How are our efforts to reduce the impact of climate change affecting post-conflict societies? Thinking and research about the possible impacts of climate change adaptation and mitigation on post-conflict societies is almost nonexistent. Most attention remains on climate change and variability and their link to war. In this article I discuss the link between climate change mitigation and building peace. Drawing on new empirical data of micro hydropower development in post-conflict Nepal I inquire further if climate change mitigation contributes to peacebuilding.

The findings show that micro-hydropower development in Nepal has not contributed to peacebuilding on a state level. This is because these measures do not strengthen the political legitimacy of the post-conflict authorities, a crucial measure for successful peacebuilding. Actually, in the short run this measure of climate change mitigation has led to new informal spaces of peace beyond the reach of the Nepali state. This puts policy decision makers into a dilemma: Should they consider abandoning climate change mitigation policies if they might in fact risk the peacebuilding process? Or is it worth the bigger cause of reducing CO2 emissions globally? As this article shows, the answer might be more nuanced.

Climate, Energy and Peacebuilding

Social scientists have studied the relationship between environmental change and war for almost three decades. Across disciplines and approaches researchers tend to agree
that environmental changes, and climate change in particular, are indirectly influencing war and conflict. The vulnerability of socio-economically weak segments of societies has become a main security concern, and environmental change is shown to negatively impact those weak segments in particular. Thus, scholars increasingly argue for stronger consideration of environmental issues in post-conflict peacebuilding policies.

Such “environmental peacebuilding” is believed to reduce the vulnerabilities of the poorest to environmental change. Indeed, the environmental peacebuilding and liberal peacebuilding debates share a common focus on economic recovery and improved governance to alleviate poverty and improve livelihoods.

One important way to achieve economic development and improve livelihoods is micro hydropower systems. These systems are often the only feasible approach to provide the poorest, most vulnerable communities with electricity and thus facilitate a boost of the economy in rural and remote areas. This is especially true because of the recent discrediting of large and small hydropower plants from environmental standpoints. The low environmental impact of micro hydropower structures on local river systems reduces further vulnerabilities and decreases fossil fuel dependency of rural communities. As such, not only does energy supply through micro hydropower systems improve rural livelihoods, but it is also crucial for climate mitigation. In the energy sector hydropower is providing over 90 percent of the world’s energy supply from renewable resources.

Nevertheless, to measure the influence of climate mitigation efforts on peacebuilding a focus on poverty alleviation and economic growth is not sufficient. Popular legitimacy is fundamental. Indeed, in recent years scholars have shown that popular legitimacy of the post-conflict order is an essential requirement of successful peacebuilding. In the liberal peacebuilding debate popular legitimacy has often been equated with democratization processes. Yet, despite democratization efforts, peacebuilding has frequently suffered from a lack of popular legitimacy, creating a “hybrid” or post-liberal peace—a term Roger Mac Ginty defines as “a hybrid between the external and the local.” In other words, new, unintended structures of peace emerge because of the local resistance to externally driven peacebuilding agendas.
The hybridity of peacebuilding is directly related to weak popular legitimacy of newly introduced authorities, especially when these are imposed through external peacebuilding actors.v

The following empirical analysis of climate mitigation and political legitimacy is a shortened presentation of research conducted in Nepal in July and September 2013.vi

**Climate Mitigation and Political Legitimacy in Nepal**

Located in the southern Himalayan region, Nepal’s population and economy are highly vulnerable to the impact of climate change. Today, increased and changing rainfall patterns are already causing extreme floods and landslides. In the first half of 2013 alone, 59 people lost their lives and over 12,000 have been displaced.vii This vulnerability to climate change is reflected in Nepali government policies that place ‘climate compatible development’ high on the agenda. However, seven years after the end of the decade-long civil war in 2006, providing Nepal’s citizens with electricity remains one of the pivotal challenges for its development. Approximately 30 percent of Nepal is not connected to the electricity grid, and even those who are connected do not receive continuous power. In Kathmandu, the capital city, there are scheduled power cuts of up to 14 hours a day during the drier winter season and two to three hours a day in the water-rich monsoon months. To address this problem, Nepal and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are focusing on micro hydropower systems throughout the country, providing tiny communities with electricity. Baglung district, located in the Western Development Region of Nepal, is one of those areas that had tremendous success in their electrification, especially thanks to coordination with UNDP.viii I have studied two of these micro hydropower projects and their community in depth. These are Kharbang and Malma, both located at the western end of Baglung District.

After the completion of micro hydropower systems in 2007 (Kharbang) and 2009 (Malma), the changes for these communities have been substantial. The introduction of electricity had positive effects on the community forest through the reduced need to burn wood. This in itself contributed to better air quality and health among the population. Yet, most significantly for the communities, economic and agricultural development has flourished. This has led to increased food security through better
food production and refrigeration of dairy products, for example. Poverty in the communities has been reduced because new economic possibilities emerged, such as welding shops, poultry farms, and furniture workshops. Significantly, education for young and old has increased, because electric light allows students to study better and longer, while at the same time more members of the community have gained access to both traditional and new news media.

However, these developments have not translated into increased popular legitimacy for the post-conflict order. Even though the state was supporting, co-funding, and coordinating these projects in cooperation with UNDP, there is no indication that the implementation of these projects affected the perception of the political legitimacy of the central government in a positive way.ix

**Community Development or National Peacebuilding**

On the contrary, there are indications that the implementation of climate mitigation energy systems in Nepal has actually undermined the central Nepali government and state. The perceived gap between local communities and the central states has empowered local leaders to emerge as new, informal legitimate authorities, which have the support of the local public. This development is interesting as it is very familiar to other peace processes in which a division between local and externally driven peace processes has created hybrid peace structures. Findings regarding hybrid peace have yet not been made in the environmental peacebuilding literature.

The reasons behind the emergence of these informal legitimate authorities are multiple. As indicated, most influential seems to be the lack of government presence and performance. In relation to the micro hydropower systems this has strengthened local self-reliance, and established a clear distance between the central post-conflict government and the local communities.

Efforts to include the local communities in the implementation of the project have increased the sense of local ownership for these projects. Particularly, the need for locals’ labor and financial contributions has strengthened the community’s awareness of responsibility as well as its ability to take care of itself. ‘We can do it’, is a frequently repeated statement by locals. And ‘we’ is not ‘we and the state,’ but the
local community despite the state.

This is an indication that new patterns and spaces of political representation and organization have emerged on the local community level.\(^5\) This development has also been noted as a problem for the central leaderships in Kathmandu, but they blame it on involvement by external actors. However, evidence from both cases suggests that whoever serves the community’s interest and needs – whether government, NGO’s or international aid agencies - is welcome.

**The Challenge for Post-conflict Politics**

It appears that in rural Nepal, climate change mitigation is not directly contributing to building peace. While it is of course too early to generalize beyond the studied cases, the findings put policy decision making into several dilemmas and it is worth speculating about the broader applicability these findings may have.

Firstly, if climate change mitigation undermines the national peacebuilding process by undermining the legitimacy of the state that is promoting it, should it be avoided in peace processes even though climate change vulnerability increases the risk of violence? Secondly, how should policy makers deal with these new local structures of authority? Thirdly, can climate change mitigation measures be adapted to reduce the negative side effects?

Of course, first and foremost, climate mitigation measures are designed to reduce the severity of climate change by reducing CO2 emissions. Nevertheless, actors promoting climate mitigation policies need to consider the consequences of these measures in the peacebuilding context, particularly measures such as micro hydropower systems that are closely linked to social development.

Projects that combine climate mitigation and economic development have the ability to drastically change livelihoods. In fact, the jump from no electricity to Internet access, Skype, and social media has catapulted remote communities in Nepal into the 21st century. This has led to increases in human development in terms of economic progress and increased living standards, and reduces the community’s vulnerability to external impacts. That means that despite the negative effects on the national
peacebuilding process, these climate mitigation measures have increased the communities’ capacity of resilience to environmental as well as societal changes

In the future, the increased human development and resilience will prove significant. Increasing human development has been associated with a better ability to mediate social conflicts and with more stable societal structures. Considering the importance of human development and emancipation to the conflict resolution capacity of communities, the short term weakening of the peace process might significantly strengthen the peace processes in Nepal in the long run, by decreasing the vulnerability of the weakest segments of society and narrowing the gap between urban and rural, elites and the ‘ordinary’ people in Nepal.

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Climate adaptation refers to strategies that are preparing societies to deal with the inevitable consequences of climate change and thus reducing their vulnerability. Climate change mitigation on the other hand, is efforts attempt to reduce the severity of climate change itself. These are all actions trying to reduce CO2 in the air, e.g. through less emissions or through increased CO2 storage. Climate variability refers to naturally occurring changes of the climate, whereas climate change are those changes to the climate caused by human interference.


ix The level of political legitimacy measured through established research variables in terms of the performance of, trust in, and interaction with governmental institutions, as well as political interest and individuals’ political participation.

x There are other indicators that strengthen this conclusion further, but are not discussed here. For more see Krampe, Florian. 2014. Climate Change Mitigation and Political Legitimacy in Post-Conflict Settings. Paper presented at ISA Annual Convention 2014 'Spaces and Places - Geopolitics in an Era of Globalization', March 26-29, 2014, Toronto, Canada.