

Expert Roundtable: The Security Implications of Climate Change in South Asia

Dhaka, Bangladesh: 29th – 30th March 2010

Summary of key points

The aim of the workshop, which brought together experts from civil society, academia and government and the donor community across South Asia, was to generate a critical discussion on the inter-linkages between climate change and conflict in South Asia. In particular,

- To explore the implications of current and future climate impacts on security in South Asia.
- To build knowledge around *who can do what and how* to promote peaceful responses to climate change
- To build a regional coalition to identify and address the gaps in policy and institutional understanding of climate change and conflict risks in South Asia.

How is climate change affecting fragile communities in South Asia?

To ground the discussions in the reality of climate security risks in the region, experts from Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka each offered a case study of specific ways in which climate change is impacting community security in their countries.

The case study on **Bangladesh** gave an overview of how predicted climate impacts on in Bangladesh - including an increase in frequency and intensity of cyclones and flooding - would lead to knock-on social economic problems such as fall in crop yields of up to 30%, increased food insecurity and possible threats to governance stability as a result of food insecurity. It was noted that already, anger is growing at the community level where the poor are feeling the inequality of the issue – with increased resentment towards the national government for inadequate management of increasingly scarce resources, and towards the international community for their failure to support adaptation and reduce future emissions through the UNFCCC process.

The case study on **India**, explored the political economy of climate change and security through a case study from Mihing, Assam. Three sources of conflict related to climate change in this context were identified as i) competition over resources ii) the climate sensitivity of key economic activities iii) policy and institutional failures. Many local conflicts are over local limits to access to resources, particularly water, created by elite capture and corruption within governance structures. Whenever there is a fall in groundwater, there is a strong trend of village elites seizing the dwindling water resources. This has potential to be scaled up to become a national threat. For example, recently, the farmers protest in Delhi against diversion of drinking water to Delhi stopped public transport and created large scale social disruption. The key to avoiding conflict is then to remove asymmetries in communication whereby the poor have access to information, transparency in local government, and increased participation.

In the **Maldives**, adaptation is a matter of survival. Security implications of climate change in Male are largely linked to internally displaced people who have been moved due to flooding on their own islands. There is an increasing trend of extremists taking advantage of the destitute during disasters, fuelling grievances and converting the vulnerable to extremist causes. Furthermore, the re-housing of communities from one island to another after tsunami flooding was met with hostility and low level violence between communities that required intervention by security forces. These tensions can be taken as a sign of future difficulties the Maldives is likely to face as climate change heightens the risk of inundation.

In **Nepal**, the Koshi river floods of 2008 caused tensions between Nepal and India – particularly with the state government of West Bengal who were concerned about movement of flood displaced communities to their state. The 2009 drought in Nepal caused huge food crisis in Mid -far-west Nepal which was highly politicised by various political actors and intensified tensions between Maoists and government – with the Maoists using the poor management of the flood response by government to fuel public protest which became violent and lead to some deaths. Increasingly, anti-elite causes are using climate change to build support against elites and different interest groups using climate change to build their support bases. Opponents of the government are using negative impacts to fuel sentiments that the government cannot protect its citizens, or even that the government deliberately gave them bad seeds so that their crops would fail. The Melamchi drinking water issue was highly politicised and had significant psychological impacts on the local community - creating uncertainty, not knowing who to believe and feeding into decisions to move.

The case study on **Pakistan** focussed on the significant problems around water in the Sindh province. There are historical tensions relating to dam construction diverting water between upstream industry and downstream agricultural users. Rivers flowing into Pakistan originate in India, so are dependent on India for flow, yet suffer from an asymmetric relationship between the two states on water management. The impacts of decreased water availability is most severely felt by the agricultural economy: there is a major loss of cultivable land, wheat and rice yields are down by 50%; sugar cane is being planted instead of mango or rice; and cotton instead of rice. The socio-economic impacts of climate change in Sindh include rural migration rates of approximately 10%, high interest rate credits of up to 10%, changing dietary habits, increased food and water insecurity faced by women and children, and an increase in children being taken out of school. The impacts of these consequences are a source of potential conflicts relating to lack of clarity and regulation around who owns the available water, who gets what water and whether it's the duty of the government to provide free safe water to the poor.

In **Sri Lanka**, ecosystem decline is already affecting livelihoods. The impacts of climate change on the coastal zone of the island are most sharply felt in agricultural and fishery sectors. The need to address the impacts of environment change on the livelihoods of communities that depend directly on ecosystem related resources is very important, however in Sri Lanka, this relationship between rural poor and natural resource dependence is overstated or oversimplified by donors and projects based on this assumption are misplaced. In Sri Lanka, most rural communities with the exception of fishermen, are not as dependent on natural resources as they are in Nepal, India and Bangladesh. Communities are very dynamic so resource-user relationships will be evolving in the face of post-conflict development. For example, traditional fishing communities may not wish to carry on fishing in the lagoon, they may be more keen to move towards the tourism sector. To ensure adaptation responses adequately address livelihood impacts, they must involve the relevant target groups; communities need to be knowledgeable; local government authorities have to

be motivated and pressurised (from the local level); central government sectoral policies and institutions should be flexible enough to respond to the types of changes projected to occur from climate change.

Across all case studies, the role of governance is addressing the problems posed by climate change, and indeed the role of governance in fuelling these problems emerged as common themes.

Policy Responses to Climate Change: Institutional responses

A major gap in knowledge and understanding of institutions currently dealing with above issue relates to the vague and varied understanding of the concept of 'adaptation'. It was suggested that the language should shift towards *resilience*. Communities resilient to one risk, such as environment shocks, are going to be communities resilient to other risks such poverty, conflict. A resilient community is one that can absorb information, digest it, understand it, and act upon it. For this, good governance structures are needed.

It is also important that knowledge translate into understanding. Furthermore, it will cause problems if this understanding is not communicated to the affected communities and the institutions promulgating the information are not trusted by the communities.

In the South Asian context, weak local government capacity is a major obstacle to building community resilience. Better governance of natural resources requires the devolution of necessary powers to local government at the district level, but knowledge and understanding of the issues is generally very low. The need to build capacity within local institutions is a priority, as is exploring public-private and civil society partnerships in technical infrastructure projects or those which require community buy-in.

Institutions need to be open and transparent, and humble about what they don't know. They also need to be flexible, to cope with variable and complex risks. Risks are interrelated, so policy responses need to be interconnected.

Key questions:

- How to get more acceptance of building 'broad resilience' rather than narrow, technical adaptation? → Copenhagen showed how policy made by environmental and legal policy experts fails. Slow shift can now be traced, over the past three years, where there is acceptance of the complex human security linkages between climate change, mitigation and adaptation.
- How can the concept of resilience be operationalised? → Education and two-way information flows between governance provides and local communities is a priority. They can be promoted in school curricula, university programmes, popular TV and radio programmes, civil society dialogue processes etc. As well as general knowledge and awareness raising, there is also a need for 'champions' who can take it up and spread the word within their circles.

Policy challenges and knowledge gaps

The state-citizen relationship in South Asia is weak. Citizens often see state as source of the problem rather than the solution. However, the paradox is that with increasing economic growth, there is greater dependence on the state to support the growth process.

Regionally, there is very little by way of multilateral approaches. Approaches to managing common resources are largely bilateral but often built on asymmetric power relations between the two states involved. Transboundary problems such as river basin management and glacier resource management however need a paradigm shift towards multilateralism.

A common problem across most states in the region is inertia in national policy frameworks, due to

- Antiquated laws (including land use planning)
- Colonial, paternalistic approach to governance
- Highly compartmentalised administration
- Conservative social and cultural institutions which are resistant to change.
- Lack of capacity and understanding in decision making and decision making systems

Broad policy goals for conflict sensitive adaptation:

- Efficiency and equity
- Socially and culturally acceptable adaptation choices
- Stakeholder involvement
- Participatory institutional arrangements

These terms are often used and risk becoming jargon, but this does not distract from the fact that they are key to effective responses. The challenge is in translating them from 'jargon' to something which is operationable.

Conclusions:

Water issues, large scale movements of climate refugees, including cross border migration, loss of people's livelihood and food security, and an increase in urban-rural tensions over resource utilization were identified as the major conflict issues in South Asia. These need to be addressed by unified approaches, which means

- 1) stronger regional understanding of potential social and conflict impacts of climate change, and
- 2) regional cooperation to build up the resilience of state institutions and civil society.

As such, the participants of the expert workshop initiated the **South Asia Network on Security and Climate Change (SANSaC)** - the first network to address this dual problem and its interlinked solutions in South Asia. The network identified the following key issues to be addressed:

Regional approach – emphasising regional approaches for addressing climate-related conflicts in South Asia through establishing platforms for exchange, sharing and concerted

action. There is also a need for better multi-lateral cooperation in managing water resources (e.g. trans-boundary river systems)

Define/refine policy responses – All responses must reflect the expressed needs of the people, involve them in consultation, take account of power distribution and social order, and avoid pitting groups against each other. At the same time they must be integrated with overall development strategies.

Shift climate change investment priorities – more research to address knowledge gaps and better understand conflict related challenges of climate change impact in South Asia and peacebuilding related opportunities in adaptation strategies. Explore also private sector support.

Devise a responsive institutional framework – with appropriate human capacity and institutional collaboration, integrating and going beyond sectoral approaches.

State responses – more than adaptation, there is a need to strengthen capacities for resilience to cope with climate change induced crisis situation. Development needs have to be climate proof but similarly climate change needs have to be addressed in a conflict sensitive manner

Improve communication – ensure information flow to citizens and key sectoral stakeholders. An improvement in sharing and learning across sectors and between states will improve efficiency, but also conflict sensitivity, of climate change response policies and programs. Steps must be taken to strengthen social capacity to understand and manage climate and conflict risks. This means communicating the knowledge available on the issue in an open and honest manner to enable understanding and response.

The following were agreed to be roles which SANSaC could take forward:

- To identify knowledge gaps
- To advise on policy responses
- To establish new institutional norms and *modus operandi* to replace current norms which are not relevant to the problems faced.
- To identify champions and create a constituency for the core messages emerging from this dialogue.

Annex

SANSaC (South Asia Network for Security and Climate Change) - Objectives:

Short-term:

1. Providing recommendations to SAARC
2. Write up presentations from Session 1 country experiences into case studies for publication (Alert to copy edit, TERI Press to print)
3. Explore the six identified thematic areas
4. Create an informal network (regular e-communication in short run)
5. Remain as a small core group of committed individuals from SAARC states
6. North and South partners to seek funding opportunities

Long-term:

1. Long-term engagement and advocacy with SAARC
2. Gradual expansion of network with additional members from existing countries, plus new states
3. Strengthening understanding around six thematic areas through further research
4. Reach out to private sector for advocacy and funding
5. Producing high quality regional research around six key themes – providing knowledge base for advocacy and training
6. Joint publications