

UNDERSTANDING COMPOUND RISKS, SHAPING EFFECTIVE RESPONSES – THE CASE OF SYRIA

Addressing the linked risks of climate change and conflict will reduce the need for humanitarian relief, such as that around the refugee crisis, and can save lives and drive both peace and sustainable development. The World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul on 23–24 May provides a once in a generation opportunity to advance this goal.

Climate change is increasing the number and intensity of humanitarian disasters around the world. Fragile and conflict-affected contexts are those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change as well as other natural hazards. More than 80% of people affected by humanitarian disasters have lived in fragile and conflict-affected contexts, such as the Chad drought in 2009 and the Myanmar cyclone in 2008.¹

Climate-driven impacts, such as droughts and cyclones, are not experienced as isolated catastrophes. They combine with the social, political and economic factors on the ground, including elections, marginalisation of certain groups and corruption. In already fragile contexts where risks such as poverty, weak governance and conflict are high, and the ability to cope with these risks is low, climate change acts as the ultimate 'threat multiplier', making it more likely that societies are pushed over the edge into violent conflict and setting back the chances for peace.

With average temperatures continuing to rise and the growing awareness among the international community that disasters and conflicts are interrelated, it is now, more than ever, imperative to address climate change, disasters and conflict risks together, removing the silos that have hampered the effectiveness of the response.

Nowhere is this made more apparent than in Syria.

DROUGHT, LIVELIHOOD INSECURITY, MIGRATION AND CONFLICT IN SYRIA

The Syrian uprising was seen by many as an 'out of the blue' case of the Arab uprising. However, the underlying drivers of social unrest were visible to anyone who knew what to look for: growing poverty, rising unemployment, lack of political freedom, corruption, a widening rural/urban divide, a severe drought, resource mismanagement

BOX 1: KEY FACTS ON DROUGHT AND INSTABILITY IN SYRIA

- Between 2006 and 2011, Syria suffered a severe drought. It hit the northeast region — the country's breadbasket — the hardest.
- Herders in the northeast lost nearly 85% of their livestock, affecting 1.3 million people.²
- Nearly 75% of families that depend on agriculture suffered total crop failure.³
- The drought was exacerbated by a long legacy of resource mismanagement. Large government subsidies for water-intensive wheat and cotton farming encouraged inefficient irrigation techniques.⁴
- Farmers sought to increase supply by tapping the country's groundwater resources. As the drought dragged on into its second and third years, the Syrian government cancelled a number of state subsidies, which overnight multiplied the price of diesel fuel and fertilisers.⁵
- More than 1 million people were exposed to food insecurity, adding substantial pressure to pre-existing stresses, such as grievances against government mismanagement. Food insecurity was one of the factors that pushed the country over the threshold into violent conflict.⁶
- The government failed to respond to the humanitarian crisis, fuelling simmering discontent in the rural areas. The first protests began in the rural town of Daraa, where secret police arrested and tortured a group of teenagers.⁷
- These peaceful protests to express people's grievances at the government's failure to act later escalated into the civil war that continues today, with 250,000 dead, 13.5 million people in urgent need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, 6.6 million internally displaced and a further 4.8 million who have fled the country.⁸

and, against this backdrop, the impact of climate change on water and food production. Less than two months after President Bashar al-Assad told *The Wall Street Journal* that Syria was immune from the Arab Spring, protests broke out in Daraa, Homs and Hama.

The case of the Syrian uprising illustrates how climate-induced drought, in interaction with other factors, can contribute to unrest and protests, through the loss of livelihoods and distress migration.

The case of the Syrian uprising illustrates how climate-induced drought, in interaction with other factors, can contribute to unrest and protests, through the loss of livelihoods and distress migration. Between 2006 and 2011, Syria suffered the worst drought on record. The drought was longer and more intense than usual. It hit the northeast the hardest – the most neglected and impoverished part of the country, but also Syria's breadbasket. The drought destroyed livelihoods in the region and led to a mass exodus of farmers, herders and agriculturally dependent rural families from the countryside to the cities. They moved into already overcrowded urban areas like Daraa, putting pressure on infrastructure and basic services such as water and health as well as jobs.

It is in Daraa that Syria's first protests began in March 2011. A group of teenagers expressed their frustrations about conditions, borrowing slogans from Tunisia and Egypt. Local secret police arrested and tortured them.⁹ The teenage boys came from some of the most prominent families in Daraa, who marched to the governor's house in protest. People in other cities also took to the street and gathered in support for the 'children of Daraa'. What started as a peaceful protest to express people's grievances with the Assad regime degenerated into the bloody civil war that still rages in the country today – to date killing 250,000 people and forcing 4.8 million to flee the country. The conflict has cost the international community an estimated US\$3 billion in humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ The crisis has triggered a wave of migration not seen since the Second World War.

The drought in Syria very clearly occurred in an already fragile social and political environment, and its effects were compounded by the government's failure to adequately respond to the crisis, triggering the protests and, in turn,

the war. Along with climate change, the drought was exacerbated by a long legacy of resource mismanagement in the country. For instance, the government heavily subsidised water-intensive wheat and cotton farming, and encouraged inefficient irrigation techniques.¹¹ Faced with water shortages, farmers turned to the country's groundwater resources. As the drought continued into its second and third years, the Syrian government cancelled a number of state subsidies, which multiplied the price of diesel fuel and fertilisers overnight.¹²

The example of Syria illustrates how climate change can contribute to conflict, as it interacts with pre-existing social, political and economic factors. Understanding the interactions between disasters, climate change and conflict is therefore vital to addressing the humanitarian challenges we face today in countries around the world, including Turkey itself.

Achieving integrated action means tearing down the walls that divide the peacebuilding, development and humanitarian communities, to focus on the prevention of disasters and conflict, and subsequently reducing the risk of protracted crises from unfurling.

CONCLUSION

The World Humanitarian Summit presents an opportunity to rethink how we 'do' humanitarian aid. It can refocus the system from knee-jerk responses once a crisis has already unravelled – which is like trying to stop a flood with a couple of towels – to informed, integrated preventative action that addresses the linked challenges of disasters, climate change and conflict at once.

Achieving this means tearing down the walls that divide the peacebuilding, development and humanitarian communities, to focus on the prevention of disasters and conflict, and subsequently reducing the risk of protracted crises from unfurling. If the summit can push the international community towards a new humanitarian norm – with institutional and funding structures to support it – it can enable interventions that address the root causes of vulnerability. Such an approach can reduce the risk of future crises as well as the human suffering it entails, and in doing so lessen the pressure on the already overloaded humanitarian field.

Endnotes

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