

## Thematic Readings

### Urban Risks, Climate Change and Conflict June 2015

#### Overview

Climate impacts can amplify urban risks in ways that impact the security environment. Given the density of population, infrastructure and assets present in urban areas, extreme weather events including hydro-meteorological events, storm surges, and heat waves can cause fatalities and a breakdown of social order and the rule of law. Human vulnerability is concentrated in cities, and if local government and institutions are unable to mitigate risk from climate impacts, or their attempts to do so exacerbate tensions and justice issues between economic or ethnic groups, this can result in social unrest and violence. These reports look at some of the ways that these dynamics could link to conflict risk in countries with multiple social challenges, low resilience and difficult underlying security vulnerabilities.

#### Key Reading

#### **USAID, 'Climate Change and Conflict in West African Cities: A policy brief on findings from Lagos, Nigeria and Accra, Ghana'**

This study was commissioned by USAID to address the lack of climate change and conflict research that specifically focused on large urban areas. It explores whether the effects of climate change are likely to lead to conflict scenarios in West African cities, and if so, under what circumstances and over what time frame. It also looks at actions that governments and donors can take to minimize these risks.

The study focuses on Lagos, Nigeria and Accra, Ghana. The two cities face differing underlying sociopolitical risks and exposure to climate-related hazards. Both are at risk from flooding, and the report looks particularly at how each city should deal with climate risks to poor, illegal, low-lying, and already vulnerable neighbourhoods.

In Lagos, around 70 percent of people live in these types of areas. Evicting and relocating people from flood-prone lands have proven highly controversial, with a high potential for conflict.

The rich/poor divide is another potential point of friction highlighted in the report, alongside a trend for increases in resentment or rejection of new migrants to the city. The authors identify this as the start of a potentially chronic problem with political reverberations that could further stress Nigeria's already fractured political environment.

By contrast, Accra has a far more stable national political environment, but torrential rains are having an increasing impact on the population. Climate change will exacerbate this, while also contributing to migration from hotter, dryer northern areas to the coast.

In response to fatal flooding events in 2011, Accra pursued a plan to reduce flood risk. However, slum residents vigorously resisted measures to relocate them, forcing a redesign of the

project that focused instead on slum improvement. The report points out that the difficult issue of relocation extends to dozens of other slum communities in West African urban areas and is almost certain to become more acute with time.

The report finds it unlikely that climate stresses will lead to the mobilization of significant organized conflict in Lagos or Accra in the near future. However, the continued proliferation and growth of densely populated settlements in dangerously vulnerable low-lying areas will result in a proportionate escalation of economic costs associated with disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. The primary victims of flood-related disasters will be the very poor, and in Lagos, they are also likely to be migrants from different ethnic groups. According to the authors, over the medium to long term, these increasing pressures along lines of class and ethnicity could result in social explosions that endanger public security.

The report warns that as long as problems with renovating or relocating vulnerable slums are allowed to fester and multiply without a satisfactory resolution, the probability of future conflict will steadily increase. Among the report's recommendations are that projects for building physical infrastructure be accompanied by strengthened government institutions and 'social infrastructure', including arrangements that allow for the expression of citizen grievances and participation in the formulation of solutions.

This report is the sole piece of research to focus on climate risks and security dynamics in specific urban contexts, and as such is the most comprehensive examination of these dynamics. It goes into detail on regional climate change model predictions for Nigeria and Ghana, as well as ongoing adaptation initiatives that could mitigate future risks. It is also grounded in illustrative examples from the case studies. The potential points of friction identified in the report are applicable to other contexts, specifically with regard to the potential for tensions to arise over differing levels of vulnerability between richer and poorer residents, different ethnic communities, and established residents versus more recent migrants. Effective urban governance is identified as key to mitigating these risks.

>> USAID (2013): ['Climate Change and Conflict in West African Cities: A policy brief on findings from Lagos, Nigeria and Accra, Ghana'](#), African and Latin American Resilience to Climate Change Project, USAID, Washington DC.

### **Additional Reading**

**International Institute for the Environment and Development (IIED), 'Understanding the nature and scale of urban risk in low- and middle-income countries and its implications for humanitarian preparedness, planning and response'**

This report is a synthesis review of the literature on disaster risk in cities. It addresses climate impacts alongside other contextual factors relevant to disaster risk including governance, poverty, demographics and migration. It notes that cities can often be safe places too, with high life expectancies and infrastructure and services that reduce risk.

It considers climate impacts within the context of how projections about future risk are generated, noting that the scale of climate risk in many cities in Africa, Asia and Latin America is largely unknown due to a lack of local analysis. Risks from flooding (both inland and coastal), water scarcity, increased air pollution and heat waves, as well as indirect effects such as food and water shortages, are the climatic changes that will have the greatest impact on cit-

ies. The report says that risks arising from the direct and indirect impacts of climate change will lead to changes in population mobility and distribution.

This review provides an in-depth review of the literature and contains an extensive bibliography on this field of study. However, because it primarily focuses on disasters that trigger a humanitarian response, it does not focus on the impacts of climate change on longer-term, slower-onset disasters - for example those that affect food security and health. Regarding the links between climate change, human insecurity and risk of violent conflict, the report only states that these are not well understood, reflecting the existence of an academic debate in the literature on these linkages.

>> UK Government Department for International Development (DFID) (2012): [‘Understanding the nature and scale of urban risk in low- and middle-income countries and its implications for humanitarian preparedness, planning and response’](#), International Institute for the Environment and Development (IIED).

### **Brookings: ‘Urban disasters, conflict and violence: implications for humanitarian work’**

While this piece is written for humanitarian actors, it illustrates the general linkages between one type of climate impact (disasters) and violence in urban settings. It begins by reviewing the upward trend in urbanization and the attendant increase in disaster risk, noting that two thirds of megacities are in coastal zones, and susceptible to flooding and sea level rise. The author also notes that 14% of the world’s population lives in slums, a figure which is likely to increase, and that most urban growth is expected in cities with populations currently under 5 million, which is often overlooked in discussions of where urban risks will be greatest.

The author focuses on interpersonal violence and violence carried out by gangs, specifically as it relates to humanitarian operations in urban post-disaster contexts. Interpersonal violence, including gender-based violence, has been demonstrated to increase after natural disasters, and the author notes that there are usually pre-existing patterns of violence within the society which are intensified in the aftermath of a disaster.

The author highlights some considerations for humanitarian actors involved in disaster response and the security dynamics relevant to their work, for example the extent to which their operation should address long-term pre-existing patterns of violence. The author also makes the point that natural disasters and conflicts have many similarities in their impacts, yet are addressed very differently by the humanitarian community.

Although this piece is briefer than the other two reports included here, and focuses more on the implications for humanitarian actors rather than conflict risk as a whole, it provides a helpful illustration of how disasters – whether climate-related or not – can impact important human security dynamics in urban contexts.

>> Elizabeth Ferris (2012): [‘Urban disasters, conflict and violence: implications for humanitarian work’](#). Remarks given on February 28, 2012 at a workshop for staff of World Vision on natural disasters in urban areas. Brookings, Washington DC.