

# The nexus of climate change and conflict in the Arab region

06 Oct 2016 by Kishan Khoday, Regional Team Leader, Climate Change, DRR and Resilience, UNDP Regional Hub for Arab States

*In this blog series, UNDP experts and practitioners share their perspective on issues of climate change, in the lead up to COP22 in November.*



*Communities in Somalia have been displaced by both climate change and conflict.*

*Photo: Stuart Price/NU Photo*

Alongside the daily barrage of rockets and gunfire facing the Arab region is a more insidious but perhaps no less important foe – climate change. Climate change and conflict both have serious consequences and their convergence, particularly in fragile states, that has now arisen as a major concern. Leading UNDP's climate change action in the Arab region, I see first-hand how this convergence is creating new forms of social vulnerability and reshaping the prospects for peace.

The Arab region was the birthplace of agricultural civilization and for thousands of years has been able to cope with risks from climatic hazards. But climate change is now happening at a pace unlike anything before, stretching the ability of societies and governments to cope.

The evidence shows that the region may well be in the midst of a 25-year climate change-induced mega drought, equal in strength only to historic droughts one thousand years ago that led to major civilizational shifts. Already the world's most water insecure region, climate change is expected to see temperatures rise faster here than the global average, making parts of the region uninhabitable by mid-century. Unless actions are taken, impacts will be felt in loss of agricultural livelihoods, high unemployment, mass displacement, and resource conflicts.

This is not a tale of a dystopian future; the nexus of climate change and conflict is already now upon us. From 2006 to 2011, the region suffered one of its worst ever climatic disasters. In Somalia, a record drought killed up to 100,000 people and displaced 4 million people.

In Syria, the drought decimated the livelihoods of more than twenty percent of the rural population internally displacing up to 1 million and exacerbating social vulnerabilities in advance of the uprisings. Climate impacts have likewise contributed to instability in Iraq, Sudan and Yemen.

The areas of the region experiencing conflict and displacement are also those most at risk from climate change. The convergence of climate change and conflict is upon us and the wealthy and privileged have a responsibility to help combat the 'slow violence' inflicted by climate change on the poor and vulnerable – those least responsible for climate change.

With the 22<sup>nd</sup> Conference of the Parties (COP22) under the UN Climate Convention taking place in the Arab region this November, an opportunity exists to consider ways that climate action can support resilience in the region's fragile and conflict-affected areas. Three issues require action:

**Resilience-based approaches to development:** Climate change adds pressure to already strained food and water resources, in turn triggering social vulnerability, conflict over resources and displacement. To prevent onset of this cycle, UNDP supports local partners to enhance climate resilience of agriculture and irrigation systems, expand early warning, and put in place social protection measures like climate-index insurance. Today over US\$30 million in grants has been allocated to build climate resilience in fragile and conflict-affected areas like Djibouti, Somalia and Sudan, with scaled-up initiatives also under development for submission to the Green Climate Fund.

**Enhancing transboundary governance:** Climate change amplifies competition for resources in communities and transboundary disputes between countries. This is even more the case in the Arab region, the world's most water insecure region and with the vast majority of water resources spanning national boundaries. UNDP is scaling up action to build regional partnerships, for example supporting Chad, Egypt, Libya and Sudan to design and implement transboundary agreements on use of the Nubian groundwater system, the world's largest fossil aquifer.

**Climate-resilient recovery:** Communities hosting refugees and internally displaced persons are also climate risk hot-spots, suffering water-scarcity and severe droughts. The crisis facing the region is of protracted nature, requiring longer-term measures to reduce vulnerability of affected communities. Recovery efforts for infrastructure, livelihoods, and basic services much therefore factor in climate risk. UNDP is now supporting solar solutions in Darfur to rebuild livelihoods of returnees from conflict; in Lebanon to ensure access to sustainable energy for communities hosting Syrian refugees; and in Yemen to provide energy solutions for farmers internally displaced by conflict.

One hundred years ago, the Sykes-Picot Agreement redrew the maps of the region based on the industrialized world's quest for oil. A century later, the emissions generated around the world from that oil have come back to haunt the poor and vulnerable of the region. As we look to the future it is not oil, but rather the growing impacts of climate change, that will define the century to come. The Paris Climate Agreement is not only a global environmental agreement. It can be a positive force for change with new partnerships supporting resilience-based approaches to development and creating the foundations for peace and security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.



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