South Asia is one of the world’s most climate-vulnerable regions. Many countries in the region lack the resources and capacities needed to cope with the worsening impacts of climate change. And climate change is increasingly interacting with socio-economic, demographic and political factors to exacerbate fragility risks. While some of these challenges are country-specific, many of them transcend political boundaries and therefore require regional responses and strategies.

4 CLIMATE FRAGILITY RISKS IN SOUTH ASIA

Four pathways that link climate change to insecurity and conflict in South Asia are:

1. **Risk 1: Escalation of regional tensions due to competition over resources**
   Water is among the most contested resources in South Asia. Climate change, in combination with other social, economic, managerial and infrastructural challenges, is expected to worsen the region’s water stress and scarcity issues. Tensions linked to increasing water stress, which often overlap with ethnic, nationalistic and religious cleavages, could further escalate existing discontent and conflict.

2. **Risk 2: Worsening economic and livelihood insecurity**
   As South Asia’s economy is highly dependent on agriculture, climate change is increasingly becoming a major driver of livelihood insecurity and economic losses. Heat waves, salinisation, and extreme weather events are causing health problems and declines in food production, driving up food prices and poverty levels. Food and livelihood insecurity risks are undermining social stability and governmental legitimacy and enhancing insecurity and conflict risks.

3. **Risk 3: Increased migratory movements and rapid urbanisation linked to slow- and rapid-onset disasters**
   Extreme weather events are often a direct or indirect driver of displacement and migration across South Asia and these are becoming more intense. Disasters caused by sea level rise, cyclones, storm surges, land subsidence and high precipitation events threaten people’s survival and exacerbate livelihood insecurities and poverty. Climate change has also intensified rapid rural-urban migration in South Asia, straining existing resources and damaging ecosystem services in urban areas and thus undermining cities’ abilities to cope with disasters. These effects can, in turn, ultimately undermine social stability and governmental legitimacy.

4. **Risk 4: Compounding risks of crime, extremism and terrorism**
   The climate fragility risks South Asia faces are compounded by poverty, inequality and other structural failings that disproportionately affect marginalised segments of society, particularly women and children. Climate change could thus exacerbate existing conditions of conflict and instability in some regions and even bring about more military interventions. Climate change-related disasters could also provide an entry point for terrorist groups to gain popular support and boost their legitimacy through rescue and relief activities, e.g. as occurred in the aftermath of the 2010 floods in Pakistan.
5 ENTRY POINTS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE FRAGILITY RISKS

At present, there are no dedicated frameworks that directly address climate-fragility risks or the security implications of climate change in South Asia. Existing regional and sub-regional cooperation institutions focus solely on disaster risk reduction (DRR) and emergency responses, or address resource-sharing issues without considering climate change. Beyond the overarching necessity to create more evidence-based and actionable knowledge on climate security in South Asia, entry points for addressing climate-fragility risks could include actions to:

1. **Facilitate and strengthen regional cooperation**: To respond to regional tensions over resources, existing frameworks on climate change and DRR need to be revitalised and operationalised. This would help build local capacities and early warning systems. It is important to formulate a regional framework that integrates various perceptions for a holistic implementation of regional climate change policies.

2. **Enable and bolster transboundary river basin cooperation**: Sustainable management of the Himalayan ecosystems is vital for the countries dependent on the Himalayan rivers. Coordination and joint river basin management between upper and lower riparian countries can prevent conflict and build trust. Climate-proofing existing river water sharing agreements is important and requires strong diplomatic support.

3. **Support adaptation and DRR efforts to secure livelihoods**: To prevent livelihood deterioration and anti-state grievances, it is essential to tackle the food-water-energy nexus. Regional cooperation on energy could help populations become more resilient and build trust between countries. Moreover, building up insurance sectors to protect the poor should be a focus point.

4. **Manage human mobility and urbanisation**: As of now, there are no suitable legal instruments to deal with climate-related cross-border migration in South Asia. Mutual bilateral and regional agreements are necessary to address this, especially when it comes to improving data collection and building information sharing mechanisms. Creating, supporting and expanding city networks in South Asia could also help deal with the security implications of urban stress and climate change.

5. **Understand and prevent violence, extremism and terrorism**: Analysing how socio-economic grievances, resource degradation and climate change interact with and potentially fuel recruitment and violence by non-state armed groups would enable policy-makers to develop more effective policies to counteract them. Diplomatic efforts could help develop different preventative mechanisms such as community-based initiatives.

**POLITICS & SECURITY**

All South Asian countries are technically democracies, but many have faced severe disruptions over the past few decades in the form of political transitions and violent conflict. Currently, terrorism is a major threat in the region, and stability in the region is further under threat from (secessionist) insurgencies, border disputes and sporadic communal conflicts.

**LEGAL NOTICE**

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**FURTHER READING**

- Climate-Fragility Risk Brief: South Asia. (full version)

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTS**

- South Asia is home to 1.8 billion people.
- More than 33% of the world’s poor live in South Asia.
- The economy is highly dependent on agriculture.
- South Asia is the world’s fastest growing region, with the majority of countries recording GDP growth rates of above 5% in 2018.
- South Asia is among the most diverse regions in the world and hosts communities of all the major religions.

**PROVIDED BY**

The Climate Security Expert Network, which comprises some 30 international experts, supports the Group of Friends on Climate and Security and the Climate Security Mechanism of the UN system by synthesising scientific knowledge and expertise, advising on entry points for building resilience to climate-security risks, and helping to strengthen a shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities of addressing climate-related security risks.


The climate diplomacy initiative is a collaborative effort of the German Federal Foreign Office in partnership with adelphi. The initiative and this factsheet are supported by a grant from the German Federal Foreign Office.

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