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The definitive version is available at:*

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0171-4>

Ide, T., Barnett, J., Detges, A. and Adams, C. (2018) Reply to 'Sampling bias does not exaggerate climate–conflict claims'. *Nature Climate Change*, 8 (6). pp. 442–443.

<https://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/59944>

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Reply to “Sampling bias does not exaggerate climate-conflict claims”

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We clarify three arguments regarding our study.¹

First, sampling bias is a serious issue in the research field. Although there are several forms of sampling bias that do not affect estimates, the specific kind of bias we criticize – sampling on the dependent variable – is very likely to lead to an overrepresentation and overestimation of climate-conflict links. Because cases experiencing both climate extremes and conflict are much more widespread in the sample of cases studied than in the general population of cases, the relationship between these variables will appear more prevalent than it is. This problem of a “sampling on the dependent variable” strategy is widely recognized in the social sciences in general and in the environmental security literature in particular.^{2,3}

Second, our study is concerned with the research field as a whole rather than a critique of individual studies. It is hence not helpful to refer to individual studies in order to criticize our conceptual approach and methods. We agree that both studies cited by Levy⁴ are excellent, but they are not representative of the research field as a whole. This is like citing the only article on Oceania in our sample to prove that climate-conflict research has actually studied this region.

Third, the sampling biases we uncover pose a problem for sustainable development and climate adaptation. We find, for example, that some highly vulnerable countries receive very little attention by climate-conflict research (e.g., Bangladesh, Haiti).⁵ But by the same token, if our objective is to understand how societies peacefully manage climate change and how such processes intersect with development and conflict prevention⁶, then we must build explanations from cases where climate risk is high but violent conflict is not the outcome. The present paucity of such analyses is a gap that needs to be addressed.

We do not deny a link between climate change and conflict in principal. Indeed, some of our own recent work indicates that such a link exists, even though it is highly conditional.^{7,8} But the

sampling biases we uncover increases the risk that such links are overstated, that crucial world regions do not receive sufficient attention, and that little knowledge is produced on peaceful adaptation.⁹

References:

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