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LEARNING NOTE

From diagnosis to action

Five lessons for addressing climate security risks

About International Alert

International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict with people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we bring people together to build sustainable peace.

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Cover: Goats at the Koroli springs in the Chalbi desert north of Kenya near the border with Ethiopia, Kenya.

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Five lessons learned on addressing climate security risks

This note is based on International Alert's 15 years of programming on climate, security and peacebuilding.

1. Guard against climate action doing more harm than good

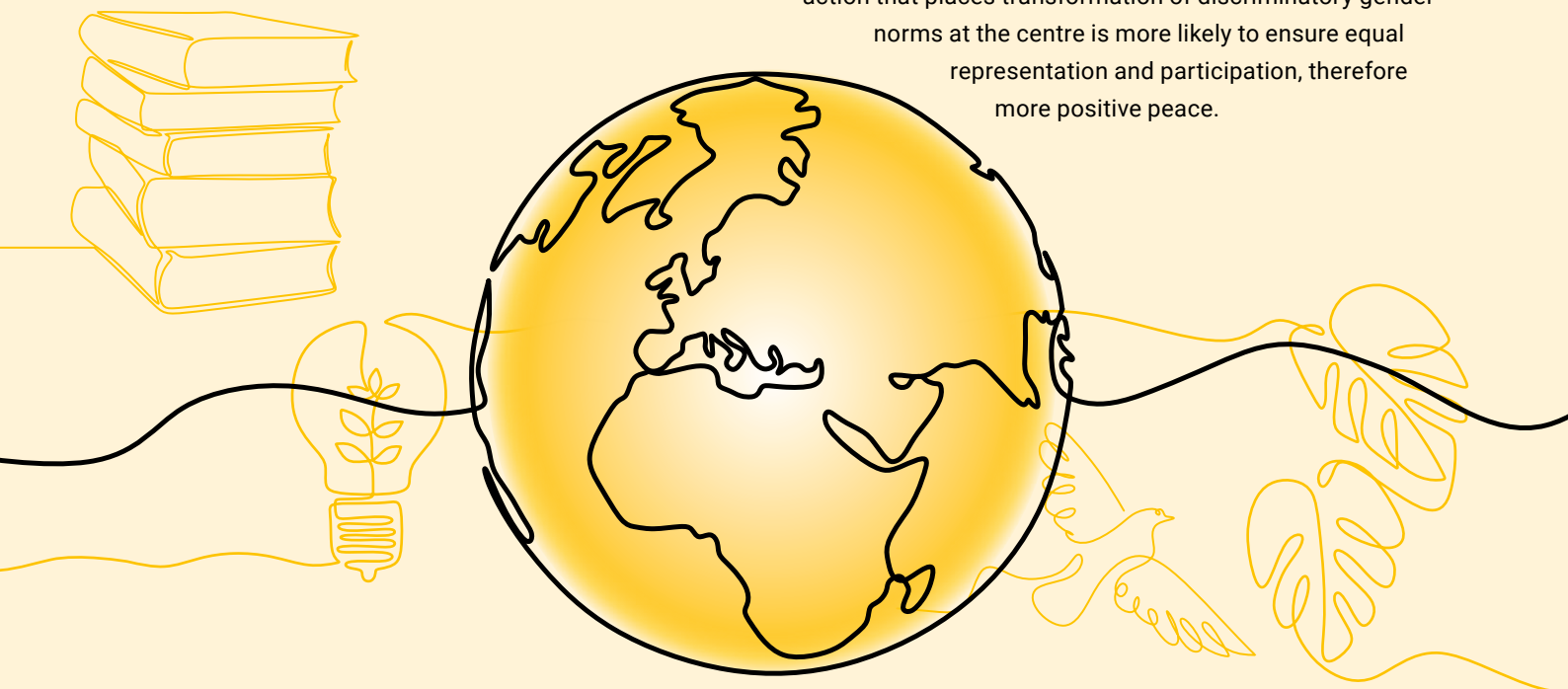
Actors driving the finance and programming to combat climate change need to ensure their actions are climate sensitive and inclusive, to avoid adverse impacts on marginalised and vulnerable groups of people.

3. Step up collaboration and approaches that cut across sectors

When discussions related to climate change and conflict are siloed, it hampers the innovative approaches needed to jointly address climate security risks. Everyone has the responsibility – governments, institutions and NGOs – to reach across these silos to promote holistic and conflict sensitive approaches that are attentive to the realities of climate-vulnerable communities.

4. Place gender and power relations at the heart of climate security action

Working across the climate-conflict nexus requires programmes to be built on an understanding of intersectional gender inequalities, power relations and the harmful norms which perpetuate them. Climate security action that places transformation of discriminatory gender norms at the centre is more likely to ensure equal representation and participation, therefore more positive peace.



2. Policy-makers, civil society actors and communities need to listen, learn and act together

Governments need to create clearly defined roles for intermediary actors, including sub-national government and peacebuilding organisations, to bring community insights and local-level evidence into national and global level decision-making on climate security risks and action.

5. Climate action needs peacebuilding – but it can also do peacebuilding

Climate change can be an entry point for dialogue and a unifying common challenge within countries and across regions. Peacebuilders can collaborate with the climate change community to work on transformative approaches to address climate security risks. Moreover, peacebuilding organisations need to ensure they contribute to reducing climate change impacts and environmental degradation.

'A climate of conflict'

International Alert's pioneering report 'A climate of conflict: The links between climate change, peace and war' published in 2007, documented the profound risks the climate crisis has on peace and security. It pinpointed 46 conflict-affected states where climate change interacting with economic, social and political problems creates a high risk of violent conflict.

The report identified another 56 countries where the governments would have great difficulty enduring the strain of climate change because it compounds and exacerbates the tensions and fractures already driving conflict.¹

The physical effects of the climate crisis were beginning to unfold when the report was published 15 years ago, yet the potential disruption to peace and security was relatively unimagined.²

The four key elements of climate security risks flagged in the report are today recognised increasingly at political levels. Another fifth element of risk – **maladaptation**, where climate action has adverse impacts on peace and security – has also emerged.

The five recognised elements of climate security risks are:



1. Political instability generated by poor governance can paralyse adaptation efforts, simultaneously accelerating the social impacts of climate change and the grievances which underlie conflict.



2. Economic instability can leave communities vulnerable to sudden environmental shocks and the slow erosion of livelihood security, depriving states of resources for climate-resilient development.



3. Food and water insecurity constrains communities' foundational survival needs and aggravates existing tensions.



4. Political and economic instability and food and water insecurity can lead to **migration and displacement**. Climate-related movements of people arriving in areas with already scarce resources create high risks of conflict if met with inflammatory policies.³



5. The surge in climate funding and programming has created the risk of **maladaptation**, adaptation measures with unintended adverse impacts on stability, which can be expected across all regions and especially in already fragile and conflict-affected states.

Introduction

Today 70% of the world's most climate-vulnerable countries are at high risk of climate-related conflict, driving the urgent need for action on climate security issues.⁴

Inclusivity is a key to successful climate action; bringing together communities, climate change and environmental experts and peacebuilders to design, pilot and scale up joint interventions, which may be complex, to ensure that the actions to mitigate climate change do not exacerbate existing fragility and conflict.

Climate security risks are increasingly recognised at a political level. The 2022 Sixth Assessment Review of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change highlights how climate change can contribute to increased conflict along indirect pathways.⁵ However, beyond raised awareness and political will, populations vulnerable to climate change and violent conflict need swift, inclusive and well-considered action.

Sustainability requires that the voices of those at the front line of the climate crisis and violent conflict are central to the responses, which are built on lessons learned from existing community-led adaptation that works and our historical failures in natural resource management.

International responses to the global call for accelerated green energy transition and investments in climate adaptation need to consider linked conflict risks. All climate efforts must deliver positive impacts on peace and security.

This report distils lessons learned from International Alert's 15 years of climate, security and peacebuilding programming. Current and former members of staff across 12 countries share practical examples of how Alert has addressed climate security risks in different contexts; from transforming gender relationships within programmes to employing constructive peacebuilding practices as part of multi-sectoral partnerships.

The five lessons learned discussed here and recommended for immediate action by International Alert, fellow peacebuilders, policy-makers and others working to address climate security risks are as follows:

1. Guard against climate action doing more harm than good.
2. Policy-makers, civil society actors and communities must listen, learn and act together.

3. Step-up collaboration and approaches that cut across sectors.
4. Put gender and power relations at the heart of climate security action.
5. Climate action needs peacebuilding – and it can also do peacebuilding.

1. Guard against climate action doing more harm than good

Step up action to prevent maladaptation – climate action exacerbating fragility and conflict. Actors driving finance and programming decisions to combat climate change must consider conflict sensitivity and ensure inclusive action to avoid adverse impacts on marginalised and vulnerable people.

A huge increase in climate finance from US\$364 to US\$632 billion over the past decade has resulted in the uptake of mitigation and adaptation measures.⁶ Key actors are now more likely to recognise and analyse climate crisis as a risk to peace and stability. However, gaps remain between rhetoric, policy and practice;⁷ there is not yet widespread integration of conflict sensitivity within investments in renewable energy, adaptation programmes and conservation efforts.

Instances of maladaptation have become more common in fragile and conflict-affected areas, increasing the urgency to prioritise conflict sensitivity in new climate finance goals and negotiations.

Maladaptation is often caused by exclusion – including tokenistic consultation – of key groups of people and inadequate understanding of the local context. Inclusivity is the key to addressing this issue. Include marginalised and vulnerable groups from the very start and conduct solid context-based analysis before designing policies and investing in infrastructure, programmes and action.

In fragile contexts, **non-inclusive and poor governance systems can exacerbate the complex vulnerabilities experienced by marginalised groups** when it comes to the management of natural resources and the distribution of adaptation support.

Research in **Nepal** illustrates the complex interactions between extreme climate events, poor governance, poverty

and volatile political systems. Where political parties are governed by a patronage-based power structure, climate shocks can skew power relations and trigger community strife and outbreaks of violence. For example, after climate-induced flooding in the Terai region, the distribution of relief packages overwhelmingly benefited people from higher castes because party leaders tend to control distribution, often favouring their supporters. This further marginalised the historically vulnerable Nepalese Dalit class, causing tensions and unrest in the area.⁸

Efforts to strengthen governance which overlook corruption can increase the risk of maladaptation.

In **Lebanon**, the pressures of the economic crisis are further aggravated by widespread corruption and resource mismanagement, which has deepened the divisions between citizens and state. In **Myanmar**, private exploitation of teak, jade and gold has been reinforced by institutional corruption, further compounding the vulnerability of climate-exposed communities.

To address this issue and ensure peaceful resource governance, **climate action must transform governance structures to be more reflective, inclusive and accountable.** Policy-makers need to prioritise inclusivity and transparency by creating spaces for all marginalised groups affected by the climate crisis and address grievances that different groups of people may have about the way resources are shared, owned and managed.

In **Kenya**, access to and control of natural resources are key conflict drivers, interwoven with identity politics, exclusion and historical grievances. Alert's analysis demonstrates how inclusive and meaningful participation of **all** stakeholders in decision-making and implementation is critical in building a shared understanding of local needs and ensuring the fair distribution of development dividends. This not only reduces conflict risks by addressing grievances but improves the delivery of government services.

Climate policies and programmes designed and implemented at national and international levels often don't reach the groups that need them most.

Governments and NGOs must work together to create a space that holds power at the table for local voices in decision-making for climate adaptation and natural

resource management. The inclusion of local perspectives is essential to define appropriate localised action. Global evidence confirms the effectiveness of indigenous conservation and resource management practices,⁹ which usually lead to stronger, more sustainable outcomes for people and the environment. At the same time, this can encourage more peaceful relations by preserving rights and identities and alleviating tensions over ownership and autonomy between indigenous groups, the wider local communities and those in power.

In **Mali**, natural resource management is one of the biggest challenges to social cohesion. A combination of accelerated environmental degradation, climate shocks, high levels of inequality and disparate access has sparked resource-based conflicts at the local level. Alert supports communities to manage these threats by building upon existing environmental conflict resolution mechanisms, such as Land Commissions, Water Usage Committees and Traditional Village Councils. This has strengthened the conflict resolution and land management capacity of community members, ultimately reducing support for violent responses to resource conflicts and improving security through more inclusive and sustainable governance.¹⁰

Collaborating with indigenous systems in Myanmar

In **Myanmar**, international donors and national implementing organisations have rolled out programmes which do not always take into full consideration the political and cultural complexities of local contexts or the rights of historically marginalised indigenous communities. Some programmes have resulted in the loss of land, rights and livelihoods. Civil society organisations in the Karen region have supported communities to strengthen protection for the indigenous Kaw system, which upholds collective land ownership and the importance of traditional leadership and women's involvement. Such meaningful formalisation of the system has improved relationships between leaders and citizens, livelihoods, human rights and environmental protection.¹¹

2. Policy-makers, civil society actors and communities need to listen, learn and act together

It is important to bring community insights and local-level evidence into national and global level decision-making on climate security risks and action. To do this, governments need to create clearly defined roles for intermediary actors, including sub-national government and peacebuilding organisations. For citizens to hold power effectively at the table, their expertise in climate-related topics must be developed and priority given to the ways in which they can influence policy and practice.

A real gap exists between the policies and programmes designed and implemented at national and international levels and the action taken at community levels.

International, sub-national, civil society and NGO actors all have roles to play in working together to create inclusive, tailored and effective solutions to climate change and conflict.

Strengthening and developing the inclusivity of sub-national government will assist it to play an effective convening and implementing role for local stakeholders.

Over the last decade in **Nepal**, NGOs and civil society have made significant efforts towards influencing inclusive policies, though the responsibility for turning those changes into reality ultimately lies with the political leadership. Sub-national governments are now in the process of designing climate adaptation action plans, yet challenges at the political level continue to obstruct full implementation at

a local level. Strengthening sub-regional governments and community leadership to act fairly and inclusively as convenors and implementors of climate change adaptation can bridge the gaps between these actors and generate functional solutions.

Peacebuilding organisations play a key role in sharing local-level evidence upward to those in power to influence and inform peace-supporting actions. In the **Philippines**, Alert developed a methodology called Resource Use Management Planning (RUMP) that facilitates the process of dialogue among key stakeholders, where evidence-based information serves as the common ground for negotiating interests and identifying mutually beneficial solutions to resource-based issues. The process of assessing resources through mapping technologies generates accurate and granular data on disaster risks and conflict dynamics to support local government units, communities and the private sector in conflict sensitive development planning and natural resource management. Geospatial and quantitative data are complemented by a participatory dialogue process which represents the plurality of voices in policy-making, where those at the grassroots can shape and benefit from development priorities and build trust in the peaceful resolution of conflicts. RUMP demonstrates how community lands and ancestral domains can be protected, rehabilitated and utilised to spur economic growth in a sustainable manner without triggering violence.

Amplifying the voices of vulnerable and marginalised groups requires equipping them with the information and advocacy skills they need to influence institutions and broker entry points in government processes that are accessible for all.

In Kasserine, a climate-stressed and marginalised border region of **Tunisia**, access to potable water is a challenge.

Working with conservation actors to prevent conflict in DRC

Peacebuilding, conservation and community organisations can organise themselves to come together to identify issues and solutions to protect indigenous rights while undertaking efforts to protect the environment. In **DRC**, conflict over land barriers has been fuelled significantly by the demarcation of national parks and reserves. Despite inhabiting the forested areas of Kahuzi Biega National Park and Okapi Wildlife Reserve before these areas were accorded park status in the 1970s, indigenous peoples have been systematically underrepresented in decision-making around resource use. Alert is working with the Wildlife Conservation Society to resolve the tensions between current conservation efforts and livelihoods by elevating traditional Congolese conservation practices in the space often dominated by environmental protection activities that are driven by western values and ideals.¹²



A member of the indigenous gold panning and fishing community in Bardiya district, Nepal prepares to cast his net at the Karnali river. He is one among many in the downstream community impacted by climate change. © Kathaharu

Alert uses a rights-based research approach to equip civil society groups and local farmers with evidence on the shortcomings in public water policies and the subsequent impact these have on vulnerable people. This empowers civil society to participate meaningfully in climate-related discussions and contribute usefully to the development of state-level initiatives to reduce disparities, ensure right of access to water in marginalised regions and advocate for sustainable alternatives to the current methods which deplete resources.¹³

Before the military coup in **Myanmar** in 2021, Alert trained 346 women and 649 men on techniques to engage with government actors, from forestry officials to national ministers. This work had begun to contribute to improving forest governance and reducing illegal logging.¹⁴

In **Rwanda**, Alert trained farmers in participatory research and advocacy skills to enable them to articulate and voice their needs and concerns on food insecurity. The process focused explicitly on the empowerment of women farmers to express their own distinct requirements. The women farmers went on to influence the Rwandan Land Commission's policy on decentralising land services, making them more responsive to local needs.¹⁵

3. Step up collaboration and approaches that cut across sectors

The effects of climate crisis reverberate in all aspects of life, exacerbating the risks of conflict through many interlinked pathways, however the discussions on climate change and conflict often remain siloed. This separation continues to hamper the creation of innovative joint approaches that are needed to address the climate security risks. It is everyone's responsibility – governments, institutions and NGOs – to reach across these silos to promote holistic and conflict sensitive approaches that are attentive to the realities of climate-vulnerable communities.

Conflict needs to be understood holistically and not treated in isolation. Access to land and water is one of the root causes of conflict and is inextricably linked to climate. Alert's understanding of conflict takes an informed, inclusive and integrated approach, for example, through the Water, Peace and Security (WPS) partnership. Using cutting-edge technologies such as big data, artificial intelligence, machine learning and remote sensing to

analyse more than 80 different indicators, the partnership tool can predict conflict up to a year in advance. Visualising the data across global, regional and local maps allows users to develop forecasts and contextual indicators.

Peacebuilders in **Kenya** and **Mali** are working with local water resource users to integrate the WPS tool into management practices to overcome the ethical issues inherent in the use of artificial intelligence, such as unrepresentative data and biased algorithms, by providing a nuanced understanding of conflict contexts.¹⁶

Breaking out of silos and opening the lines of collaboration among peacebuilding, humanitarian, development, environmental and human rights organisations can deliver programmes based on holistic understandings of local realities. Alert's experiences of peacebuilding with communities desperate for basic necessities have exposed the futility of siloed support, particularly where the needs comprise the root causes of violence. The multipronged effects of climate crisis mean that programming must go beyond simply considering the environmental dimensions alone, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.¹⁷

Alert's research into slum upgrading projects in **Kenya** found that interventions across multiple sectors were more likely to reduce conflict, crime and flood risks. Nairobi's Kibera slum evidence suggests that the most valuable approach is one which addresses simultaneously the multiple risks that make Kibera residents most vulnerable, such as youth unemployment, lack of access to basic services and poor public health.¹⁸

Alert's conflict sensitive approach to economic development and governance in the **Philippines** works to break down silos by supporting multi-stakeholder processes in which local governments play roles of moderating and disciplining economic actors, ensuring that community engagement is balanced. Tailored training enables local governments to pursue more participatory development approaches and implement equitable economic policies that compel businesses to be sensitive to community needs. Capacity building and accompaniment support communities to negotiate seats at decision-making tables and get their voices heard on economic development issues. Educational opportunities help to build increased understanding between all actors. Youth leaders participating in internships within government agencies and the private sector learn about law development and operational processes.¹⁹

Local contexts are always complex, and collaboration is crucial to creating more effective responses. In **Lebanon**, Alert's work on the Bekaa dialogue demonstrates the value of inclusive platforms that bring together diverse actors to find solutions. Beka's population growth and pressure on local services from the arrival of Palestinian and Syrian refugees caused rising tensions over extreme water scarcity and pollution of local rivers. Dialogue platforms brought together community members, authorities and water experts to discuss and pilot green economy approaches. This was a first for local activists to engage directly with the Ministry of Agriculture. Given the lack of trust in local and national authorities within Lebanon's fragile context, particularly around fair and effective resource management, this is a ground-breaking outcome.²⁰

4. Put gender and power relations at the heart of climate security action

It is vital to build understanding of the ways that various conflict dynamics affect the specific experiences of women, men, girls, boys and other gender identities. Interconnected social dimensions – such as where a person lives, their socio-economic position, age and more – impact each individual, and also depend on the identity that each person holds.

Climate security and adaptation policies and programmes must consider the ways that discriminatory systems can overlap and negatively affect those needing support. Effective climate security action requires awareness raising, responsive programming and full gender representation in governance, alongside the transformation of discriminatory norms at the root of gender inequalities.

Gender is embedded in and at the nexus of conversations around climate and security. Discussions tend to focus on women's empowerment, and while important, this approach can neglect a fuller understanding of how conflict dynamics, gender norms and power dynamics influence the ways that different intersecting identities experience and are able to respond to climate change and conflict.²¹

Peacebuilding organisations need to build an evidence base that reveals the different impacts of climate on women and different intersectional identities in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.



Two women fetch water from a nearby spring in Shan state, Myanmar. © International Alert

Research conducted by Alert's partner the West Asia-North Africa (WANA) Institute in **Jordan** reveals the distinct ways that identities intersect with the politics of marginalisation and exclusion, in terms of climate-related impacts. In situations of water shortages, women face additional layers of burden, particularly Palestinian and Syrian refugees and female-headed households. These women are at risk of increased exposure to illness and harassment during their water collection responsibilities and at higher risk of domestic violence in the home.²² In **Lebanon**, a similar trend places Syrian refugee women in precarious situations when they are employed in the agricultural sector, for collection or retail sale of agricultural products. Despite a lack of hard data on this grey economy, it appears that salary differences are stark. Gender roles can also differ in the context of ecological stress, for example, women have shown agency by stepping in for the ecological protection of forests, in the absence of state action on the issue.²³

Working across the climate-conflict nexus requires programmes built on an understanding of intersectional gender inequalities, power relations and the harmful norms which perpetuate them.

Climate security action that places transformation of discriminatory gender norms at the centre is more likely to ensure equal representation and participation, therefore more positive peace.²⁴ In Karen communities in **Myanmar**, women's participation in forest use, management and governance is strongly shaped by prevailing gender norms.²⁵ Beyond being a human right for women to participate in the structures which affect their lives, women's participation is more likely to achieve natural resource management that is more representative and effective. It reduces instances of conflict between actors, similar to the effects of increasing women's involvement in peace processes.²⁶ Alert's findings show that nuanced dialogue which considers the roots of norms and shares messages on women's meaningful participation with both male and female stakeholders helps to erode discriminatory norms in forestry governance.²⁷

To build long-term positive peace and climate outcomes, women need full and equitable representation in governance. Alert is working towards this by fostering connections through inclusive dialogue, enabling women

Steps for including climate in peacebuilding in DRC

Peacebuilding organisations should install a climate and environmental lens across their programmes and operations. Piloted in **DRC**, Alert's environmental impact assessment methodology helps teams analyse their work and operations to take corrective measures and avoid negative impacts on climate and the environment as well as to maximise opportunities for bringing about positive environmental impacts.

The steps are:

1. Identify environmental vulnerabilities in the context and how they relate to conflict dynamics
2. Identify negative impacts on the environment from the proposed action
3. Brainstorm entry points for alternative environmentally-friendly activities
4. Review operational considerations, such as energy and transport
5. Assess project team capacity to reach the goals and partnerships which can fill the gaps.

This five-step process is adapted from an environmental assessment tool developed by Sida

to challenge the patriarchal natural resource management systems in **Mali**, which are usually governed by older men with processes that are rarely gender or conflict sensitive.²⁸ Women are most often sidelined from important discussions. The dialogue forums supported women to identify their own critical roles and agree future actions towards increasing their participation within decision-making processes. The training of women as co-facilitators gave them more confidence to challenge men on natural resource issues.

5. Climate action needs peacebuilding – and it can also do peacebuilding

Climate change can be an entry point for dialogue and a unifying common challenge within countries and across regions. Opportunities exist for peacebuilders to establish better relationships with the climate change community, to work collaboratively on transformative approaches to address climate security risks. Peacebuilding organisations are also responsible for investigating their wider programmes and operations to ensure they are working in sync with aims to reduce climate change impacts and environmental degradation.

The rise in armed conflicts means that peacebuilding efforts are essential in working towards a more stable, peaceful world. Peacebuilding is often a complex process of negotiating multiple heightened tensions. **In this context, it is possible to use climate change as a neutral, unifying**

issue, bringing together different stakeholders and sectors sharing the concern as an entry point for dialogue.

In **Tajikistan**, the government considers climate change a more acceptable entry point for engagement than natural resource management.²⁹ Alert's experiences show that many different stakeholders, including climate experts, peacebuilders, local and national authorities, civil society activists and most particularly young people are willing to work together on climate, to understand how it impacts on peace and stability. Peacebuilders can play key roles in creating spaces where groups can come together to discuss issues, build better shared understanding and shape solutions.

Be aware of and prepared for the sensitivities and tensions which may arise when bringing together different actors for the first time. In Bishkek, **Kyrgyzstan**, discussions between climate experts and conflict sensitivity specialists became tense when people from distinct disciplines with varying technical perspectives struggled to communicate sensitively and effectively about the crisis. After overcoming the initial difficulties, the discussions managed to establish a new cross-border civil society dialogue mechanism which included researchers, independent climate and conflict experts, national government representatives and local authorities, all willing to work together on climate security issues.³⁰ Interdisciplinary analysis of climate-conflict impacts along the Kyrgyzstan borders with Tajikistan and Kazakhstan led to agreed recommendations for regional governments. This rare and positive achievement demonstrates that **cross-border technical cooperation on resource issues can rebuild trust towards jointly addressing a common threat, such as climate change.**

Conclusion

The links between climate change and conflict are complex, context-specific and constantly in flux, due to changing circumstances.

It is vital to keep investing in deepening our understanding, particularly where the impacts of the climate crisis interact with the politics of marginalisation and exclusion. Populations vulnerable to climate change and violent conflict need swift, inclusive and well-considered action. The various stakeholders and sectors, particularly countries and regions most affected, need to come together and participate in global policy spaces, such as the UN Climate Change Conference, to agree on climate security action plans.

As the international community, policy-makers and practitioners step up their efforts to move the climate security discourse from diagnosis to action, this paper on lessons learned over 15 years of Alert's work on climate security aims to contribute to the movement by demonstrating actions that can and must be taken to support populations vulnerable to climate change and violent conflict.

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