

Oxfam Fact Sheet | Climate Change & Security

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It begins with changes in weather: higher temperatures; rising sea levels; more frequent droughts, floods, and storms. But climate change is more than environmental shifts. Because of its human consequences—including widespread hunger, water shortages, forced migrations, and disease—it threatens to undermine global stability and security.

The severe weather effects of climate change will jeopardize the fundamentals we need for stable, secure lives: the water we drink, the food we eat, the health services that protect us from disease, even the land we live on.

These threats affect every country on earth, but the hardest hit will be the poorest and most vulnerable nations, where governments are often the least equipped to respond. And where leadership falls short, conflict and violence can occur. Forty percent of international conflicts over the past six decades have been linked to fighting over natural resources. Climate-related stresses, like water shortages and floods, have contributed to existing conflicts in countries like Sudan and Somalia. One study, conducted by a panel of retired US generals and admirals, found that climate change could increase the risk of violent conflict in 46 countries—and named climate change a “serious threat multiplier for instability” in some of the most volatile regions of the world.

As drought increases and food production declines in Latin America and Africa, many people will be forced to migrate from rural to urban areas. This pressure to move will lead to more people crossing national borders, including those of the US and Europe. Meanwhile, US agencies, including state and local governments and the military, will be called upon to respond to more severe natural disasters here and abroad.

If we act now, we can prevent much of the human cost of climate change. We can also save money by responding proactively instead of reacting to crises as they unfold. By funding adaptation projects, which help build people’s resilience to these harmful effects, we can save lives and strengthen vulnerable communities worldwide—while also ensuring a safer and more peaceful future.

In North Darfur, Sudan, local people must sometimes collect drinking water from unsafe or contaminated water sources. Climate change can worsen existing conflicts by making vital resources—like clean water—even harder to come by.



“The critical factors for economic and security stability in the 21st century are energy, water, and the environment. These three factors need to be balanced for people to achieve a reasonable quality of life. ... In my view, therefore, military planning should view climate change as a threat to the balance.”

Gen. Paul J. Kern, USA (Retired)

Oxfam America

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Resources under threat

Water. By 2025, 40 percent of the world's population will be living in countries experiencing significant water shortages—which in turn could worsen existing tensions over water in conflict-affected regions like the Middle East.

Food. Nearly a billion people worldwide already suffer from hunger—and scientists estimate that grain production will fall by approximately 10 percent for every 1.8°F rise in average global temperature. Such losses are expected to be most pronounced in the drier regions of South Asia and Africa.

Health. The World Health Organization predicts an expansion of the range of contagious diseases such as malaria, dengue fever, and salmonella. In some areas, water shortages will add to disease outbreaks, since good health is closely linked to adequate supplies of clean water.

Land. Sea-level rise could potentially displace tens of millions in low-lying nations like Bangladesh, while the shifting weather patterns elsewhere will mean that people can no longer use their land for farming and pasture. Studies estimate that up to one billion people could be forced to move from their homes by 2050.

Tackling the problem

Adaptation projects use local know-how to build people's resilience, taking a cost-effective approach to helping poor communities here and abroad facing the worst effects of climate change. Because these projects protect the essential resources of life, they also increase global safety and security:

- > In Bangladesh, one project helps 7,500 households stockpile food in flood-proof storage, harvest rainwater, and create floating vegetable gardens in waterlogged areas—meaning fewer people will be forced to migrate when floods become more severe.
- > In North Darfur, Sudan, a community-led project combines traditional water conservation and seed-sowing methods, along with home gardens and new cultivation techniques, to protect village food supplies during times of hunger and conflict.
- > In Tajikistan, drought-resistant plants, greenhouses, and irrigation systems help local farms withstand drought. The project also builds peace in the region by helping civic leaders work with neighboring Central Asian nations to share water resources fairly and efficiently.

How we can lead

These projects are helping to protect vulnerable people, one community at a time. But the US now has an opportunity to lead on a global scale. We must fully integrate climate change into our national security strategies, and we must commit to playing a greater role in addressing climate change in order to help avoid its destabilizing effects.

Most important, US legislation must set aside financial and other assistance to help poor and vulnerable communities build their resilience to the crisis. This federal legislation should then provide a framework that helps the US influence global negotiations on a climate deal.

For the US, investing in adaptation projects is not only a way to save lives but also a smart investment in the future. For every dollar we spend now, we can save money required for disaster response and for dealing with the consequences of preventable conflicts. And when we help the world's most vulnerable communities, we are also investing in long-term stability and security—making the world safer today and for generations to come.

Lacking other transportation options during a flood, a woman in Bangladesh floats down a swollen river on a collection of trash. Low-lying countries like Bangladesh are vulnerable to the floods and rising sea levels caused by climate change, which in turn could force millions of people from their homes.



JANE BEESLEY / OXFAM

“Climate change is a security issue, but it is not a matter of narrow national security. ... This is about our collective security in a fragile and increasingly interdependent world.”

Rt. Hon. Margaret M. Beckett, Former UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

Main sources include the CNA Corporation, the World Resources Institute, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and US Congressional testimony. List of additional sources available by contacting editor@oxfamamerica.org.

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