

ICRC Submission to the International Development Committee's inquiry: Climate change, development and COP 26

About the ICRC

1. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organisation whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening international humanitarian law (IHL) and universal humanitarian principles.
2. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, alongside the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC) and national societies around the world, including the British Red Cross.
3. The ICRC directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.
4. ICRC works closely with the Climate Centre, the specialist reference centre of the IFRC, which is staffed largely by climate scientists and provides strategically important knowledge and advice on climate-smart practice to humanitarian partners, in the Movement and beyond.
5. This submission stands in complement to the **British Red Cross's** evidence to this inquiry, but with a specific focus on conflict.

Introduction

6. This submission will focus on an area which was not covered by the IDC's 2019 report, but which the ICRC believes should be a fundamental consideration for the UK Government if it is to support adaptation and resilience in the communities most vulnerable to climate shocks: **the intersection between climate change and conflict**.
7. To date, conflict and fragility have not been prominent topics for debate in the UK-hosted discussions on adaptation, resilience and climate finance which are preceding COP26. Whilst there has been a clear focus on the countries most vulnerable to climate change, there was no specific mention of conflict or fragility in the Chair's summary from the recent Climate and Development Ministerial, and only a small number of conflict-affected countries took part in the discussions.¹
8. ICRC welcomed the UK Government's focus on climate security during its UN Security Council presidency in February and the recognition by Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the challenge climate change poses to our collective security.² As climate security continues to rise up the political agenda of many governments around the world, including the UK, there is an

¹ <https://ukcop26.org/climate-development-ministerial-chairs-summary/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-boris-johnsons-address-to-the-un-security-council-on-climate-and-security-23-february-2021>

opportunity to widen the debate to consider the complex interplay between climate change and conflict, and the very real humanitarian consequences of climate change and environmental degradation on communities affected by conflict and violence.

9. ICRC is seeing first-hand through its operations the devastating impact of climate change on conflict-affected communities, and the urgent need for greater focus and support. Through this submission we hope to raise this up the agenda in time for it to be of greater consideration by the UK Government, and states around the world, at COP26.

The double frontline of climate change and conflict

“Like climate change, conflicts are unfair. They increase the vulnerability of those who are already vulnerable.”

- *When Rain Turns to Dust, ICRC, 2020*³

10. Conflict-affected countries are disproportionately impacted by climate change. Climate disruption is increasingly affecting populations across the globe, threatening lives, physical and mental health, and food and economic security. Growing climate risks also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and inequalities.
11. The ICRC is committed not only to responding to life-threatening emergencies, but also to ensuring that its work has a more sustainable humanitarian impact by helping conflict-affected communities become more resilient to shocks, including those resulting from a changing climate and environment.
12. The vast majority of the countries deemed most vulnerable, and least ready to adapt to climate change by the ND-Gain Index, are mired in conflict.⁴ This is not because climate change causes conflict, but because countries in conflict have a very limited capacity to adapt to a changing climate.
13. The ICRC is witnessing firsthand the impact of climate change on people living in conflict-affected countries. From deadly flooding in Mali that affected 80,000 people across large swathes of the country last year to Iraq where smallholder farmers must often relocate due to the increased risk of heatwaves and droughts. Each of these countries are enduring protracted conflict or are in a state of fragility. They are especially vulnerable to climate change, in part because of their geographical location but more importantly, because of the lasting consequences of conflicts for communities, systems, institutions and authorities.
14. Most major armed conflicts between 1950 and 2000 took place in biodiversity hotspots, putting delicate ecological balances at risk. Attacks can lead to water, soil and land contamination, or release pollutants into the air. Explosive remnants of war can contaminate soil and water sources, and harm wildlife. In certain circumstances, the environmental consequences of armed conflict can also contribute to climate change. For example, the destruction of large areas of forest, or damage to infrastructure such as oil installations or big industrial facilities, can have detrimental climate consequences.

³ ICRC, [When Rain Turns to Dust](#), July 2020

⁴ “12 out of 20 countries” is the figure quoted by ICRC in [When Rain Turns to Dust](#) correct as of July 2020

Case Study: Southern Iraq

15. Iraq's water stress – and broader environmental problems such as weapon contamination, hazardous waste, air pollution, and ecosystem destruction – has been fed by the direct and indirect consequences of repeated conflicts that have severely damaged the environment, destroyed infrastructure, and eroded the resilience of communities and institutions.
16. In places like Fao, south of Basra, people attribute their water and farming problems to the cutting of emblematic date palms for military purposes during the Iran-Iraq war. Such events had immediate consequences for their lives and environment, and these consequences continue to be felt, through all the bouts of conflict that have come and gone since then. They also tore apart the social fabric, wore down national cohesion and aggravated the resentment and distrust of the population towards the State.

Case Study: Northern Mali

17. When the violence flared up in 2012, the already fragile State apparatus vanished from the north. Elected representatives and local officials targeted by armed groups either fled their area of responsibility out of fear or stopped venturing out of urban areas. "The State exists in name only. It doesn't help us. Before 2012, the State would potentially help when we faced a big problem", recalls Issa.
18. Weak services failed. People fled. Herders who needed to move with their animals were trapped in place. Farmers could no longer reach their fields. Travelling to neighbouring countries to work became extremely dangerous. Humanitarian access shrank. Insecurity ruled, as social tensions and mistrust between communities grew. People who were already extremely vulnerable to climate variations and shocks were even less able to cope, as their usual ways of facing climate hardship were hindered. Conflict disrupted efforts to develop basic infrastructure, and where such infrastructure existed, provoked its collapse. Development gains, minimal to begin with, were undone, worsening already meager adaptation prospects.⁵

Recommendations

19. **Broaden the understanding of climate change, conflict and security.** Efforts to develop responses that meet the needs of the most vulnerable must go beyond hard security measures and encompass broader human security, such as the impacts from combined conflict, climate and environmental shocks on people's livelihoods, access to food, water and essential services. When discussing the impact of climate change on armed conflict, vulnerability and risk, a broad understanding of changing climate consequences on our collective security is key.
20. Recognise that armed conflict often harms the natural environment, which further limits or hampers resilience and adaptation to climate change. **The UK Government could work with its own military, and with partners, to increase adherence with the rules of International Humanitarian Law that protect the natural environment and seek to limit the damage caused to it by armed conflict, including by implementing the ICRC Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict⁶ into policy and military doctrine, as appropriate.**

⁵ Both of these case studies are taken directly from the ICRC's 2020 flagship report on conflict and climate, [When Rain Turns to Dust](#).

⁶ ICRC, [Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict](#), September 2020

- 21. Increase climate adaptation efforts for fragile and conflict-affected countries.** Currently, climate action, including adaptation efforts, is particularly weak in fragile and conflict-affected countries. There is a need for greater investment in preventative and anticipatory action in fragile states which could ultimately limit the combined humanitarian consequences of climate change and armed conflict. It will also be important to integrate community engagement as an essential element in climate change-related and resilience programming.
- 22. Increase access to climate finance for fragile and conflict-affected countries.** Unlike stable countries, fragile ones often lack the necessary structures to access and manage financing and the technical capacity to design adapted programs. To close this gap and ensure that funding from major climate funds and bilateral donors reaches countries in crisis, and the most vulnerable and remote communities within those countries, a certain level of risk needs to be accepted. In addition, international climate finance needs to be more equitably balanced between mitigation and adaptation to ensure that populations receive the support necessary to strengthen their resilience to a changing climate.
- 23. Adaptation and resilience efforts in fragile states must be conflict-sensitive to be effective.** Conflict sensitivity is difficult and appropriate resources must be committed to ensure that this happens. There are lessons to be learned from previous interventions in fragile states by international finance institutions, to avoid unintended consequences as climate finance scales up in similar locations.