OXFORD INSTITUTE FOR ETHICS, LAW AND ARMED CONFLICT

CONFLICT, CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE WORKSHOP

Jointly hosted by the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict (ELAC) and the Environmental Change Institute (ECI)

WORKSHOP REPORT

On 11 October 2010 the Oxford Institute for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict (ELAC) and the Environmental Change Institute (ECI) jointly hosted a half-day workshop to discuss the intersection between environmental pressures and violent conflict.

This relationship is currently poorly understood, but there is a pressing need for both an understanding of the 'conflict potential' of climate and ecosystem change, and the development of political, social and economic strategies to address the issue. One core question is why certain societies faced with rapid and detrimental environmental change have survived or thrived, and why others have collapsed into conflict.

Professor Jennifer Welsh introduced the workshop by outlining the objectives:

- To unpack the 'nexus' between climate/environmental change and conflict; and
- To identify a set of core questions that could drive a research project on this intersection.

Session One

1. Dr Jeffrey Mazo (International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS)

Should we consider climate change and its effects as a 'security' threat?

The first presentation by Dr Mazo drew on research from his recent book 'Climate Conflict: How global warming threatens security and what to do about it' (Routledge 2010). He described the increased interest in climate change as a driver of conflict since the late 1990s, but also that the alleged intersection is still subject to controversy, noting for example that many countries have objected to discussions about climate

change at the UN Security Council. He described the four main ways that climate/environmental change can produce security threats: through a general systemic weakening; by creating boundary disputes between states; by contributing to resource wars between states or within states; and, by multiplying instability in already fragile or weak states. The latter is a particularly acute concern, given the rise of global terrorist networks. Dr. Mazo argued that the first three threats are relatively less urgent in the immediate future.

Moving on to the relative vulnerability of states to environmental change and the potential for conflict, Dr Mazo set out three major factors: the physical impacts of environmental change; the degree of sensitivity of states to these impacts; and the capacity of states to adapt (the latter encompassing both capability and willingness). He argued that the most fragile states would be worst affected by environmental shocks, but that these societies were *already* vulnerable. Therefore, he suggested that they might not actually pose an increased security threat.

Dr. Mazo recommended that more attention be focussed on those states which were undergoing processes of rapid economic development – who might be 'thrown off course' by environmental shocks that produced violent conflict. In concluding, he called for better projections about climate and environment change (in the short to medium-term), along with a better understanding of the processes around resilience and vulnerability.

2. Professor Thomas Homer-Dixon (University of Waterloo)

What are the challenges facing those who wish to engage in research at the intersection of climate and conflict?

Professor Homer-Dixon agreed with Dr Mazo that the issue of environmental change as an 'instability threat multiplier' was pressing. He also largely agreed that pressures within states (such as civil violence and grievances between ethnic groups) would be the most likely result, rather than conflict between states. Nonetheless, he was less optimistic that the first three threats identified by Dr. Mazo were really that 'distant' in the future.

Homer-Dixon's main argument was that climate/environmental change will affect conflict indirectly, by interacting with other stresses, institutional weaknesses, and existing resource-use practices. He argued that its influence on violent conflict would always be obscure and difficult for social scientists to 'prove', using traditional

methods. This reality would also make it harder to find policy leverage to address the issue.

Describing the ways environmental change could weaken capacity through multiple pathways, he highlighted some of the complex and interrelated issues that come into play when looking at physical impacts – for e.g. agricultural production, land-use practices. Through these pathways, and complex causal mechanisms, decreased economic productivity could result – and with that the potential for violent conflict. He used what he termed the INUS model of causation (insufficient but necessary, unnecessary but sufficient) to show that among the variables that can push a society towards conflict, climate change might be one important factor among many and difficult to separate from the whole set of factors. At the same time, it was possible for climate change to be a 'profound threat' that could increasingly dominate.

He concluded by warning that in 50 years time, climate and environmental issues will no longer be 'just another systemic threat', but fundamental to the way we define and respond to threats to world security.

3. Ariella Helfgott (ECI)

Principles and approaches to building resilience

The lack of a common definition for resilience across disciplines has made it difficult to use the term productively in academic and policy debates. Ariella Helfgott looked at the ways of defining resilience, acknowledging that in many cases people use the term as a synonym for 'robustness' or 'stability', contributing to confusion. One important aspect of resilience that any research program must appreciate is that its effects would normally be viewed as *beneficial.* In short, resilience carries normative connotations, and what constitutes 'beneficial' involves a value judgment. Where one observer might see failure, another might see productive adaptation.

Helfgott highlighted two important dimensions of resilience. First, she stressed that resilience in the face of a change/shock could take multiple forms. We might consider a society resilient if it recovered to its original state, or if it adapted and moved into a different state. Second, she noted that one's timeframe was crucial for determining what constitutes resilience. Looking at a 5-year horizon, certain societies might be described as 'failing' to respond to change; looking at a 20-year horizon, one's judgment might be different.

As a result, her preferred definition of resilience is 'the response of a system to particular disturbance of a particular magnitude, from the perspective of a particular observer'. Noting the complex causal pathways described by Professor Homer-Dixon, she warned that being completely holistic in one's approach to resilience was an unobtainable ideal and that boundary judgments about the scope and scale of changes, the appropriate timeframe in which to observe such changes, and what would count as 'success' would need to be made by researchers.

Sessions Two and Three – Breakout Groups and Final Plenary

The breakout groups were asked to address 3 questions that are important in framing any research agenda on the intersection of climate change and conflict:

1) What are the key dimensions of conflict that need more research?

2) What don't we know that we need to know?

3) What are the core ethical/normative issues that arise in relation to 'climate conflict'?

- ***Group A - Professor Jennifer Welsh***

Group A wanted to test the assumption that, at least in the short run, climate conflict was likely to be an intra-state phenomenon. Was this really the case, or were there signs that inter-state tensions and conflict were also possible?

The Group also wanted more data and analysis on how climate and environmental change contributes to conflict. In particular, the following questions were raised:

- How context-specific are the factors that lead some societies to fall into conflict? Are there recurring risk factors for societies that might be identified and generalized?
- What can be learned from successful cases – i.e. of conflict avoidance – about the complex causal mechanisms in which climate change plays a part?
- What are the 'levers' that could be manipulated to try to mitigate the escalatory dynamics that produce conflict? And what particular dynamic does climate/environmental change exacerbate?
- Does research of this kind have anything distinctive to offer, or could it all be folded into the general category of 'conflict prevention'?

The impact of 'securitising' climate change was also discussed in Group A, and in particular whether this would lead to unhelpful, conditioned responses to the problem if it was defined as a 'threat' to security. It was noted, for example, that securitization

is often accompanied by a demand for military responses, or that it could produce demands for state sovereignty to be overruled in the name of measures designed to address the potential effects of climate or environmental change.

The group also focussed on the international community and whether institutions existed that were capable of addressing the threat – and also who/what at the global level had the authority to decide what 'we' wanted to preserve or protect. This led to a discussion about the ethics of adaptation/mitigation, and whether those that were the 'source' of an environmental threat should compensate those affected, or pay for adaptive measures. It was also noted that any redistributive measures related to compensation or capacity-building might affect core international principles such as sovereignty or the control over resources.

Another set of questions was raised about the normative preference for peace and diversity. What are the 'costs' of peace (in terms of a preservation of the status quo)? Is conflict always to be avoided? And what is the status and value of 'lost cultures'? Should diversity *necessarily* be maintained?

Looking forward, the group also expressed concern about what would happen in 50 years time, when climate change becomes a direct, and not just an indirect, threat. To put it another way, what will the response to climate change be when it is more clearly *the* factor in producing violent conflict? And what does this kind of desperation do to ethics?

- ***Group B – Dr David Rodin***

Group B invited further reflection on how a climate conflict should be defined. It also discussed moral and legal issues related to causation, responsibility and compensation, asking whether these concepts could be transported from philosophy and social science into these highly complex and uncertain areas. Like Group A, it raised questions about the capacity and authority of existing institutions to respond to the threat posed by climate change, or to design solutions that would involve compensation or redistribution.

Dr Rodin also asked whether it would be useful to research 'classic cases' of climate conflict, such as Darfur, in order to draw out more insights about causation. Since the number of 'real' cases was still relatively small, as much as possible had to be gleaned from existing examples.

Group Discussion

During the final plenary, there was further discussion of what cases would be most useful to examine. DCDC had looked into the case of Darfur and found that it was not

a clear-cut case where environmental triggers produced conflict. The problem of generalizing and also of gathering appropriate evidence was discussed, and the possibilities were raised of both retrospectively assessing past conflicts. The participants also began to identify what kind of data should be captured in future instances where conflict is a real risk.

Dr Rodin raised the question of whether 'war games' or scenario planning would be a useful methodological tool (since cases were rare). Opinion was split, with some regarding these positively if those charged with making real decisions were involved to provide a window on military and political thinking, and others preferring to rely on analogous work if more relevant examples were lacking.

There was also discussion of the possibility for collaborative research with IPCC and the Strategic Trends Reports produced by DCDC. It was noted that research would have to be very much outcome-focussed for the UK Ministry of Defence to be involved, and that this was an uncertain time for such work until the outcome of the Strategic Defence Review was known.

Appendix – Participant list

Speakers:

1. Dr Jeffrey Mazo (International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS)
2. Professor Thomas Homer-Dixon (University of Waterloo)
3. Ariella Helfgott (ECI)

Other participants:

4. Commander Steve Aitken (MOD DCDC)
5. Dr Oliver Bakewell (International Migration Institute)
6. Dr Sarah Burch (ECI)
7. David Newton (Conflict Adviser, Africa Conflict & Humanitarian Unit (ACHU), DfiD)
8. Dr David Rodin (ELAC)
9. Professor Henry Shue (University of Oxford)
10. Dr Hugo Slim (ELAC Visiting Fellow, Corporates for Crises)
11. Janani Vivekananda (Senior Climate Policy Officer, International-Alert)
12. Professor Jenifer Welsh (ELAC)