

Will climate change cause water conflict?

December 12 2012

International researchers from 14 institutions met in Nicosia (Cyprus) on the 10th and 11th of December to present and debate the results of studies on water, conflict and security conducted in the past three years in a variety of locations in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Sahel under the CLICO research [project](#). The CLICO project explored the social dimensions of climate change and in particular, conflicts related to water, and the threats this may pose for national and human security. The project was led by the Institute for Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB) and financed by the Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities (SSH) Theme of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme.

The [effects of climate change](#) on water are expected to intensify in the Mediterranean and surrounding regions in the coming years. This raises potential threats to the security of populations, particularly those most vulnerable to droughts or floods. Prominent people have talked about the danger of "water wars" and about climate change as a threat to national security. The results of the CLICO project, however, found that such discourses oversimplify a complex reality. Climate and water resource changes are important, but play only a secondary role – at least for the time being – in the causation of conflict and insecurity compared to political, economic and [social factors](#). According to the research, countries with good institutions are unlikely to experience violence because of water, and populations in countries with strong welfare and civil security systems will suffer much less from climate disasters, compared to those in countries without.

CLICO's final conference in Cyprus, which was held at the same time as the high-profile EWACC 2012 (Energy, Water and Climate Change) conference, presented the project's results, established [policy recommendations](#) to raise the security of populations and proposed new ideas on public policies and institutional arrangements needed to promote peace and security under changing climate and water conditions. Among other aspects, the meeting served to debate the relation between droughts, floods and sea level rise and social conflict, the role of institutions and international agreements and adaptation policies for human security.

The CLICO studies found that political stability and the welfare state reduce the likelihood of social conflict. The vulnerability of populations stems from deeper causes which precede disaster events, such as poverty, lack of access to education, and corruption in political and administrative institutions. CLICO researchers found that development reduces violent domestic conflicts over water, though in some cases, such as with the expansion of large-scale agriculture, it might also be a source of social tensions and conflicts.

A key conclusion is that political discourses must not reiterate simplistic models which link climate change directly to social conflict and insecurity: a better distribution of wealth, greater social protection, universal access to justice and higher levels of democracy can largely help to improve human security and reduce outbreaks of social conflict.

CLICO also warns about the weakening of social protection and support systems in cases of natural disasters in northern Mediterranean regions due to the economic crisis, and strongly advises reversing this tendency in order to improve human security.

The policy analysis of CLICO highlights the need for institutional collaboration and integration of [climate change](#) adaptation policies into

already existing structures, such as those related to human development and poverty reduction. A review of existing policies in a number of countries found that good policies already exist, but they are not implemented.

Moreover, in many cases the knowledge and experience of the populations affected by [water](#) phenomena is not taken adequately into account, and as a result government policies end up being counterproductive. A greater social participation would need to go hand-in-hand with social and economic policies to empower vulnerable groups to have a meaningful role in participatory processes.

Provided by Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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