

# Water, Peace and Security

## Water for peace: how to make climate action conflict sensitive

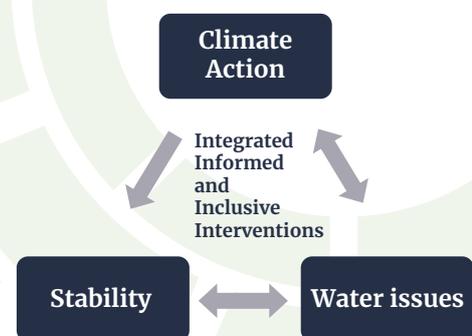
This policy brief quotes speakers from the session: 'Water, Peace, Security and Adaptation, which was organized by the WPS partnership for the Climate Adaptation Summit 2021

### Key message:

- Climate action, water issues and social stability are all three closely interlinked.
- Adaptation and improved water management offer opportunities for reducing human security risks. However, if not done in a conflict sensitive way, they can aggravate these risks.
- Addressing the links between climate, water and stability is complex, since various sectors and factors impact the triangle.
- This complexity requires an integrated, inclusive and informed approach to plan adequate interventions

Climate, water and human security or stability interlink in a triangular relationship, reinforcing each other. It is well known that climate change impacts the poor hardest because they are the most vulnerable: poor people are often highly dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods and have limited resilience to protect themselves from natural hazards. In a socio-political fragile context, these risks combined with a dissatisfaction of how other actors, like authorities, private companies or competing

communities respond can trigger protest, social unrest or violent conflict. Climate change manifests itself primarily through the water cycle. Hence, it aggravates already existing water issues that threaten ecosystems and livelihoods around the world. These water issues can be socially disruptive. They can increase competition over scarce water resources between upstream and downstream water users. As a result, they can undermine resilience and livelihoods, creating existential risks for certain groups of people, as they become more vulnerable to water scarcity, floods or loss of livelihood.



1 Hallegatte, Stephane; Vogt-Schilb, Adrien; Bangalore, Mook; Rozenberg, Julie. 2017. Unbreakable : Building the Resilience of the Poor in the Face of Natural Disasters. Climate Change and Development, Washington, DC: World Bank. © World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/25335> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO



### Threat Multiplier

Climate change, and water stress, are therefore both frequently mentioned as a ‘threat multiplier’: they are not a security threat in themselves but can exacerbate existing tensions. This all underlines the crucial importance of both climate change mitigation and adaptation to prevent aggravation of poverty and inequality, and the escalation into conflict or displacement. At the same time, security challenges (fragile states, weak governance and violent conflict) can also negatively affect water systems, as they put water supply at risk. Security challenges can in turn hamper effective climate change adaptation, because concerns of climate change may not be high on governments’ agendas and interventions may be ineffective due to inaccurate planning and implementation.

### The Link with Security

Climate adaptation and water management need to be conducted in a conflict-sensitive way, to ensure they do not aggravate tensions or trigger conflict. Many adaptation measures involve interventions in water systems, such as dams, flood protections, intensified irrigation or water distribution and water rationing measures. Such interventions alter the distribution of water resources, impact ecosystems and thus affect ecosystem services. When these impacts undermine livelihoods or limit access to water for certain groups, they can be perceived as unfair or unequal and delegitimize authorities. This is especially the case when the costs and the benefits of such adaptation measures are borne by different communities or different ethnic or political groups. These grievances and delegitimization can increase tensions between communities or vis-à-vis other actors and the state, resulting in heightened social unrest or even violence.

### The Case of Iraq

River flows in Iraq’s main rivers: the Euphrates and Tigris have been very low in recent years. This decreased flow is considered a major factor in the salinization of water resources, contributing to the displacement of around 20,000 individuals from southern provinces. The water

crisis in Iraq was also one of the key factors that led to protests in the streets of Basra in 2018. The low flows are the combined result of various factors: low rainfall, high water use for agriculture, and dams in neighbouring countries. These dams are themselves interventions to support climate change mitigation (renewable energy), adaptation (coping with increased climate variability) and water resources management (regulating irrigation water). . This is one example showing that climate change mitigation and adaptation, as well as other interventions that impact the water systems, should consider how positive and negative implications are distributed among different social groups. If these different interests are not sufficiently taken into account, it is likely to impact social stability with consequences for peace and security.

### Integration

*“Climate change, rising temperatures and water scarcity affect Iraq in many aspects: economic, health, social security as well as political stability... Water flowing from Tigris and Euphrates decreased allowing salt intrusion from the Arab Gulf into the rivers, depriving Basra city of drinking water.”*  
Dr. Hayder Salh Al-Asadi, First Secretary of the Embassy of Iraq to the Netherlands

Therefore, we argue that the triangle of climate adaptation, water management and human security and peace-building needs to be addressed in an integrated manner. In order to prevent negative security implications of climate adaptation, climate mitigation and water management, it is crucial to plan and manage these interventions in a conflict-sensitive way.

2 United Nations and World Bank. 2018. Pathways for Peace: Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1162-3. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

3 Human Rights Watch, “Basra is Thirsty: Iraq’s Failure to Manage the Water Crisis,” July 22, 2019

4 IOM Iraq. 2020. Water Quantity and Water Quality in Central and South Iraq: a Preliminary Assessment in the Context of Displacement Risk



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Things get even more complex as the links between these three elements are not straightforward. They are influenced by various factors related to governance, institutions, economy, ecology, social relations and demography. For integrated, informed and inclusive climate action, the Water, Peace and Security partnership works on generating improved insight in how these connections between the natural resources system, the economic system and the social system, play out in the local context of our work in Mali, Iraq, Afghanistan and East Africa. When we analyse water stability linkages in an integrated way we include actors, institutions, policies and interests that influence the beliefs and behavior of people. This also requires insight in how changes are communicated and perceived, including the (increasing) role of social media, states and influencers, who spread information as well as dis-information. Information from data, models and analysis can play a role to help understanding the magnitude and timing of

*“For one, we should not be afraid of complexity of all these interdependencies. They are actually an opportunity. Second, we have to start to understand it from a systems perspective. Only then are we able to recognize pathways forward. Knowing that understanding we can create added value by investing investing in water for society and then start to manage and organize ourselves around it. Investing in people in a partnership approach, forging coalitions, being inclusive, will in the end deliver the results we need.”*  
Mr. Henk Ovink, Dutch Water Envoy

climate and water-related risks and human security consequences. They can be used to assess which interventions can be effective, under various climate scenarios, and how they will impact different communities.



### Inclusive

WPS promotes to develop these insights together with key actors through informed and inclusive participatory processes, allowing those directly affected and involved to get into a dialogue on impacts and interventions. Productive cooperation requires such an inclusive process, in which the various actors have access to the drawing table of solutions and are able to exchange their concerns and ideas in order to come to agreed steps forward. This way they can defend their interests, while an inclusive process will improve trust, legitimacy and collaboration and thus decrease socio-political tensions.

### Towards conflict-sensitive climate action

To make climate action conflict-sensitive, WPS recommends working:

#### *Integrated*

Foster cooperation between the climate, the water and the security and peace building community.

#### *Informed*

Apply integrated analyses that brings together data and information on climate, water and social stability.

*“actors from different sectors have different realities, different value systems and different guiding principles. Working together and bringing together in this complex area of water, peace and security starts with genuine interest in the other party at the table. Being curious and asking questions about basic interests and underlying assumptions is where cooperation starts. The use of independent knowledge, tools and models have to contribute to this open dialogue. Working with many stakeholders requires an open-minded attitude and a genuine curiosity. Then we can really support the dialogue with models and tools and that is how we can contribute to impact in society.”*

Ms. Annemieke Nijhof – Managing Director of Deltares

#### *Inclusive*

Intervention planning will need to foster dialogue between the different stakeholders and communities involved and affected, to ensure different interests are taken into account and are felt, seen and trusted to be taken into account.

And we call the climate community to mainstream these aspects in their climate action efforts.

The Water, Peace and Security partnership was initiated in 2018, and currently involves IHE-Delft (lead), Deltares, World Resources Institute, the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, Wetlands International and International Alert. Rolien Sasse provides advisory services to the partnership. The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs supports the partnership financially. See also [www.waterpeacesecurity.org](http://www.waterpeacesecurity.org).

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