

The European Security and Defence Union

Climate Change

A global security and humanitarian challenge



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The changing climate plays a very real role in exacerbating and prolonging the existing crisis

Climate change, conflict and crisis in Lake Chad

Source: Janani Vivekananda/adelpi

by Janani Vivekananda, Senior Adviser, Climate Change and Peacebuilding, adelphi, Berlin

Lake Chad is a geophysical and ecological miracle. Situated in the arid Sahel region, two large rivers create an oasis in an otherwise water scarce region. But today, the Lake Chad region is best known for armed conflict, Boko Haram and one of the world's largest humanitarian crises.

The roots of the current crisis

The region is currently suffering the world's largest humanitarian crisis with approximately 10.7 million people in need of immediate humanitarian assistance.

While the current crisis was triggered by violence linked to armed groups such as Boko Haram, the situation has deep roots in longstanding developmental challenges, namely widespread inequality and decades of political marginalisation of the communities in the region. This has instilled an entrenched sense of exclusion and lack of trust between communities and government. Against this backdrop, the region also faces significant environmental stresses.

The changing climate plays a very real role in exacerbating and prolonging the existing crisis. But the tendency to draw a direct line of causation between

the alleged shrinking of the lake as a driver of the conflict and intractability of the humanitarian emergency misses the real role of climate change. Indeed, current research demonstrates that global warming is not shrinking Lake Chad which grows and shrinks intra- and inter-annually¹. Instead, it is the more changeable and unpredictable rainfall patterns – resulting from climate change – that are having the most impact on the resilience of the communities around the lake.

Climate change is a risk multiplier

The resulting resource scarcity, livelihood insecurity and extreme poverty have exacerbated tensions between pastoralists, farmers and fishers. These stresses are also taking place in the same space where young people are vulnerable to recruitment by non-state armed groups such as Boko Haram. The engagement and retention of individuals in armed opposition groups feeds into armed conflict and contributes to widespread internal as well as cross-border displacement – nurturing a vicious cycle of fragility and armed violence. The impacts of climate change on communities around Lake Chad further exacerbate these pressures. With support from UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), the Dutch and the German governments, adelphi is leading a landmark climate-fragility risk assessment of the Lake Chad region to better understand these risks from the ground up. With a team of local conflict researchers and climate change experts from the Institut

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Photo: adelphi

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The water of Lake Chad sustains agriculture in the Sahel region. Here: Women working in a plantation in Chad

Photo: © Alexander Carius

“Climate change is exacerbating conflicts over natural resources.”

Janani Vivekananda

de recherche pour le développement (IRD), this assessment is the first step in understanding the joint risks and informing of solutions linking the region’s complex problems.

Four key climate-fragility risks

Research to date points to four key climate-fragility risks affecting the stability of the region:

1. **Climate and ecological changes are increasing livelihood insecurity and social tensions:** the variability of the weather was increasing before the Boko Haram crisis, but communities were mostly able to cope or adapt. However, increased climate variability – namely more unpredictable inter- and intra-annual rainfall patterns – is decreasing livelihoods, livelihood diversity and resilience, and is leading to adverse livelihood strategies (such as deforestation and sex for food) because of the conflict². These pressures are damaging social cohesion and increasing tensions and conflicts at all levels, from within families to between different ethno-linguistic groups.
2. **Conflict and fragility are increasing vulnerability to climate risks:** the ongoing conflict has significantly undermined community resilience – including the ability of the population to adapt to climate change. For example, the blocked access to parts of the lake by Boko Haram or state security forces mean that communities have lost major livelihood diversification options such as fishing and farming the fertile lands around the shore of the lake. This reduced coping capacity impedes future efforts to address conflict and climate risks.
3. **Natural resources conflicts:** climate change is exacerbating conflicts over natural resources. There was a trend of increasing conflicts around natural resources before the conflict with Boko Haram, in particular over land and water, often between different occupational groups, such as pastoralists and farmers. These conflicts decreased in the context of the ongoing conflict with armed opposition groups, but

are seeing a recent resurgence. After the Boko Haram crisis stabilises, it is likely that they will gain in salience and it is as yet uncertain how they will play out in the new context of lesser resilience.

4. **Livelihood insecurity and recruitment into armed groups:** recruitment into non-state armed opposition groups is increasing and retention rates are sustained in the face of social and economic inequality, increasingly vulnerable livelihoods and a history of financial incentives offered by armed groups to join them. The rise in recruitment, retention rates, and an emerging trend of returnees choosing to go back to Boko Haram from IDP (Internally Displaced People) camps is linked to the increased insecurity of livelihoods. This is, in turn, linked to climate change, man-made ecological damage, namely deforestation, conflict making jobs less viable and the lack of livelihood options and equitable service provision in IDP camps. To clarify: climate change does not create terrorists, nor does it turn law abiding citizens into criminals. But a warming world acts as a threat multiplier, worsening existing risks and making it harder to work on solutions. The specific nature of the linked implications of climatic variability, man-made ecological damage and conflict on different livelihood strategies are still unclear and need to be better understood.

What should be done?

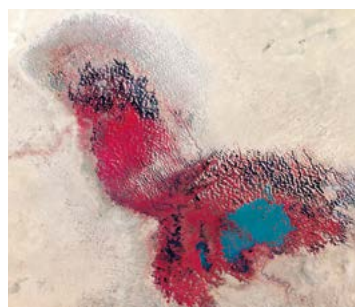
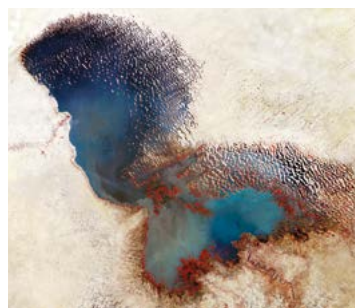
Taking these risks together, they create a self-enforcing feedback loop between increasing livelihood insecurity, climate change vulnerability and conflict and fragility. The latter are decreasing the resilience of communities, making them more vulnerable to climate change, which at the same time is further undermining livelihoods and exacerbating the competition around scarcer natural resources. If not broken, this vicious circle threatens to perpetuate the current crisis and take the region further down the path of conflict and fragility.



Lake Chad

Lake Chad sits in the Sahel and spans more than 2.4 million square kilometers. Bordered by mountain ranges, its water sustains people, animals, fishing, irrigation, and economic activity in Chad, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Niger. The water level is largely controlled by the inflow from rivers, notably the Chari River from the south and, seasonally, the Komodugu-Yobe from the northwest. Inflow fluctuates also with the shifting patterns of rainfall associated with the West African Monsoon, making the system very sensitive to drought. Extreme swings in Lake Chad's water levels are not new, but in the past half century, Lake Chad has lost most of its water, which means that the once-great lake now spans less than a tenth of the area it covered in the 1960s. Resource managers and scientists are concerned about the dramatic loss of fresh water that is the lifeblood of more than 30 million people.

source: www.nasa.gov



Satellite pictures of Lake Chad, 1973 and 2017

Photo: © NASA

In order to tackle this crisis with any kind of sustainability – even in the short-run – there needs to be a thorough understanding of what caused it to spiral in the first place. Despite the significant role climate change plays in shaping the risk landscape, there is as yet no analysis or process which explicitly takes into account the role climate change plays in either risk or the shaping of appropriate responses. The current emergency relief and stabilisation efforts in the region will be



The Lake Chad Basin is currently suffering one of the world's greatest humanitarian crises. Approximately 10.7 million people are in need of immediate humanitarian assistance.

- 80-90% of the population depend on agriculture, fisheries and livestock for their livelihoods
- 5 million people are expected to face severe food insecurity during the 2018 lean season
- 2.4 million people have been displaced

Map: © Floki Fotos, stock.adobe.com

nothing more than a superficial solution if responses do not address the accelerant of fragility that is climate change. The only effective solutions will be ones that address the underlying causes of the crisis, and that are durable and sensitive to the environmental changes brought about by a warming world. That means ensuring that stabilisation, humanitarian and development efforts in the region better understand the interactions between environmental factors and the security and humanitarian context to inform effective responses. This would involve greater cognisance of the linked conflict, humanitarian, environmental and developmental risks in the region and taking steps to ensure interventions do no harm to climate-fragility risks. For example, reintegration and resettlement programmes should include a clear focus on livelihoods. The planning around these livelihoods needs to take into account the variable climatic conditions in the region to ensure they are viable in the face of increased climate variability.

Risk assessment is only a first step

A climate-fragility risk assessment is a good first step to understanding the joint risks and informing of joint solutions to the complex problems faced in the region. But any assessment will only be as good as the institutional will and capacity to take up and respond to its findings. This means generating understanding of and buy-in to these compound risks across historically siloed institutions. The EEAS high level event "Climate, Security and Peace: The Time for Action" (see pp. 32-33) on 22 June in Brussels was a positive milestone towards generating greater awareness and buy-in. The proof of this will be evidenced in joined-up programming on the ground.

→ Web: <https://www.adelphi.de/en>

1 See Nagarajan et al, 2018: Available at <https://bit.ly/2LvV3ve>

2 These causal links are strong and easy to trace through qualitative studies.