Climate change and its possible security implications:
Briefing on SG's Report to GA64

by
Division for Sustainable Development
UN-DESA

Background

- Security Council debate, April '07 (UK)
    - Questions raised about suitability of forum
- GA resolution A/63/281(June '09) calls on SG to prepare report to 64th session based on views of Member States and relevant organizations
- SG's report based on inputs from:
    - 35 governments
    - 4 groups
    - 17 organizations

Does climate change have security implications?

- Uncertainties:
  - perhaps the biggest is whether the world's leaders will take timely action to slow climate change
  - Others: how big, sudden, irreversible CC impacts
- Answer to first will partly determine the answer to the second
- Other considerations:
  - How resilient are local societies, economies, ecosystems?
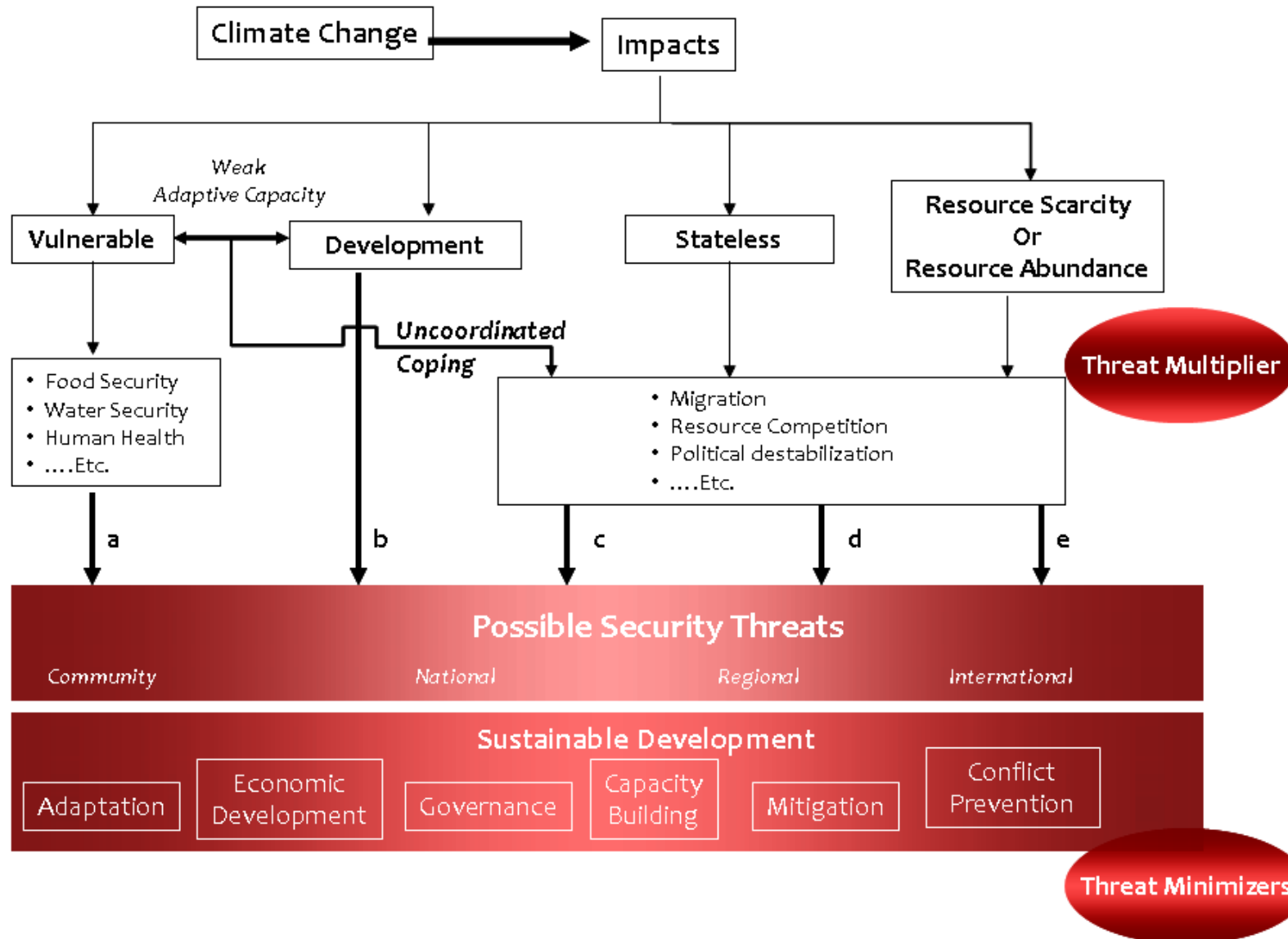 - How strong are local adaptive capacities?

A preventive approach

- What actions are needed to ensure CC does not become serious security risk?
- Consistent with UN's commitment to conflict prevention
- Preventive measures often least costly options
- Stern review: already positive B/C ratio
  - even before considering contingent costs …
  - …to address second-order impacts – migration, conflict – induced by first-order ones (drought, water stress, extreme weather, sea-level rise)

Possible scenarios

- If strong mitigation action taken
  - richer countries should have the means to adapt, though stresses (extreme weather) will still appear
  - poorer and more vulnerable countries (SIDS) will still struggle to adapt (some CC is already 'locked in')
- With business as usual emissions growth
  - adaptation will tax capacities even of developed, emerging economies
  - many poorer, more vulnerable countries may face economic and political crisis, collapse.

Channels of Influence

Climate change as threat multiplier

- Many poor countries already face severe environmental, economic, social and political stresses, from
  - population pressures
  - land degradation, water and food scarcities
  - weak governance and economic stagnation
- Climate change likely to exacerbate these stresses.

Channels linking CC to security

(a) Vulnerable populations: worsening poverty, hunger and malnutrition, disease

(b) Development: whole regions and countries face economic shocks

- capacities of states weakened

- If impacts too large, adaptation inadequate …

(c) Survival strategies (un-coordinated coping)

- competition for scarce resources
- population displacement, forced migration
  - ➤ both increase risk of violent conflict

Domestic security implications

- food shortages, soaring food prices: source of social unrest, esp in urban areas
    - even destabilizing governments
- population movements due to changing weather, drought, flooding: conflicts between "sons of soil" and new immigrants
    - conflicts between pastoralists and farmers

Channels linking CC to security

(d) statelessness: extreme instance of resource scarcity and population displacement from sea-level rise

- – entire coastal areas, islands, even nation-states submerged, rendered uninhabitable
- – how can the international community prepare for such an eventuality?

Channels linking CC to security

(e) changing international resource availability: scarcity or abundance

- scarcity: shared waters
  - Himalayan, Andean, other glacier melt; aquifers
    - Cooperation the norm
    - How can treaties governing shared water sources be reinforced in anticipation of worsening stresses?
- abundance: Arctic sea and seabed resources
  - managing overlapping claims
  - strengthened cooperative governance
  - protecting Arctic ecosystems, culture of indigenous communities

Threat minimizers: keeping CC from becoming a security threat

- Strong measures agreed at Copenhagen to **reduce global GHG emissions**
- Int'l support to **sustainable development** as basis for building resilience, reducing vulnerability
- Building **adaptive capacity** to address CC's unavoidable impacts in vulnerable countries
- Strengthening **governance institutions** to manage resources, migration, prevent conflict
- Sharing **information** for risk mitigation, timely response: earth observation, meteorological data, early warning

Role of UN in climate-challenged world

- Humanitarian crises increase: food aid, disaster relief may need strengthening
- Climate migrants: political refugee regime established after WWII not well suited to this new challenge
- Statelessness: multilateral agreements providing where, and on what legal basis, affected populations would be permitted to relocate
- Reinforcement of treaties, cooperative mechanisms for shared waters, other resources
- Need to improve flow of information & sharing of assessments between different regional & international organizations

Research & Practice: Agenda

- Research on causal pathways & factors linking physical impacts to potential instability/conflict

- e.g. under what circumstances can droughts trigger migration and conflict?

- Challenges:
  - linking climate science and social/political science;
  - improving data/information base;
  - making research relevant for practitioners in the UN and elsewhere

Institutional questions

- Not explicitly addressed in SG's report
  - Different proposals available in submissions online: http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/resources/res_docugaecos_64.shtml
- Some states: continued attention by GA and ECOSOC
- Other states: possible item on agenda of SC
  - SC Working Group on CC and Security
- Other suggestions:
  - SG to appoint special rapporteur on CC and security
  - UN to create focal point to track growing security implications of CC

Some concluding thoughts

- Issue cuts across the UN, other orgs; got a good sense from submissions of concerns of different units – OCHA, DPA, IOM, etc.
- Need for further research linking climate models and social science analysis
- Analysis of political economy of climate-constrained world (group of experts from developed and developing countries)
- Watching brief needed on key issues: reporting to GA, yes, but every year, not sure …