

A Natural Solution: Environmental Solutions to Displacement

Nassim Majidi discusses linkages between environment and displacement, stemming from a plenary session held at the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) in Nairobi in May 2016. Displacement challenges in Somalia – and other settings, such as Afghanistan – raise critical questions on the role and potential of the environment.

On 25 May 2016, at the UNEA session on Environment and Displacement in Nairobi, panellists and participants reflected on the human and policy implications of environment and displacement, asking: what are the root causes of displacement, and what is the role of the international environmental community?

The link between environment and displacement goes beyond climate change. The discussion on the impact of environment on displacement casts a wider net than is commonly acknowledged. Other drivers include land mismanagement, erosion, natural disasters, resource depletion, and competition over natural resources. All drive displacement in a way that interacts with, but is not solely linked to, climate change.

Understanding these nuances can help us know what can be done, and what solutions can be introduced to curb the negative impacts of environmental shocks and displacement.



Drought in Africa (image courtesy of [Oxfam International via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

Somalia is a good example. Although there is war and conflict, many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been displaced in resource wars because of drought and scarcity of resources. Similar findings emerge in the Great Lakes and Sudan. Further away from Africa, Afghanistan shares similar realities on the broader link between displacement and the environment.

The case of Somalia is illustrative of the nexus between conflict, environment and displacement. Michael Keating, UN Special representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Somalia, spoke



at UNEA to express his views on the reality of this nexus and on the potential of the environment to unlock the nexus:

*“I believe, that our understanding of what the contribution of environment to conflict has increased dramatically. Our understanding of how environment can contribute to solutions is still pretty primitive. (...) In the case of Somalia, the dynamics whereby unbridled use of resources is contributing to displacement, it is a symptom of conflict, clans and sub-clans, who are competing on diminishing assets such as water. The question is: to what degree can an understanding of natural resources contribute to efforts to improve peace and conflict resolution?
[1]”*

In the case of Somalia, the SRSG and representatives of the Government, such as the Minister of the Environment of Somalia, call for investigation into the role of energy to transform the situation, and bring new solutions to the old problem of conflict and displacement. They jointly acknowledge that energy is both a cause of conflict and a potential solution to it. But they also asked a question: to what degree has the role of energy been analysed to end conflict?

Somalia is among the windiest places in Africa, with substantive solar and thermal resources. Solar and wind energy have been referred to as the “low-hanging power fruits of Somalia[2]”, yet Somalia’s power bills are noted to be among the most expensive in the world. While the resources exist the energy sector remains underdeveloped. One root problem is that the energy sector is part of the war economy. Money from privatised energy is used to fuel the conflict, rather than to explore how these resources could help form solutions.



Solar Panels (image courtesy of [James Moran via Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0](#))

What is the potential of energy for displaced people? Whether in Somalia or Kenya, the lives of marginalised and displaced communities can be improved by looking at the energy needed to transform their lives. Yet, that lens is often missing for reasons related to the war and conflict economy. In Somalia, the production and export of charcoal is one of the key drivers of radicalization and displacement in the country. The revenue is used to perpetuate conflict and violence. Those traditionally engaged in agriculture have seen their revenues and livelihoods

eradicated as their trees were converted into charcoal, and charcoal exported to neighbouring countries. In the words of Bur'i Mohamed Hamza, the State Minister for the Environment, this has led to youth joining Al-Shabab. The link is then made between radicalization and the environment, conflict and displacement.

Mr Hamza stated at the UNEA panel that “radicalization that you witness is partly due to environmental degradation”. Solving the environmental challenge, using natural resources to strengthen environmental management, and bringing environmental solutions can then both limit conflict and violence, as well as radicalization and displacement.

The conflict-displacement-environment nexus is not just an African problem. To take a second country case study, Afghanistan, where Samuel Hall operates, the situation is acutely similar. However, more comparative analyses are needed to understand common problems and learn from solutions. Across the Afghanistan-Pakistani border, trees are being cut down and the environment being degraded as a result of the conflict waging in the sub-region and the efforts against radical groups. Internally, renewed conflict has led to over 1.2 million displaced persons as most recently reported by Amnesty International. Prince Mostapha Zahir spoke at UNEA of the impact of conflict and displacement on the economy and on the environment.

Afghanistan and Somalia are but two examples among many where renewed conflict, climate change, and civil unrest, have come together to test the people, the government and the international community. Solutions that build on the environment and on the energy sector are needed to bring stability and prevent further displacement.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Endnotes

[1] For a full video of the event, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDJMIrLbJA&app=desktop> .

[2] <http://somaliiinvestor.so/solar-and-wind-energy-somalias-low-hanging-power-fruits/>

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