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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Local approaches to climate-sensitive peacebuilding: lessons from Afghanistan

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Since the early 2010s, academic and policy debates about the interlinkages between climate and security have expanded and deepened. Climate is now widely acknowledged to magnify security risks especially in conflict or post-conflict contexts. This relationship is viewed as complex, dynamic and indirect, involving a wide range of intermediate variables. However, this discussion – and hence, related policy efforts – have tended to occur at highly aggregate levels of analysis, especially national, regional and global ones. Instead, this paper addresses climate-sensitive peacebuilding at the local level. What does local climate-sensitive peacebuilding look like on the ground? What are the promising areas for research and policy responses in fragile and conflict-affected settings? After offering a broad overview of climate-sensitive peacebuilding, we focus on the case of Afghanistan, drawing on specific examples that were in place prior to the 2021 return to power of the Taliban. We find that the traditional Western approach in the country – top-down, focused on hard security rather than human security and highly state-centric – tends to ignore the impacts of climate change. In addition, the dominant security paradigm overlooks the potential of local peacebuilding initiatives that address adaptation and resilience. We argue that climate-sensitive peacebuilding offers a bottom-up alternative to addressing the intersection of these risks in conflict-affected settings.

**Key words** climate • conflict • peacebuilding • local approaches • Afghanistan

#### Key messages

- There is a need to better incorporate climate change impacts and risks into the design of peacebuilding responses.
- The responses should draw on local demands, concerns, experiences and perceptions.
- Access to climate financing must be improved for vulnerable groups in conflict-affected settings.
- Evidence-based research should be developed to explore the potential of climate-sensitive peacebuilding.

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## Introduction

Since the early 2010s, academic and policy debates about the relationship between climate and security have expanded and deepened. Climate is now widely acknowledged to magnify security risks in certain contexts. This link is viewed as dynamic, complex and indirect, involving a wide range of variables (von Uexkull and Buhaug, 2021). In conflict-affected settings, weak institutional capacity to cope with the impacts of climate change can exacerbate the effects of the climate-security nexus, especially for population groups that are highly exposed to such risks – including women, children, the elderly, migrants, LGBTQI+ and indigenous groups (see APWLD, 2015).

However, major gaps remain in this literature and related policy discussions, especially as they have tended to occur at highly aggregate levels of analysis, especially national, regional and global ones. Instead, this article addresses climate-sensitive peacebuilding at the local level. What does local climate-sensitive peacebuilding look like on the ground? What are the promising areas for research and policy responses in fragile and conflict-affected settings?

After offering a broad overview of climate-sensitive peacebuilding, we focus on the case of Afghanistan, drawing on specific examples that were in place prior to the 2021 return to power of the Taliban. We find that the traditional Western approach in the country – very top-down, focused on hard security rather than human security and highly state-centric – has largely ignored the impacts of climate change. In addition, the dominant security paradigm has overlooked the potential of local peacebuilding initiatives that address adaptation and resilience. Given the security situation in Afghanistan, before the Taliban takeover and after, the paper is based mostly on desk research and field research conducted before 2019. The purpose of the paper is to seed the idea that, even in fairly extreme situations of day-to-day violence and instability, it is possible, indeed necessary, to encourage localised efforts at climate-sensitive peacebuilding. We argue that climate-sensitive peacebuilding offers a bottom-up alternative to addressing the intersection of security and climate risks in conflict-affected settings.

The article is structured in three parts. The first two sections outline the recent literature on climate, security, focusing on peacebuilding and the role of local perspectives. They also define key terms such as peacebuilding and climate-sensitive approaches and explains the methodology used in this paper. The next two sections home in on the case of Afghanistan, identifying examples of climate-sensitive peacebuilding. Finally, the conclusion notes key take-away points and notes directions for future research.

## Climate-sensitive peacebuilding

Since the early 2010s, researchers have explored the links between climate and security. This literature shows the relationship to be both dynamic and complex.

Climate is now broadly recognised as a multiplier of insecurity in many contexts – especially when a broad definition, such as human security, is used. Extreme events, slow-onset phenomena, or a combination of both, can increase energy, water and food security, for instance through desertification, or by undermining local capacity for resilience. Such impacts affect both rural and urban areas, albeit in different ways (see von Uexkull and Buhaug, 2021).

This relationship is not direct; rather, it is mediated by a whole gamut of factors. They include the effectiveness and inclusiveness of natural resources governance and local groups' access to resources, technology and know-how for climate adaptation and resilience. Another important point emerging from this research is that the burdens stemming from climate and security are not borne uniformly: populations that are highly exposed to climate change, and which enjoy inadequate access to adaptation resources, are more seriously affected. Low-income groups, women, children, indigenous people, LGBTI+, migrants and the elderly are among those more often subject to forced displacement, loss of livelihood and social services, and damaged infrastructure (UN Women, 2020).

Much of this literature and related policy discussions (including those taking place at the United Nations (UN) Security Council; Abdenur and Folly, 2021) focus heavily on armed conflict contexts. However, there is an incipient literature – and associated policy debates in other parts of the UN system – that concentrate on peacebuilding: here defined broadly as efforts undertaken not only to prevent violence and conflict by strengthening capacity for conflict management but also to promote positive peace: attitudes, institutions and structures that foster peaceful societies (Matthew, 2014). From a policy perspective, the corollary is that peacebuilding responses must be made climate-sensitive: that is, they need to assess the risks and impacts of climate change within that particular context, and offer responses that are designed accordingly (Navone, 2021). In turn, this requires combining knowledge, data (qualitative and quantitative), and assessment methodologies used in the climate field with those used in that of security. As a result, climate-sensitive peacebuilding requires epistemic bridges, as well as a more flexible approach on the ground.

This, in turn, requires a shift away from the dominant, 'liberal peace' paradigm for peacebuilding, premised on the idea that societies achieve sustainable peace when their norms and institutions reflect and maintain key liberal values, such as multiparty democracy, a free-market economy, individual human rights and the rule of law. Western donors have promoted peacebuilding interventions aimed at the top-down adoption of liberal norms and institutions (Pritchett et al, 2010). In cases where conflict recurred or intensified, peacebuilding failures were attributed to insufficient efforts, and policy makers and practitioners doubled down on the approach.

The failures of this dominant, liberal peacebuilding paradigm in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular prompted the peacebuilding community to recognise the ineffectiveness of this approach, which overlooked (in those countries but also in other contexts) the 'catastrophic convergence of poverty, violence and climate change' in other contexts (Parenti, 2012: 5). In response, starting in the mid-2000s scholars started exploring the link between climate and conflict and its impact on poverty. However, they mostly referred to natural resource management in conflict-affected settings (Bruch et al, 2016). The primary aim was to reduce the incentives for violence by integrating climate change concerns into peacebuilding (Matthew, 2014; Ide,

2020) and supporting local initiatives to ensure resilient livelihoods, especially in conflict-prone settings or areas of (potential) political instability (Vivekananda et al, 2014). To address some of these convergences, de Coning (2018) calls for ‘adaptive peacebuilding’, which recognises not only the inherently political nature of peacebuilding, but also the importance of incorporating concepts such as complexity, resilience and local ownership.

These discussions have called the peacebuilding community’s attention to diversification of approaches, along with the focus on different levels of those affected and moving from top-down to the local level (Mac Ginty and Richmond, 2013). At a theoretical level, this shift dovetails with discussions of the ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding: the recognition that local actors – including governments and communities – are an integral part of peacebuilding.

However, local approaches to peacebuilding run into several challenges in a field that remains macro-oriented and marked by contexts that are heavily securitised (Öjendal, Schierenbeck et al, 2017). These challenges include: changing security and climate conditions and ensuring continuity and sustainability of successful initiatives but, also, political challenges, such as the risk of the local being subordinated to top-down dynamics in rigid and unfruitful ways (Öjendal, Leonardson et al, 2017). In addition, the ‘local turn’ sometimes relegates local actors to local debates and efforts. As Shuayb (2022) has noted, the term ‘localisation’ has become common in humanitarian circles, but can be used to relegate actors from developing countries to anecdotal roles in policy discussions rather than full participants in key decision-making spaces. This is particularly true when local actors are left out of all phases of response design and implementation, from risk analysis to impact assessment, and/or when policy making at higher levels of aggregation, including at the subnational, national, regional and global levels, fail to draw on lessons learned at the local level. The same is true for conceptual discussions of climate and security (or peacebuilding), including at global governance bodies – discussions in which local actors are often tokenised.

With respect to climate and security/peacebuilding more specifically, in many parts of the world, local communities have been dealing with the impacts of change for years – in some instances, for decades. Phenomena such as rising sea level, accelerating soil erosion, increasingly unpredictable hurricanes and storms and intensifying droughts and floods are already leading to loss of livelihoods and cultures, forced displacement and health problems. As a result of these experiences, many local actors have developed nuanced understandings, perceptions and concerns about those effects in the particular contexts in which they live – and, in many cases, have developed responses to these changes. However, without their experiences heard at higher levels of decision making, they are either unable to access resources to scale up and complement existing responses. In worst-case scenarios, local actors can be subjected to poorly designed adaptation and resilience responses imposed in a top-down manner, which can end up doing more harm than good (the so-called boomerang effect – see Swatuk et al, 2021).

In many places, local stakeholders may not adopt the language of climate, security and peacebuilding, but in practice they have been working to identify and assess risks, develop solutions and anticipate trends. Sometimes, the language of early warning and early response is used; in other contexts, different vocabularies have been adopted, for instance focusing on natural resource governance, on specific

variables, such as water or land; or else on droughts or other disasters. In other words, many existing, local peacebuilding approaches are adaptation strategies that arose (organically or through partnerships with external actors) in contexts affected by conflict and violence, not necessarily using the language used by policy debates and policy makers at the UN, donor countries and other decision-making key spaces at national, regional or global level.

According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014: 118), adaptation is ‘the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects’. A distinction is sometimes drawn between autonomous and planned adaptation (Fankhauser et al, 1999). The first type refers to more or less spontaneous changes in human behaviour in response to changing conditions in their immediate environment, independently of any broader plan or policy-based decisions. Autonomous adaptation is often implemented at a local level, especially by households and communities, and it does not require centralised management or policies. Responses are frequently developed in reaction to observed or felt impacts and have a short- or medium-term nature. For instance, a farmer may change cultivation practices or timing in response to changing precipitation patterns. Likewise, many communities became pastoralist as a way of adapting to rainfall variations (Savage et al, 2009).

In contrast, planned adaptation measures are based on deliberate policy options or response strategies, often preventive in nature. These measures frequently entail multisectoral collaboration carried out with the long-term goal of increasing adaptive capacity. They are often anticipatory and preventive, drawing on research and/or a collective awareness of growing risk or imminent change. They are guided by policy frameworks and governance decision-making and often require major structural change. For example, planned agricultural adaptation measures include application of new irrigation technologies.

However, in many contexts the distinction between autonomous and planned adaptation may represent a false dichotomy; adaptation responses, including in peacebuilding, are often iterative processes. This is especially true when planned adaptation draws on local knowledge and perceptions, and when local actors in different contexts exchange experiences and learn from one another. Indeed, the failure to build in feedback loops between local and higher levels of decision making can lead to maladaptations – defined by Barnett and O’Neill (2010: 211) as ‘action taken ostensibly to avoid or reduce vulnerability to climate change that impacts adversely on, or increases the vulnerability of other systems, sectors or social groups’. Thus, from a policy perspective, one key challenge for adaptation in conflict-affected settings is how to design early warning systems and responses, as well as preventive measures, that harness autonomous adaptive knowledge alongside more aggregate data and information.

There are examples of climate-sensitive peacebuilding initiatives from around the world that bridge the gap between autonomous and planned adaptation. In Uganda, for instance, the Kwatanisa Women’s Group, active in the Hoima district, works to empower local women through modern farming techniques for environmental conservation and climate adaptation. Low rainfall has led to increasing drought; in response, Kwatanisa promotes cultivation of fruit trees, especially mango and jackfruit, which both builds resilience and boosts local food security. The initiative includes sensitisation meetings to raise awareness within communities and build a shared sense of responsibility among its members.

In the Brazilian Amazon, levels of illegal deforestation and forest fires caused by human action have reached new peaks in recent years. In response, indigenous communities have become essential in detecting deforestation. In some places, such as in the state of Pará, in the Western Amazon, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) has helped to build up local capacity for forest monitoring, through partnerships with local communities. Members of the Tembé community – which has been facing relentless land invasions, illegal logging, poaching and drug-smuggling operations in their protected areas – have been working with Rainforest Connection (RFCx) to improve forest monitoring. The AI system alerts trained Tembé rangers to signs of illegal logging (for instance, by detecting the sounds of chainsaws), poaching (motorcycles) and smuggling (trucks/vehicles) (Graham, 2021).

In the Middle East, there are many examples of local climate action in fragile and conflict-affected areas that have both climate and security implications. For instance, a 2022 report documenting best practices in local climate action at the municipal level includes several examples from conflict-affected settings (UN Habitat et al, 2022). In Palestine, key measures have included enhancing food security through the planting of alfalfa and reuse of wastewater, as well as efforts to increase water availability, such as dams, water tanks, ponds and improved irrigation. In Lebanon, some priority adaptation measures have included efforts related to biodiversity, water and forestry. And in Sudan, adaptation actions included addressing agriculture (crop production, rangeland and livestock), water, coastal zone and health sectors. All of these efforts help to boost human security through enhanced water and food security, or a combination of both.

In fact, climate-sensitive peacebuilding is not strictly about adaptation; such initiatives can also have an impact on climate mitigation. For instance, in tropical forests such as the Congo and Amazon basins, environmental crimes like illegal deforestation and illegal gold extraction contribute to climate change (through greenhouse gas emissions and by undermining the carbon sink potential of forests), but they are also associated with high levels of violence and with other forms of organised crime, such as human and arms trafficking, sexual exploitation, and corruption and money laundering. Conversely, climate mitigation measures in forest settings – whether through law enforcement against environmental crimes, REDD+ initiatives, or reforestation of degraded areas – may help reduce crime and violence (and more broadly, human security) associated with these activities (Alves et al, 2021). In addition, the initiatives that promote more sustainable and equitable access to natural resources may help to temper or prevent disputes over those resources.

The next part of this article analyses climate-sensitive peacebuilding at the local level in Afghanistan. Afghanistan was chosen primarily because dominant approaches applied through the liberal peace paradigm there have been heavily top-down yet have failed to achieve lasting peace and security. Top-down policies have failed to consider the impacts of climate and largely overlook the importance of local peacebuilding, even as climate has been widely recognised as one of the many driving forces behind recurring instability in the country and region. There is thus a need to consider alternative approaches to peacebuilding in Afghanistan, and to build on whatever relevant local experiences have taken place in the country. Due to the current high level of instability in Afghanistan, fieldwork was not possible; instead, data on specific initiatives was gathered from official documents and statistics, but the conclusion addresses the need for more in-depth case studies.



## **The liberal peace paradigm in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan embodies a new breed of international crisis, where the hazards of war collide with those of climate change. Although Afghanistan has one of the world's lowest emissions of greenhouse gases (in 2018, it emitted 0.3 tons of carbon dioxide per capita) (World Bank, 2018), it is among those that feel most directly the impacts of climate change. The links between climate and security has resulted in a disastrous feedback loop, impacting Afghanistan's most vulnerable people and severely limiting their capability to cope with the aftermaths of the conflict, more so after the return to power of the Taliban and the continuation of violence. The situation has been further exacerbated by decades of top-down peacebuilding efforts focusing heavily on hard security and the War on Terror, at the cost of human security. The heavily militarised approach has led to the securitisation of peacebuilding measures.

The 2001 Bonn Conference was held under UN leadership but was strongly influenced by the US international interventions and peacebuilding efforts. Theoretically, the meeting aimed at establishing a liberal, Afghan-led state, but it generally failed to systematically and sustainably address the needs of Afghan citizens and rebuild state capacity (Suhrke, 2013). The Taliban was left out of the discussions, which ended up being considered to be 'an externally driven division of spoils among a hand-picked group of stakeholders who were on the right side of the War on Terror', rather than a peace agreement between belligerent actors (Goodhand and Sedra, 2010: 82; see also Suhrke, 2008). Bilateral development aid was channelled towards counter-insurgency operations, and donors focused more on 'Winning Hearts and Minds' (WHAM) rather than truly supporting local-led initiatives.

Most of the donors had different priorities and interests; there was no coordination and coherence, resulting in a fragmented and disjointed approach. Even Western donors followed different paths to funding allocation and programme implementation. The US provided generous funding and adopted a quick-fix approach to programme implementation. In contrast, the European Union spent carefully and prioritised long-term programme execution. The US-influenced development efforts focused on interventions that offered tangible and physically measurable results, while European initiatives concentrated on 'soft reforms', including those related to freedom of expression and human rights.

While the United States has spent at least \$744.9 billion in warfighting since 2001, in addition to millions more from the international community, most of that money went to traditional security efforts: training Afghan soldiers, dropping bombs, and supporting thousands of foreign troops. Sixteen percent of the U.S. budget in Afghanistan has gone toward reconstruction, the majority of it funding security, counternarcotics, and governance projects. Only a small fraction of funding has supported initiatives that help Afghans adapt to climate change, respond to natural disasters, and foster resilience. (Jones, 2020)

The coordination deficit in international assistance was aggravated by the decision of the donors to adopt a 'light footprint' approach, which was not clearly defined by the UN (Krampe et al, 2021). These decisions towards Afghanistan's post-conflict reconstruction have come to haunt the international community in the light of resurgent violence, lack of political stability and failing economy.

In contrast to the role of Western actors in Afghanistan, South–South efforts by countries like India have focused on humanitarian assistance, especially in the form of food assistance, infrastructural projects and targeted, community-based development projects and capacity-building programmes. To fill the gap in Afghanistan’s energy supply, India has provided support in establishing high-voltage transmission lines for electricity generation. It has also initiated other projects in the energy sector, including the Salma Dam project, the Pul-e-Khumri to Kabul Transmission Line, and the Chintala substation (Prabhu, 2021). India also provided financing and encouraged projects at the grassroots level, including primary healthcare centres, small bridges or culverts to provide connectivity to remote villages, and vocational training centres (Prabhu, 2021). Similarly, Turkey focused on sociocultural projects to benefit the Afghan public in the fields of education, health and infrastructure. These projects have included restoring and building schools, hospitals and mosques; conducting health checks for people living in rural areas; building roads, bridges and water wells; along with training judges, and mayoral and police officers; and providing vocational training to Afghan women (Kaya, 2013). A key difference from Western-led efforts has been the focus on local initiatives, mostly carried out with Afghan district-level governments and civil society, built around the values of ownership, accountability and partnership. The international peacebuilding agenda has since broadened from its focus on liberal ideologies; failures in the approach in Afghanistan arguably contributed to this process (de Coning, 2018). Once a significant actor in liberal peacebuilding interventions, the UN has since shifted towards the concept of ‘Sustaining Peace’. This concept recognises the limitations of a template approach to peace, and focuses instead on ‘supporting the political and social capacities that sustain peace’ (de Coning, 2018: 304). Issues of inclusivity and the environment featured more prominently in UN peacebuilding efforts, albeit a bit late and these issues will be put to test with the Taliban in power.

## **Conflict and climate in Afghanistan**

The literature on climate and security indicates that, in Afghanistan, climate change is already exacerbating conflict and modifying its dynamics. Nett and Rüttinger (2016) have underlined four major climate–fragility risks for Afghanistan: land degradation and natural resource conflicts; water-related conflicts and armed insurgency; scarcity and illicit livelihoods; and rapid-onset disasters and instability. The combined pressures of continuous warfare, civil disorder, lack of proper governance, and drought have taken a major toll on Afghanistan’s natural and human resources, especially in rural areas, which already faced poverty and food insecurity. These effects are most visible in conflicts over land, water and timber, destroying sources of income and livelihood for many Afghans and leading to forced displacement.

The links between climate and security are most evident with respect to agriculture, since most people in Afghanistan depend on agricultural activities for their livelihood. Up to 70 per cent of the country’s population live and work in rural areas and are involved in farming, herding or both, and 61 per cent of all households derive income from subsistence agriculture (Leao et al, 2018). The absence of controlled and sustainable land-use management and the collapse of local and national governance have significantly harmed the environment and left Afghanistan highly vulnerable to land degradation and desertification (UNEP, NEPA and GEF, 2009). This has



resulted in increased competition over land in both rural and urban areas (Brown and Blankenship, 2013). In the central highlands of Afghanistan, the degradation of grazing land productivity and vegetation cover have forced the Kuchis (nomadic pastoralists) to seek grazing at higher elevations, leading to contestation between legal rights held by the Kuchis and historical rights held by the Hazaras (UNEP, NEPA and GEF, 2009). Both groups depend on high-altitude grazing land to support livestock and, in the absence of clear legal frameworks and policies regarding access to the land, they resort to violence to restrict the access of the other resource-user group.

Conflicts over land resources have been aggravated by the scarcity of arable land: only 12 per cent of Afghanistan's total land is arable. Agriculture is highly dependent on the erratic rainfall and winter snows in the Hindu Kush mountains, and therefore highly climate sensitive – which increases the vulnerability of the local population. For instance, in 2018 the north-western region of Afghanistan was severely affected by drought in an area lacking an adequate irrigation system. Water levels dropped, a problem that was compounded by uncoordinated and unmanaged extraction, along with the completion of the Salma Dam (now known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam – AIFD) on the Hari river, severely affecting water flows and access to water by local communities. Issues surrounding water allocation arose between neighbouring villages, resulting in low-level violence. From 2018 to 2019, the drought displaced more than 400,000 people (in an earlier drought in 2011, the figure was 100,000). These impacts were exacerbated by the simultaneous occurrence, in 2019, of flash flooding, which caused at least 63 fatalities, forcibly displaced around 42,000 people, and led to extensive loss and damage to several thousand properties (ReliefWeb, 2019).

Evidence suggests that the hazards leading to disasters in Afghanistan may already have been made more likely and more intense by human-induced climate change (NEPA, 2017). In many cases, deep wells have been drilled without considering the long-term impacts on regional groundwater resources, including traditional *karez* systems (underground water canals) that are maintained by villages. Some of them remain functional, but the vast majority were destroyed or have not been repaired during the decades of war, adding to water scarcity.

In many parts of Afghanistan, water scarcity and livelihood insecurity drive farmers to engage in illicit poppy production instead of or in addition to more water-intensive crops, such as wheat or almonds. In their study on the livelihood trajectories of rural households in Afghanistan in Sar-i-Pul province, Huot and Pain (2017: 6) report that cyclical drought periods in the province have led households to diversify activities, including cultivation of opium poppies. Although the opium trade does not benefit the farmers directly, it provides large revenues to traffickers and insurgents, and contributes to maintaining the status quo of poor governance (Brown and Blankenship, 2013).

Against this backdrop, the interplay between weak governance and climate change has pushed people towards illicit economies to ensure their survival. Poppy farming employs an estimated 120,000 Afghans and brings in an estimated \$300 million to \$400 million a year. It has also benefited the Taliban. After taking over power in 2021, the Taliban – in an attempt to gain legitimacy from foreign powers like Qatar and China – claimed to ban poppy cultivation (Sengupta, 2021). However, in part due to the lack of alternatives and the unreliability of rains, it has faced pushback from poppy growers. According to the Afghanistan Opium survey 2020 from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, in 2020 the amount of land allocated to poppy

cultivation in Afghanistan expanded 37 per cent (UNODC, 2020). The reliance on poppy cultivation has been aggravated by political instability and conflict, devastating droughts, high seasonal floods, social and economic uncertainties, and declining international funding.

Instability and conflict in Afghanistan have also generated migration, both within and outside the country – a dynamic that was largely ignored by US and NATO forces (Parenti, 2012). The withdrawal of the international forces and the power capture by Taliban has only worsened the refugee situation, with over 2.6 million registered Afghan refugees in the world – of whom 2.2 million are registered in Iran and Pakistan alone. Another 3.5 million Afghans are internally displaced, having fled their homes to other locations in the country (UNHCR, 2021). They are driven to flee partly to avoid climate-driven violence. This ‘development in reverse’ trend (Collier et al, 2003) is likely to continue in the coming years as the structural drivers of the opium economy – armed conflict, poor governance, widespread poverty and climate change – continue to worsen (Goodhand, 2021).

However, there have been some local climate-sensitive experiences in Afghanistan from which lessons can be learned. The next section discusses some of the main climate frameworks and commitments adopted in Afghanistan, then delves into specific examples.

### **Instances of climate-sensitive peacebuilding in Afghanistan**

Since the turn of the millennium, Afghanistan has adopted major global climate frameworks and commitments. In 2008, after a consultative process, it issued a National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) (UNEP, NEPA and GEF, 2009). In 2015, it submitted a climate plan to the UN, acknowledging its vulnerability to climate change. The document estimated that US\$2.5 billion would be needed for watershed management and another US\$4.5 billion for restoring irrigation systems.

Afghanistan’s Second National Communication to the UNFCCC (NC2), submitted in 2017, highlights the country’s commitment to increase its adaptation capabilities for the key sectors of agriculture, human health, energy and infrastructure, as well as to raise the population’s overall awareness about climate change (NEPA, 2017). However, its ability to address climate change, especially through adaptation and resilience-building, has been curbed by a combination of lack of resources, weak government and recurring conflict, which undermines state capacity as well as civil society’s ability to respond to local challenges.

A number of external actors have supported local counterparts to implement or expand context-specific climate-related initiatives, some of them aimed at curbing reliance on poppies – especially through the cultivation of saffron. The saffron plant requires little water and is thus highly resistant to droughts. In addition, because of saffron’s high market value, farmers can earn up to seven times more cultivating saffron than poppies and need far less land, which makes it more affordable (Fang, 2020).

Creating alternatives by promoting the cultivation of crops that simultaneously address climate risks and promote peace is also important from a gender perspective. Women account for around 80 per cent of saffron production in Afghanistan; they are involved in all stages, from planting and harvesting to refining and packaging. In some parts of the country, female saffron growers have established their own saffron associations, eliminating middlemen who did not compensate them fairly. For instance,

the Ghoryan Women's Saffron Association has received support from the Agricultural Development Fund (an Afghan government organisation that received US funding) (Fang, 2020). This is an example of how a climate-sensitive project can contribute towards inclusion and, hence, help to promote peace.

Other efforts have focused on scaling up experiences at the local level. In 2018, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) implemented the Community-Based Agriculture and Rural Development project (CBARD) in the Ghormach district, in the north of Badghis province, as well as in Nangarhar and Farah provinces. In these parts of Afghanistan, people depend heavily on agriculture as their main source of income and livelihood, but an increase in droughts has pushed much of the population to cultivate poppies, which requires less water than other crops. In addition, inadequate infrastructure and weak access to markets prevent farmers from switching to higher value-added crops. CBARD was designed to reduce the dependence on poppy cultivation in the region by implementing greenhouses for the production of crops such as cucumbers, tomatoes, aubergines (eggplants) and peppers. It included the construction of 70 greenhouses in Ghormach district (in Badghis) alone. This component was accompanied by awareness-raising among the local population of the risks of opium farming and building capacity for ensuring product quality. In order to reduce malnutrition risks among children and pregnant women, who are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity, CBARD has provided communities in Kapisa province – which has an especially cold climate – with access to produce during winter months while also providing a general improvement in food quality. Combined, these measures helped to curb food insecurity in these parts of Afghanistan (UNDP, 2019).

In a complementary effort channelled through a national-level initiative yet with local implementation, the World Bank has funded the broader National Horticulture and Livestock Productivity Project (NHLP), through which greenhouses were distributed to families across Afghanistan's provinces. Over 300 Afghan women in Kapisa alone were able to grow food year-round for their families; some of the women became the sole breadwinners of their family. After distributing these greenhouses, the NHLP also provided classes for participants on how to cultivate vegetables and apply fertiliser made from organic waste. Eventually the initiative was scaled up and, by 2020, reached 291 districts across all 34 provinces in Afghanistan, covering more than 500,000 citizens, half of them women (Ellis, 2021). Although in March 2022 the World Bank announced that it would make available US\$1 billion to cover basic needs in Afghanistan (World Bank, 2022), as at the time of writing it is unclear whether the NHLP will be continued.

There have also been efforts to implement local climate action in Afghanistan by private sector actors, in collaboration with international organisations. For example, Rumi Spice, a company started in 2014 in the US that sources most of its products from Afghanistan, has promoted saffron production instead of poppies, although it has faced major challenges such as disrupted flight routes and greater uncertainty since the Taliban's return to power (Chhabra, 2021).

Another type of climate-sensitive project with peacebuilding impacts has been led by the Aga Khan Agency for Habitat (AKAH), formerly known as Focus Humanitarian Assistance. Its Emergency Management Unit focused on development of Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM), capacity building, awareness-raising, search and rescue, and response and recovery. For instance, it helped Shughnan district of Badakhshan province – where most residents live in the

slopes of high mountains, thus facing higher risk of climate-induced natural disasters such as avalanches, landslides and floods – to develop an early warning system. At one point, the Community-Based Early Warning System (CBEWS) had reached 56 villages out of 59 villages in Shughnan.

The initiative has also entailed development of Community-Based Early Warning Systems (CBDRM):

Based on the historical data and long discussions and interviews with local people, the risk mapping process was done. After reviewing the historical data and having close coordination with the local people, a team of AKAH experts was deployed to the area for a transaction walk exercise to identify the vulnerability and risk exposure of the communities scientifically. Based on the findings of this team, a risk and vulnerability profile of the community is prepared by national and international experts, which is called Village Disaster Management Plan (VDMP). After preparing the VDMP, a village seminar is organised in which all residents of the community participate. During that seminar, a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) is established, which is composed of ordinary 25 people, including male and female who are trained and equipped with basic equipment for emergency response. Besides the equipment, this team is trained on first aid response, search and rescue. (AKAH, 2022)

Other organisations have focused on water management. In Ghor Province, whose inhabitants are among those most affected by water insecurity in Afghanistan, insufficient water for agricultural production severely limits licit livelihood options for farmers and livestock keepers. In 2007, Catholic Relief Service, with support from USAID, carried out a two-year, Village-Based Watershed Restoration programme. The initiative aimed to reduce water insecurity so as to produce viable economic alternatives to poppy cultivation in the province, as part of biodiversity objectives. Measures included construction of irrigation infrastructure, improvement of soil and water conservation within local watersheds, and development of safe water supplies for productive and domestic use. The initiative also involved mobilising communities around natural resource management, and – based on that experience – implementing measures (Savage et al, 2009). A three-year, \$6 million expansion of this programme ran until June 2011.

Another example of efforts with cross-sectoral reach implemented prior to 2021 included a UNEP project designed to support communities in four Afghan locations – Badakhshan in the northeast, Balkh in the north, through the Koh-e Baba range to Bamyan and Daikundi in the Central Highlands – to adapt to climate change effects. The initiative, implemented starting in 2012 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and funded primarily by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), supported communities that are vulnerable to drought and other climate change impacts, while building the capacity of Afghan institutions to better address shocks and hazards. The goal was to increase resilience at a decentralised level. Interventions included improved water management and use efficiency; community-based watershed management; improved terracing, agroforestry and agro-silvo-pastoral systems; climate-related research and early warning systems; improved food security; and rangeland management. Watershed

management activities at village level includes tree-planting, the terracing of slopes or the gathering of wild seeds to replant overgrazed mountainsides. Finally, the initiative included education and the development of vocational skills for the communities involved (UNEP, 2012).

There was also the project *Adapting Afghan Communities to Climate-Induced Disaster Risks*, a joint initiative by the Government of Afghanistan, with the support of the UNDP and the Least Developed Countries Fund, to support women and marginalised groups by promoting community-based preparedness and adaptation in the highly vulnerable provinces of Jawzjan and Nangarhar.<sup>1</sup> In addition to raising public awareness of climate change risks, the effort sought to strengthen institutional capacities to respond to the challenges, including by involving local communities in decision making. The project focused on four main pillars: enhancing gender-sensitive disaster risk reduction in, and by, vulnerable communities; establishing community-based early warning systems; promoting climate-resilient agricultural practices and livelihoods; and working with national, provincial and district-level government institutions to better integrate climate change into planning. A range of local institutions, including men and women's *shuras* and cooperatives, community-based organisations, civil society organisations and NGOs, was included so as to maximise the voice of women, youth and others in decision making (UNDP, 2017).

For projects that were still taking place in 2021, many have been affected by the interruption or downsizing of funds, and by the changes in political relations between external actors and the Taliban. For recently completed initiatives, the return to power by the Taliban interrupted project impact assessment efforts. As at the time of writing, the UN is working to re-engage but focusing on humanitarian efforts, and some South-South actors have chosen to, or managed to, maintain a degree of continuity, especially where political relations were not suspended. AKAH, for instance, has continued to engage in development and humanitarian assistance, including through other climate-sensitive peacebuilding initiatives, such as planting trees in Kabul to increase well-being and promote safety in the capital (AKAH, 2022).

In sum, using a broad definition of climate-sensitive peacebuilding, a broad range of initiatives have been implemented, both led by Afghan actors or promoted by external ones, but with capillary reach into communities around the country. Until 2021, many of these efforts included community-based early warning systems and risk assessments, inclusive local governance and participation of local actors in the response and implementation of responses. Some initiatives were multisectoral, multi-scalar or both, reflecting the complex dynamics interlinking climate and security and the need to include a broad range of stakeholders in addressing climate and security risks simultaneously. However, these efforts have been marked by fragmentation, discontinuities and subjection to political and geopolitical shifts. There is thus a need to think more systematically about how to incorporate climate into risk assessments and response design, whether strictly at the local level or by scaling up across provinces. More broadly, these examples offer useful lessons for how communities, local governments, external donors, humanitarian sector actors and other stakeholders can better promote conflict-sensitive peacebuilding in Afghanistan and other post-conflict settings.

## Concluding thoughts

After decades of top-down, militarised approaches efforts based on the liberal peace paradigm, many policy actors now realise that bottom-up, inclusive peacebuilding represents a potential path to lasting peace and a way to address the grievances that gave rise to the conflict in the first place. In our paper, we attempt to argue for a local climate-sensitive peacebuilding paradigm that takes into account the direct and indirect links between climate and security, in the particular ways they are manifested in conflict-affected settings.

The case of Afghanistan shows that most peacebuilding efforts have not incorporated climate risks. The dominant Western-led efforts at peacebuilding and security in the country (especially US-led ones) focused on delivering hard security. European efforts focused more on soft reforms such as enlarging freedoms and human rights, but also in a top-down manner. The resulting approach of Western actors spectacularly failed in the end, partly as a result of overlooking climate and environmental aspects. In a context like Afghanistan, where economic and social life remains largely rural, agricultural and tribal, land and water are often scarce, and climate change is likely to fuel disputes and violence. With the 2021 takeover by Taliban, a country that was already ill-equipped to address climate change – not least due to decades of peacebuilding gone in the opposite direction of peace – has become even less able to do so.

What is the way forward in the current context? There are no easy answers, especially given the catastrophic humanitarian situation as the economic crisis deepens and acute hunger, poverty and displacement spread among Afghans. However, a window of opportunity may be emerging, after the UN Security Council passed a unanimous resolution (in January 2022) allowing humanitarian aid to be delivered from abroad to the people of Afghanistan. The Taliban is also aware that it cannot solely rely on a few governments in the long run, and that it must address the socio-economic situation in order to gain legitimacy before the Afghan people. We argue that, in the short term, this aid should be disbursed directly to the communities – neither keeping the country on humanitarian life-support, nor abandoning it altogether. In the long term, however, a durable strategy depends on the formation of an inclusive government that can look after the long-term protective and human security needs of the Afghan people – including by addressing the impacts of climate change.

The challenges faced in conflict-affected settings include the impacts of climate change, which are felt differently across and within countries, and which pose particular challenges in conflict-affected settings like Afghanistan. From a policy perspective, five key gaps stand out in boosting climate-sensitive peacebuilding in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The first is the need to better incorporate climate change impacts and risks into risk assessments, as well as into the design of peacebuilding responses. The second is to conceptualise and implement such responses at a local level, drawing on local demands, concerns, experiences and perceptions. The third is to strengthen feedback mechanisms so that policy making and responses in general at subnational, national, regional and global levels incorporate lessons learned from local experiences and, conversely, that local initiatives are informed by efforts at higher levels of aggregation. The fourth is working across sectors to formulate effective, inclusive approaches to climate-sensitive peacebuilding. And finally, access to climate financing must be improved for those in conflict-affected settings, especially vulnerable groups such as women, migrants and youth. Evidence-based research should be developed to



help address all of these gaps, and to further explore the potential of climate-sensitive peacebuilding to promote sustained peace.

While filling in these gaps cannot be accomplished in a short span of time, there are precedents for incorporating climate into peacebuilding – even in settings like Afghanistan. Better natural resources management, investment in resilient water infrastructure, and climate-smart agriculture should be central elements to overcoming major humanitarian and development challenges and avoiding the recurrence of conflict. With the support of external actors – including South–South cooperation – a climate-sensitive approach to peacebuilding can promote stability, well-being and development by boosting climate adaptation and resilience, opening economic opportunities and fostering positive peace.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> The US\$71.1 million project was financed with a \$5.6 million grant from the GEF Least Developed Countries Fund and co-financing from the Government of Afghanistan (\$5 million), Asian Development Bank (\$57 million), World Bank (\$2.5 million) and UNDP (\$1 million).

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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