The role of inclusion in the climate-conflict nexus in Iraq

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POLICY PAPER

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ABSTRACT

This analysis explores how climate change is interacting with conflict and social dynamics in Iraq, including the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, with a focus on three climate-vulnerable areas: Kalar (Sulaymaniyah), Hawija (Kirkuk) and Al-Midaina (Basrah). Drawing on a desk review, 22 key informant interviews with women and men, and three focus group discussions with 37 women, the study examines how climate-related pressures, including water scarcity, livelihood disruption, displacement and environmental degradation, affect men and women differently. The findings show that women play an often-overlooked role in managing these pressures through informal mediation, household resource management and efforts to prevent disputes over scarce resources. Despite their distinct experiences and contributions, women remain largely absent from formal decision-making on climate adaptation, natural resource management and conflict prevention. Addressing these gaps requires meaningful participation, stronger support for women's leadership, and integrated approaches linking climate adaptation, livelihoods, psychosocial wellbeing and conflict prevention to strengthen community resilience.

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1 Background

Climate change has become one of the most significant drivers of instability in Iraq, exacerbating existing governance challenges, resource scarcity, displacement and social tensions. This two-pager summarises the key findings and recommendations from a Berghof Foundation analysis examining the interaction between climate change, conflict, inclusion and governance across three climate-vulnerable districts in Iraq: Kalar (Sulaymaniyah), Hawija (Kirkuk) and Al-Midaina (Basrah). The analysis was conducted through desk review, 22 key informant interviews (KIIs) and three focus group discussions (FGDs) that included 37 women. It explores how environmental degradation affects women and men differently, while providing a clear foundation for shifting climate and security approaches from viewing women as passive recipients of assistance to recognising them as essential actors – with meaningful influence over decision-making, priority-setting and resource allocation – in conflict-sensitive climate adaptation, inclusive resource governance, dialogue, mediation, conflict prevention and resolution.

2 Key findings

Instead of being seen only as vulnerable to climate change, women were found to play an important, but often undervalued, role in helping communities cope and stay resilient. Across all the target locations, women were found to be routinely performing "everyday mediation," negotiating water sharing between households, calming tensions and preventing resource disputes from escalating. Despite their central role in managing local challenges, women's contributions are often overlooked in formal resource management, climate adaptation and conflict prevention processes.

Climate-related livelihood loss is also reshaping household dynamics. Drought, declining agricultural productivity and displacement put increasing economic and psychological pressure on families, contributing to heightened domestic tensions and protection risks. Women frequently become the primary shock absorbers of these stressors, while simultaneously taking on greater resource management responsibilities. Men may also experience increased "provider stress" as climate-related livelihood losses undermine household income and their ability to fulfil expected provider roles.

Despite progressive national policies promoting equality and the participation of women, implementation remains constrained by limited institutional capacity, centralised budgeting and insufficient representation of women within government technical sectors such as water, agriculture and environmental management. As a result, women often remain underrepresented in the decisions that shape climate adaptation, resource management and conflict resolution efforts.

The analysis identifies strong potential for transformative change among younger women, whose education, digital literacy and climate awareness position them to play a leading role in climate adaptation and conflict resolution processes. However, sustained mentorship, institutional support and formal pathways into decision-making remain essential to move beyond tokenistic participation.

The findings ultimately point to a fundamental shift in how women's roles are understood, as reflected in the following observation by a key informant:

"The intersection of climate change, migration and women's empowerment is no longer a theoretical debate. Responsible institutions must shift their perception of women from 'recipients of aid' to 'essential partners' in building community resilience and adaptation. When they must rely on a male relative to speak for them before tribal leaders due to social stigma, their specific concerns, like water for household sanitation, are completely lost in translation to 'big' agricultural issues." This shows how women's day-to-day needs and priorities are frequently overshadowed by decision-making that focuses on larger-scale agricultural and irrigation issues.

> We, the women, are the ones who quietly go to our neighbours to coordinate how we can share the remaining clean water pipes without causing a fight in the street.

Policy recommendations

1 International development partners

Partners are encouraged to strengthen women-led and locally owned climate action by recognising women as partners, not only beneficiaries, in the design, implementation and monitoring of climate adaptation, conflict resolution and resource governance initiatives.

2 Government institutions

Relevant state institutions can strengthen the implementation of existing commitments to women's inclusion by enhancing institutional coordination, promoting merit-based recruitment of qualified women in technical sectors and expanding the meaningful participation of women in environmental and natural resource governance.

3 Civil society organisations

Organisations can play a key role in building on women's existing contributions to community resilience by supporting women's leadership, documenting local knowledge and informal mediation practices, and creating mentorship opportunities for young women to engage in local decision-making.

4 Local authorities and customary leaders

Local actors have an important role to play in fostering more inclusive and participatory resource governance by creating safe and culturally sensitive opportunities for women to contribute to local climate planning, water management and community dialogue.

5 Across all stakeholder groups

All relevant stakeholders are encouraged to adapt integrated, inclusive approaches that combine climate adaptation with sustainable livelihoods, psychosocial wellbeing and conflict prevention will be essential to ensure that interventions respond to women's priorities, while strengthening community resilience.

The analysis demonstrates that climate change in Iraq is fundamentally a governance and peacebuilding challenge as much as an environmental one. Environmental degradation is intensifying conflict, displacement and social vulnerability, while institutional challenges prevent effective responses from being launched. Women are already central actors in household resilience, community resource management and informal mediation, yet they remain excluded from formal decision-making processes. Future programming should therefore move beyond symbolic participation towards meaningful inclusion by creating opportunities for women to actively participate in climate adaptation, natural resource management and conflict prevention processes. Achieving this requires investing in women's

technical leadership, strengthening local governance, decentralising resources and integrating climate adaptation with conflict prevention and social cohesion efforts. This approach can strengthen inclusive, locally owned decision-making and help build resilient communities, while promoting sustainable peace and inclusive development.

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION IN HAWIJA, KIRKUK. © BERGHOF FOUNDATION 2026.

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