The risks of ecological security

Tor A. Benjaminsen

Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Ås, Norway

During the last 15–20 years a changing climate has increasingly been seen internationally as a security risk (Brown et al., 2007). This securitisation has in particular taken place within the military, (green) international NGOs and among policy-makers (Selby and Hoffman, 2014). In conferences about climate security, a peculiar mix of actors can be observed among participants of military officers in uniform, climate activists and politicians. Since 2007, the UN Security Council has also discussed the link between climate change and human security several times, and in particular related to the dire security situation in the African Sahel. In March 2021, the African Union's Peace and Security Council also issued a communiqué dedicated to the effects of climate change on peace, security and stability in Africa.

International media have generally been keen to repeat a policy narrative about climate-caused conflicts. Especially the current crisis in the Sahel has drawn international attention to climate change as a possible cause. Just to give two examples – *Le Monde* reported on 11th April 2019 that conflicts between Fulani herders and Dogon farmers in Mali are caused by resource scarcity following climate change and population growth, while *Deutsche Welle* (11th June 2019) concluded that 'The conflict between Dogon and Fulani ethnic groups over resources in Mali has been exacerbated by climate change, population growth, an absentee state and Islamism'.

Indeed, the Sahel is often pointed out as the most typical example of a toxic brew of climate change, poverty, migration and armed insurgency. This view was reflected by the Norwegian Nobel Committee when it awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 to former US Vice President Al Gore and the IPCC and highlighted farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel as typical examples of a close link between climate change and conflicts.

Academic research, on the other hand, has been more critical to framing climate change as a cause of conflicts or as a threat multiplier, although researchers continue to investigate climate change as a risk factor for violent conflict (Mach et al., 2019). Such risks may occur via possible indirect pathways as for instance through reduced food security or the implementation of adaptation or mitigation measures.

Both quantitative peace and conflict studies (e.g. Buhaug 2010; Theisen et al., 2013; Koubi 2019) and case-based political ecology (e.g. Benjaminsen et al., 2012; Abrahams and Carr 2017; Benjaminsen and Ba, 2021) have questioned assumptions about climate change as a driver of violence and insecurity, although there may be indirect pathways under certain contexts. My own positionality in debates about climate security and in these comments on the book discussed in this

Corresponding author:
Tor A Benjaminsen, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, PO Box 5003, Ås 1432, Norway.
Email: t.a.benjaminsen@nmbu.no

Forum (McDonald, 2021) is rooted in my background in political ecology research on land-use conflicts in the Sahel where I have seen the need to push back at simplistic and apolitical narratives about giving climate a leading role to explain crisis and conflict in the region.

This push-back is based on the fact that I see several risks associated with the increased focus on climate security that may also spill over to the ecological security approach promoted by McDonald. First, the risk of over-focusing on climate change as a cause of violent conflict, as seen in policy and media perspectives, is that it may gloss over underlying historical and political causes, and thereby prevent adequate explanations of causes and represent an obstacle to effective solutions.

Second, a focus on climate security may ironically undermine long-term public engagement in climate change if it becomes widely known that associated policies are based on politically-guided beliefs rather than on carefully collected empirical knowledge (Benjaminsen, 2021a).

Third, this focus on climate security may also be seen as a new form of climate reductionism (giving climate the role as a main variable predicting social change) and as a continuation of the Eurocentric climate determinism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hulme, 2011). As in the prime time of climate reductionism when the agency of colonial subjects was reduced to being a product of African climates, there is also a particular focus on Africa in today's climate reductionism. The risk of such an approach is that African actors and agency remain invisible in conflict analyses (or is at least not explicitly focused on). And when there is attention to local agency, there is a tendency to follow a deterministic and apolitical logic with a Malthusian focus on ecoscarcity neglecting local and indigenous knowledge and institutions.

Therefore, climate change may come to represent new action space for powerful actors to maintain and strengthen practices that may be seen as forms of green neocolonialism. Such an argument, which I agree with (see below), goes against a common way of thinking implying that 'downplaying the role of climate change (in explaining conflicts in the Sahel) removes responsibility from wealthy nations of the global North, which are not only failing to substantially curb the emissions that are so drastically affecting the lives of poor people elsewhere but which are also home to movements against climate action that are overtly racist and xenophobic' (McGiffin, 2022: 7). In other words, reducing the role of climate change in explaining conflict and crisis in the Sahel may remove responsibility from powerful actors in the Global North and neglect the impact of climate change on poor people in the region, and in addition play into the hands of right-wing racist climate denial (see also Malm, 2021).

In contrast to this view, I would argue that such a moral argument may easily, without careful engagement with historical and political context, result in practices that can be labelled neocolonial. McDonald's book seems to share this risk in its reflection of some of the above thinking about the moral imperative of stressing the role of climate change in explaining conflict, although perhaps not in the same straight-forward way. Based upon good intentions to speed up climate action, the book argues that the practices encouraged by climate security discourses tend not to be morally defensible, because they do not address climate change in an effective way and that they do not allocate moral responsibility for climate change to particular actors.

While I may agree with these points in a general way, I still find an Ecological Security approach, as outlined in the book, problematic for at least three reasons – it is unclear what the approach means in practice; it is unclear how it relates to other propositions to understand the social and ethical aspects of climate change; and it neglects the various forms that power may take in these contexts and includes a rather thin notion of agency. Ultimately, by expanding moral considerations embedded in climate security to include broader ecosystems – leading to an ecological security approach, McDonald risks further reinforcing green neocolonialism – as unpleasant such an insight may be.

What does ecological security mean in practice?

McDonald's book puts climate security into a broader environmental philosophy framework, which extends the attention from the climate system to the resilience of ecosystems. The book also aims to move beyond the simplistic dichotomy of anthropocentrism-biocentrism. These are both sound ideas and easy to sympathise with.

But after having read the book it still remains unclear what Ecological Security would imply in practice. What type of action may result from an Ecological Security discourse? Even the sub-chapter titled 'Ecological Security in Practice' is vague on the potential practical implications of this discourse, and what difference it would make in terms of concrete climate initiatives.

While the author acknowledges that climate action may hurt vulnerable people, the focus is still on progressive and effective climate action challenging 'the tyranny of the status quo' (p. 192) without much attention to the trade-offs and hard choices involved. One wonders what this means in terms of concrete climate action, because the trade-offs are numerous such as – increased extraction of minerals to scale up green technologies globally (with considerable conflict potential); large-scale afforestation in the Global South following IPCC scenarios (mostly in Africa because this is where it is believed that there is available land – also with formidable conflict potential); continued funding of Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD), which so far has had adverse effects on the livelihoods of forest adjacent communities in addition to questionable effects on forest conservation; or the 30 × 30 land conservation initiative, which aims to conserve 30% of land area globally by 2030 (also recommended by the recent 6th Assessment Report of the IPCC, and with a high conflict potential – see Cavanagh and Benjaminsen, 2022). In general, climate mitigation as a security risk and as a risk which may further strengthen green neocolonialism (or green grabbing – Fairhead et al., 2012) is not addressed in the book. While McDonald's primary ambition is to establish a normative framework, which necessarily ends up being largely abstract, given there is a chapter on putting this framework into practice, more engagement with the extensive research on the downsides of mitigation efforts and trade-offs, would have been welcome.

How does ecological security relate to other approaches?

Furthermore, it is not clear how Ecological Security could help in answering some of the above dilemmas, since 'progressive climate action' may easily result in widespread climate injustice. Various other approaches to climate action are already struggling with these questions such as in the debate between ecomodernism (including its socialist version) and degrowth (Ara Begum et al., 2022; Virtual Forum on Environmental Limits, Scarcity and Degrowth in *Political Geography* (Benjaminsen, 2021b)).

While an ecomodernist position holds that economic growth can be decarbonised, dematerialised and decoupled from resource use and pollution through increased use and development of green technologies and automation, degrowth advocates see such a position as utopian and argue that the only way to stay within planetary boundaries will be to downscale global consumption and production levels. In the tension between these two positions is where the most intense current debate on social transformation following climate change is situated, and which one would expect such a book on climate change politics and ethics to relate to.

Moreover, the scholarship, activism and debate about climate justice is another major theme that I miss an active engagement with in this book, although the issue is implicitly present throughout the text. This is a broad and expanding debate embracing various normative positions and aspects of

justice (Schlosberg and Collins, 2014; Robinson and Shine, 2018; Newell et al., 2021; Benjaminsen et al., 2022; Sultana, 2022).

How does Ecological Security relate to climate justice in its different interpretations and its different ways of understanding justice and injustice? How does its ethical position add to the debate about justice implications of ongoing climate change as well as of planned and current mitigation and adaptation initiatives?

My intention here is not to wholesale reject Ecological Security as a concept. Broadening the scope from climate systems to ecosystems makes sense in a general way as the current moment is marked by both a climate and biodiversity crisis. But we simply need more details to assess the implications of such an approach and how it speaks to existing debates about climate change, social transformation and justice.

Where is power and agency?

While McDonald points at the lack of moral responsibility of climate change reflected in climate security discourses, as mentioned above these discourses also tend to lack a discussion of power and how local agency plays out, which is a risk that remains in Ecological Security. This means for instance that in discussions of farmer-herder conflicts in the Sahel, local and regional politics and history are neglected leaving aside key aspects to understand how and why such conflicts emerge (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2021). Again, there is the risk of Eurocentrism and environmental determinism.

In discussing the conflicts in Darfur and the Sahel, McDonald argues that the UN Security Council (UNSC) has a responsibility as an agent of ecological security (p. 156), while local and national actors in these areas remain invisible in the text. The main argument seems to be that the UNSC should promote more mitigation action (in the Sahel or in the Global North?). It is unclear whether this responsibility also includes military or humanitarian intervention.

To illustrate how local agency and power relations may be neglected and what practical implications this may have, let us have a look at the example of the Great Green Wall (GGW) in Africa (Benjaminsen et al., 2022). This is a large-scale mitigation action in the Sahel promoted by powerful actors such as various UN agencies, the World Bank, the EU, the French government and some retired African Presidents. The project is planned as a 15 km wide wall of trees over a distance of about 8000 km from Senegal to Djibouti. The aims are to by 2030 restore 100 million hectares of degraded land, create 10 million jobs, and sequestrate 250 million tons of carbon. It is believed that these results will furthermore bring down recruitment to jihadist insurgency, reduce migration from the Sahel to Europe, stop desertification (while the Sahel is actually greening) and mitigate climate change.

So far the project has been dominated by a technical and top-down approach focused on tree planting on grazing land. Through totally ignoring the needs of pastoralists and their livestock, the GGW has led to the blocking of pastoral mobility and dispossessed pastoralists from key resources. Ironically, this means that the afforestation has resulted in increased natural resource scarcity for the local pastoralists, which risks further increasing the social tensions that are behind the recruitment of pastoralists to insurgency groups in the Sahel (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2019).

I present this example to illustrate that the devil is in the details and that good intentions are not enough. In discussions of climate change and security, good intentions need to be paired with contextual and empirical knowledge to avoid the risks of adverse effects of climate action such as increased injustice and insecurity. Disregarding how local agency and power play out in context, while emphasising the role of climate change, which is common in climate security discourses,

easily leads to reproduction of Eurocentrism, environmental determinism and green neocolonialism (see also Selby et al., 2022). Despite good intentions, Ecological Security risks reflecting these same effects unless there is more explicit engagement with context, empirical knowledge and the politics of climate justice.

References

Abrahams D and Carr ER (2017) Understanding the Connections Between Climate Change and Conflict: Contributions From Geography and Political Ecology. *Current Climate Change Reports* 3: 233–242.

Ara Begum R, Lempert R, Ali E, et al. (2022) Point of Departure and Key Concepts. In: Portner H-O, Roberts DC, Tignor M, et al. (eds), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge, UK and New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, pp. 121–196. DOI: 10.1017/9781009325844.003

Benjaminsen TA (2021a) Climate change and human conflict in the Sahel. In: Villalón LA (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Benjaminsen TA (2021b) Virtual Forum introduction: Environmental limits, scarcity and degrowth. *Political Geography* 87: 102344.

Benjaminsen TA and Ba B (2019) Why do pastoralists in Mali join jihadist groups? A political ecological explanation. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 46(1): 1–20.

Benjaminsen TA and Ba B (2021) Fulani-Dogon Killings in Mali: Farmer-Herder Conflicts as Insurgency and Counterinsurgency. *African Security* 14(1): 4–26.

Benjaminsen TA, Svarstad H and Shaw of Tordarroch I (2022) *Recognising recognition in climate justice*. IDS Bulletin, 53.

Benjaminsen TA, Alinon K, Buhaug H, et al. (2012) Does climate change drive land-use conflicts in the Sahel? *Journal of Peace Research* 49(1): 97–111.

Brown O, Hammill A and Mcleman R (2007) Climate change as the 'new' security threat: implications for Africa. *International Affairs* 83(6): 1141–1154.

Buhaug H (2010) Climate not to blame for African civil wars. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107(38): 16477–16482.

Cavanagh C and Benjaminsen TA (2022) *Conservation, Land Dispossession and Resistance in Africa*. Oxford Handbook of Land Politics. Available at: https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/44609.

Fairhead J, Leach M. and Scoones I (2012) Green grabbing: A new appropriation of nature? *Journal of Peasant Studies* 39: 237–261.

Hulme M (2011) Reducing the future to climate: a story of climate determinism and reductionism. *Osiris* 26(1): 245–266.

Koubi V (2019) Climate change and conflict. *Annual Review of Political Science* 22: 343–360.

Mach KJ, Kraan CM, Adger WN, et al. (2019) Climate as a risk factor for armed conflict. *Nature* 571: 193–197.

Malm A (2021) *White Skin, Black Fuel*. London: Verso.

McDonald M (2021) *Ecological Security: Climate Change and the Construction of Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McGiffin E (2022) *Conflicted Colonialisms: Multi-Dimensional Violence in the Western Sahel*. Third World Thematics. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23802014.2022.2099573

Newell P, Srivastava S, Næss LO, et al. (2021) Toward transformative climate justice: An emerging research agenda. *WIREs Climate Change* 12(6).

Robinson M and Shine T (2018) Achieving a climate justice pathway to 1.5 °C. *Nature Climate Change* 8: 564–569.

Schlosberg D and Collins LB (2014) From environmental to climate justice: climate change and the discourse of environmental justice. *WIREs Climate Change* 5: 359–374.

Selby J, Daoust G and Hoffmann C (2022) *Divided Environments: An International Political Ecology of Climate Change, Water and Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sultana F (2022) Critical Climate Justice. *The Geographical Journal* 188(1): 118–124.

Theisen OM, Gleditsch NP and Buhaug H (2013) Is climate change a driver of armed conflict? *Climatic Change* 117(3): 613–625.

Selby J and Hoffmann C (2014) Rethinking climate change, conflict and security. *Geopolitics* 19: 747–756.

Author biography

Tor A. Benjaminsen is a Human Geographer and Professor of International Environment and Development Studies at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. He has been a Lead Author of the IPCC (AR6 WGII) and Associate Editor of *Political Geography* (2016-2022). His latest book (co-authored with Hanne Svarstad) is titled 'Political Ecology: A Critical Engagement with Global Environmental Issues' (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2021). In 2022, he received an ERC Advanced Grant to study the political ecology of conflicts and migration in the West African Sahel.