

Climate and Conflict: a Double Disaster for the Poorest People

While world leaders have left Copenhagen with an inadequate “climate agreement”, the effects of climate change are already experienced quite seriously in many places in the world. In conflict countries like Afghanistan and Sudan the situation of the people is even more distressing. Inhabitants



of fragile states are among the poorest people in the world. The lack of a functioning government makes them even more vulnerable.

In the Dutch newspaper Trouw (January 6th, 2010) Mark van Dorp and Eric van de Giessen plead for a special approach for fragile states, which will offer people in these countries more protection to climate change. This will prevent them from being hit by a double disaster.

Photograph: Piet Wit, CIMIC Operation (Civil-Military Cooperation), Uruzgan, Afghanistan 2007.

A double disaster

In the Himalayas many glaciers are melting. Many Africans face rising temperatures and increasing droughts. Knowledge and capacity to tackle these major problems is often insufficient. For countries involved in a civil war or those slowly recovering from a conflict situation, a double disaster is looming. These so-called fragile states will not be able to adapt to climatic changes in time. There is a lack of good governance and democratic control mechanisms to ensure that money aimed at climate adaptation is spent well and wisely. In these countries desertification and water scarcity could even lead to new, additional conflicts.

In Afghanistan, for instance, melting glaciers in the high mountains of the Pamir and the Hindu Kush seriously threaten normal water flows. In recent years this has already led to serious droughts and water shortages. This will have an impact on agricultural productivity and the health situation of the already heavily stressed Afghan people. While the Taliban is recruiting new fighters, the Afghan government hardly takes any measures to address the looming water shortages. This lack of water may soon create very difficult conditions for agricultural production, forcing many Afghan farmers to join the Taliban as a last resort.

Also in Darfur, where civil war is still continuing, climatic changes are key motives for the beginning and continuation of violent confrontations. According to the United Nations, water shortages and a lack of fertile farmland and pastures for cattle have aggravated the conflict, leading to millions of displaced persons. This spiral of drought, water scarcity, food shortages and increasing violence is undermining stability and security worldwide.

In 2008, 20 million people have been displaced as a result of climate related natural disasters. Western and local aid organizations and the United Nations are deploying their limited financial resources to help people building up resilience to the effects of global climate change.

Copenhagen and beyond...

At the climate summit in Copenhagen the rich countries have pledged to give 30 billion dollar – mounting to 100 billion in 2020 – to help developing countries adapt to the negative effects of

climate change. Governments of developing countries can use these funds for building dams or for training farmers in growing more drought-resistant crops, for instance. In countries involved in civil war these funds will probably not be spent well and wisely. Democratic principles, as adopted in many other countries in the world, do not function in fragile states as these governments are often not capable, nor willing, to protect the most vulnerable people. Other, more innovative ways have to be found, therefore, to tackle climate change in fragile states.

A positive outcome of the climate summit is the decision to set up a special fund to protect tropical forests and reduce destructive logging. After all, deforestation currently causes 20% of global CO2 emissions. This compensation fund (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries, or REDD) offers great opportunities for many developing countries. In fragile states, however, management of forests and other natural resources is generally rather poor, making it unlikely that these countries will benefit much from the compensation fund. Poor management and unequal distribution of natural resources in these countries could even lead to increased tensions between people, creating more instability.

These findings encouraged representatives of the Netherlands armed forces, the Ministry of Defense, refugee organizations, environmental groups and scientific institutions to come up with common solutions. In October 2009, the Dutch Working Group Ecology and Development organized the seminar “Nature for Peace”.

One recommendation that came out of the seminar is to deploy (Dutch) military and civil experts during peace operations to help improve forest and water management, fishery and agriculture. This idea would be well applicable in the Afghan province of Uruzgan, where 85 percent of the population depends on agriculture. According to Piet Wit, Major in the Civil-Military Cooperation Battalion of the Dutch Armed Forces (CIMIC), sustainable ecosystem management is crucial. Major Wit: ‘there will be no security in Uruzgan without ecological security and there will be no stability without sustainability.’

Apart from the deployment of experts during peace operations, more aid should be provided at the local level. A lot of money will be provided to developing countries, enabling them to adapt themselves to climate change. In order to spend this money properly in fragile states, a large part should be spent through humanitarian organizations, grassroots organizations as well as through churches or religious groups. These are often the only functioning institutional channels in these fragile states.

The billions of dollars that have been pledged in Copenhagen need to be spent efficiently, flexibly and transparently, benefiting as much as possible from local organizations, knowledge and experiences. This is an essential prerequisite for the population to prepare themselves for imminent climate disasters. This approach will prevent the poorest people from being hit by a double disaster of climate and conflict.

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