

The Influence of China's Infrastructure Investments on Climate-Driven Conflict in Somalia

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ABSTRACT

Somalia is a country that is highly susceptible to climate change. It faces escalating droughts, floods, and resource scarcity that have plagued the nation for several decades. These environmental stressors, combined with weak governance and other human security issues, fuel conflict. While China's infrastructure investments promise economic growth, they may inadvertently intensify climate-driven conflict. This paper examines how China's projects intersect with climate change to impact resource access, displacement, and inequality in Somalia. By analyzing the interplay of these factors, the research in this paper aims to understand the potential for China's investments to exacerbate conflict and to propose strategies for mitigating these risks.

INTRODUCTION

Somalia has been highly vulnerable to climate change over the last few decades, experiencing more frequent and intense weather that has resulted in widespread food insecurity, mass displacement, and a humanitarian crisis. These environmental stressors disrupt traditional livelihoods, particularly pastoralism, and exacerbate competition for scarce resources. This competition, coupled with weak governance, creates fertile ground for conflict between communities and armed groups like al-Shabaab. While intended to stimulate economic growth, China's infrastructure investments in Somalia may exacerbate climate-driven conflict by disrupting traditional livelihoods, exacerbating resource competition, and reinforcing existing power imbalances, ultimately undermining the region's stability.

UNDERSTANDING CLIMATE CHANGE IN AFRICA

Climate change is a multifaceted challenge with far-reaching implications for human, state, and global security. These challenges are not only present today but are projected to intensify in the future if effective action is not taken to mitigate them and adapt. While global temperatures have risen throughout the 20th century, the past 50 years point a clear finger at human activity, particularly the burning of fossil fuels, as the primary culprit. As the impacts of climate change are expected to become more severe and widespread, Africa is particularly exposed and vulnerable. The complex challenge of climate change demands urgent action both within Africa and on the global stage. The future of Africa's development and democratic progress hinges on our collective ability to mitigate these growing threats and adapt to a changing environment. In Somalia, the consequences of climate change are particularly acute. Statistics show that temperatures continue to rise across Africa, exacerbating threats to human security and creating fertile ground for eco-conflict.

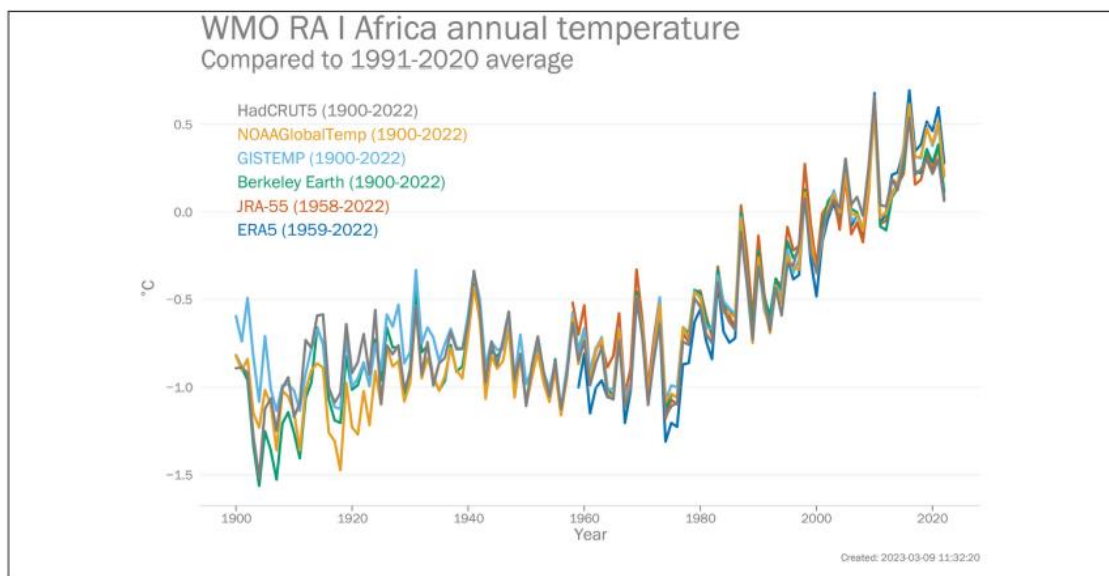


Figure 1: World Meteorological Organization, “Annual Africa Temperature.”

Moreover, increasing temperatures create an opportunity for the potential exploitation of the country's resources and strategic location, with China emerging as a key player. So how do China's infrastructure investments in Somalia intersect with climate change to influence conflict dynamics in the region? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand what drives eco-conflict and why Somalia is so susceptible.

UNDERSTANDING SOMALIA TODAY AND DRIVERS OF CONFLICT

Population

Somalia's rapid population growth is a major challenge for the country's development and stability. Notably, it has one of the highest fertility rates in the world, at 6.2 children per woman. If the fertility rate remains constant, Somalia's population is projected to reach 33 million people by 2050.¹ Should these projections prove accurate, Somalia's population growth will not only put a strain on natural resources but on its social and economic infrastructure, despite any advancements made with China's aid.² Population growth and poverty are two of the biggest risk factors for environmental degradation in Somalia. These two factors are interrelated and exacerbate each other. A larger population means more demand for natural resources, such as land, water, and food. It also means more pollution and waste. Somalia is already facing a number of environmental challenges, including drought, deforestation, and pollution.³ Rapid

¹ Elizabeth Leahy Madsen, "In Somalia, Beyond the Immediate Crises, Demography Reveals a Long-Term Challenge." Wilson Center, December 21, 2011.

² Abdimalik Ali Warsame, Abdikafi Hassan Abdi, Amir Yahya Amir, and W.N.W. Azman-Saini, "Towards Sustainable Environment in Somalia: The Role of Conflicts, Urbanization, and Globalization on Environmental Degradation and Emissions." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 406: 136856, 2023.

³ Global Forest Watch, "Somalia," 2023.

population growth is likely to intensify all of these challenges.

Poverty

Poverty is a major challenge for Somalia, as over 70% of the population lives below the national poverty line.⁴ It is ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world due to decades of conflict, corruption, drought, and weak institutions.⁵ Additionally, Somalia's GDP per capita is one of the lowest in the world. This year, the World Bank reported,

Amid repeated shocks, growth in GDP averaged only 2% from 2013 to 2020. Owing to the multiple crises, GDP contracted by 0.2% in 2020. GDP growth recovered to 2.9% in 2021 but is projected to have fallen to 1.7% in 2022 under the regional drought and worsening global economic conditions. GDP growth is forecast to rebound to 2.8% in 2023 and 3.7% in 2024.⁶

Poor people are more likely to rely on natural resources for their livelihoods and live in areas that are vulnerable to environmental hazards. Poverty can lead to several environmental problems, including overexploitation of resources, pollution, deforestation, and degradation of land and water.⁷ Addressing population growth and poverty is essential to reducing environmental risks in Somalia. This could include measures such as investing in education and family planning services to reduce fertility rates, creating economic opportunities for poor people to reduce their reliance on natural resources, investing in social services to make communities more resilient to natural hazards, strengthening environmental regulations, and promoting sustainable land management practices.

⁴ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Somalia's challenges in 2023." Brookings Institute, January 27, 2023.

⁵ The World Bank, "The World Bank in Somalia: Overview." March 30, 2023.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anantha K. Duraiappah, "Poverty and environmental degradation: a review and analysis of the nexus." World development 26, no. 12 (1998): 2169-2179.

Resources

Water is a vital resource that is essential for human life. However, water is also a finite resource that is becoming increasingly scarce in many parts of the world. The availability, use, and conservation of water are all important factors that need to be considered in order to ensure water security for all. Somalia is plagued by water scarcity. It is a multifaceted challenge, stemming from an arid climate that provides little rainfall, frequent bouts of drought, deforestation that hinders water absorption resulting in catastrophic flooding, and the contamination of water sources due to industrial and agricultural activities.⁸ Compounding these issues is an ailing water infrastructure that exacerbates losses and impedes equitable distribution across the nation.⁹

Somalia has a rich diverse marine ecosystem and is home to some of Africa's most productive fishing grounds. Nevertheless, the fisheries sector's development is stymied by a critical deficiency in essential infrastructure.¹⁰ These inadequacies represent a formidable constraint impeding growth and economic potential. In response, the Growth, Enterprise, Employment, and Livelihoods (GEEL) project is an initiative committed to fostering sustainable, environmentally responsible expansion within Somalia's fisheries industry. Backed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), GEEL operates in partnership with a consortium of stakeholders, prominently featuring RTI International.¹¹ Its initiatives assume a critical role in mitigating the risk of eco-conflict in Somalia. Resource-related

⁸ World Bank Group, "Somalia," Climate Change Knowledge Portal: For Development Practitioners and Policy Makers, 2023.

⁹ Warsame et al., 2023.

¹⁰ Research Triangle Institute, "Propelling an Economic Ecosystem in Somalia."

¹¹ USAID, "Empowering an Economic Ecosystem in Somalia: 2016-2021," USAID: Growth, Enterprise, Employment & Livelihoods Project (GEEL), July 2021.

competition often acts as a catalyst for conflict in vulnerable regions, and the fisheries sector is no exception. By fostering responsible resource management and sustainable practices, international initiatives like GEEL effectively diminish resource-related tensions, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflicts arising over these valuable marine assets.

Environment

Somalia's environment is under severe stress due to the combined effects of population growth, civil conflict, and climate change. As previously mentioned, these issues have led to widespread deforestation, land degradation, and pollution.¹² According to a press release by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in May of 2023,

A toxic mix of conflict, severe drought and devastating floods has forced more than 1 million people in Somalia to flee their homes in around 130 days – a record rate of displacement for the country. The figures...show that conflict was among the main causes of displacement between 1 January and 10 May this year, while over 408,000 people were displaced by floods engulfing their villages and another 312,000 people by ravaging drought.¹³

A recent study by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) revealed other alarming findings regarding the impact of drought in Somalia in 2022. It estimated that 43,000 "excess deaths" may have occurred, with about half affecting children under the age of five.¹⁴ These stressors set the stage for eco-conflict, as resource-driven tensions can arise and put a further strain on an already impoverished country.

The formidable combination of population growth, civil conflict, and climate change is creates fertile ground for eco-conflict. In fact, eco-conflict is already evident in Somalia. For

¹² Felbab-Brown, "Somalia's challenges in 2023".

¹³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Over 1 million people internally displaced in Somalia in record time," 2023.

¹⁴ UNICEF, "New study finds that 43,000 "excess deaths" may have occurred in 2022 from the drought in Somalia," 2023.

example, there have been clashes between farmers and herders over access to water and land.¹⁵ Additionally, there have also been reports of charcoal production and logging in protected areas.¹⁶ The charcoal trade is a major source of income for al-Shabab – a Somali-based Sunni Islamic extremist group – and contributes to deforestation and environmental degradation.¹⁷ Although the international community has taken steps to combat the trade, it remains a problem.

Other Contributing Factors

Somalia is a country with a long history of civil conflict and state collapse. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was established in 2012 in an effort to stabilize the country. Despite international efforts, Somalia's institutions are still weak, which is a major obstacle for its development and peace.¹⁸ While the FGS has made some progress in recent years, it still faces many challenges. One of the biggest challenges is the lack of effective control over much of the country's territory. The FGS is only able to fully control about half of the country, and the rest of the country is controlled by various armed groups, including al-Shabab. A 2018 Brookings Institute article stated,

Characteristically, the most effective, even if brutal, stabilizing actors in Somalia have been Islamist groups. More than other contestants for power, they have been able to rise above clan divisions and administer a uniform rule, protect marginalized minority clans, and deliver swift, predictable, and non-corrupt justice¹⁹

Thus, al-Shabaab was not strengthened by countering an autocratic regime, rather, it was fueled by weak institutions. Given Somalia's history of conflict, weak institutions, and a lack of governance, it has created an environment that is conducive to eco-conflict, specifically, when

¹⁵ Andrew E. Yaw Tchier, "Somalia: Climatic changes effects like drought could fuel herder-farmer conflicts as communities compete for few resources," Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 2021.

¹⁶ Climate Diplomacy, "Climate Change, Charcoal Trade and Armed Conflict in Somalia," 2024.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Vanda Felbab-Brown, "Developments in Somalia," Brookings Institute, November 15, 2018.

¹⁹ Ibid.

considering how al-Shabaab has been known to exploit natural resources to fund its activities.²⁰

CURRENT CLIMATE CHANGE POLICIES IN SOMALIA

Somalia has made progress in developing policy, legal, and institutional frameworks related to climate change and the sustainable management of natural resources in recent years.²¹ It has developed a number of national plans and policies, including the National Development Plan, National Climate Change Policy, National Environment Policy, Updated NDC, NAP Framework, and National Disaster Management Policy.²² These provide a framework for addressing the country's climate change and environmental challenges. However, it is important to note that Somalia's ability to respond to environmental risks is constrained by political instability, conflict, and resource limitations. The lack of a strong central government and ongoing security concerns make it difficult to implement comprehensive environmental policies and initiatives. International organizations, NGOs, and the United Nations (UN) agencies often play a significant role in providing assistance and expertise to address environmental challenges in the country.²³ According to the Somali NGO Consortium, “Given the highly insecure environment, the complexity of the operating environment and the large numbers of agencies working in Somalia/Somaliland, a coordinated voice is critical to successfully conduct development and humanitarian aid.”²⁴

²⁰ Claire Klobucista, Jonathan Masters, and Mohammed Aly Sergie, “Al-Shabaab,” The Council on Foreign Relations, December 6, 2022.

²¹ Federal Government of Somalia, “Somalia’s First Adaptation Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change,” Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. Mogadishu, Somalia, 2022, 14-15.

²² Ibid.

²³ United Nations, “Somalia – UNISOM I,” Accessed July 31, 2024.

²⁴ “How we work in Somalia/Somaliland,” Somali NGO Consortium, Accessed July 31, 2024.

While these challenges make it difficult to implement comprehensive environmental policies and initiatives, Somalia's National Environmental Policy (NEP) directly addresses the country's environmental issues and sets out several goals for environmental protection. These include conserving and managing Somalia's natural resources sustainably, preventing and controlling pollution, promoting public awareness of environmental issues, and strengthening environmental institutions.²⁵ The NEP was developed in collaboration with the UN, NGOs, and international organizations and adopted in 2000. While it reflects the country's commitment to sustainable development, it too has been hampered by conflict and instability.²⁶

Somalia's National Disaster Risk Management Policy is another comprehensive framework for reducing the risk of disasters and their impacts in Somalia. It has four main goals: (1) to reduce the risk of disasters and their impacts on people and property; (2) to strengthen disaster risk governance and institutions; (3) to build capacity for disaster risk reduction at all levels of government and society; and (4) to promote disaster risk reduction as an integral part of sustainable development in Somalia.²⁷ It was adopted in 2017 and is aligned with the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (SFDRR).²⁸ Adopted by the UN member states in 2015, the SFDRR is a global agreement that outlines a set of actions to reduce the risk of disasters and their impacts.²⁹

"Somalia's National Adaptation Plan (NAP) Framework," Directorate of Environment and Climate Change (DoECC), Office of the Prime Minister, February 2022, v-vi.

²⁶ Federal Government of Somalia, "Somalia's First Adaptation Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change," 14.

²⁷ The Federal Republic of Somalia, "Official Statement for the Republic of Somali Africa-Arab Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction," 2017.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

CHINA'S INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS

The question remains: how do China's infrastructure investments in Somalia intersect with climate change to influence conflict dynamics in the region? China has a long history of engagement with East Africa. While historical trade relations existed for centuries, contemporary relations intensified in the mid-20th century, with Somalia becoming one of the first African nations to establish diplomatic ties with China.³⁰ China's increased involvement in Somalia is primarily driven by economic interests. It seeks new markets, resources, and opportunities to expand its global influence. This is evident in its significant investments in infrastructure projects across the continent, including the renowned Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While China's investments pose an opportunity for economic growth and development for Somalia, it also poses several adverse effects. These include exacerbating political and security tensions due to investments in disputed territories, fostering suspicion and backlash due to perceived exploitation, and risking the escalation of local conflicts between communities.³¹ For example, the Oromo and Somali communities have long had historical grievances stemming from past conflicts and perceived injustices that may be exacerbated while simultaneously exposing both China's Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) and Somalia to greater risks.³²

Resource Exploitation

In 2018, Somalia entered a “fishing agreement with a consortium of 31 Chinese fishing vessels, giving them the fishing rights of Tuna and Tuna-like species in Somali waters for an

³⁰ SIDRA Institute, “The Benefits and Burden of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment in East Africa,” Policy Brief 18, November 2019, 2.

³¹ Ibid, 6.

³² Kenee, Fekadu Beyene. “Pastoralists and Violent Conflict along the Oromia–Somali Border in Eastern Ethiopia: Institutional Options toward Peacebuilding.” *African Studies Review* 65, no. 2, 2022, 404.

annual fee of \$35,000 each.”³³ While this provides Somalia with crucial funding,

Many Somalis have expressed grave concerns about the agreement and the secrecy surrounding it, typical of agreements signed with China in other parts of East Africa, and the fact that Chinese companies may be gearing up to pursue other trade and investment opportunities in Somalia, taking advantage of the weak and ineffective institutional governance in Somalia.³⁴

Moreover, the influence of China on Somalia’s waters may have other adverse effects. For instance, the ongoing maritime dispute between Somalia and Kenya could intensify, prolonging diplomatic tensions, and potentially instigating animosity between the two nations. This could ultimately jeopardize investment and economic development in both countries.³⁵

Finances

One of the biggest adverse implications to China’s investments across Africa is the debt burdens felt by the host country. In this case, Somalia has made significant progress since December of 2023. According to the International Monetary Fund,

A decade ago, Somalia emerged from a devastating civil war. Now, it has become an ambitious model of economic reform. With strong international support, Somalia is wiping away nearly 90% of its \$4.5 billion external debt through the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC), designed to help countries like Somalia reduce debt burdens and focus on improving quality of life...After two decades of conflict and instability, Somalia is rebuilding state institutions, with notable progress by the Central Bank and increased domestic revenues and social spending...While there's still a long way to go, Somalia's achievements under HIPC demonstrate its ability to deliver reforms for improved resilience, inclusive growth, and social development.³⁶

This debt relief is significant for Somalia’s sustainable development and must be maintained in order for it to effectively address the pressing challenges of climate change. While the HIPC initiative offers a crucial reprieve, the question remains whether Somalia can leverage this

³³ SIDRA Institute 2019, 5.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ IMF, “Somalia’s Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative Completion Journey,” YouTube Video, 3 min., 28 sec., December 19, 2023.

financial space to invest in climate-resilient infrastructure and policies. Moreover, ensuring transparency and accountability in infrastructure investments is crucial for maximizing benefits to the Somali people. Corruption, mismanagement of funds, and lack of oversight can undermine project effectiveness and lead to social unrest.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

As discussed earlier in this paper, Somalia has developed several policies to address climate change and environmental challenges, but implementation is hindered by political instability, conflict, and limited resources. It has made progress in creating frameworks for sustainable resource management, disaster risk reduction, and climate change adaptation, but translating these plans into action remains a significant hurdle. Given that climate change is a global challenge and not just an African issue, international support is crucial for Somalia to effectively respond to its growing threats. This could be achieved primarily through financial aid, technical expertise, capacity building, policy advice, technology transfer, humanitarian assistance, continued debt relief, and diplomatic backing. These efforts are crucial to building Somalia's resilience and fostering sustainable development.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON CHINA

As the thesis of this paper suggests, China's infrastructure investments in Somalia can inadvertently exacerbate climate-driven conflict. To mitigate these risks, Somalia should prioritize conducting impact assessments with an environmental focus. Additionally, strong governance, transparency, and anti-corruption measures are essential to ensure that investments

benefit the Somali people, not just the government. This can also be achieved through growing or building on other international relationships. By fostering collaborative partnerships and considering the broader implications of its projects, China can contribute positively to Somalia's development while minimizing the potential for conflict escalation. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, diversifying partnerships *beyond* China is crucial for Somalia to leverage various development models and mitigate risks associated with over-reliance on a single donor. These partnerships should not only be a singular state, but broader organizations strengthening its relationship with the UN, European Union (EU), and the African Union (AU). By engaging with multiple international actors, Somalia can access a broader range of financial resources, technologies, and expertise, enhancing its capacity to address complex challenges such as climate change and conflict, not just with its debt relief.

CONCLUSION

The intricate relationship between China's infrastructure investments, climate change, and conflict in Somalia presents a complex and multifaceted challenge. While these investments hold the promise of economic development and improved infrastructure, their potential to exacerbate existing vulnerabilities is undeniable. The intersection of climate change, resource scarcity, and weak governance creates a volatile environment where infrastructure projects, if not carefully planned and executed, can amplify tensions and contribute to conflict. Evidence suggests that China's investments in Somalia, particularly in the realm of resource exploitation, have the potential to disrupt delicate ecological balances and exacerbate competition for scarce resources. Moreover, it could cause social unrest both within the Somali community and tension with groups like al-Shabaab who capitalize on natural resources. While this paper presents the

argument that Somalia may face adverse effects as a result of China's influence, it is crucial to acknowledge that the precise outcomes of these investments are contingent upon a multitude of factors. These factors include the nature of the projects, how the government handles these opportunities, the *quality* of governance, and the effectiveness of conflict prevention measures. Ultimately, the success or failure of China's endeavors in Somalia will hinge on the Somali government – with the support of the international community – to mitigate the negative consequences and maximize the benefits. It is undeniable that China's investments intersect with climate change; however, addressing the complex interplay of climate change, governance, and resource management will be crucial in determining whether China's infrastructure investments contribute to stability or conflict in Somalia.

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