

Briefing Note No. 7

“Climate change, violence and young people”
Report by the International Institute for Strategic Studies, January 2015
International Institute for Strategic Studies, London UK

Summary

This 21 page report assesses how youth bulges and climate change can interact and multiply the risk of violence in regions already vulnerable to poor governance and social and political instability. Violence is defined here as civil conflicts, anti-state political violence and civil unrest. The report identifies sub-Saharan Africa as the region most at risk, with several other sub-regions facing concurrent demographic and climate dynamics that could negatively impact the security environment. The report recommends prioritizing **equitable, climate-resilient economic growth**, and **strengthening democratic institutions** to improve livelihoods and political inclusion for young people, in order to promote peace and stability. The research was commissioned by UNICEF-UK for the start of their five-year campaign on long-term threats to youth, and was co-authored by the International Institute for Strategic Studies and International Alert. It is the first research report on youth, climate and violence linkages. It uses case studies on Egypt, Guatemala, Indonesia and Kenya, all of which have youth bulges and limited resilience to climate impacts.

In detail

The study looks out to 2050, when global population is projected to reach 9.6 billion and both climate impacts and the concentration of youth bulges in developing countries will be more evident. Many of these countries are currently fragile, and are predicted to be among the most exposed to the impacts of climate change, yet have the lowest resilience and capacity to adapt.

The first section outlines the links between climate change, environmental stress and violence, highlighting the ways that **weak state capacities, poverty and unemployment** can increase risk. It notes that youth are among the most vulnerable to climate impacts. The authors take care to not overstate the links between population growth and environmental degradation, noting that technology and consumption patterns mediate this relationship.

The second section describes the conditions under which youth bulges are associated with increased risk of violence, such as **lack of economic opportunity, weak political structures and poorly-serviced urbanization**. It argues that large youth bulges increase the risks of civil violence occurring, for example by mobilising large numbers of people for political protest, but that any such violence is only likely when other factors conducive to political upheaval are present.

The report gives an overview of the geographical distribution of large youth cohorts, which will continue to be located predominantly in sub-Saharan Africa, the region at the highest risk of climate- and youth-related security stressors. The report also identifies other regions where state fragility, climate vulnerability and youth bulges overlap: Central America's Northern Triangle; Middle Eastern countries including Yemen, Iraq and Palestine; and several countries in Asia including Afghanistan, East Timor, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

Reinforcing multiple risk factors

A key theme of the report is the **compounding risk factors** created by youth bulges, existing drivers of insecurity, and climate impacts. Conditions such as high youth unemployment, unmet expectations, rapid urban population growth, poorly functioning democratic institutions, political grievances and exclusion can increase the risk of violence in settings with

large youth cohorts. Weak basic service provision on the part of the state is often correlated with youth bulges, and reinforces many of these risks.

Climate change impacts have the potential to further exacerbate all of these issues, the report argues, and this effect may be particularly acute if an unstable political or economic environment impairs a country's capacity to implement climate **adaptation** measures. The report concludes that the areas where these factors overlap and interact may experience higher risks of violence as a consequence.

For example, **Egypt** is the most populous Arab country, with a third of Egyptians under the age of 15. Free education and limited economic opportunities have resulted in a high unemployment rate, fueling grievances with the government and civil unrest. Egypt's vulnerability to water stress, sea level rise and food price shocks will increase as climate impacts accelerate. Its unstable political environment limits climate adaptation prospects and economic growth opportunities.

Economics

The study highlights the **key role** of economic factors in influencing the risk of violence in both climate- and youth-related contexts. In order to absorb youth into the **labour market** and harness their potential to boost growth and development, the report recommends that education systems evolve alongside economic policies and labour-market strategies to prepare for larger numbers of graduates, foster inclusive growth and to transition to economic activity that is resilient in a climate-changed future.

However, it warns that states experiencing situations of fragility tend to lack the governance capacities, stable macroeconomic conditions and investment environment required to implement these policies. The report closes by reaffirming that **building economic and social capital** in order to promote peace and stability will be particularly relevant in countries that face the combined challenges of youth bulges and limited resilience to climate impacts.

Assessment

Climate and demographic models provide mid-century projections with reasonably high levels of confidence, so the identification of countries where these two risk factors will be highest is fairly reliable. However, both risk factors are subject to moderating forces. These include improved development and basic service provision, e.g. for sexual and reproductive health measures, which could slow population momentum. Implementation of climate adaptation measures in the next two decades could reduce climate vulnerability in high-risk countries, making projections of combined vulnerability to these two drivers in 2050 somewhat less certain.

This report is the first piece of research to examine the interlinkages between risks associated with youthful demographic profiles and climate impacts. It was shaped by meeting the communication needs of launching UNICEF's campaign on long-term threats to youth, and so devotes attention to overviews of the basic connections between climate change, demographic factors and security. Within these broad associations, it identifies key dynamics where youth and climate may interact to drive fragility, and policy interventions that might minimize risk. However, it is limited in terms of providing more specific regional- or national-level recommendations. It provides a starting point for understanding these associations but acknowledges the need for further detailed exploration.

In sum, the report finds that the combination of climate change and large youth cohorts within challenging social conditions is problematic. Because economic and social marginalisation is a key part of the problem, **inclusivity is a fundamental part** of the long-term solution. Governments need to know and understand more about these linkages, to design policies that address the economic and political needs of youth and promote resilience to climate impacts.