

POLICY BRIEF
From forecast to prevention:
Acting on resource-related conflict risks



Early warning tools keep improving in their ability to predict resource-related conflict. However, preventive action on water, food and energy conflicts is still lagging behind. This policy paper discusses what elements decision and policy makers from the Sahel region need to move from conflict forecast to prevention. It summarizes the session “From forecast to prevention: Acting on resource-related conflict risks” that was organized by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Water, Peace and Security (WPS) Partnership for the Stockholm World Water Week 2021.



Resource-related insecurity is increasing worldwide with water and climate as root causes for conflict and migration. Several hotspots can be identified where the conflicts over water, energy and food (WEF Nexus) are looming or erupting already, including the Sahel region. The security situation in the Sahel region has rapidly deteriorated over the last decade with a rise in armed conflict, rebel groups and terrorism. Natural resources play a major role in tensions between communities, and at the same time, climate change acts as a threat multiplier, as the Sahel is one of the most vulnerable regions to changing climate according to the IPCC. Effective action is required to mitigate resource-related conflicts or prevent them from unfolding, and through effective action, we can build resilience among communities and consequently save lives and livelihoods. So, what are the elements needed to enact effective action for resource-related conflict prevention?

UNDERSTANDING

Over the last decade, significant attention has been generated on the linkage between resources, climate, and security. However, attention alone is not enough: we have to understand this complex linkage. Several early Warning tools have been developed in order to predict emerging or ongoing conflicts related to resources. One example is the Global Early Warning Tool, developed by the WPS Partnership, which identifies potential and future hotspots for water-related conflicts. Early warning tools are vital to predict when and where conflicts may arise, but they are not perfect. The Global Early Warning Tool now predicts 86% of conflicts with a bias towards overprediction. However, the tool is being further developed through the addition of high-level datasets and by moving from a correlation to a causation model. Improvements such as these can make early warning tools more reliable. However, at the same time, we should accept that our understanding will always have limitations and that action must be taken regardless. Despite all of the complexities and challenges, we have to try – and hit the ground running.

AWARENESS

Once the linkage between resources and conflict is identified and, to some degree, understood, it is time to act. However, this is often not the case. Preventive action based on the predictions of early warning tools lags behind, in part, because of a lack of awareness among both the regional and global 4D-communities.



We cannot work on resilience without awareness, and the world is often not aware of the resource-conflict linkage until it is manifested in a crisis. Even when conflicts do surface, such as in Syria, the WEF Nexus is barely taken into account. There is a tendency to neglect underlying issues of a conflict, with a focus on the tip of the iceberg and disregard of what is hidden under the surface. In addition to this, complex matters take a long time to address. In resource-related conflict hotspots, governments are often already strained by multiple challenges. Therefore, it is hard to prioritize preventive action relating to the WEF Nexus, including anticipation, planning, and implementation. Therefore, before we can formulate a systemic approach for resource-related insecurity, more awareness has to be raised. Moreover, we have to help policymakers in prioritizing action to help them get ahead of the game.

EMPOWER LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The focus on effective action with regard to resource-related conflicts should not only consider policy and decision-makers. We must not forget the people who are most vulnerable to resource insecurities (especially women and Youth): local communities in hotspot areas. Tensions related to water, energy and food destabilize these communities and threaten lives and livelihoods. By co-creating and providing access to tools and information, communities are enabled and empowered to address the resource-related challenges they are faced with. The tools that WPS develops can play an important role here.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Another prominent reason for a lagging action with regard to resource-related conflicts is a lack of partnerships. It is impossible to deal with immense and complex issues as climate change and the WEF Nexus without extensive collaboration. Strategic partnerships are key, both regionally and globally. In Mali, for example, initiatives of the GIZ Frexus project and WPS bring together different stakeholders to find interlinkages and areas for cooperation. Experience from the field shows that participation of most, if not all, relevant actors is vital for durable and effective action.

MOVING FORWARD: 3 C'S AND ANTICIPATORY STRENGTH

A first step for moving from forecast to prevention in acting on resource-related conflict risks is focusing on the 3Cs: consistency, continuity and commitment.



These key components are the opposite of the more reactive or even regressive attitude that often characterizes the current political domain. There is a need for long-term and politically viable approaches that focus on adaptation. Institutions such as the EU can play a pivotal role here. Unlike most national governments, the EU institutions are in place for long periods and can thus maintain long-term initiatives. On the other hand, due to the shorter lifespan of national administrations, policy and decision-makers are more focused on concrete opportunities, such as pilot programmes. Many donor countries, such as Mali, prefer these pilot programmes which creates several challenges. Although pilots may be opportune, they lack consistency and fail to build long-term resilience. However, these shortcomings can be addressed if governments collaborate with institutions to identify synergies that combine the 3Cs with opportunism.

Finally, we have to make use of already existing anticipatory capabilities. We can no longer afford to wait until situations deteriorate beyond repair before responding to conflict risks, as this is both an expensive and inhumane type of governance. Military actors always plan ahead and predict risks – why is this not the case for non-military challenges? In the field of governance, we should rethink what is peacebuilding and what is security, as well as what role the WEF Nexus plays here. Furthermore, climate change is making all crises bigger and is hitting us with high speed. We should seize the political momentum that gathers around climate change to address the closely linked resource-related insecurities. The aim should not be to increase responses to today's crises, but to proactively and progressively build resilience to face the crises yet to unfold.



"We can not afford just to respond. We should make the investments as prevention!"

– Sharon Burke (New America)



RECOMMENDATIONS

How can we move from forecast to prevention in acting on resource-related conflict risks?

- Improve understanding by further improving early warning tools
- Increase awareness and help policy and decision-makers in prioritizing action
- Empower local communities with access to tools and information
- Forge strategic partnerships that combine opportunism with the 3Cs (consistency, continuity, and commitment)
- Bring a military-like anticipatory strength to the table to face tomorrow's crisis

These key components can strengthen proactive mitigation and resilience in the Sahel and beyond.

FURTHER INFORMATION



Nexus Resource Platform: www.water-energy-food.org

Water, Peace and Security partnership: www.waterpeacesecurity.org

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Dag-Hammarskjöld-Weg 1-5
65760 Eschborn
Germany

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Authors

Alexandre Mesnil, Susanne Schmeier, Jakob Seidler

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