CLIMATE CHANGE, RESPONSE, AND MASS ATROCITIES

Sudikoff Interdisciplinary Seminar on Genocide Prevention

RAPPORTEUR'S REPORT JANUARY 2024

UNITED STATES
HOLOCAUST
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MUSEUM

SIMON-SKJODT CENTER
FOR THE PREVENTION OF GENOCIDE

THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
teaches that the Holocaust was preventable and that by
heeding warning signs and taking early action, individuals
and governments can save lives. With this knowledge,
the **Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide**
works to do for the victims of genocide today what the
world failed to do for the Jews of Europe in the 1930s
and 1940s. The mandate of the Simon-Skjodt Center is
to alert the United States' national conscience, influence
policy makers, and stimulate worldwide action to prevent
and work to halt acts of genocide or related crimes against
humanity, and advance justice and accountability. Learn
more at **ushmm.org/genocide-prevention.**

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INTRODUCTION

On October 18 and 24, 2023, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum brought together a diverse group of scholars, practitioners, and policy makers for two 90-minute virtual convenings to discuss the relationship between climate change, climate response, and mass atrocities. Motivations for this seminar included (1) taking stock of knowledge about the relationship between climate change, climate response, and mass atrocities; (2) generating new ideas for future research or practice; and (3) exploring how the Simon-Skjodt Center can play a constructive role in this area.

This rapporteur's report summarizes key observations raised during both discussions under the Chatham House rule of non-attribution and does not necessarily represent the views of all participants.

The first session focused on exploring the interaction between the effects of climate change and risks of mass atrocities. Guiding questions included:

- In addition to the findings that we highlight in the seminar background paper, what is known about the relationship between climate change and risks of mass atrocities?

- What are some of the most promising approaches that governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations are using to address these risks?

- Which new or additional actions would help reduce mass atrocity risks associated with climate change?

The second session focused on the effects of climate response measures and risks of mass atrocities. Guiding questions included:

- What is known about the relationship between climate response measures and risks of mass atrocities?

- Which actions would help reduce mass atrocity risks associated with climate mitigation and adaptation?

- How can various actors—including governments, international organizations, private firms, and civil society organizations—pursue climate response measures in countries at highest risk of mass atrocities in ways that also help reduce mass atrocity risks?

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND RISKS OF MASS ATROCITIES

Risk factors

The seminar's background paper highlights how climate change may contribute to two mass atrocity risk factors: exclusionary ideologies and large-scale conflict or instability. Risk factors can be thought of as enabling conditions that increase the overall likelihood of new mass atrocities in a country, rather than proximate causes of violence (McLoughlin 2014).

Exclusionary ideologies

One participant described how climate change can contribute to the creation or transformation of group identities. For example, the participant detailed how state or non-state actors could label populations affected by climate change as a single identity group to foment division for their strategic gain. Another participant noted that inadequate government responses to climate change risks could contribute to the development of grievances between identity groups and the characterization of previous harmonious communities as being opposed to each other. The participant said this could also lead to the emergence of armed groups who use exclusionary ideologies to rally support for attacking communities, contributing to increased violence.[1]

One participant described how these mechanisms may be at play in northwest Nigeria, where environmental stressors have overlapped with ongoing conflict between communities. The participant said that both state and non-state actors have labeled entire communities as bandits and have waged indiscriminate attacks against them.

Participants also discussed how climate change may influence the perceptions or development of exclusionary ideologies. One participant asked whether a high, pre-existing degree of group polarization is a necessary condition for exclusionary ideology to take root or if exclusionary ideologies can also develop as a result of climate change-induced tensions. The participant said that clarifying this potential distinction could help practitioners identify populations that are most at risk among populations most affected by climate change.

Large-scale conflict or instability

Multiple participants described cases where climate change may be contributing to ongoing or potential conflict and instability.

For example, one participant described the potential for increased flooding in South Sudan to push groups who have historical divisions to the same geographic areas as they flee, heightening risks for violence among these groups. Additionally, another participant noted that in Somalia, Al-Shabaab has exploited environmental conditions such as drought and resource scarcity to gain control over larger territories through violent means.

One participant said that conflict is also a driver of heightened vulnerability to climate change and an amplifier of mass atrocity risks.

Participants also described how these two atrocity risk factors—exclusionary ideologies and large-scale conflict or instability—interact. One participant described how, in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, different

livelihoods, such as farmers and herders, are primarily associated with individuals from certain ethnic backgrounds. They noted that conflicts stemming from contrasting land-use interests between groups with different livelihoods can become intertwined with ethnic identities, which may evolve into violence organized along ethnic lines. The participant described how a lack of institutions to address these tensions contributes to collective fear among communities and increases the risk of violence. One participant noted that strengthening social ties between communities could help reduce risks of violence.

Additional considerations

Participants also discussed the ways that climate change may further compound risks for groups that are already vulnerable to mass atrocity risks, such as women, girls, and Indigenous Peoples.

One participant suggested it would be useful to present these intersecting risks in a matrix that identifies (1) countries where livelihoods and populations are most vulnerable to climate change, (2) the capacity of these governments to address climate risks, (3) security threats in each country, and (4) any existing or historical divisions between groups. Participants suggested that this matrix might help analysts create a narrower list of countries where higher mass atrocity risks converge with climate risks.

Participants agreed that context needs to be considered when discussing potential risks posed by climate change as it interacts with mass atrocity risks in specific cases. An additional participant suggested practitioners and researchers consider how different livelihoods and community practices may broaden options for atrocity prevention in the context of climate mitigation and adaptation. For example, practitioners may design programs focused on atrocity prevention sensitive to the dynamics of different agricultural sectors in a particular community.

Research gaps

Participants identified several research gaps in the relationship between the effects of climate change and the risks of mass atrocities. These include research on:

- **THE INTERSECTION OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND MASS ATROCITIES**: Participants noted that significant research focuses on the intersections between climate change and armed conflict as opposed to mass atrocities. Multiple participants said they did not understand how climate-related mass atrocity risks are distinct from climate security risks. As one participant responded, mass atrocities most often, but not exclusively, occur in armed conflict contexts. Therefore, atrocity prevention is not synonymous with conflict prevention or resolution in every case. However, the participant noted that whether the relationship between climate change and mass atrocities is distinct from climate change's relationship with conflict requires further research. Another participant suggested that it would be useful for policy makers and other practitioners if researchers developed more case studies of how climate change may be impacting mass atrocities.

- **FUTURE RISKS**: Participants suggested a need for more research on future scenarios, accounting for how climate change risks may change and how it may affect mass atrocity risks in turn. Participants described that climate vulnerability research has tended to focus on the past few decades and is often specific to the impact of climate change via natural hazards. Additionally, one participant suggested that exploring more case studies that go beyond how climate change will impact agricultural issues,

the dominant focus of much climate-conflict research, may broaden practitioners' understanding of different entry points for atrocity prevention.

- **REGIONAL- AND LOCAL-LEVEL ANALYSIS:** On one hand, participants suggested that the analysis of how climate change may be influencing mass atrocity risks should expand beyond country-specific analyses. Participants said that research should examine how other levels of analysis, including both local and regional patterns, can offer insight into how climate change intersects with mass atrocities. Participants suggested that focusing on local-level mechanisms could enable more preventive action through more specific programs.

- **BUILD CONNECTIONS ACROSS FIELDS**: One participant suggested that practitioners in the climate change field do not understand the interventions that could help prevent mass atrocities, and vice versa. Participants suggested that joint perspectives at the intersection of climate science and the atrocity prevention field could strengthen programs to prevent risks from both issues. Additionally, participants stressed that more partnerships across fields in climate science, climate response, the private sector, and among policy makers could help strengthen policy responses to these issues.

Approaches to address risks

In terms of promising approaches to address these risks, participants suggested that governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations should look for entry points for policies and programs beyond responding to the physical impacts of climate change.

For example, participants suggested approaches should focus on addressing structural risks that overlap with both atrocity prevention and climate change, such as conflict and fragility. Multiple participants suggested that efforts to promote land tenure rights present a promising area for building community resilience. These programs may include focusing on strengthening institutions that address land disagreements and promoting equitable access to land. For example, one participant described a program in Uganda where, following years of increasing land conflict between communities, an organization helped to develop legal aid clinics to provide guidance on land rights.

Participants suggested efforts that can simultaneously produce benefits for addressing climate change and mass atrocity risks. For example, they suggested that atrocity prevention efforts could build community resilience to climate change by targeting groups most vulnerable to both issues.

Participants also suggested that intersectional responses—programs that address communities that are vulnerable to climate change or conflict in multiple, overlapping ways—are necessary, specifically with regard to the vulnerability of women to climate and mass atrocities. One participant suggested a need for more analysis about how investments in atrocity prevention and climate adaptation can benefit from focusing on women and other marginalized groups. For example, the participant described how providing women with agricultural training and capital could reduce their vulnerability to the effects of climate change and the risks of atrocities.

Multiple participants said that local and context-specific approaches are important for addressing the risk of climate change for mass atrocities. One participant described a program in the Niger Delta that uses a community-centered early warning and early response system to anticipate potential conflicts induced by

floods or changes in migration patterns. Additionally, one participant said local leaders, and in particular, religious leaders, can help calm tensions and reduce the chance of atrocities taking place. Another participant illustrated that focusing on city leaders and local governments in urban areas facing a high risk of climate change could also help strengthen atrocity prevention measures.

One participant suggested it would be particularly helpful to clarify how to frame the immediate necessity of policies to address what are perceived as the long-term risks of climate change as it intersects with atrocity prevention. One participant said there are ways to address the structural issues in the contexts of other policy frameworks, such as the Global Fragility Act, for countries that are vulnerable to climate change, such as those in Coastal West Africa and Haiti. Another participant suggested policy makers should also address risks to internally displaced people from climate change, as opposed to focusing only on the immediate risks of mass atrocities.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CLIMATE RESPONSE MEASURES AND RISKS OF MASS ATROCITIES

Participants also discussed the potential effects of climate response measures,[2] as distinct from climate trends themselves, on mass atrocities. As one participant said, mass atrocity risks surrounding climate response are likely to be faced in the near future with the expansion of mineral extraction to limit the negative effects of climate change and reduce global dependence on fossil fuels. One participant stated that as countries move towards diversified energy systems, researchers and practitioners should address the immediate risks and not neglect the long-term concerns that climate response and adaptation may bear. One participant noted that rapidly increasing demand for critical minerals required for energy diversification will pose the greatest risks of mass atrocities for communities that do not have institutional safeguards in place. Another participant said that there needs to be an added focus on the geopolitical dimensions of climate response decision-making between governments and private companies and how these decisions will affect local communities.

Another participant discussed the risks for some state or non-state actors to capitalize on real and perceived injustices of both climate change and climate responses to sow division or support, especially as economic rivalries between countries such as the United States and China grow. They said that climate responses that do not address different levels of vulnerability among and between communities will provide incentives for some state or non-state actors to capitalize on a community's collective fear of losing livelihoods. These efforts, including incitement to violence, may escalate tensions in communities or increase risks of mass atrocities.

Participants said policy makers and researchers should draw attention to groups that are particularly vulnerable and already facing risks from climate response efforts, such as Indigenous Peoples. One participant said that a large portion of critical minerals central to renewable energy systems falls within land belonging to Indigenous Peoples. They said that more research is needed to identify how extractive efforts could affect these communities' individual and collective rights and potentially contribute to conflict.

Approaches to reduce mass atrocity risks associated with climate response

Participants agreed there are ways to mitigate mass atrocity risks in climate response efforts, even if mass atrocity prevention is not among the intended objectives of the climate response effort. Participants suggested

a promising first step could be identifying mass atrocity prevention best practices and then identifying ways for the practices to be integrated into climate responses.

One participant said that efforts to mitigate potential mass atrocity risks will depend on including local communities in decision-making processes of climate response efforts. They noted that local communities may understand the risks and opportunities for building resilience through response measures that do not cause harm, directly or indirectly.

Participants suggested that developing relationships between private companies, local communities, civil society organizations, and governments will be beneficial in thinking through approaches to reduce mass atrocity risks associated with climate response. One participant said that this model exists with forums in the critical mineral sector. They mentioned the application of the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights[3] in the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose mining sector is critical to the global energy transition.[4] They said that these existing frameworks may incorporate civil society into dialogues with companies involved in these sectors to encourage greater community protections.

Another participant stressed the need for government engagement with the private sector. They noted that, without government engagement, the private sector is put at a disadvantage in working on sustainable, safe, and well-governed climate response practices. Without governments providing and enforcing regulations, the participant said that some companies will use harmful practices and undermine the ability of others to do well. Participants suggested that engaging both governments and private firms in conversations could help reduce potential harms.

ENDNOTES

[1] As the seminar's background paper outlines, exclusionary ideologies may provide perpetrators with a set of themes, symbols, and common references that justify violence against particular groups (Maynard 2022).

[2] *Climate response* measures are normally categorized as either mitigation or adaptation. Climate mitigation refers to "a human intervention to reduce emissions or enhance" the removal of greenhouse gasses from the atmosphere (IPCC 2022b, p. 1807). Mitigation includes measures such as reducing fossil-fuel use, increasing use of renewable-energy sources such as wind, solar, hydro-, and nuclear power, and the replenishment or expansion of forests. Additionally, *Climate adaptation* refers to "the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects in order to moderate harm or exploit beneficial opportunities" (IPCC 2022a, p. 43). Adaptation includes measures such as migration in response to climate changes and their environmental effects, changes in the use of common resources to address scarcity, and changes to physical infrastructure to improve resilience against extreme weather events.

[3] The Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights, established in 2000, "is a multi-stakeholder initiative that promotes the implementation of a set of principles that guide companies on providing security for their operations while respecting human rights," https://www.voluntaryprinciples.org/the-initiative/.

[4] Andrew Clark and Anselme Muzalia Wimye, "Report Implementation of the Voluntary Principles in the Democratic Republic of Congo," Search for Common Ground and USAID, April 2023, https://cnxus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/SFCG-DRC-Voluntary-Principles-Report-2023-Eng1.pdf Research.

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