Transcript of ‘Conflict, Climate Change and Migration’

Season 4, Episode 1, Transforming Tomorrow

[Theme music]

Paul: Hello and welcome to Transforming Tomorrow from the Pentland Centre for Sustainability in Business. I'm Paul Turner.

Jan: And I'm Professor Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]

Jan: Today you're going to hear how climate change can create the conditions for conflict and violence.

[Theme music]

Paul: Are you often in conflict, Jan?

Jan: I try very hard not to be in conflict. I think there's enough conflict in the world without me adding to it, quite frankly.

Paul: Do you have inner conflicts?

Jan: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Usually involving, uh, glazed doughnuts and whether or not I should buy them and consume them immediately. I don't think that counts in the overall scheme of things, but you know, it's there.

Paul: It's, no, it's big for you, but for the rest of the world's population, they're not greatly affected by the decision of whether you eat the glazed doughnut or not. [Jan laughs]

But I do suspect there might be the odd one or two people who, working immediately around you, appreciate it when you do have the glazed doughnut.

Jan: [laughs] Up and ready to go, yes.

Paul: Well over the summer, while we've been away and before we recorded our brief series in Malaysia for Tipping Points, there's been emphasis in various parts of the world on conflict, um, the Middle East, uh, particularly around Iran, the US and Israel and Iran, and the various nations around them.

You will also, obviously, be aware, and we've discussed on this podcast before, Ukraine and Russia there, and that is continuing. And there will be other conflicts at various scales, whether that be things related to Sudan that we discussed with Nonhlanhla Dube, and the situation there.

These conflicts combined with natural disasters, which you see, and various other issues such as this can have an impact on sustainability and things like forced migration.

Jan: They can indeed and, and one never knows whether or not the current time that you're living in is, is, you know, more profoundly conflictual than others. But maybe it's coverage in the newspaper or a sensitivity or whatever, but, um, conflicts seem to be, you know, large and spreading.

Um, over the last few weeks as well, we've had, like, the flood in Nepal, um, which has been very, you know, horrifying to watch and which, um, seems to also have, um, you know, created a huge amount of problem for people there, et cetera.

So it does, it has been quite a gloomy summer in that respect, I think, and a worrying summer, but thinking about what you do next in the face of that, I think is perhaps the next step we need to work towards as well.

Paul: Yes, you could look closer to home. Not so much natural disasters, I don't think we'd class it as that, but things such as the heat waves that we've had here in the UK, but also in Europe, wildfires that have been as a result, water shortages.

All of these are issues which can have an effect on migration, on the way people live, on politics and everything like that. I think we need to talk about this Jan.

Jan: I think so as well, and I'm sure that you've got somebody who's perfect for the job.

Paul: Yes, because while we may have gone into space on the last couple of episodes that opened our seasons, this time we're starting very much here on Earth, and we're gonna be looking at issues around conflict, natural disaster, forced migration with a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Economics here at Lancaster, but also a Professor of Economics at the School of Louvain, or "Lerven", depending upon how you want to pronounce it, either French or

Dutch, because it is in Belgium where they insist on having, uh, pronunciations for both of them.

And that is, uh, Professor Jean-François Maystadt. Hello Jean-François.

Jean-François: Hello, Paul. Hello, Jan.

Paul: Thank you very much for joining us to talk about this today, and as we've highlighted in our brief discussion there, a lot of these topics that you are specialising in: conflict, natural disasters, force migration, they really do feel like of the moment. They're happening now, we're seeing on the news every day, essentially, in one way or another.

What prompted you to want to investigate these issues from the perspective of being an economist?

Jean-François: So, um, thank you for hosting me. Uh, it, it's true that at first sight, uh, it may looks like I'm chasing whatever is on the, on the headlines. But as an economist, um, what I'm partly interested in is to understand why people end up into conflict or into violence, and basically why some household or communities are able to cope with several shocks while others actually cannot and end up collapsing into violence. That's the, the main motivation.

Um, and I would say there is a, a big puzzle, actually, for economists, but also social scientists in general. Uh, conflict is very costly. It's always an economic disaster for any country, any community. And still it happens, right?

And even without departing from, you know, the assumption that people respond to, to incentives, which is very important for economists, uh, you can try to, to rationalise this seemingly unrational event, right?

So either you, you, you call upon bonded rationality or misinformation. People make some mistake in their calculation about how much I can gain from conflict, or what is maybe more obvious, um, there is a leader or small group that actually gain from conflict at the expense of the, of the large majority.

And in this, in this kind of framework, let's say, you can try to model that and then to try to use data to test this, this prediction. And this kind of, uh, setting, uh, or understanding of the world, uh, there are some kind of, uh, economic shock, social, societal shock or critical juncture, uh, some people would say that, that make people, that give the incentive to the people to join the armed group or the conflict between groups to intensify.

And today, climate change might be one of them, right? It might be something that is accelerating some of this incentive or accelerating the, the intensity of violence.

Jan: In particular, what are the specific aspects of that climate change impact that, that promulgate, or who create these conflicts?

Jean-François: So, um, there is just one thing we should, uh, maybe, uh, be careful about is, when we talk about climate change, I'm going to talk a lot about, first of all, the frequency and intensity of weather shocks, right? That's very close in the sense that it's an approximation of the consequences of climate change, but it's not exactly the same.

Climate change is slow moving, you know, structural shift and, and it's different from weather shocks for two reason. Uh, first you may have some adaptation, you know, farmers, they may switch from one crop to the others. People may move to another place, move out of agriculture, for example.

Uh, but you may also have some form of what we call intensification, or you were talking before about tipping point in a previous episode, right? So it's not the same to move from one to two degree then to move from three to four degree Celsius in terms of temperature, in terms of damages. The damages in the former, in the latter case will be much bigger.

And I would say in the Global South, it's not, uh, very optimistic as a message, but we have more evidence for intensification rather than adaptation. So, uh, things does not seem to, to get better in terms of, uh, consequences.

So the, the, when you were talking about the, the aspects, right? Some, sometimes people say, but why should I expect climate to have any impact on conflict, right? So it's a bit about the kind of channels. And there are maybe two channels that we have a lot of evidence for, and then there are some others that we are still working on.

Um, we have quite a lot of evidence about what I would call the opportunity cost channel and the competition over natural resources. So the opportunity cost channel is somehow the simple story where you have, uh, extreme temperature, uh, a very bad harvest because of a lack of rainfall, right? It affect the income of the people in particular in place that depends on agriculture, uh, being crops or livestock, right? And this decrease in income, it makes what we

call the opportunity cost to, to join a rebellion lower. It simply means that you don't have much other choice by to, to join the armed groups.

So, for example, a few years ago, we did some work on Somalia, and it came from the field, you know, USA it came to us, uh, in, in the US saying we are very concerned because there was a drought in the Horn of Africa and we are concerned an armed group like Al-Shabaab is recruiting young people.

So we basically test this, you know, to show that higher frequency of drought in Somalia were followed by a sharp decrease in the price of livestock, which is an export good to the Middle East, so it's a source of income for the people. And this decrease in, in income was associated with an increase in violence. So that's the, the usual suspect, is the economic shock.

Uh, another one is, uh, competition over natural resources, and of course, natural resources like land, water that could be affected by weather shocks. Uh, and we have recent evidence from researchers that, for example, in the Sahel, in place where you have traditionally pastoralist group or herders and farmers that coincide, when there is a, a heat wave or a very strong increase in temperature, you have more violence between these groups, right?

So they tend, let’s say the land becomes scarce, becomes more valuable, and some group may end up, who traditionally used to work to, to live together, right, tend to, to enter into violence.

So that's, that's the two main big, big aspects, uh, you, you may, you may, cover.

Paul: Historically, Jean-François, are these things that we've seen all throughout history, these kind of effects? Is it something recent, uh, that's just maybe escalated in recent years, or is it something that's always been there?

Jean-François: Alright, so, um, it depends a bit on, on how much you want to go in terms of, uh, really, uh, in terms of attributing an event to, to, um, attributing a conflict to climate, right?

So there are some historical, um, evidence suggesting that the fall of large civilisation was due to, for example, large cold spells. Uh, that's not my field, so I'm not going to enter too much into that, right?

But what is important is always to remind that it's not so much about geography, you know, we have a lot of work about Africa, but it's mainly because of vulnerable, vulnerability. Um, it's mainly about the fact that people

are highly exposed to weather shocks, does not have the mean to protect themselves, or the authorities to protect them.

Uh, and so I, I like this analogy with the rainy, raining condition and, and, and car accident, right? We know that when it's rainy there are more accidents, but the rain is usually not the cause of the accident. It's usually the mistake of a driver or from mechanical breakdown. And this is more likely when it's raining.

It's a bit the same with climate and conflict. Climate is not the cause of conflict, but it makes the condition or the likelihood to have more violence, more likely, but of course conditional on being in a fragile environment.

So the message is not hot countries like to fight, is that countries with weak institution, low safety nets, they are more likely to be exposed to these weather shocks, to suffer from these weather shocks and to enter into a vicious cycle of violence.

Jan: So you note that the vulnerability, um, opens up the possibility for these, these shocks to, you know, pass through the system. Is there a sense in which we're all getting more vulnerable, or can you build capacity to act in the face of that, that known vulnerability or increased vulnerability that you feel is likely. How, how easy it is to work on that vulnerability art of that, that question?

Jean-François: Yes, uh, of course that's the most difficult. Uh, you know, like, uh, for example, we know that the quality of institution is very important. And when we say quality of institution, it's not only the national government and so on, but it's also, you know, traditional local institution that could solve land dispute, for example.

So it might be also very locally, but of course it's the most difficult to change, right? So if it's just a question of, uh, I dunno, uh, dropping some cash somewhere, that would be easy. But, of course, if it's about institution, about safety net, it's much more difficult.

But we have some example that have worked, you know, we can be also a bit, [small laughs] uh, more positive, right? Uh, so for example, uh, we know that in India, uh, there have been plenty of evidence showing that low rainfall monsoon is associated with conflict between groups, right?

But this relationship tend to disappear when you have, when they implement it in some places, uh, social protection programme. So this is the kind of programme you have in the, in low income and middle-income countries

where you try to smooth the income of the, of the assault over time to, to make them more resilient to shock, right?

And in that case, the relationship disappear because people can, they, it's almost like an insurance. They can protect themself in case of, of, uh, of shocks. Of course, it's not that easy to implement and so on, but, it, it's possible.

Paul: And you've mentioned a few different countries at various points here, Jean-François, and I know your research has taken in various different parts of the world. Are there some of these regions, some economies where the link might be more pronounced, more severe, between climate change, weather shocks, that, and such, and conflict?

Jean-François: So for sure there've been a lot of work, um, so I think I mentioned a bit some work on Somalia. I did also some work on Sudan and there are quite a lot of work on Sub-Saharan Africa.

So one of the reason is that there are particularly vulnerable to weather shocks. You know, they have, the economy still depends a lot on agriculture, which is the sector the most vulnerable to these weather shocks. Natural resources are very important there, land, water, and also they have this condition of relatively, in some cases, not everywhere, but weak institutions, right?

But, uh, we should also admit that, um, there are other parts of the world where we didn't pay much attention. Uh, so for example, we did a work, uh, in 2022 where we apply some kind of machine learning methods. So it, it's like putting a lot of different, very granular, data over three decades, uh, at the pixel level, so very granular, and you let the data speak. So it's not very, uh, causal, but it's very strong correlation.

And we found, for example, that about um, uh, 50% of the conflict risk, uh, in South Asia was associated with climate. While we only count 40% for Africa and about 20% for, for the Middle East. So somehow South Asia, it's surprising that there are no, not more work.

And getting more work on South Asia would be very interesting, because basically it would move away from the assumption that this conflict is mainly about religion, or mainly about ethnicity. Uh, and you can actually attribute to

some change of incentives. To come back to what I was saying at the beginning, you know, changing income, changing prices, uh, and so on.

Jan: So one of the things that, again, that's been in the news over the summer in the UK and more broadly in Europe, and I, I guess will continue to do so, is the issue of migration.

So I wonder if you can sketch out for our listeners that connection between some of these pressures, the shocks, responses to it, and the impact that has on migration out of countries.

Jean-François: Okay, so yes, this is, this is a big theme, uh, and that's true that, you know, I was talking about some aspect of, uh, or, or some, some channels. And one narratives that come quite often is migration, right?

It might be internal migration, so for example, there is a, uh, uh, an important case that was made about Syria, for example. That before the war in Syria, one or two years before there was a drought, people were moving within Syria, and it created some tension that could be at the origin of the Civil War.

And I'm not saying it's not true, right? But people have used that to say that it's quite systematic, and at least internally we are actually working on a project now where we look at this, and I don't have yet the final result, but what I can say is that at least it's not so systematic, you know, it's not important that you find in every part of the world.

And, uh, when we look at international migration, I've been working a lot on the impact of refugees on, uh, hosting economies. And there, usually, the impact is quite positive on the economy. You know, uh, when you see the impact of refugee camp on local economies, right? Uh, it creates some, uh, positive impact on average on the economy.

Why? Because refugees may constitute some labour force. Agriculture, agriculture, uh, expand close by. There is an increase in demand for goods coming from refugees, but also from the humanitarian sectors. You have new goods and services created. You have roads that are built close to refugee camps. So this has positive effect, but with redistributive effect, right?

So we show actually, uh, and we are not the only one, that refugees do not tend to increase conflict in neighbouring countries, even if it was kind of usual narratives, right? Um, there is maybe one exception, uh, and we have

published that in a recent paper, when ethnic polarisation is increasing as, as a result of this, of this, uh, movement.

So when the ethnic balance change in a way that the polarisation between groups, uh, accentuates in the hosting area, in that case, it might be a kind of, uh, more risky situation in terms of conflict.

Jan: What I like about that conversation, our conversation to date, is just the sheer complexity, and the systems of facts that clearly come into play about, you know, vulnerability, but then also pressure, but then other things can mediate between them. The extent to which you can intervene to maybe dampen down what might otherwise turn into a conflict.

So it's a, it's a very complex picture with lots of people and institutions being able to somehow, you know, change the outcomes, um, either self-consciously or accidentally change the outcomes by their interventions.

Paul: So, so, yeah, exactly with that in mind, do you see different causes, effects in different parts of the world where you've investigated all of these issues?

Jean-François: So for sure, it really depends on the context. Uh, so it depends a bit, you know, I, I said, of course it's a simplification, but, you know, there are kind of three things that will, that will, uh, affect the intensity of this relationship.

It might be the importance of agriculture. Of course, that's why you have so much work on Africa, because agriculture is still the main, main source of livelihood for many people, right? But then, uh, all, all crops, for example, are not equally subject to, to weather shocks, right? Uh, some are more resilient than others. Uh, some people are also able to, to move much more from one occupation to the others.

The second one, the, the role of natural resources. Again, land and water seems to be very important, uh, in some part of the world. If you think about, for example, Darfur, environmental stress has been, has been, uh, highlighted, uh, for very long. But we are also thinking about Darfur because the, the, call it if you want, the system of governance is, is very weak, right?

So, uh, if you add the same environmental stress, uh, in a country, uh, like, the UK right, I'm sure that you would get the institution, the local governance to deal with, with such an environmental stress, right? So it's always also

depending on, uh, the, the resilience of the people, the communities, the institutions.

Jan: So, for our listeners, where would they have maybe seen in the news, um, a climate change conflict connection? And would they, would they have seen it as a climate connection, or do you think they'll just sort of see a conflict has emerged and not hear about the climate aspect of it in the news?

Jean-François: Yeah, that's, that's, um, that's interesting because indeed it seems not to be too much on the news, right? Uh, and I think, uh, it's quite challenging, I think, to make the, the link, right? Uh, so one of the reason is a bit the, the timeframe, right?

So I give you the example of Syria, for example, where people were saying, or, Darfur, right? So there, there are two cases that they've been connected to, climatic factors, right? One, a drought occurring, people moving in within Syria. Another one in the, in, in Darfur with the environmental stress.

But usually this even, this, this environmental stress, they are slow moving. They take a, they, they happen over several years, over decades, last year, two years ago, three years ago. And then suddenly you have a spike of violence, right? And then the news eventually will report the spike of violence, but it's not going to make, for example, the, the work of attributing some of it to something that happened two, or, or three years ago.

So, um, what, what they are going to look at is the fighting, the suffering, uh, the displacement. Uh, but so it's going to be difficult to see, um, I would say this relationship.

And I think somehow, if I can promote a bit my profession, uh, that's where economists, they have some added value, or also political scientists, right? But to try to link it to change in incentive, change in income, change in prices that occur over the last four or five years to try to understand that finally the violence we see is almost like the continuation of something that is going on over the last four or five years. You know, it's not something completely irrational that pop up, uh, one day. Uh, so that, that might be one of the reason why it's difficult to make this climate conflict, uh, in the news, right?

Paul: If it's hard to draw the line between the conflicts, the migration, uh, and the climate change, is it easier to draw a line, maybe in some ways between climate change and migration? Just those two. Whereby if you are seeing

natural disasters and climate change in an area, you are able to see that that is affecting the migration that's happening, and people leaving an area, with or without conflicts in those areas.

Jean-François: Okay. So again here it depends a bit what kind of, uh, climate shocks you are talking about, right? So it's true that, uh, natural disaster, it's, it's easier to see the, you know, to attribute the displacement to, to the shock, earthquake, floods, uh, also somehow drought, even if, if it's a bit more slow moving, right?

So this is true, but it's much more difficult to attribute, uh, people moving due to more slow moving, uh, climate change, right? So there've been some work showing actually that people are reacting to these weather shocks by, by moving, right? Uh, but you need to think also about who is moving. Usually it's not the, the poorest who are moving, it's actually those who have the mean to cover the migration costs, who have the network to move.

And so, to be a bit provocative, I'm more worried about those who are not able to move than those who are moving, right? Those who are really trapped in some places affected by weather shocks and that do not have that ability to migrate, right? That's, that's a, a challenge. So, uh, I would be even more inclined to, it's not going to be very popular, but to have policies that facilitate people to move rather than, let them trap, uh, in their place of origin.

Paul: And that must have an effect on the economies of the areas that these people are leaving. If it's all the people who've got the resources and the wealth that are leaving, those areas that are leaving behind will be left with the people who are at the poorer end of the economic scale. And that must affect not just the people who are left, who may lose jobs because the businesses have gone, but the, everyone. The whole area must be affected, the region.

Jean-François: So interestingly, they, I, I agree with you. That's, that would be, it's quite logical to think that, uh, you know, uh, those remaining behind will be strongly affected by, uh, this population movement.

Uh, but I think we don't have much evidence about this. Uh, and that's a fascinating topic, you know, not only about, uh, how they will, they, they will be, uh, let's say financially or, you know, in terms of, uh, economic means, right? But also in terms of, uh, group dynamics, social cohesion, uh, you know, how much it affect the, the trust between people or trust with respect to the institution.

Uh, my, my two cent, guess why we don't have much evidence that it's not very easy in terms of data. I'm mainly a quantitative person, so I need data. Uh, because usually you get information where the people are, so including where the migrants go, right? But it's, it's quite rare to know exactly where they're coming from, right?

And so you need to make this link between, to have bilateral migration data. So we are working on that to reconstruct, for example, bilateral internal migration data. To try, actually to, to reply to your, to your question, Paul, but you will have to invite me for another episode. [Jan laughs] Yeah.

Paul: And something you said there made me think again because you talked earlier about institutional strength having an effect on the likelihood of conflict, et cetera, and things popping up. And if you're saying institutions might be weakened by those at the top of the food chain, so to speak, moving away, then does that, therefore, open up more potential for conflict and for stuff to happen for weakening environments?

But, like you said, it's a very interesting topic all around and you can see how it applies to just politics and life everywhere in the world.

Jean-François: Yes, I agree. Uh, but I cannot say much. Uh, I, I can simply agree with you that, uh, we need to do more.

Jan: So…

Paul: …you, you see Jan, this is why like I economists rather than, uh, accountants. [Jan laughs] They agree with me more often.

Jan: Um, so moving, I guess, from bigger numbers down to your sense, and the sense of your literature, of what's happening on the ground, are individuals and communities in these stress places, do you think they're becoming more aware about climate change and the extent to which it might offer future problems for them?

And here I'm thinking about, you know, sort of how, if you can forecast a vulnerability, you can perhaps protect against it before you get there. You can't stop the weather, but you might be able to stop the effect of it. Is there evidence of that capacity developing in places that are subject to these shocks?

Jean-François: Uh, so I think mainly from, uh, the, the few time I, I went to the field talking to people, I'm always surprised, you know, if you talk, you go to Africa, you talk to a farmer. How much they're aware of, you know, weather

shocks, right? They may call it differently, but they will always mention somehow that over their lifetime they, they got the impression that things got worse in terms of unexpected shocks, right?

So I think that regarding the, the weather aspect, uh, people got much more aware. Uh, you know, also in Europe or, or in the, in the UK, I think people are much more aware, for example, that somehow floods, heat wave are more frequent, more intense, and you can attribute that somehow, uh, to, to climate change, right? Uh, I, I think people are less and less, uh, sceptics about this, right?

Uh, but then to make the link with, with, uh, conflict is much more difficult, right? So we were talking about the news before. I think one of the challenge also is that, um, to, to raise awareness. Uh, you got in one of your previous episode, one of your colleague to talking about the CNN disaster, uh, concept, right? That, uh, some events there are highly visible. There are sudden, then people can empathise, you know, she give the example of the, uh, tsunami in 2004, I think.

For, for the effect of climate change and conflict, uh, it's much more slow moving, right? So if for example, you have, uh, some evidence for Sudan or for, for Yemen, it's much more protracted, and therefore when it pops up again in the news, they're not going to make the link with something which is so slow moving, uh, over the years. So I think we, we are still quite far to have the, the general public thinking that, being aware of, of this relationship, right?

On the research side, I think there is a bit more convergence than before. Uh, I can give you an example, which is we, we published in 2019, uh, an expert solicitation exercise in Nature.

So we basically gather, uh, researchers from very different fields, uh, political scientists, economists, environmental scientists, sociologists, uh, and many others. And even people who were really with very different opinion about the link between climate and conflict, these people, some of these people, they were even fighting through journals. You know, it was very hot debate, uh, uh, discussing the methods, the data you are using the, the country you are selecting your sample. I'm not going to, to enter too much.

But what was quite amazing, when we did this expert solicitation where you have to make some evaluation, we were all converging, more or less to say that climate over the last century was, was important. It was estimated that

between 5 and 20% of the conflict in the past century was related somehow to, to climate, right? So significant, but not, they were not saying climate is the main determinants, right? Um, but at least it, it was important and that it would increase in the future, right?

So even among people who got very different, uh, opinion, uh, to start with, uh, they agree about the importance of climate. And in terms of awareness, now it has been, uh, somehow recognised by the IPCC, you know, this intergovernmental panel for climate change, which try to find a consensus, almost between governments, uh, about the, the state of the world regarding climate change, let's say. They, they now recognise with what they call medium confidence that, that climatic events increase the frequency, the duration, uh, of conflict.

So, uh, now there is an increase awareness. They would still say that the statistical association is weak. I, I would be a bit more assertive, assertive about this, you know. Uh, I think we have strong statistical evidence, right? Uh, but I agree with them that, of course, it's not all about climate, right?

So conflict is before a political contest between groups, factors such as natural resources, uh, weak institution, the colonial legacy, the, the history of, uh, violence is still the major factors, right? But we see this climate playing a, a role of exacerbating some of the situation.

Paul: So you've mentioned the IPCC there already, JF, and they're showing increased awareness around this whole issue. Do you feel there's other people who need to become involved, and understanding and working in the area, so that the links between climate change and conflict are better understood by more people, and can maybe be remedied in some way, shape, or form?

Jean-François: So, you know, that is a dangerous question to ask to an economist because he will always say, depends, it depends, you know, we don't, [Jan laughs] we never get very strong [laughs] advice for policy.

But, um, I, I think yes, there are few people, uh, actors to, to be involved, but also things that we can do. Uh, and I think the important thing is always to start from this idea of vulnerability or fragility.

It's not the weather per se that we can, uh, of course the, in Europe or in the US you can do much more to reduce, to cut emission and so on. But, uh, at, at

the other end, those who are suffering the most, I think the most you can do is to try to make people more resilient.

Uh, and so there are several actors that could act for sure, government and the private, private sector, uh, they have, uh, the largest leverage. Um, I was mentioning, I think before, uh, in India, the role of social protection, to break this climate conflict cycle.

Uh, somehow, you know, uh, there, the government and this, the private sector, they have a large role to play, you know, to develop this, uh, cash transfer programme, um, social protection. In a sense that what you try to do is always to smooth income of the most vulnerable over time to make them more resilient. Uh, so this has been done in India, but also in countries like Mexico, in countries like Indonesia. So you have a lot of example of that.

Another, I think, example is in, um, in, in Kenya, I think. They, they experiment in introducing what is called weather-based insurance. So for farmers, they introduce this insurance product, but that depends on the weather conditions. So for example, if it does not rain a lot, you got the kind of protection, right?

And again, the idea is always the same, trying to, to make this, uh, income, uh, uh, to smooth the income over time to make people more resilient. You, you have also some initiative to find some more local way, built on the tradition of the people, to solve conflict over land, for example. So that's the role of local government, but also the private sector. When you think about insurance product, for example.

I would say the international donors and the development agencies, they have a strong role to play. Uh, you know, for, for very long time, there were a lot of criticism about the role of international donors, uh, in conflict setting, because cash in a conflict setting, or providing free food, is also some resources for, for armed groups, right? To, to contest, to control, you know, so it should be, you should be very careful.

But what we show, for example, in Yemen, we have a paper in Yemen where we look at, again, the, the impact of a cash transfer that was only possible with the support of the World Bank, and other international organisation.

And what they managed to do, um, with that, we can estimate that it reduced a bit the, the, it reduced a lot, the detrimental impact of conflict on child malnutrition, right? So we can show with quasi-experimental evidence that if

you get this access to this social protection programme, the impact of the conflict on child malnutrition decreased by about 42%. So it's a huge impact, you know, to reduce the negative effect.

Uh, the, the opposite is also true, right? So, uh, we have unfortunately a recent evidence, So there is a paper in Science showing that the recent cut by President Trump, uh, of humanitarian aid in January 2025, has that huge impact on conflict. So, basically, conflict has increased a lot after January 2025 in countries that were largely dependent on this humanitarian assistance before.

So, um, you know, um, unfortunately, sometimes the, the reality give us almost some, some kind of experiment to study. Uh, I wish this would not exist, but this, this is very striking.

And also we should look at ourself, right? Uh, research and research funding. Uh, you know, we have a tendency to work on some places where data are easy to access, you know, former English-speaking or, you know, where, where data can, can be easily read, and so on.

So it's much more difficult to work in places like Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and this is the place where we need research, right? and so somehow I feel that also, uh, the research funder, they could also, uh, not forget this forgotten war, right? So try to, to get more resources to, to these places that, that need, uh, more attention.

Paul: Well, thank you very much, Jean-François, you've taken us around the world into so many different places and so many different perspectives on conflict, natural disaster, climate change, migration.

It's been fascinating, and we will be sure to have you back on when you've solved all of these problems, like you suggest.

Jean-François: [laughs] Thank you.

[Theme music]

Paul: Well, that's a fascinating way to start the series, Jan. It's not quite asteroid mining and you know, wars in space, but it is very much wars on Earth.

And considering how they link in with weather shocks, which is a really good phrase to differentiate from climate change, because weather shocks are more immediately obvious…

Jan: …mm-hmm…

Paul: …and how this all affects issues of migration. And you can see how it ties in with economics, sustainability, I dare say there's a few accounting things that you can think of as well.

Jan: And one of the things I found really interesting about it, and it's a word that he came back to several times, and I, and I, I think it might be a word we'll hear more in this podcast series as well, is that underlying vulnerability exacerbating everything else.

And so that speaks to, you know, things that don't sort of immediately appear very exciting or in your face about building strong institutions, about ensuring, um, you know, that, that institutions are accountable, which is, you know, where, where maybe some of the accounting comes in, that they adequately discharge responsibility for funds, et cetera, et cetera.

So that, sort of, strong institutions protecting vulnerability to me came out as, you know, a really big nexus of interest in, in the conversation.

Paul: Yeah, it really makes you wonder, because whilst there are, uh, lots of people in lots of countries such as the UK, such as America, such as France, Germany, who believe that their governments are totally useless, really disagree with everything they do, it might be that the strength of the institutions, if not necessarily the politics of the party who's leading…

Jan: …yeah…

Paul: …plays a big role in ensuring that certain things don't happen there, and you just don't appreciate it at the time. It's just something that's so deeply embedded within the culture, society, and way of working of those countries that you don't appreciate that if they weren't there, you don't know how life might be, and how things could change if there was a major natural disaster, or if there were certain issues that popped up.

Jan: And that brought me back on a, it's a whole different scale of issue, 'cause it's not going, you know, towards conflict necessarily. But that idea of smoothing income, and this is where I think, um, businesses have a, you know, quite an important role to play in terms of if they know there's known

vulnerability and they're gonna be under stress, actually finding a way to smooth incomes, to buffer, um, their employees' income.

And I remember during the, um, cost of living crisis that, uh, the Work Foundation did a really bit of interesting piece of work where they asked businesses whether or not they were, you know, helping in some way, people deal with their energy bills, et cetera, et cetera.

So there's a sense in which that businesses are one of those institutions that also could support and help a process, um, not, you know, descend into conflict because the cost of conflict on, on business activities and business operations must be enormous. I mean, it's, it would be, you know, the very last thing you need and want, um, while you're trying to run a business.

Paul: Well, it was one of the first phrases that JF used during the course of the discussion was, conflict is costly…

Jan: ...yeah…

Paul: …and that's to everyone. It doesn't matter what the level of conflict and who you are, it is going to be costly. And then, you've got people at the other end of the scale say, yeah, but how much can I gain from this conflict? [Jan laughs] And at who, uh, whose expense?

Uh, and he pointed that out as well, that that's possibly why some conflicts do arise, 'cause it's the people who think, actually, I could make something out of this, I could gain from this. But, and then it's interesting…

Jan: …they're not the…

Paul: …sorry, go on…

Jan: …sorry, those folk are not partners for sustainability in business, I think.

Paul: No, I don't think we'll be having them on this podcast. Uh, but it was interesting to note that he had the statistics that the estimates that somewhere between 5 and 20% of conflicts in the last century are linked to climate.

But then also the different percentages that he had for conflicts in certain regions and how they tie into climate and how, um, South Asia has a greater percentage than Africa and the Middle East. And those percentages are quite, not over the last century, over a more recent period, but noting that, that people are starting to notice that this is happening.

Jan: Yeah. But then I also really liked the, um, I mean there was a hopefulness that one, uh, doesn't always associate with economists, um, that, that there can be interventions. Um, so the example of the weather-based insurance in Kenya, to actually smooth out incomes again, I thought was really promising.

Paul: Well, it's been a great way to start the series, and we've got some fascinating topics coming up over the course of the next 10 months or so. We'll be discussing topics such as medicine supply chains, and vulnerabilities in those. Vulnerabilities generally across many systems. We'll be talking about labour exploitation. AI will no doubt come up in lots of topics, including in a, a very much upcoming episode where we'll be discussing green software.

We'll be talking about power infrastructure. We'll be talking about so many subjects across the whole gamut of sustainability. So we do hope you'll stick with us for the series to hear those topics.

Until then, thank you very much for listening. It's goodbye from me, Paul Turner.

Jan: And from me, Jan Bebbington.

[Theme music]