



Photo: UNHCR



5 PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION

PATHWAYS TO PREVENTION

There is often a close relationship between disasters and conflict. Conflicts undermine the capacity and commitment of states to prevent and respond to natural disasters and humanitarian crises. At the same time, disasters themselves can create unstable economic conditions, exacerbate social fault lines and heighten social exclusion – creating fertile ground for disputes. Reducing disaster-related risks can sometimes open paths for conflict prevention and more peaceful societies.

The United Nations Secretary-General has made the prevention of conflicts and crises a cross-pillar priority in the repositioning of the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Box 5-1). The focus is on areas of the world where there is a convergence between violent conflict, humanitarian crises and the impacts of disasters and climate change.

In recent years, most conflicts in Asia and the Pacific have been within states. The region has around 15 potential areas of inter-state conflict, but the conflicts that cost the most lives have been within states.¹ Figure 5-1 maps the occurrence of such conflicts for the period 1991–2015.

The extent of conflict risk can be gauged from the OECD States of Fragility Framework. Based on political, economic, social, environmental and security criteria, this framework identifies 56 fragile states, of which 11 are ESCAP members.² Of these countries, ESCAP designates eight as Countries with Special Needs (CSNs) that have priority for technical cooperation and capacity building support – Afghanistan, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Timor-Leste, Cambodia and Tajikistan. Given the close interlinkages between sustainable development, disasters and conflict-prevention, the CSN category of countries should now be expanded to include other aspects of fragility such as environmental risk and conflict prevention to effectively address disaster resilience.³

Box 5-1

The vision of the United Nations Secretary General on prevention

“While the universal and comprehensive agenda for sustainable development and sustaining peace pledged to “leave no one behind,” the goals of peaceful coexistence and development are at risk in many countries. Millions flee in search of safer, better lives – even as doors are closing in many places. Brutal and violent conflicts continue to rage in many corners of the world, taking countless lives and displacing millions more. For many others, sustainable development seems distant. Terrorism and violent extremism are affecting all regions of the world. Climate-related disasters are becoming more frequent and their destructive powers more intense.

“By prevention, I mean doing everything that we can to help countries to avert the outbreak of crises that take a high toll on humanity, undermining institutions and capacities to achieve peace and development.

“The best way to prevent societies from descending into crisis is to ensure they are resilient through investment in inclusive and sustainable development, including concerted climate action and management of mass migration. Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change are an essential part of humanity’s universal blueprint for the future.

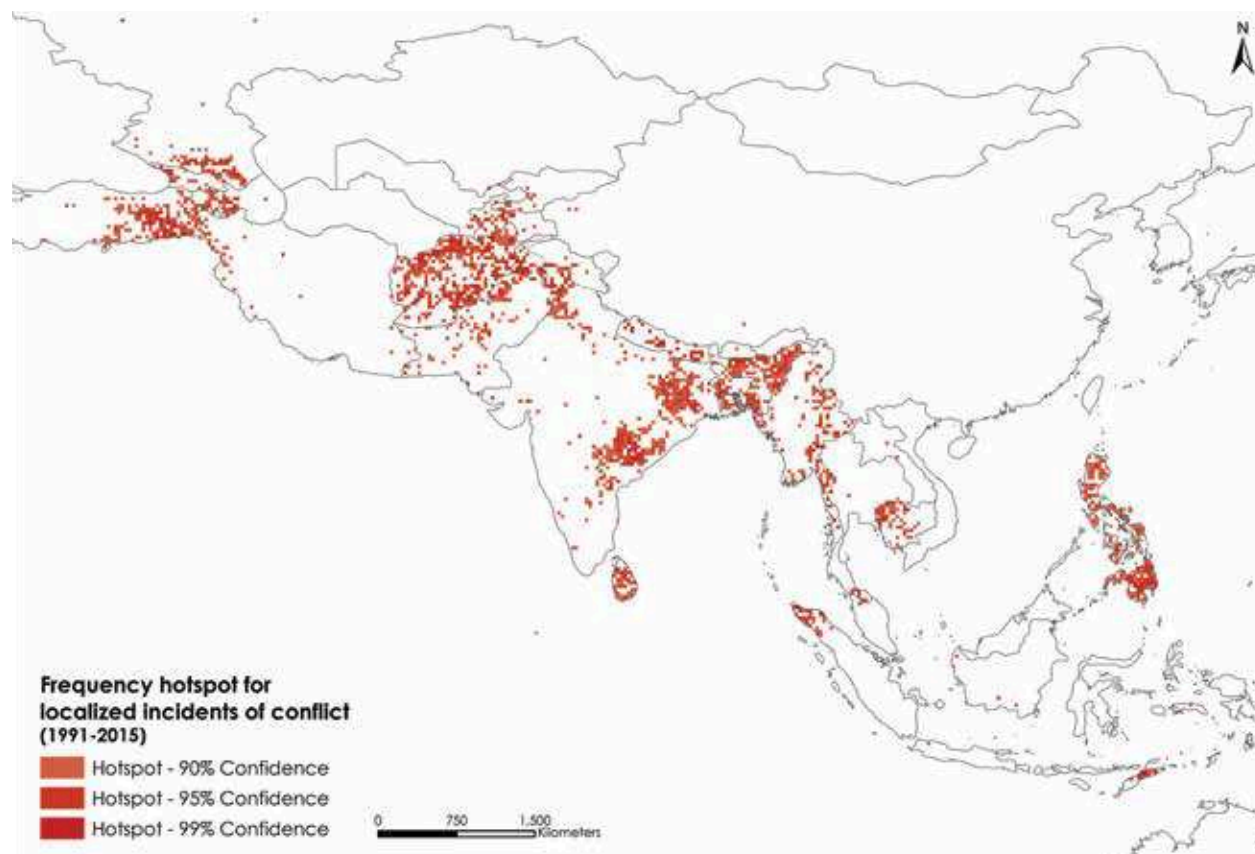
“For all countries, addressing inequalities, strengthening institutions and ensuring that development strategies are risk-informed are central to preventing the fraying of the social fabric that could erupt into crises. We need to invest more to help countries build strong and inclusive institutions and resilient communities. Development is the key to prevention. Far from diverting resources or attention away from development, an effective and broad focus on prevention will generate more investment and concerted efforts to achieve the SDGs.

“The SDGs and Sustaining Peace are complementary and mutually reinforcing. Sustainable development underpins peace, and sustained peace enables sustainable development. Implementation of both agendas will ensure that stable societies prosper and fragile societies become more resilient and can manage risks and shocks more effectively. Our prevention work seeks to shore up national and local institutions and capacities to detect and avert looming crises, sustain peace and achieve sustainable development.”

Source: Extracted from The Vision of the United Nations Secretary General on Prevention.

Figure 5-1

Localized conflict incidents, 1991-2015



Source: ESCAP analysis based on UCDP GED (2016).

Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

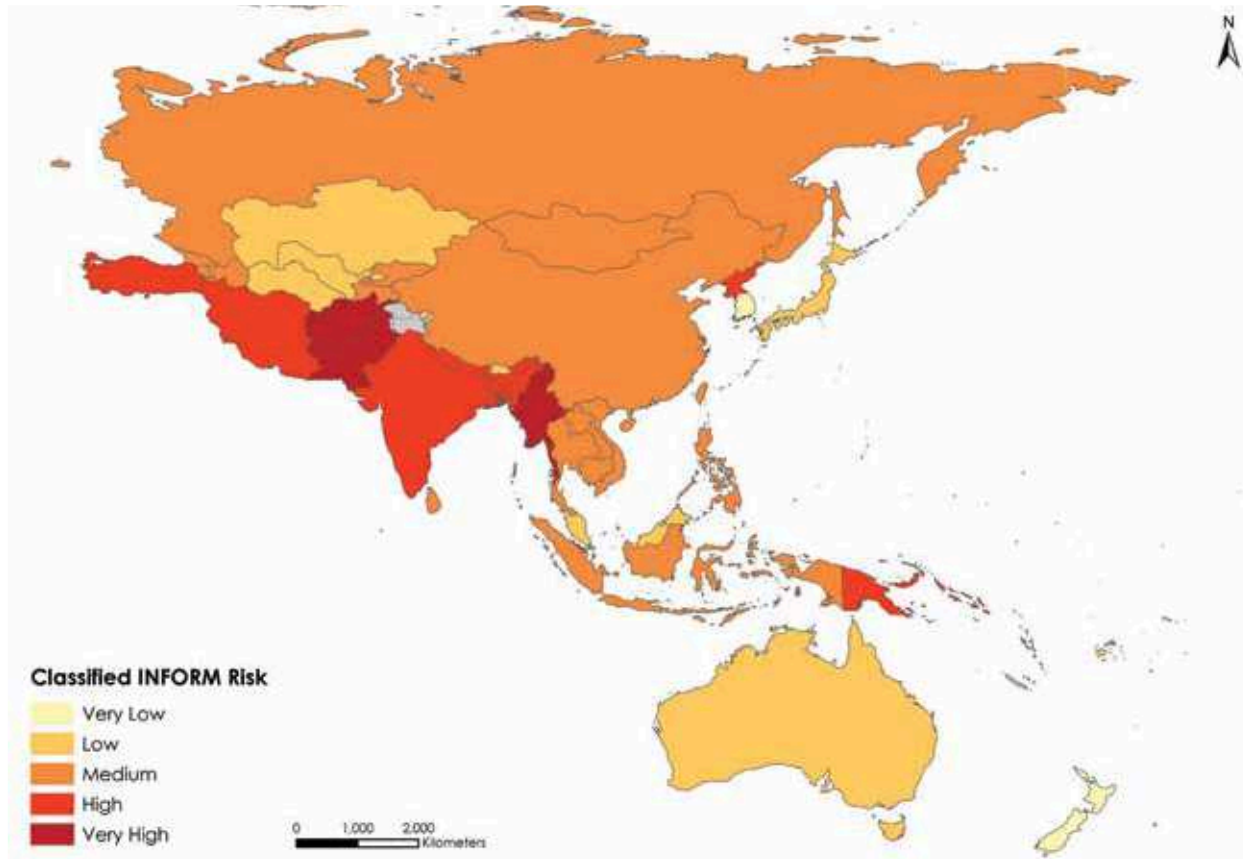
Compared with natural disasters, which are one-off, sometimes rapid, events, conflicts tend to last longer. Nevertheless, conflicts and disasters to the extent they exacerbate each other, compound risks to create complex and converging crises, so they can be considered together.⁴ The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Team for Preparedness and Resilience Capacities, has developed the INFORM index for risk management which identifies the Asia-Pacific

countries where conflict and disaster risk co-exist to create conditions of high or very high overall risk (Figure 5-2).⁵

As well as leading to loss of life, intra-state conflicts also displace many people within and between countries. Asia and the Pacific houses 15 per cent of the world's internally displaced people – 6 million people.

Figure 5-2

INFORM risk index for Asia and the Pacific



Source: Based on data from INFORM Index for Risk Management.

Note: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

The disaster-conflict interface

Fragile states affected by conflict find it more difficult to respond to disasters, as well as to protect communities from disaster, or to empower them for risk reduction or implement uninterrupted development agendas. At the same time, disasters can also exacerbate conflict fault lines and social exclusion.⁶ This is common where there is competition for natural resources, along with environmental stress, degradation and mismanagement.

Drought and desertification, for example, can exacerbate disputes where poor people

are competing for limited land and water.⁷ A severe drought threatens local food security, and livestock feeds, aggravates humanitarian conditions, and often triggers large-scale human displacement. It may also provide the breeding ground for sustained conflict.⁸ Environmental shock and violent conflict thus create vicious circles. One global study has concluded, that around one quarter of conflicts in ethnically fractionalized countries coincide with climatic calamities.⁹ Three examples in the region where the risk of disasters is compounded by conflict are Afghanistan, Myanmar and Papua New Guinea.

Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, there has been a close connection between conflict and drought. Nearly 85 per cent of agricultural production uses water from snowmelt that feeds rivers and streams and is then channelled through irrigation canals. The remaining water comes from groundwater.¹⁰

Years of conflict have either destroyed irrigation infrastructure, or restricted its maintenance resulting in siltation, bank damage and vegetation growth. The Government estimated in 2016 that during the previous 30 years of conflict, 4,850 irrigation networks had been destroyed and did not work at all.¹¹ In 1978, there were around 3.0 million hectares under irrigation; by 2002 this had fallen to 1.5 million hectares, but in 2014 rose again to 2.1 million hectares.¹²

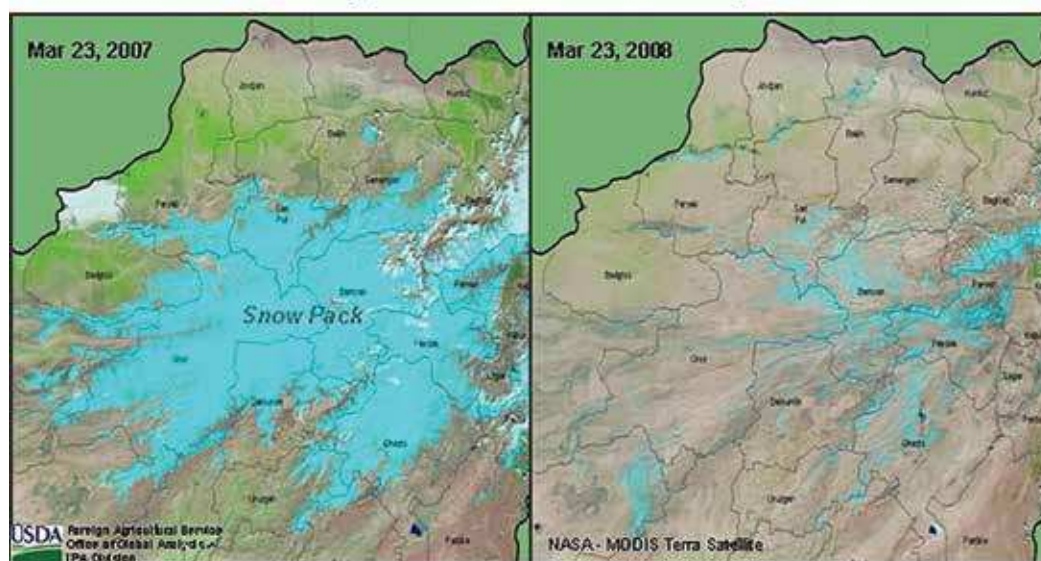
Afghanistan is vulnerable to fluctuating weather conditions and abnormal rainfall. During late-2007 and early 2008, across most of the country rainfall and winter snowfall were well below

normal and led to the worst drought in a decade (Figure 5-3). In 2008/09 wheat production was down 60 per cent.¹³ Food prices were rising in domestic food and feed grain markets – and globally – making it difficult for people to meet their basic food needs. Millions of people became food insecure and young men were more vulnerable to recruitment by militias who paid them for their services.

In 2008, the Government of Afghanistan and the United Nations issued an emergency appeal for donations of up to \$400 million to cover wheat imports and food aid for the 4.5 million people affected, and to prepare for the next winter cropping season.¹⁴ The problems were exacerbated by attacks on food aid convoys by both criminal groups and anti-government elements. Had government capacity not been constrained by conflicts, and the irrigation systems been maintained and fully functional, the advanced warning from the satellite imagery of snow pack would have enabled the Government and communities to better prepare for, and manage the drought.

Figure 5-3

Afghanistan, 2007 and 2008 winter snow packs



Source: Foreign Agricultural Bureau and NASA Modis terra satellite.

Myanmar

Standards of living have increased, with commensurable improvements in the quality of life in Myanmar. Despite this recent progress, Myanmar remains one of South-East Asia's poorest countries, with a per capita GDP of \$1,105. In 2010, around one-third of the population lived below the poverty line, most of them in rural areas with a high propensity for conflict.

Myanmar is also prone to a range of high-impact natural hazards, including cyclones, seasonal flooding, landslides, droughts, fires and earthquakes.

But widespread poverty and poor infrastructure mean that the country finds it difficult to prepare for, or recover from, such events. This capacity has also been eroded by conflict, notably in Kachin and Rakhine states.¹⁵ This interplay of natural hazards and human-induced risks has increased the vulnerability of the poor, especially women and children and reduced access to basic social services.

Rakhine state is especially exposed – people live in hard-to-reach areas predominantly in bamboo-constructed houses isolated from the rest of the country by inaccessible ranges of mountains and hills. There are few paved roads and in several areas transport links are limited to weather-dependent boat routes. Poverty is around 78 per cent, with limited access to health and education services.¹⁶

In July and August 2015, torrential rains and the onset of cyclone Komen triggered widespread floods and landslides across 12 of the 14 states and regions in Myanmar. Around 1.6 million individuals were temporarily displaced from their homes, and 132 lost their lives. Total losses and damages were equivalent

to 3.1 per cent of GDP. Rakhine residents sustained the second-highest value of damages and per capita losses. Younger and unmarried women were particularly vulnerable, due to cultural restrictions on movement without male accompaniment; and women felt more exposed and insecure during the evacuations.¹⁷

In July 2016, around 120,000 people were confined to IDP camps in low-lying coastal areas where there were few measures for disaster management or mitigation.¹⁸ IDPs have limited livelihood opportunities because their movements are restricted and their legal status is unclear, so most depend for food and shelter on external support provided by humanitarian organizations.

Papua New Guinea

In Papua New Guinea, 80 per cent of the population are semi-dependent on rain-fed subsistence farming. More than three-quarters of the food consumed in the country is locally grown, so weather changes that reduce household food production have immediate, severe and lasting impacts on food security.

The areas most vulnerable to weather extremes are the Highlands, where 2.2 million people live in thousands of isolated villages. The security situation in the Highlands remains volatile and was recently aggravated by El Niño related drought and weather anomalies.¹⁹

From April 2015, due to a strong El Niño, much of rural Papua New Guinea was hit by a major drought. By September, many areas experienced only 40 per cent of average rainfall. During the period November 2015–March 2016, some regions received only 30 per cent of normal rainfall. In the higher altitudes, these dry conditions reduced cloud cover and also produced damaging frosts.²⁰

This created a series of cumulative shocks to food security. Lack of water stunted the growth of staple root crops, and at higher altitudes frosts wiped out crops completely. At the peak of the drought, replanting was impossible. Following the increase in rains in November to December, communities resumed planting food gardens, but in some areas, including the Highlands, the sudden and heavy rains on dry ground resulted in flooding and landslides that destroyed properties, food gardens and agriculture infrastructure. Crop yields were also reduced by pest infestations and the excessive nitrogen content of the soil. By January 2016, having lost staple crops multiple times, reserve

stores of food, and other coping mechanisms, had been exhausted. During the period January to March 2016, around 1.3 million people were experiencing high food insecurity, and an additional 162,000 were classified as severely food insecure.²¹

While there is no evidence that the El Niño-induced disasters contributed directly to violent conflict in the Highlands, it is clear that the ongoing conflicts reduced community resilience to drought, and that the sustained drought heightened the risk of struggles over scarce resources (Box 5-2).

Box 5-2

El Niño and conflict in Papua New Guinea

A CARE monitoring mission in October 2015 made the following assessments:

There is a breakdown in social cohesion in some communities. Due to shortage of food, water and firewood, people do not want to share their resources with others. However, in other villages, there is strong community cohesion as it has been raining a lot and there is enough food to share.

ICRC works in conflict areas in the Southern Highlands and Hela provinces and also conducted their own assessments. The El Niño impact level is at category 3 but insecurities linked to conflict make people very vulnerable, and thus increase the level of impact. Communities are food stressed as they try to recover from the consequences of conflict. Assessments found that families cannot take care of themselves as prices of food crops also increased. Households are selling livestock just to buy food. If drought persists, the challenge will be migration. However, hostilities do not give much economic space for migration or manoeuvre.

Husbands are reportedly leaving their families in search of food from wantoks in town, making the women and children more vulnerable when left alone. Young men have also been moving in masses into Mendi town and participating in the informal sector – street vending. Increased street vending has since resulted in social chaos as vendors compete for buyers and the police try to exercise some control of these activities.

Source: CARE PNG El Niño Monitoring, October 2015.

Building disaster resilience can help reduce conflict

Communities in conflict-affected areas tend to have lower resilience to disasters. Similarly, community members affected by disasters can be more prone to engaging in conflict. In these circumstances, in addition to more conventional peacebuilding approaches, climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction offer further entry points for preventing conflict. The potential has been demonstrated by regional cooperation for transboundary river-basin flood risk management (Box 5-3).

In situations where conflict is based on competition for scarce resources, better management of natural resources, combined with climate change adaptation, can channel competing interests into non-violent resolutions.²² DRR interventions, such as climate risk information for drought, transboundary basin cooperation for floods, early warning for cyclones, and earthquake resistant building codes can reduce the disaster risk and build the resilience of households

and communities. In a volatile situation where conflict is either brewing or in full swing, these interventions can offset or soften the impact of a disaster. As illustrated in Figure 5-4 these interventions can be combined to tip the balance – as building disaster resilience and measures for conflict reduction are mutually reinforcing.

Disaster, climatic shocks and conflict risk can also be linked with declining rural incomes.²³ More resilient rural livelihoods can go a long way in preventing climate-related conflicts. In addition to more conventional peacebuilding, in places that are both vulnerable to disaster and climatic shocks and prone to social turmoil, climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction thus offer entry points for conflict prevention (Figure 5-5).

It is important to note that intense violence has much greater impact on environmental vulnerability than environmental shock has on conflict risk. Special attention must therefore be paid to disasters that strike zones of chronic conflict. Countries in Asia and the Pacific have demonstrated that disaster

Box 5-3

River basin cooperation to reduce international tensions

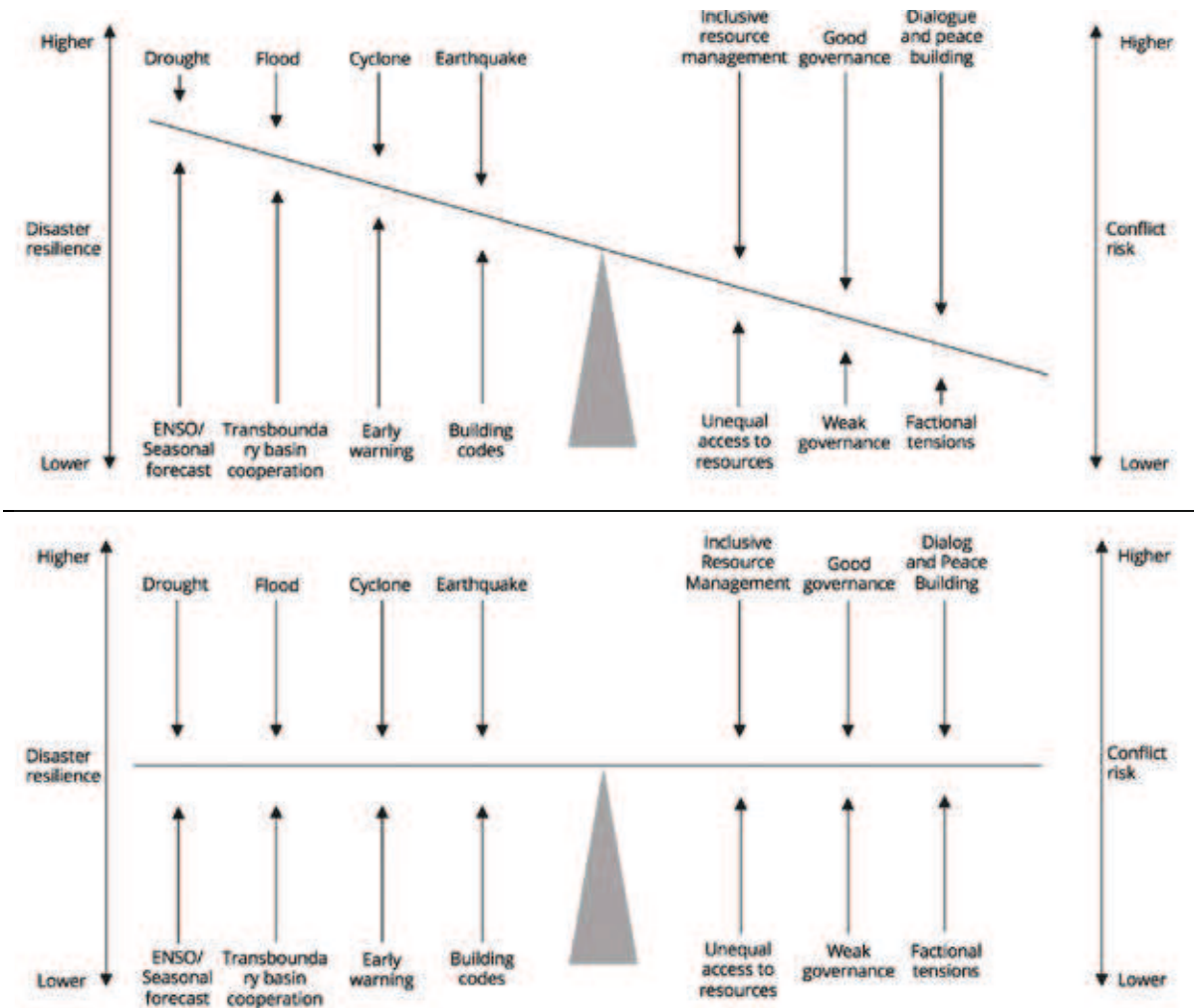
Research on bilateral and multilateral interactions between two or more states from 1948 to 2008 shows strong evidence of significant formal cooperation among river basin riparian states, and no cases of water causing two states to engage in war. Transboundary water cooperation, particularly joint management, flood control, and technical cooperation, can form a basis for longer-term cooperation on a range of contentious issues.

Efforts at basin-wide institutional development tend to help move relations on, from the assertion of conflicting rights to water, to addressing the multiple values of water, and ultimately to sharing benefits across national boundaries.

Source: Adger, W.N., et al, 2014. Human Security

Figure 5-4

Tipping the balance: higher disaster resilience for lower conflict risk



Source: ESCAP

management interventions can stimulate dialogue and collaboration between social groups since community cooperation and capacity development are less contentious than direct attempts at conflict reduction. The most dramatic windows of opportunity can be opened by large-scale, generally rapid-onset, disasters.

In Indonesia for example, the 2005 tsunami destroyed some coastal areas of the province of Aceh which had long been subject to a conflict.

Here the response to the disaster helped bring peace talks to fruition. The post-tsunami recovery was seen as an historic opportunity to ‘build back better’ – addressing both tsunami recovery and post-conflict reconstruction in a more unified way. In 2005, after 29 years of war, the separatist movement signed a peace agreement with the Indonesian Government.

Aid, however, is not always so supportive, and in some cases, post-disaster responses can

exacerbate conflict. Assistance programmes involve transferring resources of some kind – be they seeds, tools, housing, water and sanitation, financial services, food, health care or technical skills. If these infusions appear to favour some sections of society over others aid may increase social tensions. In conflict areas, such resources are likely to already be scarce, so those who gain control over them increase their power and wealth, and the resources themselves become part of the conflict.

Sri Lanka’s experience of post-tsunami relief, for example, was different from that of Indonesia. Here there was a long-running conflict between the North and the South. On 22 February 2002, the Government and the separatist group signed a Memorandum of Understanding and agreed on an indefinite cease-fire agreement.

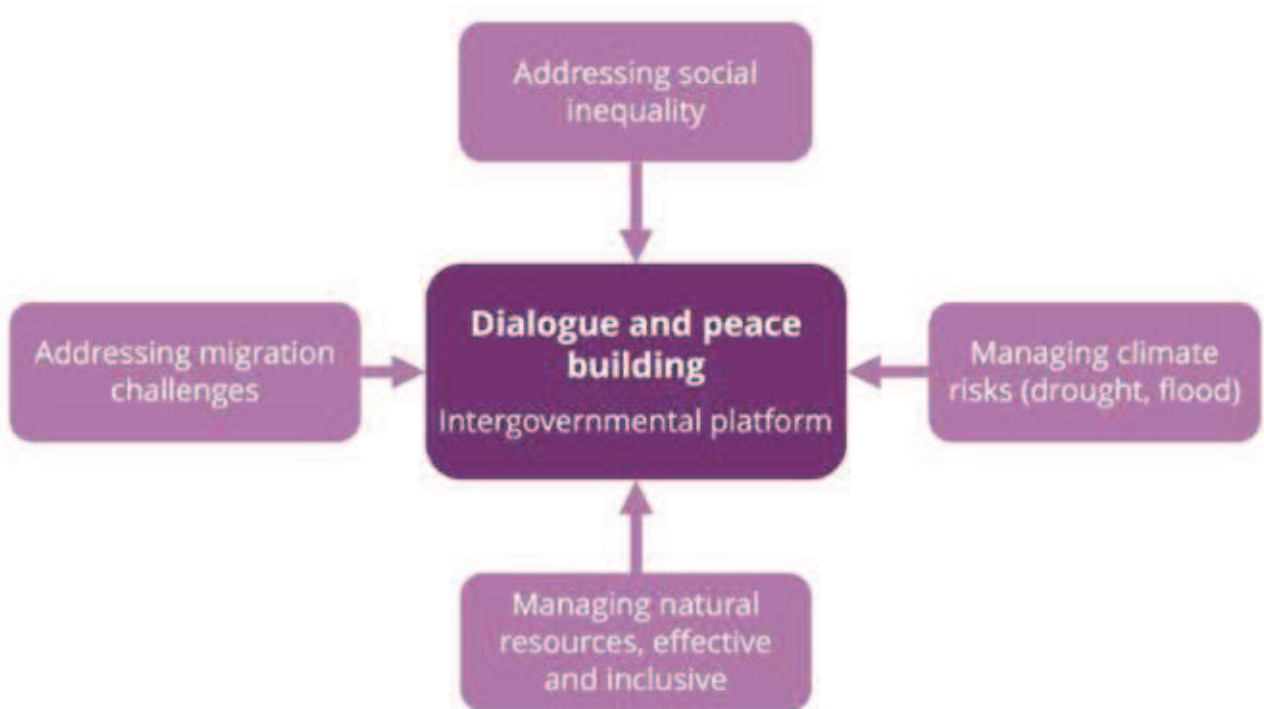
But ongoing tensions were exacerbated after the tsunami.

Disaster management should therefore be conflict-sensitive to guard against unintended harm, while peace-building should be hazard proof. Even though organizations working in DRR may not possess specialist conflict resolution or peace-building skills, they should be conflict-sensitive, seeking to avoid contributing to social tensions. Over the past 15 years or so, many agencies have increasingly adopted the ‘Do No Harm’ approach in emergency programmes.

ESCAP can support these efforts at the conflict-disaster prevention nexus by serving as a hub for bridging development gaps and providing integrated policy analysis and advice – helping

Figure 5-5

Climate adaptation and DRR are entry points to help reduce conflicts



Source: Detges, 2017.

to build peace in conflict affected areas while also helping to prevent fragile situations from becoming full-blown crises (Box 5-4).

Environmental management, conflict prevention, DRR and peace-building thus should not be seen as separate activities but as linked to each other, as well as to programmes for

poverty reduction and improving livelihoods. Interventions to reduce disaster risk cannot prevent conflict on their own, particularly if these are related to political power struggles or ethnic conflict, but they can be part of a larger, more integrated approach to conflict prevention and peace building. Some of the new tools available for this purpose are the subject of the next chapter.

Box 5-4

ESCAP's contribution to DRR and conflict resolution

In cooperation with Member States, ESCAP engages in efforts at DRR that can contribute to conflict resolution. These include:

Risk scenarios – ESCAP's analytical work on the 2015/2016 El Niño impact outlook presented a methodology to understand the complex risk scenarios of slow-onset disasters in countries with critical disaster-conflict interfaces.

Monsoon forums – ESCAP, through its Trust Fund and partners, established monsoon forum risk communication platforms in Myanmar, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste to reduce vulnerability and strengthen disaster preparedness. ESCAP plans to expand these forums with context-specific risk assessment and early warning products.

Regional Drought Mechanism – This mechanism takes advantage of data and imagery from the region's space-faring countries – China, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation and Thailand – and shares it with other countries, especially those prone to drought.

Analytical work – Most of the analytical research in disaster prevention and peace building is from Africa and the Middle-East. There has been less work in Asia and the Pacific. ESCAP's flagship biennial publication, the Asia-Pacific Disaster Report, has therefore undertaken a diagnosis of the disaster-conflict-nexus. Further, the INFORM Index for Risk Management for natural and man-made disasters will be used to monitor the progress of disaster prevention and peace building in the region.

Capacity development – ESCAP plans to scale up its work on building resilience to drought and improving the capacity of countries to produce early warning on major weather events such as El Niño and related slow-onset disasters. This will contribute to building the overall resilience of fragile countries and conflict-impacted communities.

Box 5-4 cont'd

ESCAP's contribution to DRR and conflict resolution

Regional cooperation – The Regional Economic Cooperation and Integration high-level meeting has recommended establishing a specific platform for LDCs and fragile states on shared vulnerabilities and risks. In this regard, the ESCAP Committee on Disaster Risk Reduction at its 5th session in October 2017 will initiate discussions on how to establish a platform that builds disaster resilience in a cohesive way.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) uses the dataset from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) as one of a handful of inputs in developing its CERF Index for Risk and Vulnerability which provides a comprehensive picture of current and likely future humanitarian needs.
- 2 OECD, 2016.
- 3 Peace-Building and Conflict Prevention in the Asia Pacific Region: Role of ESCAP. Draft Concept Note. 20 June 2017.
- 4 GFDRR & GTZ, 2016.
- 5 INFORM is the first global, objective and transparent tool for understanding the risk of humanitarian crises, developed by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC). <http://www.inform-index.org/>
- 6 GFDRR & GTZ, 2016.
- 7 UNDP, 2011.
- 8 von Uexkul et al., 2016.
- 9 Schleussner et al. 2016.
- 10 Qureshi, 2002.
- 11 UNAMA, 2016.
- 12 FAOSTAT, n.d.
- 13 United States Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service, 2008.
- 14 USDA, n.d.
- 15 Government of the Union of Myanmar, 2015.
- 16 UNOCHA, 2016.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, 2017.
- 19 IFRC, 2015.
- 20 United Nations Country Team in Papua New Guinea, 2016.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Detges, 2017.
- 23 Catani, 2008.