



22-12-2023

Conflict and Climate

Funding and Accountability at COP28

Haid Haid



The UN Climate Change Conference, COP28, recently **held** in the UAE, has put the spotlight on climate-related discussions. Among the key themes highlighted this year is the often-neglected intersection between conflict and the climate crisis, underscoring the need for heightened climate funding in conflict-affected regions.

Despite considerable **controversy**, an invitation was extended to a delegation led by the Syrian regime, which allowed it to **attend** this significant event. Apart from advancing Assad's international image, the conference presents an opportunity for Damascus to secure funding for climate adaptation initiatives.

While it is of course urgently important to address Syria's environmental **challenges**, it is crucial to consider the broader context. Channeling climate funding to a regime that has not only **worsened** existing environmental challenges, but also **created** new ones, undermines efforts to hold it to account for these failures – along with its countless other violations and crimes.

Moreover, the regime's extensively documented **corruption** and **manipulation** of aid and development funding pose a significant risk of diverting climate finance away from its intended objectives. Therefore, any climate funding allocated to Syria must thoroughly consider the intricate realities within the nation to avoid falling prey to familiar pitfalls.

The Syrian conflict, stretching over 12 agonizing years, has **inflicted** brutal violence, economic turmoil, and widespread suffering upon the population. Concurrently, recent years have **witnessed** a surge in extreme weather events in Syria: scorching temperatures, devastating wildfires, relentless droughts and ceaseless sandstorms.

These calamities, escalating both in frequency and ferocity, have heightened Syria's vulnerability to the harsh impacts of climate change. **Ranked** 146th out of 181 nations on the Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative (ND-GAIN) index,

Syria stands among the countries most severely affected by the climate crisis. This ranking also underscores the nation's acute vulnerability and limited resilience against the challenges posed by climate change.

Yet, however dire these circumstances may be, they must not eclipse the accountability of the Syrian regime in reaching this critical juncture — an vital aspect to consider in forging a way forward. Even predating the eruption of the ongoing conflict, the regime's policies directly **exacerbated** a range of environmental challenges, including water scarcity, soil degradation, and air pollution.

The situation further deteriorated following the peaceful uprising in 2011. A November **report** by former International Criminal Court judge Howard Morrison echoed these concerns, placing responsibility squarely on the Assad regime for extensive environmental devastation, exacerbating existing issues and introducing new ones.

The relentless bombing campaigns orchestrated by the Syrian regime, and its repeated use of chemical weapons throughout the prolonged civil war, inflicted substantial environmental destruction. The aforementioned report sheds light on the aftermath: hazardous conflict rubble left in the wake of devastated cities, posing significant environmental and health risks both presently and during subsequent removal phases.

Furthermore, the report underscores Assad's targeting of the oil industry, resulting in destructive oil fires and spills that ravaged cultivated lands and triggered health crises, notably increased respiratory issues among affected populations.

It also delineates how Assad's weaponization of vital resources like water has precipitated a crisis in safe and clean water access, leading to various health ailments. Simultaneously, the deliberate targeting of sanitation systems has polluted groundwater sources, and the ravages of war have rapidly diminished Syria's forests, heightening concerns about increased flooding risks and a stark decline in biodiversity.

Extending climate finance to the entity responsible for Syria's urgent climate issues, however, not only undermines efforts to hold those responsible to account, but also risks yielding minimal impact. The Syrian regime's track **record** of diverting and misusing aid reveals a troubling pattern where funds designated for humanitarian relief or development purposes are systematically manipulated.

Numerous instances point to aid being selectively directed to loyalist areas, manipulation of exchange rates for aid transfers, and frequent reports of compromised procurement procedures. Furthermore, the regime's constraints on the operational freedom of international agencies impede independent needs assessment and monitoring, leaving these bodies heavily reliant on data provided by regime-affiliated entities.

Allocating climate financing to the Syrian government also entails significant risks due to the deep-seated structural **corruption** within state institutions. Widespread corruption at various government levels raises alarming concerns regarding mismanagement and potential fund diversion from climate initiatives. This entrenched corruption not only undermines the effectiveness of climate financing but also

detracts from essential reforms needed to address Syria's governance challenges.

More broadly, the exclusive invitation to the Assad regime as Syria's sole representative effectively barred stakeholders from non-regime-held zones, particularly civil society groups, from directly engaging in or benefiting from this global affair. This pattern is likely to persist even after the conference. Throughout the Syrian conflict, Assad actively **impeded** aid delivery to non-regime territories: and this approach **persisted** even after the recent earthquakes severely affected areas outside regime control in northwest Syria. Given this history, it is challenging to envision a scenario where the Assad regime willingly shares or permits climate funding to flow through Damascus to regions outside its dominion.

Hence, if the heightened focus on conflict and the climate crisis at this year's COP summit results in additional funding for Syria, entities overseeing this support must not approach climate change solely from a technical standpoint. Climate-related financing, like any funding directed to regime-held areas, must carefully consider the context in order to mitigate corruption risks and ensure that funds genuinely enhance climate action without exacerbating Syria's existing problems.

Given the technical and political challenges of coordinating with the Syrian regime, which has persistently resisted principled cooperation, climate funding to Syria should target societal and civil society structures at the local level: these are the entities that possess the skills and genuine interest to improve conditions in their areas.

Engaging directly with the Syrian regime, despite these stark realities, risks enabling Assad to exploit yet another critical cause to secure political survival.

However, this time, the repercussions will not be borne solely by Syrians.