
The Impact of Climate Change on Conflict and Displacement in South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Climate change has emerged as a critical driver of conflict and displacement globally, with South Asia being one of the most vulnerable regions due to its dense population, geographic location, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. This paper examines the complex interplay between climate change, resource scarcity, forced migration, and violent conflicts in South Asia. It explores how climate-induced phenomena such as rising sea levels, erratic monsoons, and extreme weather events exacerbate displacement and social unrest. Through case studies from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, the paper highlights the socio-political and economic consequences of climate-induced migration. The study concludes with policy recommendations aimed at mitigating the impact of climate change on security, stability, and human displacement in South Asia.

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South Asia, home to over 1.8 billion people, is highly susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, and environmental degradation have intensified water scarcity, food insecurity, and forced migration. These climate-induced changes have exacerbated socio-economic inequalities, leading to conflicts over resources and displacement of vulnerable communities. While governments and international organizations have initiated climate adaptation



programs, the intersection of climate change, displacement, and conflict remains a growing concern. This paper explores the causes, impacts, and policy measures related to climate-induced displacement and conflicts in South Asia.

Climate Change and Its Impacts in South Asia

South Asia is one of the most climate-vulnerable regions in the world. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified the region as a hotspot for climate-induced risks, including:

Rising Temperatures: Average temperatures in South Asia have risen significantly, leading to heatwaves, reduced agricultural productivity, and water scarcity. The increased frequency and intensity of heatwaves have caused significant health issues, particularly among vulnerable populations such as the elderly and low-income communities. Rising temperatures also accelerate glacial melt in the Himalayas, threatening water availability in major rivers like the Ganges, Indus, and Brahmaputra.

Erratic Monsoons: Changes in monsoon patterns have disrupted agricultural cycles, causing crop failures and food insecurity. Delayed or excessive monsoons have led to flooding in some regions while prolonged dry spells have caused droughts in others. These fluctuations have reduced overall crop yields, threatened the livelihoods of millions of farmers and increased rural-to-urban migration.

Sea-Level Rise: Coastal regions, particularly in Bangladesh, India, and the Maldives, are experiencing inundation, salinization of freshwater resources, and loss of habitable land. Coastal erosion is forcing communities to relocate, leading to internal and cross-border migration. The submersion of small island nations like the Maldives poses a significant existential threat, requiring urgent global intervention.

Extreme Weather Events: The frequency and intensity of cyclones, floods, and droughts have increased, displacing millions and straining resources. The economic impact of these disasters is significant, as they destroy infrastructure, disrupt supply chains, and hinder economic growth. Vulnerable communities are often left without adequate government support, leading to social unrest and conflicts over relief distribution.

Biodiversity Loss and Ecosystem Degradation: Climate change is affecting biodiversity, leading to habitat destruction and species extinction. Deforestation, desertification, and pollution are further exacerbating these environmental crises. The loss of natural ecosystems has a cascading effect on food security and water availability, intensifying existing socio-political challenges.



These climate-induced challenges are not only environmental but also socio-economic and political, as they exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and create new sources of tension. Disruptions in agricultural productivity, forced migration, and water scarcity contribute to economic instability, exacerbate inequalities, and, in some cases, fuel conflicts over dwindling resources. Addressing these multifaceted issues requires urgent and coordinated regional action.¹

Climate Change, Resource Scarcity, and Conflict

Resource scarcity, driven by climate change, is a significant factor in the escalation of conflicts in South Asia. Competition over dwindling resources such as water, arable land, and fisheries has led to tensions within and between communities.

- **Water Scarcity:** South Asia is heavily dependent on transboundary river systems, such as the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra. Climate change has altered water availability, leading to disputes between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh over water sharing. As water resources dwindle, tensions over dam construction, irrigation rights, and hydroelectric projects are intensifying, increasing geopolitical friction and diplomatic strain. Rural communities facing water shortages are migrating to urban centres, straining infrastructure and exacerbating socio-political tensions.²
- **Land Degradation:** Soil erosion, desertification, and salinization have reduced agricultural productivity, forcing farmers to migrate and increasing competition for fertile land. As arable land becomes scarce, marginalized communities often find themselves in conflict with larger landholders and state authorities. Encroachment on protected lands and forests for agriculture and habitation has also increased, leading to disputes over land ownership and environmental conservation.
- **Fisheries and Coastal Resources:** Rising sea levels and overexploitation have depleted fisheries, affecting livelihoods and triggering conflicts among fishing communities. Countries such as India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan have witnessed growing disputes over fishing rights, often leading to confrontations between local fishermen and security forces. The degradation of coral reefs and marine ecosystems due to climate change further compounds the crisis, reducing fish stocks and pushing coastal communities into deeper economic hardship. Similarly, declining agricultural productivity and loss of coastal livelihoods have fuelled internal migration and social unrest.³



- **Energy and Resource Competition:** Climate-induced energy shortages have intensified regional conflicts over access to fuel, forests, and hydropower. The increasing demand for alternative energy sources has led to competition over solar, wind, and hydroelectric projects, often resulting in political disputes and resistance from local populations.

These resource-driven conflicts are often compounded by weak governance, inadequate infrastructure, and socio-economic inequalities, making them difficult to resolve. Governments in South Asia need to implement sustainable resource management policies, enhance cross-border cooperation, and invest in climate-resilient infrastructure to mitigate these risks and ensure long-term stability in the region.

Climate-Induced Displacement and Migration

Climate change is a significant driver of forced migration in South Asia. The region accounts for a large proportion of global climate-induced displacement, with millions being displaced annually due to floods, cyclones, and droughts.⁴ Many of these migrants relocate to urban centres, leading to overcrowding, strained infrastructure, and social conflicts.⁵

1. **Bangladesh:** Rising sea levels and cyclones have rendered large areas of coastal Bangladesh uninhabitable, displacing millions.⁶ Many of these displaced individuals migrate to urban centres, leading to overcrowding, resource strain, and social tensions.
2. **India:** Erratic monsoons and droughts have forced farmers in states like Rajasthan and Maharashtra to migrate to cities in search of livelihoods.⁷ This internal migration has strained urban infrastructure and increased competition for jobs and resources.
3. **Pakistan:** Glacial melt and floods in northern Pakistan have displaced communities, while water scarcity in the south has driven rural-urban migration.⁸

Climate-induced migration often leads to the emergence of informal settlements, increased poverty, and social unrest, further complicating efforts to achieve sustainable development.

Case Studies

1. **Bangladesh:** The country is often cited as a prime example of climate-induced displacement. Rising sea levels and cyclones have displaced millions, with many migrating to Dhaka and other urban centres. This has led to overcrowding, poor living conditions, and increased vulnerability to exploitation.



2. **India:** In the Sundarbans delta, rising sea levels and salinization have forced communities to abandon their homes and migrate to cities like Kolkata. This has exacerbated urban poverty and strained local resources.
3. **Pakistan:** The 2010 floods displaced over 20 million people, highlighting the region's vulnerability to extreme weather events. Many of the displaced have yet to recover, leading to long-term socio-economic challenges.

These case studies underscore the urgent need for regional cooperation and targeted policies to address climate-induced displacement.

Policy Recommendations

To mitigate the impact of climate change on conflict and displacement in South Asia, a multi-faceted and collaborative approach is essential. The following policy measures are recommended to address the region's unique challenges and build resilience:

1. **Strengthening Regional Cooperation:** South Asian nations must prioritize regional collaboration to address shared climate risks. Establishing frameworks for transboundary water management, joint disaster preparedness initiatives, and coordinated climate adaptation strategies can help mitigate conflicts over resources. Platforms like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) should be revitalized to foster dialogue and collective action on climate-related challenges.⁹
2. **Investing in Climate Resilience:** Governments should allocate resources to develop climate-resilient infrastructure, such as flood-resistant housing, drought-tolerant crops, and renewable energy systems. Investments in sustainable agriculture, including water-efficient irrigation techniques and crop diversification, can enhance food security and reduce dependency on climate-vulnerable practices.¹⁰
3. **Enhancing Early Warning Systems:** Strengthening early warning systems and disaster response mechanisms is critical to minimizing the impact of extreme weather events. Advanced meteorological technologies, community-based alert systems, and efficient evacuation plans can save lives and reduce displacement during cyclones, floods, and other disasters.¹¹
4. **Promoting Sustainable Urbanization:** As climate migrants move to urban areas, policies must focus on managing urban growth sustainably. This includes improving affordable housing,



upgrading infrastructure, and creating livelihood opportunities in cities. Urban planning should integrate climate adaptation measures to ensure cities can accommodate growing populations without exacerbating vulnerabilities.¹²

5. **Empowering Vulnerable Communities:** Vulnerable groups, including women, indigenous communities, and marginalized populations, must be empowered to participate in climate adaptation and decision-making processes. Providing access to education, resources, and leadership opportunities can enhance their resilience and ensure inclusive solutions to climate challenges.

By adopting these measures, South Asia can mitigate the adverse effects of climate change on conflict and displacement, fostering a more secure, stable, and sustainable future for the region.

Conclusion

Climate change is not just an environmental challenge; it is a profound socio-political issue that exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and intensifies conflicts in South Asia. The region's dependence on agriculture, shared water resources, and coastal communities makes it highly susceptible to the adverse effects of rising temperatures, erratic weather patterns, and resource scarcity. Climate-induced displacement is increasing, putting immense pressure on urban centres, creating new security challenges, and heightening geopolitical tensions.

The case studies of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan illustrate how climate change disrupts livelihoods, forces migration, and fuels competition over diminishing resources. Without effective policies, these challenges will only worsen, leading to further displacement, economic instability, and regional conflicts. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including regional cooperation, investment in climate resilience, improved disaster preparedness, and inclusive governance. Governments, international organizations, and local communities must work together to implement sustainable solutions that mitigate climate-induced conflicts and displacement.

In conclusion, South Asia's climate crisis is a collective challenge that demands immediate action. Strengthening adaptive capacities, enhancing transboundary resource management, and empowering vulnerable communities will be critical to ensuring long-term peace and stability in the region. A proactive, cooperative, and sustainable approach is essential to preventing climate change from becoming a catalyst for further conflicts and humanitarian crises.



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