

## The Warming Conflict: Climate Change and its Impacts on Afghanistan's Ongoing Conflicts

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### ABSTRACT

There might be various and several reasons for the conflicts in Afghanistan, such as foreign political interventions, illiteracy, poverty, the geography of the country, ethnic and linguistic diversity, social injustice, various kinds of corruption, and generally a lack of rule of law. Climate change does not seem to be a direct factor in the conflicts in Afghanistan, but it is one of the main indirect factors in the conflicts. The link between climate change and conflicts in Afghanistan has not been the focus of studies yet, so little literature is found in the area. However, the intersection of climate change and conflict in Afghanistan presents a critical area of study, as environmental stressors exacerbate the already volatile socio-political landscape. Looking at the importance of the link between climate change and unresolved conflicts in Afghanistan, a literature review was done to find out how these two link to each other. Particularly, this paper explores the multifaceted impacts of climate change on Afghanistan's ongoing conflict, analyzing how rising temperatures, unpredictable precipitation, and extreme weather events contribute to resource scarcity and displacement, thereby fueling tensions and violence. Drawing on recent environmental data, conflict analysis, and case studies, the paper argues that climate change acts as a threat multiplier, intensifying competition over natural resources, undermining livelihoods, and complicating peacebuilding efforts. The findings underscore the urgency of integrating climate adaptation strategies into conflict resolution and development programs to foster long-term stability and resilience in Afghanistan. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for national and international stakeholders to address the nexus of climate change and conflict, emphasizing the need for collaborative, cross-sectoral approaches to mitigate risks and capitalize on opportunities for peace.

**Keywords:** Climate Change, Conflicts, Conflict Resolution, Migration, Scarcity of Resources

### INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has defined climate change as "a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable periods." (UNFCCC, 2012). Climate change has caused negative impacts globally, such as droughts, floods, storms, untimely cold and rainfall, landslides, rise in average temperature, heat waves; early melting of natural glaciers, increase in diseases and migration, agricultural decrease, etc.

The negative impacts of climate change might be as clear nowhere as they are in Afghanistan. It is a mountainous country located in central Asia with cold winters and hot summers (Savage et al., 2009). It has an extreme continental dry climate with desert, steppe, and highland temperature regimes (Shroder, 2014). Since the 1950s, there has been a significant change in its climate; the temperature has increased by about 1.8 degrees Celsius while annual precipitation has decreased (Aich et al., 2017). According to Savage et al. (2009), the temperature would increase from 2 to 6 degrees Celsius, the climate would be drier, and spring rainfall would be significantly reduced by 2100.

Even though the contribution of agriculture to the national GDB is about 22%, it is an important source of livelihood for the poor people in rural areas of Afghanistan (Haque et al., 2018). According to Baizayee et al. (2014), about 79% of the population is engaged in farming, herding, or both. These climate changes have affected a vast majority of the population of Afghanistan, either directly or indirectly, in different ways. According to a report by the International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC) in 2020, Afghanistan was among the ten most vulnerable countries to disasters from 2000 to 2019.

The causes of conflicts in Afghanistan seemed to be more ethnolinguistic intolerance than that caused by climate change. However, the effects of climate change and scarcity are rarely felt in isolation, and the degree of their impacts depends on social, economic, and ecological vulnerabilities too (Evans, 2010).

As SIDA (2018) has stated, climate change does not directly lead to conflicts, but climate change can exacerbate other factors that lead to conflicts. For instance, lack of water and extreme weather events lead to a shortage of food, which affects the livelihoods of families and larger communities. Natural resource scarcity then leads to competition at different levels, which leads to severe conflicts in certain conditions and circumstances. Kuchi people are particularly vulnerable to such risks because they are continuously moving in search of natural resources around the country.

Several studies have used climate change as a factor that results in non-climatic conflicts. Lukas and Rüttinger (2016) studied the link between climate change and non-state armed groups in Afghanistan, Syria, Lake Chad, and Guatemala. They found the role of competition over natural resources and the conflicts. This competition over resources interacts with other factors of conflict, such as corruption, unresolved complaints, and a legacy of violence (Lukas and Rüttinger, 2016).

According to Rüttinger et al. (2015), there are seven climate-fragility risks, such as local resource competition, livelihood insecurity and migration, extreme weather events and disasters, volatile food prices and provision, transboundary water management, sea-level rise and coastal degradation, and unintended effects of climate policies. However, conflict does not seem to be a direct impact of climate change; it seems to be indirectly related to it. Conflicts seem to be triggered by the impacts of climate change in particular circumstances. Particularly, as Lukas and Rüttinger (2016) have stated, there are four major climate change risks for Afghanistan, such as land degradation and natural resource conflicts; scarcity and illicit livelihoods; transboundary water conflicts and armed insurgency; and rapid-onset disasters and instability.

The majority of research on the link between climate and conflict has focused on East and sub-Saharan Africa, while studies on South and Southeast Asia have remained understudied (Adams et al., 2018). Although Afghanistan witnessed both extreme climate change and long years of conflict, there are few studies on the relationship between these two. This paper focuses on the impacts of climate change on the conflicts that Afghanistan has dealt with for the last half century.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials used for this library research conference paper were primarily academic databases and online libraries such as Google Scholar and other resources. The search was conducted using keywords relevant to the paper topic, with filters applied to include peer-reviewed articles, reports, and books published lately.

The methodological approach was a systematic literature review. The process began with the formulation of research questions, followed by a comprehensive search strategy to identify relevant literature. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the selection of appropriate materials for analysis. The data extraction involved summarizing key findings, methodologies, and conclusions from each source. This was followed by a thematic analysis to identify patterns and trends within the research field.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Afghanistan experiences various climate challenges, such as extreme temperatures, droughts, floods, earthquakes, landslides, and avalanches. From 1980 to 2015, Afghanistan was the second among low-income countries for the highest degree of fatalities due to natural hazards and half of all deaths were due to weather-related and geographical events (World Bank and GFDRR, 2017). Similarly, Weerasinghe (2021) has mentioned that frequent conflicts, violence, and natural hazards interact and create overlapping vulnerabilities, which are often exacerbated by climate change.

Burke, Hsiang, and Miguel (2015) have claimed that productivity, migration, physical geography, and mental health are the channels that lead to conflicts. First, extreme weather events like droughts and heavy rain decrease the productivity and income of the agriculturalists and indirectly increase the risk of conflicts. Second, the urban market cannot facilitate livelihood for all rural migrants, and in the meantime, decreases in per capita income facilitate chances for conflicts. Third, extreme weather events change physical geography, which raises or lowers the chances of successful attacks. Finally, weather changes can cause physical and mental stress, which leads to various kinds of conflicts.



On the other hand, Lukas and Rüttinger (2016) stated other climate-fragility risks that finally led to conflicts in Afghanistan. These risks are land degradation and natural resources, scarcity and illicit livelihoods, transboundary water, and rapid-onset disasters, and instability. Brown and Blankship (as cited in Lukas and Rüttinger, 2016) have stated, for example, that the conflict between the Kuchi tribe and regional residents. They claimed that the completion of grassland was the main reason for this conflict. However, each of these conflict-causing factors may have other causes too, along with climate change. For instance, as Alex (2011) has proposed, government incompetence can worsen resource scarcity, and population vulnerability, ecosystems, economies, and institutions can outweigh the degree of climate or scarcity effects themselves.

While opium was a major income resource for armed Taliban militants in the last twenty years, reduced water resources and periodic extreme droughts drive farmers to engage in illegal poppy production instead of other water-intensive crops like wheat. According to Heijmans et al. (as cited in Lukas and Rüttinger, 2016), reduced livelihood opportunities due to drought and other climate change effects make young people more vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Climate change became a strategic factor for opium production and the relationship between its production and prolonged droughts and conflicts can be seen (Gauster and Roshan, 2020).

In addition, climate change-related droughts and reduced river flow, because of earlier snowmelt, increased pressure on water resources. Every year, about 70% of the 80 billion m<sup>3</sup> of renewable water flows to Iran and Pakistan and does not benefit Afghanistan (Gauster and Roshan, 2020). However, there has not been any agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan on the Kunar River, which flows to Pakistan; there has been an agreement with Iran on the Helmand River, signed in 1973. According to Gauster and Roshan (2016), India completed a dam in Herat province that provided electricity to Herat and Kandahar, but it caused political disputes with Iran. A report by the Environmental Law Institute and UNEP in 2014 (as cited in Lukas and Rüttinger, 2016) claimed that Iran backed Taliban militants and directed water diversions. It is not only Iran that brings pressure through and even backs anti-government armed groups to weaken the Afghan government and not benefit from its water; Pakistan supports regional militias and anti-government armed groups to stop making dams on the Kunar River and using its water anyway.

Discussing the link between climate change and conflicts in Afghanistan leads us to the conclusion that there are various and several causing factors in the conflicts in the country. It is hard to say what factor is the main and what the subsequent factors of these conflicts are. Most importantly, climate change cannot be mentioned as a single or even a direct factor in the conflicts. Still, climate change acts as a threat multiplier that facilitates the ground for direct factors of conflicts such as foreign political interventions, illiteracy, poverty, the geography of the country, social injustice, various kinds of corruption and a lack of rule of law. This review indicates that certain climate changes, such as lack of productivity and natural resources, opium cultivation, transboundary water, migration, and physical geography, are direct factors in conflicts that are caused mainly by climate-related changes.

## CONCLUSION

However, Afghanistan did not contribute to global climate change; it is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change. Various kinds of negative impacts of climate change can be seen in the country, such as droughts, floods, storms, untimely cold and rainfall, landslides, rises in average temperature, heat waves, early melting of natural glaciers, increases in diseases and migration, and agricultural decreases. These impacts intensify the factors of conflicts such as land degradation, lack of production, migration, opium cultivation, and political disputes. Unfortunately, conflicts negatively affect efforts to reduce the effects of climate change. As a result, climate change and conflicts created strong bonds and supported each other.

With relative security after the collapse of the republic, dealing with the negative effects of climate change might have become easier. This article emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach that considers the environmental aspects of the conflicts. On one hand, it would reduce vulnerability to such changes and on the other hand, it would help reduce the possibility of conflicts. Particularly, the government needs to prevent housing in agricultural areas. Besides that, the government needs to provide job opportunities for jobless people, especially youths. In addition, the government may make dams and canals to increase agricultural land.

**Conflict of Interest:** Both authors express no conflict of interest in any part of the research.

**Authors' Contributions:** Both authors equally contributed to the paper. Zirman's contribution was in conceptualization, resources, and investigation, while Rahimi's contribution was in methodology, drafting, and preparation review, and editing.

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