Beyond Climate Conflict: The Role of Human Security in the Climate Security Debate

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Introduction

In August this year, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told a Global Environment Forum in Korea (at the same time that governments were meeting in Bonn for five days of informal climate negotiations) that failure to act quickly on climate change could lead to a worsening of tensions, social unrest and even violence.[2] The proposition that environmental degradation is or should be a security concern is no longer a novelty on the non-traditional security agenda. Put broadly, environmental security falls within two sometimes competing approaches to non-traditional security (other terms include new security, transnational security, comprehensive security, and non-conventional security). The first of these focuses on non-traditional threats to traditional 'referent objects' (that is, states) and worries about the potential for conflict and political violence as a result.[3] The second takes account of what might be called 'non-traditional' referents, including individuals, communities, societies, economies and, where environmental issues are concerned, possibly even species and ecosystems.

The genesis of this conceptualization of human security lies in ideas articulated initially by the United Nations Development Programme in its 1994 Human Development Report. The UNDP presented human security as a universal, people-centred concern with 'human life and dignity' and as an antidote to conventional views of security that had 'for too long … been shaped by the potential for conflict between states … [and] equated with … threats to a country's borders'.[4] While environmental degradation was not the only component of human security explored by the UNDP, the report nevertheless identified the 'basic question of human survival on an environmentally fragile planet' as a central matter of concern. This theme was also picked up by the Commission on Global Governance which argued that [inter alia]

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[2] Remarks by the United Nations Secretary-General to the Global Environment Forum, Incheon, Republic of Korea, 11 August 2009, http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statments_full.asp?statID=557# <accessed 12 October 2009>

[3] The literature on environmental security is now extensive. For useful explorations of the various interpretations and contestations surrounding the term and its policy implications see: Simon Dalby, *Environmental security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), Jon Barnett, *The meaning of environmental security* (London: Zed Books, 2001), Lorraine Elliott, *The global politics of the environment* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), chapter 9; 'Environment and security: what's the connection?', *Australian Defence Force Journal*, no. 174 (2007): 37-50.

[4] United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 1994* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 22.

'threats to the earth's life support systems … challenge the security of people far more than the threat of external aggression'.[5]

Of the two security models, it is the more traditional statist approach that has dominated the recent resurgence of interest in the link between security and climate change. In a series of reports prepared by government agencies and defense and security think tanks climate change is presented as a threat multiplier, overstretching societies' adaptive capacities and creating or exacerbating political instability and violence, possibly to the extent of inter-state conflict. This is an updated version of predictions made by scholars in the late 1980s and early 1990s that environmental degradation could contribute to instability, the 'disruption of legitimised and authoritative social relations'[6] and 'civil turmoil and outright violence'.[7] While most reject the dystopia of a 2004 Pentagon report that anticipated 'nuclear conflict, mega-droughts, famine and widespread rioting', [8] all assume that some form of disruption and conflict – ranging from civil unrest through intercommunal violence to political radicalisation and, in extreme situations, state collapse. This is thought most likely in conditions where state capacity to manage the ecological, social and economic impacts of climate change is limited even though the empirical evidence for such claims remains sketchy and often untested.

Human security concerns often appear incidental, or relevant only to the extent that those who are affected or made insecure by the impacts of climate change are themselves recast as the sources of social tension, civil unrest and other pressures. Yet it is people who ultimately bear the cost of climate-related environmental harm through increased vulnerability, poverty, disease, loss of livelihoods, and food insecurity sometimes to the extent of real malnutrition and starvation.

Northeast and Southeast Asia

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports a worrying litany of likely climate change impacts for the Asia Pacific region: a decline in crop yield, an

[5] Commission on Global Governance, *Our global neighbourhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 79.
[6] Thomas F. Homer-Dixon 'On the threshold: environmental changes as causes of acute conflict', *International Security*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1991), pp. 76-116 at p. 9.
[7] Norman Myers, 'Environment and security', *Foreign Policy*, no. 74 (1989), p. 24.
[8] Cited at (http://observer.guardian.co.uk …). Admittedly, the report was explicitly intended to assess likely outcomes in the face of *abrupt* climate change. See Peter Schwartz and Doug Randall, *An abrupt climate change scenario and its implications for United States National Security*, October 2003, for a public version of the report.

increase in climate-induced disease, an increased risk of hunger and water resource scarcity, an increase in the number and severity of glacier melt-related floods, significant loss of coastal ecosystems, many millions of people in coastal communities at high risk from flooding, and an increased risk of extinction for many species of fauna and flora.

In a region which is reported to have an already higher-than-average number of internal armed conflicts and struggles of various kinds,[9] the multiplier effect of climate induced resources scarcities and stresses should not be entirely discounted. Burma, Indonesia and the Philippines are among those countries where there is thought to be a high risk of climate-related armed conflict. Those with a high risk of climate-related political instability include Cambodia, Laos, North Korea, Thailand and Timor-Leste.[10] Climate security analysts have also worried about the potential for climate change to increase the likelihood of state failure in the Asia Pacific if governments are unable to respond effectively to the social and economic challenges of climate change or the kinds of civil unrest and communal violence that might result.

Challenging the orthodoxies: climate change from a human security perspective

There are also important lessons to be learned from a human security approach to climate change that starts with (and indeed goes beyond) a clear and simple recognition of the impact of climate change on the lives of millions of people in the Asia Pacific. Of the ten countries in the world most imperilled by climate change in terms of the *number* of people likely to be affected, six are in the Asia Pacific region: China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines.[11] In a region in which subsistence lifestyles constitute a significant sector of human livelihoods, the poor in both urban and rural areas remain the most disadvantaged and impoverished by climate change, a condition the Asian Development Bank refers to as 'environmental poverty'.[12] In conditions of economic weakness (the term used by International Alert) the range of income possibilities is narrowed and the state is also deprived of resources with which to

[9] Benjamin Reilly, 'Internal conflict and regional security in the Asia Pacific', *Pacifica Review*, 14(1) (2002) pp. 7-21 at p. 8.
[10] See Jan Smith and Janani Vivekananda, *A climate of conflict: the links between climate change, peace and war* (London: International Alert, 2007)
[11] The Economy and Environment Program for Southeast Asia (EEPSEA) reports that climate change is less rapid in Southeast Asia when compared with global averages; see Herminia Francisco et al., *Climate change: impacts, adaptation and policy in Southeast Asia* (Singapore: EEPSEA 2008), p. 5.
[12] See ADB, *Environmental Poverty: New Perspectives and Implications for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific* (Manila: ADB, 2007).

meet people's needs.[13] Marginal incomes provide little or no safety net against health burdens, food insecurity, flooding and drought, or other impacts of climate change. And those who are economically marginalised are also least able to pursue adaptive strategies, least able to buy their way out of the impacts of climate change. The IPCC has also noted that 'projected climate change-related exposures are likely to affect the health status of millions of people, particularly those with low adaptive capacity' through increases in malnutrition, greater frequency of death, injury and disease from heat-waves and other disasters of nature, an increased disease burden including diarrhea, cardio-respiratory illness, and infectious diseases.[14]

A human security model which takes people (or peoples) as the security referent questions the 'taken for granted' assumptions and analyses in the policy community about climate change, threat and (in)security. Making people and their communities the security human security helps us to think differently about those 'triggers' that are often identified in a more orthodox approach to climate insecurity as the threat multipliers. For example, a human security model demands that we worry about the way that climate-related food insecurity, malnutrition and an increased disease burden exacerbates poverty and misery for the millions of people who are affected rather than worrying about this only as a trigger for civil unrest and potential extremism. From a human security perspective unwilling migration from unsustainable or uninhabitable lands is a source of insecurity for those whose lands and homes can no longer support them. This challenges the representation of so-called 'climate refugees' or climate migrants as a potential source of pressure on or threat to states. Vulnerability to the kinds of natural disasters (or disasters of nature) and humanitarian crises that accompany severe climate change is more than just a source of demand for financial and physical intervention and stretching of peacetime military deployment (among other things) by countries with the capacity to do so.[15]

Climate security strategies: adaptation and social resilience

[13] Smith and Vivekananda, *A climate of conflict*, p. 3.
[14] IPCC, *Climate change 2007: impacts, adaptation and vulnerability – contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 12.
[15] Purvis and Busby point out that 'between 1990 and 1999, an estimated 188 million people a year were affected by natural disasters, 6 times more than the 31 million annually affected by armed conflict'. Nigel Purvis and Joshua Busby, 'The security implications of climate change for the UN system', in *The United Nations and environmental security*, ECSP Report no. 10, (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, Environmental Change and Security Program), p. 68

Human security approaches also have something to say about how to respond to climate insecurity. The expectation in more traditional, adversarial models of climate security is that governments should work cooperatively to avoid the kinds of tensions that might result from competition for resources and the cross-border challenges of 'climate refugees' but should also prepare themselves for possible demands on their defence forces to protect borders against refugees, to protect strategic assets and supply lines, or to assist in cases of climate-related humanitarian crises or civil unrest. Underlying this has been a focus on climate mitigation as a preventive strategy. But it is too late to rely on mitigation alone as a climate security strategy – whether that means preventing conflict or whether it means protecting people and their communities (and the complex urban, rural and coastal ecosystems in which they live).

A human security model demands strategies that have the potential to save lives, increase individual adaptive capacity, build societal resilience and lessen both the chances of conflict and the risks faced by individual people and their communities. Adaptation can serve as a traditional security response, to reduce the potential for conflict and instability, and as a human security response, to support the lives of those who are most vulnerable to climate-induced conflict and to the social and economic consequences of climate change. Planning for adaptation means that people and societies are likely to be more rather than less resilient to the challenges of climate change. More resilient societies are those in which structures are in place to manage competition for resources which, in turn, can reduce the risk of unrest and social violence in the face of the impacts of climate change. The IPCC has identified a vast array of potential adaptive responses – technological, behavioural, managerial and regulatory.[16] However the emphasis in a human security approach to climate insecurity is that the development and governance of effective adaptive responses cannot rely on 'top-down' decision-making and technocratic responses. It requires openness to the views and voices of affected communities. It demands dialogue and social engagement, inclusivity and transparency.[17]

[16] IPCC, *Summary for policy-makers: Contribution of working group II*, p. 19.
[17] Smith and Vivekananda, *A climate of conflict,* p. 4.