasing tensions among families, less solidarity and less sharing of resources within the community. Traditional social safety nets, such as borrowing money from a neighbour, were eroding. Climate change affects people's ability to survive, which in turn affects solidarity and trust among people. While it is difficult to talk of a "tipping point"—that is, when a breakdown in social cohesion leads to security risks and violence—conflicts between farmers and herders have taught us that competition over vital natural resources can have such an effect.

Climate change can push people to migrate to places that may or may not have the capacity to absorb them, which can make them vulnerable to illicit activities. Focus group discussions in Mauritania and Niger revealed some elements of climate-induced migration. For example, young men are leaving rural villages to search for jobs in the city. In Mauritania, soil erosion, sandstorms and water scarcity are so acute in many places that it is difficult to comprehend how people could survive there. Migration from urban centres to Nouakchott, the country's capital and largest city, has increased significantly, leading to increased criminality. Government interlocutors interviewed in Nouakchott confirmed this trend, which has security implications for the city.

The link among climate change, migration and security will be the subject of further UNOWAS research during

the next stage of the fieldwork in 2020. A partnership is also being sought with UN Women on gender-sensitive approaches to climate change-related security issues. Focus group discussions in Niger, Mauritania and Senegal have already revealed that women are disproportionately affected by climate change-related risks. Women spoke of walking further and further from their villages in search of firewood to places that were not considered safe. They were also increasingly left alone to care for the household when their men left in search of jobs. While a woman left alone does not automatically imply vulnerability, the volatile security environment in the Sahel heightens that risk.

UNOWAS' new mandate and guiding principles

UNOWAS' renewed mandate for the period 2020-2022 now includes explicit language on the need for the office to "take into consideration the adverse implications of climate change" by "assisting the governments of the region and the United Nations system in undertaking risk assessments and risk management strategies relating to these factors."[7] Building on this, UNOWAS is working to broaden its risk assessments in the coming year, together with the UN system, ECOWAS and other partners.

Three principles guide UNOWAS' work on the adverse implications of climate change on security:

- UN integrated approach;

- Regional perspective, including linking grassroots perspectives with national and regional policy; and,

- People-centred approach focused on local ownership.

Expected outcomes of UNOWAS' work on climate change and security include:

- Improved understanding by the UN system, regional organizations and other actors of the adverse impacts of climate change on human security in West Africa and the Sahel, and options to address such impacts from a conflict prevention perspective; and,

- More widespread adoption of national climate change adaptation plans and policies that incorporate conflict-sensitive and dispute resolution approaches.

Challenges and opportunities

The last decade has seen increased efforts to mainstream gender and human rights in UN mandates, with varying degrees of success. It will be important to learn from these efforts to incorporate a climate-sensitive approach to conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Without climate change considerations, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals will also be difficult.

Moreover, Africa faces an added challenge: the continent contributes the least to greenhouse gas emissions globally—just under 5 percent—but is the most affected by climate change. Hence, when the IPCC projects a temperature increase of 3 to 6 degrees in the Sahel by 2100, without a more robust global commitment anchored in the Paris Agreement, the region alone cannot reverse this trend *despite* individual countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs).[8]

For UNOWAS, addressing climate change-related security risks in West Africa, in accordance with the new mandate, presents *both challenges and opportunities*, including:

Competing priorities

As of January 2020, UNOWAS is mandated to "take into consideration the adverse implications of climate change by assisting the governments of the region and the United Nations system in undertaking risk assessments and risk management strategies relating to these."[9] As might be expected, with the many competing priorities in UNOWAS' mandate, including good offices and preventive diplomacy related to democratic consolidation and peacebuilding in the ECOWAS region, as well as the heightened security and terrorism situation in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, mainstreaming climate change–related security issues is likely to be a long-term endeavour.

Integrated UN approaches

UNOWAS' experience in addressing climate change-related security issues in West Africa and the Sahel has involved several stages, all capitalizing on an integrated security, development, human rights and gender approach. Risk assessments were conducted in close cooperation with the WFP, UNDP, UNEP and FAO in Senegal, Niger and Mauritania. Focus group discussions with selected villages were based on an open-ended questionnaire developed jointly with the WFP, drawing on its standard household survey. The same methodology will be used for fieldwork in

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7   See: https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/85
8   https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement
9   See: https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/85

2020-2021, with additional questions added by UN Women and ECOWAS. The integrated approach with ECOWAS has also been crucial; its directorates of political affairs, peacekeeping, environment and agriculture have all been involved in the ECOWAS-UNOWAS meetings held on climate change and security.

Dual climate change and security expertise

Given that the climate change-related security perspective is so new, there are few experts available with excellent knowledge of both climate change science and conflict prevention or security issues. Effectively analysing and addressing climate change-related security issues requires bringing together experts from different fields. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. More cross-fertilization across sectors breaks down walls and opens up space for new thinking and joint solutions. What can be done to facilitate such dialogue between the scientific community and political actors in support of governments in the region? UNOWAS is engaging with the University of Dakar's WASCAL and other academic institutions to explore partnerships with young African science students. This is especially important in building local knowledge and ownership. Such partnerships are also important to counter some of the media reporting on climate change in the region, which often builds on secondary analysis and generalizations, despite the contextual nature of this topic.

Broadened partnerships

Overall, the UNOWAS approach to analysing the impact of climate change on security in West Africa and the Sahel has been to broaden partnerships as much as possible. The World Bank has been a key partner since the beginning; regular exchanges have been held with the Bank's environmental and conflict prevention experts, and the Bank's 2018 Groundswell Report on climate-induced migration has served as a reference. UNOWAS is also working closely with colleagues at the Climate Security Mechanism (CSM) in New York and with UNEP colleagues in Nairobi. Consultations have also been held with numerous Francophone think tanks, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Search for Common Ground and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS). In 2020, ECOWAS and UNOWAS will begin exchanges with other regional bodies, including the G5 Sahel, CILSS, LCBC and the African Union.

Linking local, national and regional efforts

Ensuring that national climate change adaptation policies and related dispute resolution mechanisms (to resolve resource conflicts, for example) correspond to local efforts and capacities is essential. Every effort should be made to minimize the burden on local communities and, instead, draw on traditional knowledge and good practice. This was a key action point from the November 2019 UNOWAS-ECOWAS meeting on climate change and security in Abuja. Similarly, links must be established between regional regulations and mechanisms and national policies to ensure harmonization or complementarity. As a regional political mission with a UN Security Council mandate, UNOWAS has a unique role to play in coordinating, harmonizing and advocating for greater linkages among local, national and regional efforts, which international partners can then support in a coherent and complementary way.

Immediate versus long-term perspectives

Addressing the impact of climate change on human security requires both a short-term and a long-term perspective. Based on UNOWAS' research to date, two approaches seem appropriate:

- immediate efforts to reduce conflict exacerbated by climate change, especially farmer-herder conflicts, which in 2018 caused more deaths than Boko Haram, based in part on the spike in competition between both groups over access to water and land in already volatile security environments;[10] and,

- long-term efforts to support West African governments in operationalizing national climate change adaptation and mitigation plans and rendering them more conflict sensitive. With regard to the former, UNOWAS is working with ECOWAS to implement some of the 20 recommendations of the UNOWAS 2018 Study on Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel;[11] a joint workshop was held in Abuja in February 2020 to capture good practices from local dispute resolution mechanisms in five ECOWAS countries. Moving forward, work on this also involves strengthening the partnership with the West African Civil Society Forum (WACSOF).

Conclusion

The Security Council is increasingly addressing aspects of peace and security related to climate change.

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10   International Crisis Group Report, "Stopping Nigeria's Spiralling Farmer-Herder Violence" (2018): https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/262-stopping-nigerias-spiralling-farmer-herder-violence

11   UNOWAS, "Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel: Towards Peaceful Co-existence" (August 2018).

Climate change is often seen as a risk multiplier in West Africa and the Sahel region, given their vulnerability to both climate shocks and instability.

As a regional special political mission, the UNOWAS mandate has been broadened to address the impact of climate change on security, including through risk assessments in the region in support of ECOWAS Member States and the UN system. Such work has already commenced. It brings with it both challenges and opportunities, some of which have been outlined in this paper. Further reflection is needed, including comparative knowledge from other regions, to strengthen these exploratory efforts.

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UNDP Oslo Governance Centre

The Oslo Governance Centre (OGC) is one of six UNDP Global Policy Centres, established in 2002. It works closely with its New York based Headquarters and other relevant UN and UNDP units strengthening the overall analytical and learning ability in the area of Governance and Peacebuilding. It supports policy development and applied research with an overarching focus on democratic governance and peacebuilding in crisis, conflict and transitional contexts.

www.undp.org/oslocentre

Joint UNDP-DPPA Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention

Since 2004, the United Nations Development Programme and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) have partnered to strengthen support to the UN's work in building national capacities for conflict prevention. Often times, such support is extended through the deployment of Peace and Development Advisors (or PDAs), a growing cadre of UN staff who support Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams adapt and respond to complex political situations and to develop and implement strategic conflict prevention initiatives and programmes.

https://peaceinfrastructures.org/

Folke Bernadotte Academy

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (FBA) is the Swedish government agency for peace, security and development. As part of Sweden's international development aid, FBA promotes peace in conflict-affected countries by offering training, advice and conducts research in order to strengthen peacebuilding and statebuilding; as well as grant funds to civil society organizations working with peace and security. The agency is named after Count Folke Bernadotte, UN's first peace mediator.

https://fba.se/en/