

Levy, Marc A., "Sampling bias does not exaggerate climate-conflict claims," *Nature Climate Change* 8,6 (442) <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0170-5>

Final pre-publication text

**To the Editor** – In a recent Letter, Adams et al<sup>1</sup> argue that claims regarding climate-conflict links are overstated because of sampling bias. However, this conclusion rests on logical fallacies and conceptual misunderstanding. There is some sampling bias, but it does not have the claimed effect.

Suggesting that a more representative literature would generate a lower estimate of climate-conflict links is a case of begging the question. It only make sense if one already accepts the conclusion that the links are overstated. Otherwise it is possible that more representative cases might lead to stronger estimates. In fact, correcting sampling bias generally does tend to increase effect estimates<sup>2,3</sup>.

The authors' claim that the literature's disproportionate focus on Africa undermines sustainable development and climate adaptation rests on the same fallacy. What if the climate-conflict links are as strong as people think? It is far from obvious that acting as if they were not would somehow enhance development and adaptation. The authors offer no reasoning to support such a claim, and the notion that security and development are best addressed in concert is consistent with much political theory and practice<sup>4,5,6</sup>.

Conceptually, the authors apply a curious kind of "piling on" perspective in which each new paper somehow ratchets up the consensus view of a country's climate-conflict links, without regard to methods or findings. Consider the papers cited as examples of how selecting cases on the conflict variable exaggerates the link. Each uses a case selection strategy rooted in the qualitative methods literature<sup>7</sup>. One, using a form of "crucial" case study, finds no evidence of climate impacts on land use conflicts in Mali, a region where climate-conflict links were especially likely to be found<sup>8</sup>. The other, using a "structured, focused comparison," investigates two regions in the Middle East with similar

climate stress but different conflict outcomes and concludes that climate's role as a conflict driver has been exaggerated<sup>9</sup>. It is hard to see how these papers mislead people into thinking climate-conflict links are stronger than they really are.

Knowing that case selection is biased is useful, but not a reason to lower our estimate of climate's impact on conflict.

## References

1. Adams C., Ide T., Barnett J., Detges A. *Nat. Clim. Change* **12** (2018).
2. King G., Keohane R.O., Verba S. *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton Univ. Press, 1994).
3. Collier, D. and Mahoney, *World Politics* **49**, 56-91 (1996).
4. Hobbes, T. *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (Penguin, 1982).
5. United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations* (1945), <http://www.un.org/en/sections/un-charter/un-charter-full-text>
6. United Nations General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. A/RES/70/1 Available at <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/> (2015).
7. Bennett, A. and Elman, C. *Annu. Rev. Polit. Sci.*, **9**, 455-476 (2006).
8. Feitelson, E. & Tubi, A. *Glob. Environ. Change* **44**, 39–48 (2017).
9. Benjaminsen, T., Alinon, K., Buhaug, H. & Buseth, J. T. *J. Peace Res.* **49**, 97–111 (2012).

Marc A. Levy

Center for International Earth Science Information Network, Columbia University, 61 Route 9W,  
Palisades, NY 10964 USA.

e-mail: [mlevy@ciesin.columbia.edu](mailto:mlevy@ciesin.columbia.edu)