

# CLIMATE AND SECURITY IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

**FOR** the past two decades, Southern Africa has been hit by the worsening effects of climate change, extreme weather ranging from cyclones to droughts to floods, forcing communities to migrate, exacerbating disputes over land and resources and undermining food security. Cyclones Ida and Kenneth tore through the region in 2019, killing more than 1300 people and triggering a humanitarian crisis in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe. And the UN's World Food Programme has reported that, notwithstanding other political and economic root causes, climate change was the driving force behind a drought in southern Madagascar, the worst in four decades, that has left over a million people facing famine.

These climate events add to the region's pre-existing economic, political and security difficulties. Southern Africa has a long history of political violence. Many of its states have gone through lengthy independence and anti-apartheid struggles, with protracted wars and liberation campaigns in countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The colonial era and post-independence instability have left entrenched inequalities and conflicts over land rights in their wake. Southern Africa also remains the most heavily affected region for HIV-AIDS globally.

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In recent years, a new threat has emerged. A violent insurgency in Mozambique's northernmost province of Cabo Delgado is sparking fears that the area could become the next frontier for global jihadism in Africa. All told, more than 3,000 people have been killed in the violence and 700,000 have been chased

from their homes by insurgents since they launched their campaign in 2017. Now almost one million people in the region face chronic food shortages and have lost their livelihoods there.

In this context, there is consensus over the fact that climate change is acting as

a "threat multiplier", one that exacerbates the region's pre-existing socio-economic and political vulnerabilities. The following Q&A, which synthesises three reports focusing on climate change in Southern Africa, looks at the potential links between conflict, environmental conditions and demographics.\*

## A. What issues arise from climate change in Southern Africa?

Southern Africa has been hit by many of the types of extreme weather events associated with climate change. In recent years, Madagascar, Zimbabwe and Angola have suffered prolonged droughts, Namibia and Zambia have seen deadly floods, Mozambique has been hit by tropical cyclones, and Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe have been affected by locust outbreaks caused by unusually high rainfall.

These have weakened the region's socio-economic development. Reduced water levels affect Southern Africa's agriculture, and its food security and capacity to export, but also its hydroelectric potential and water supply to big cities, as seen in Cape Town's water crisis in 2017-2018. Some adaptive solutions, such as the more systematic use of irrigation in agriculture, have often made matters worse. Heavy rainfall and floods are also associated with the spread of epidemics in the region, notably of diseases such as malaria and cholera. Increasingly erratic climate events have also further exacerbated pre-existing migration patterns. In 2020 alone, at least half a million people have been forced to move due to climatic conditions in Southern Africa. In most of these

cases, it is the poorest in the rural areas that are hit hardest.

Given these multiple consequences, it is no surprise, then, that climate change is thought to be a threat multiplier, one that affects more deeply already vulnerable communities, especially the rural poor. Some of the region's political leaders could be tempted to use these vulnerabilities for their own political and economic interests. In Zimbabwe, for example, former President Robert Mugabe would regularly ensure greater shares of agricultural products were channelled to areas that supported the ruling ZANU-PF party, reinforcing its base and weakening areas that supported the MDC opposition party. State security forces harassed and attacked those same opposition areas.

The insurgency in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado further highlights the intricate links between climate change, pre-existing vulnerabilities and conflict. The rebels known locally as al-Shabab (no direct ties with Somalia's Al-Shabaab), have exploited grievances born from Cabo Delgado's high levels of poverty and inequality, partly dating back to the colonial era and compounded by the failure to transform the former war economy and provide basic social services. The recent discovery of rubies and natural gas reserves in the region has further heightened tensions. Elites close to President Filipe Nyusi have scrambled for these resources,

which have pulled in international investors offering lucrative service contracts but have provided little benefit for local people.

Climate change is believed to have exacerbated these frictions and forced people to move within the region, sometimes far beyond it. Cyclones Idai and Kenneth, in 2019, were devastating, and the flooding of December 2019 gravely damaged farmland, cutting transport links and local services, further isolating an already discontented population.

## B. What responses have there been so far to the security challenges posed by climate change?

Southern African states' immediate responses to insecurity have relied heavily on the use of armed force. Mozambique called on elite paramilitary police units and local militias, with support from a South African private military company, to fight al-Shabab in Cabo Delgado. Armies are also often part of the emergency response to climate crises and food insecurity: Madagascar's army has helped national and international humanitarian bodies in supporting

\* A. Swain et al., "Climate Change and the Risk of Violent Conflicts in Africa", Global Crisis Solutions, June 2011; C. Quinn et al., "Rapid Climate Risk Assessment for the SADC Region", SADC Futures and CCAFS, 2020; "Climate Change in Southern Africa", World Food Programme, June 2021.

communities affected by droughts, and South Africa's air force won plaudits for rescuing people marooned by floods in Mozambique.

### Longer-term responses have focused on two aspects:

**1.** Mapping climate risks for more precise targeting of prevention programs: cross-referencing information about areas most likely to be affected by climate hazards such as droughts and extreme rainfall with socio-economic vulnerability indicators (which measure people's capacity to adapt to climate change). The concept of resilience, or capacity of a household to recover after such shocks, is used to measure the levels of vulnerability amongst populations living in areas most threatened by climate change. Research based on household survey data in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo suggests that communities hardest hit by drought may be more supportive of political violence — but this link is far from categorical, as the same research has also shown that there is no general association between drought exposure and support for violence.

**2.** There has also been a focus on strengthening the adaptive capacities of the affected populations. This has included agricultural adaptation strategies

such as changes to the planting calendar, uptake of agricultural technologies, crop diversification and the use of non-timber products to supplement incomes. The revival of traditional practices, such as keeping a community grain store for times of hardship or the study of migratory birds and the flowering pattern of certain trees to predict droughts and floods, has also been encouraged.

## C. What are the results of these responses, and where and why have they not worked?

The use of armed forces, in response to insecurity and climate crises, has caused its own problems. In Mozambique, not only has the armed response, in the form of mass arrests and counter-insurgency, failed to neutralise al-Shabab, it has stoked local grievances, notably by failing to protect civilians. Some of the state security forces are accused by Amnesty International and other rights organisations of committing abuses.

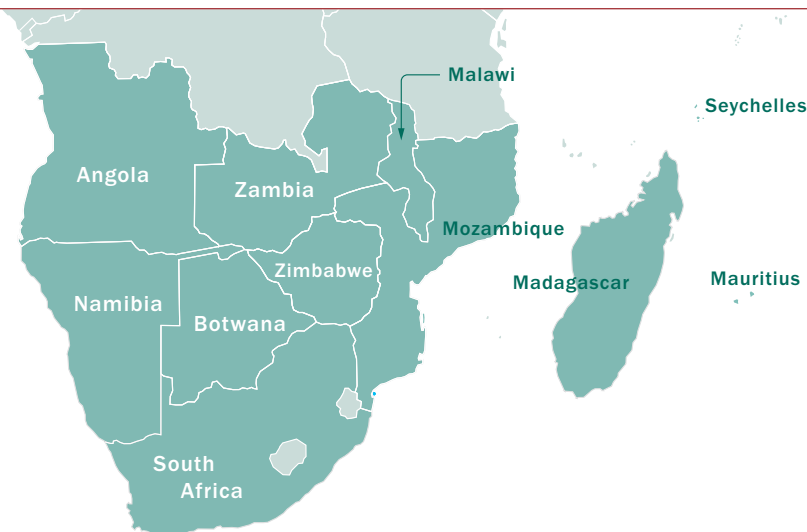
The region's armies, shaped by political deals after the liberation and civil wars,

are often ill-equipped to respond to local insurgencies. Mozambique's armed forces have been under-trained and under-funded for nearly three decades, partly because they incorporated, as per the 1992 peace deal, fighters from Renamo, the former armed opposition force. Moreover, Southern Africa's armies have struggled to move beyond a traditional security role. The concept of climate change as a threat multiplier, and the proactive role armies could play, for example, by collecting weather data and informing the population, have largely been neglected so far.

Climate risk mapping also has its limits. Not enough research has been conducted to assess risk and vulnerability in some parts of Botswana, northern Madagascar, but also in Southern Africa's small island states, Mauritius and the Seychelles. Similarly, some climate hazards, such as rising sea levels, have been insufficiently researched so far. There is, in addition, a mismatch between areas where research on climate change adaptation is being undertaken and those with the highest future climate risk. This has serious consequences for the testing of solutions.

Adaptation efforts are also hampered by the low adaptive capacities of the region's most vulnerable inhabitants. Faced with little other choice, communities often resort to solutions that trigger new problems. One of these is cross-border and rural-urban migration by the most economically productive family members – often younger men – who can then send remittances back home. This leaves women, the elderly and disabled, and children to deal with rural hardships. It adds to the burdens facing women who are in charge of providing food, fuel and water and have to walk further for the basics because of climate change-induced scarcity.

Climate change can affect strategies to adapt to other major challenges. Mass



displacement due to floods or conflict inevitably disrupts local economic activity. In Mozambique, attempts by business, including those companies involved in mining and gas, to develop commercial horticulture and smallholder farming have been hampered by climate change and borne little benefit so far. .

## D. What are the ingredients of a successful response?

While the role played by climate change in increasing insecurity in an already highly vulnerable region such as Southern Africa must be considered with caution, there are a number of steps that can be taken in order to prevent it from adding to the region's vulnerability.

1. Southern Africa's armies are being increasingly called upon to intervene in domestic settings fraught with local tensions. Whatever the roots of these tensions – historical, socio-economic or climate change – security forces must focus efforts on helping local people. This should include a systematic ban on abuses but also **prioritising the protection of civilians**, whether during counter-insurgency missions, humanitarian interventions or resettlement campaigns. Security forces can provide essential relief in emergencies, thanks to their aerial and naval transport capacities which enable them to reach inaccessible zones and transport freight. Climate change should become a

central concept for national defence planners so the forces can use their skills and tools to collect data and warn populations of extreme weather.

2. Current efforts to map climate risk, measure people's vulnerability and develop adaptation strategies are achieving some success but should be strengthened. This would mean **ensuring that climate, environmental and socio-economic data are systematically collected** throughout the region, including small island states and more remote areas. Research should more systematically assess coping strategies and their consequences, and measure how they relate to climate conditions.
3. Observers also call for **participatory approaches** that invite local people to identify needs, existing local knowledge and responses that can be tailored to the specific context. These participatory processes should systematically include women, given the additional burden placed on them by climate change and its impact on the running of households. Similarly, a gender lens should be applied when making decisions about who receives support to generate climate change adaptation knowledge and technology, and also when measuring its benefits.
4. A longer-term, and more holistic, approach to **building community resilience** would also reduce recourse to harmful coping strategies such as 'distress migration'. Social protection systems that improve

everyone's living standards, for example via social transfers, school feeding programs and asset and infrastructure creation, can build resilience and offer social safety nets in crises. Public employment opportunities and employment guarantee schemes can also improve living standards in the towns and countryside, as well as offsetting some of the effects of climate change. In addition, public works that focus on environmental conservation and rehabilitation, improving soil and water management, and disaster-proofing physical infrastructure can contribute directly to reducing the impact of climate change.

### Further reading

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