# Assessing the impacts of armed conflict and climate-related disasters on vulnerability: a Machine Learning approach

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**Abstract**

Armed conflicts have been associated with a variety of detrimental impacts on human security and development, and represent a crucial vector of vulnerability to climate hazards. The burgeoning literature on climate security has highlighted that climate hazards may indirectly increase conflict risk in vulnerable locations. However, solid knowledge of the role of armed conflicts in shaping vulnerability to climate hazards, especially in complex crises where conflicts and climate-related disasters compound, is still lacking. This study fills the gap by using a Machine Learning framework to study how armed conflicts, climate-related disasters, and the combination thereof, impact countries' vulnerability to subsequent climate hazards. The paper uses global, time-varying data on climate-related disasters, armed conflict, and vulnerability for 189 countries between 1995 and 2019, combining information. We find that the combination of armed conflicts and climate-related disasters is associated with increased predicted vulnerability to climate hazards, and that these impacts are time persistent, non-linear and extend beyond strictly economic losses.

# Introduction

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues of our time. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has estimated that human activities have caused approximately 1°C of global temperature increase with respect to pre-industrial levels (IPCC, 2021). A number of climatic changes have already been observed in the last decades, including changes in temperature and precipitation patterns, and the increase in frequency and magnitude of extreme weather events (IPCC, 2021). In 2021, 432 disasters related to natural hazards were recorded in the EM-DAT Database (CRED, 2022). These changes have been and will increasingly affect both natural and human systems to an extent that could require radical adaptation responses and major adjustments in current social, political and economic systems.

Organized violence has also been increasing worldwide since 2020, reversing the downward trend in fatalities observed after the peak in 2014 (Davies et al., 2022, see also Figure 1). The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) recorded 56 active conflicts in 2020 – a record high since 1946 (Strand and Hegre, 2021). Armed conflicts and climate-related disasters have widespread detrimental impacts on societies and individuals, especially if they co-occur (see Figure 1 for instances of armed conflict and climate-related disasters).

We argue that the impacts of armed conflicts and climate-related disasters – including reduced economic growth, impaired access to healthcare and infrastructure, forced displacement, and widespread material and immaterial destruction – increase societal vulnerability to subsequent climate hazards. In line with the IPCC, we understand societal vulnerability as *"the propension or predisposition to be adversely affected"* (IPCC, 2022, p.5). Vulnerability is a multifaceted concept, which encompasses several dimensions, many of which are likely to be affected by armed conflicts and climate-related disasters. Both shocks have been associated with a decline in economic growth (Gupta et al., 2004), development failures (Gates et al., 2012), food insecurity (FAO, 2020), increased migration and displacement (Schutte et al., 2021), public health crises, the outbreak of diseases (Ghobarah et al., 2004) and at large a deterioration in social, physical and mental well-being of affected individuals (Cheung et al., 2020), as well as declining educational attainments (Davies, 2005; Diwakar, 2015). In turn, low levels of development, poor livelihood conditions, increased migration flows, and weak state capacity are associated with heightened vulnerability to climate hazards (Augsten et al., 2022).

Crucially, climate-related disasters, vulnerability and armed conflicts might compound with each other in a self-reinforcing feedback loop that breeds higher vulnerability, increased conflict risk and harmful climate-related impacts (Figure 1). The result may be a vicious circle, trapping affected societies in a spiral of violence, vulnerability, and harmful impacts (Buhaug and von Uexkull, 2021).

Although research on the climate-conflict nexus has surged in the past decades (e.g. Koubi, 2019; Mach et al., 2019; von Uexkull and Buhaug, 2021), this literature has mostly focused on the impacts that climate change, especially in vulnerable settings, can have on the risk of armed conflict, while the effects of armed conflict on vulnerability to climate hazards remain poorly understood. To the best of our knowledge, only one empirical study (Marktanner et al., 2015) has analysed the impact of armed conflict on societal vulnerability to climate-related hazards in a cross-sectional setting.

Understanding the complex feedback loops involving armed conflict and vulnerability to climate-related hazards is, however, paramount to meaningfully predict and minimize future climate impacts in conflict-exposed, vulnerable countries. More systematic empirical research is therefore needed to fully understand the mutual association between armed conflict and vulnerability to climate hazards (Buhaug and von Uexkull, 2021; Augsten et al., 2022).

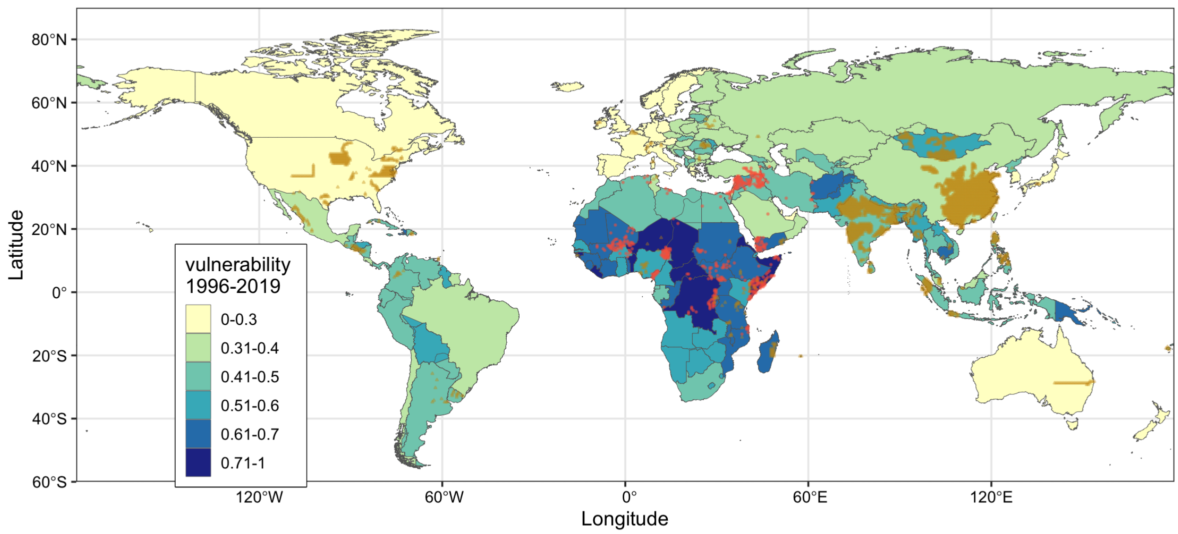


Figure 1. The map visualizes the locations hit by at least 3 climate-related climate-related disasters in 2018 (purple) from GDIS, a geo-coded extension of the EM-DAT database (Rosvold and Buhaug, 2021); the count of fatal political events of any type (red) recorded by UCDP-GED in 2018 (Croicu and Sundberg, 2015), and the 'disasters and conflict sensitive' vulnerability score reconstructed from (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 2022) one year later, in 2019.

The present work aims at filling this research gap by analysing the impact of armed conflicts, alone or in combination with the occurrence of climate-related disasters, on societal vulnerability. Specifically, we argue that armed conflicts and climate-related disasters increase countries' vulnerability to subsequent climate hazards, and that the impacts are higher when conflicts are more intense or longer. Moreover, we expect the combination of armed conflicts and climate-related disasters to be more detrimental to vulnerability than the occurrence of individual shocks.

We test these hypotheses by using global, yearly data on 189 countries from 1995 to 2019 to assess the out-of-sample performance of armed conflict and climate-related disasters indicators in predicting a country vulnerability index drawn from ND-GAIN.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows: the first section illustrates the data and methodology used; the second section reports results and the final section discusses and concludes.

# Data and Methodology

Understanding the overall impacts of compound events, such as armed conflicts and climate-related disasters, requires an analysis of complex causal mechanisms and interactions among various components. Traditional statistical methods that rely on reduced form regressions are not fully equipped to grasp the complexities of these linkages and are especially unsuitable to characterize endogenous relationships (Schutte et al., 2021), such as the one analysed in this study.

Predictive models reliant on machine learning algorithms are sufficiently flexible to overcome the limitations of reduced form regressions, while maintaining high interpretability. Although the specific functional form of the relationship between conflicts, disasters, and vulnerability is unknown, it is likely characterized by non-linearities, feedback loops, and heterogeneity. Flexible machine learning models are better suitable to capture these complex relationships than reduced form regressions, as they do not assume a functional form *a priori*, and can thus account for interactions and endogenous linkages. Broadly, out-of-sample predictions which enable to observe how a model fares in generalizing on unseen data can successfully contribute to the testing of theoretical arguments as an alternative or supplement to null hypothesis significance tests (Hegre et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2010). Examining the variables that increase the predictive performance of the models provides insight on the aspects of the models and underlying theories that generalize well on previously unseen data (Colaresi and Mahmood, 2017). For example, the increase in prediction error when removing a variable from the overall model indicates a positive marginal contribution of that variable in predicting the outcome (Ward et al., 2010).

Accordingly, we leverage the potential of machine learning and examine the out-of-sample performance of three models employing the same machine learning algorithm but varying sets of features to predict country-year vulnerability to climate hazards, measured by an yearly vulnerability score constructed from ND-GAIN (Chen, 2015). We test the predictive power of armed conflict and climate-related disasters by step-wisely adding a set of features to a 'baseline' model of vulnerability and comparing their accuracy in predicting vulnerability using unobserved data. The predictors in the baseline model are GDP per capita, a Gini index of economic inequality, and health and education expenditures. These predictors proxy the most prominent drivers of vulnerability to climate hazards according to the literature, and especially capture the crucial role of socio-economic development in reducing countries' vulnerability (Brooks et al., 2005). We then add armed conflict and climate-related disasters indicators to the baseline model, and observe how the predictive performance of the models change when the relevant set of features is added to the baseline. Specifically, the 'conflict' model includes the annual, national count of armed conflict events of any type (state-based, one-sided, non-state) from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the related number of fatalities, and the duration of ongoing conflicts for every country and year in addition to the baseline (Pettersson and Öberg, 2020). The 'disaster' model includes, in addition to the baseline, the count of climate-related disasters for every country-year, the related number of affected people, i.e. those injured, killed or in need of assistance, and the total estimated damages in USD, drawn from the EM-DAT Database (Guha-Sapir, 2020). The 'compound' model combines both armed conflict and climate-related disasters predictors from the conflict and the disasters models. Additionally, a compound count variable is included to account for the occurrence of both conflict and disaster events in the same country-year.

As we expect that the effect of human and climate-related disasters on countries' response may be delayed and prolonged, and accumulate over time, the indicators for armed conflict and climate-related disasters are included in all models as their 5-year moving average. All predictors are lagged by one year and Box-Cox-transformed to improve the models' performance. As the choice of lags and moving average may affect the prediction results, we test the robustness of our models by varying the lag structure and the $k$ parameter determining the length of the moving average. More information on the main data sources is provided in sub-sections , , and . Further details on the indicators and data sources used for each model are detailed in the Supplementary Information (SI).

## Modelling design

We train, evaluate and test the performance of a conflict, disaster and compound model in predicting vulnerability using global data for each country and year in the 1995–2019 period. We utilize a random forest machine learning algorithm in a 'leave-the-future-out' cross validation setup that closely approximates the task of predicting the real near-future vulnerability. To maximise the amount of data while avoiding leakage, we train the models on 19 partially overlapping sub-sets of the samples within the period 1995-2018, as in (Schutte et al., 2021) (e.g. 1995-1999,...2014-2018) and predict for one year ahead within the range 2000-2019.

All models are trained with a random forest regressor (rf). Random forest is a 'bagging' method where decision trees are added simultaneously to the ensemble and fit to correct the prediction errors made by prior models (Breiman, 2001). Random forest is less prone to over-fitting than other algorithms. Moreover, the random selection of features and the resulting diversity of the trees make this algorithm highly interactive and able to capture complex feature patterns, while going beyond stringent functional forms assumptions.

We evaluate the predictive performance of each model as the squared-root difference between predicted and actual outcomes (*'root mean squared error' or RMSE*), averaged across all test sets. Better-performing models have lower average errors. As the modelling set-up is equivalent to dropping a particular set of features from the compound model, the difference in predictive error between the compound model and the armed conflict or disasters models provides an indication of the marginal contribution of a given set of features in predicting vulnerability. For example, to test the compound effect of armed conflict and climate-related disasters on vulnerability, we can compare the predictive performance of the *compound* model against the one of the *disaster* and *conflict* models. A lower error of the former model would indicate a positive contribution of the combination of armed conflict and climate-related disasters in predicting countries' vulnerability to climate hazards.

In order to assess the effects of individual predictors on the average prediction, we compute the accumulated local effects (ALE) plots for all the features in the compound model (excluding the baseline), including the duration of ongoing conflicts and the intensity of violence, proxied by the count of battle-related deaths. ALE plots describe how features influence the prediction of a machine learning model on average, and represent an efficient and unbiased alternative to partial dependence plots that are not suitable in presence of highly correlated features (Molnar, 2021).

## Vulnerability data

Our main independent variable is a country-year 'disasters and conflict sensitive' vulnerability index that we reconstruct from the ND-GAIN vulnerability score (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Initiative, 2022). The ND-GAIN aggregate index assigns a 0-1 vulnerability score to each country and year from 1995 to 2019. Consistently with the IPCC's definition, ND-GAIN defines vulnerability as the 'propensity or predisposition of human societies to be negatively affected by climate hazards' (Chen, 2015). The index measures the vulnerability of a country with respect to six macro-sectors: food, water, health, ecosystem services, human habitat and infrastructure. For each sector, the ND-GAIN score results from the

aggregation of three components: adaptive capacity, sensitivity and exposure, each including a number of sub-indicators. For each sub-indicator, 0-1 scores are assigned according to each country-year's performance against an optimal benchmark. The aggregated vulnerability score, ranging from 0 (low) to 1 (high vulnerability) is computed for each country-year as the arithmetic, unweighted, mean of all the sub-indicators.
The ND-GAIN vulnerability index is well established in the literature and has been used, among others, to explore how countries' vulnerability responds to climate change perception (Azócar et al., 2021), investigate the effect of macro-level characteristics on vulnerability to climate shocks (Halkos et al., 2020) with a particular focus on the challenges faced by developing countries (Namdar et al., 2021), study the nexus between adaptation, readiness, and vulnerability of countries over time (Sarkodie and Strezov, 2019), and identify challenges and adaptation options (Amegavi et al., 2021).

Other country-level indexes are available to measure trends in vulnerability and resilience, including the World Risk Index (WRI) and the INFORM Risk Index. Our choice of ND-GAIN data over alternative indicators is motivated by a number of factors that we summarise here. First, the definition and operationalization of ND-GAIN are explicitly consistent with the IPCC's definition of vulnerability that we adopt in this study, as encompassing 'a variety of concepts and elements, including sensitivity or susceptibility to harm and lack of capacity to cope and adapt' (Glossary IPCC, 2022).

Second, the availability of ND-GAIN scores across multiple sectors is advantageous over the other indices, as it allows for a selection of sub-indicators relevant to our specific research question. For example, (Regan and Kim, 2020) select a subset of ND-GAIN sub-indicators relevant for water stress to study the impact of climate drivers on the risk of armed conflict, and find that higher levels of adaptive capacity decrease the probability of conflict risk in response to water stress.

As we are interested in how societal vulnerability responds to both climate-related disasters and conflicts, the provision of disaggregated information on sectoral vulnerability is fundamental for the purpose of this study. Among these sectoral indicators, ND-GAIN includes information on fundamental components of vulnerability that are very sensitive to climate-related disasters and armed conflict. In particular, ND-GAIN encompasses data on access to electricity, energy dependency, agricultural capacity, and food import dependency, which not only represent a significant component of countries' vulnerability but are also impacted by both armed conflict and climate-related disasters. Although the WRI and the INFORM index include many dimensions of societal vulnerability linked to economic development (such as GNI per capita or the HDI index), they do not account for a number of other components that are critical to analyse societal responses to climate-related disasters and armed conflicts, such as infrastructure, water, and food/agriculture.

Lastly, the temporal span of ND-GAIN data (1995-2019) enables us to maximise the amount of information for training and testing the predictive models. ND-GAIN consistently reports data for the period 1995-2019, while WRI have updated and consistent data (including all the sub-indicators) available for the years 2000-2022, and INFORM collects data from 2014 to 2022.

## Disasters and conflict sensitive vulnerability index

Despite the broader temporal and spatial coverage of ND-GAIN as well as the provision of sectoral information on vulnerability, ND-GAIN is not exempt from limitations.

Crucially, not all sub-indicators that are included to compute the ND-GAIN aggregate vulnerability score are relevant for our research question as some dimensions may be un-affected by the material and immaterial destruction caused by violence. To isolate the vulnerability shock suffered by sectors that are sensitive to the impacts of conflict and climate hazards, we draw from the sub-indicators of ND-GAIN and re-construct a 'disasters and conflict sensitive' vulnerability index, following a similar procedure to the one used in (Kling et al., 2021).

Our 'disasters and conflict sensitive' vulnerability index is constructed by averaging the ND-GAIN sub-indicators that are responsive to conflict and climate-related disasters. The sub-indicators are selected based on an evaluation of their relevance, according to the existing empirical literature on the impacts of armed conflict and climate-related disasters, as summarized in Table S3 in the SI. To minimise the risk of data leakage, the re-constructed indicator also excludes all sub-indicators that are derived from projected data.

## Armed conflict data

Data on violence are drawn from UCDP (Pettersson and Öberg, 2020), and follow their definition of armed conflict as an incompatibility concerning the government and/or territory of a state where the use of armed force results in 25 or more battle-related deaths per country-year (Gleditsch et al., 2002). We include all types of violent events coded by UCDP: state-based armed conflicts involving at least the government of a state, non-state violence between non-governmental actors such as rebel groups, and one-sided violence where a governmental or non-state actor attacks unarmed civilians. UCDP data are extracted from a multitude of sources, including news articles, reports from United Nations agencies and international organisations, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and case-oriented research studies (Eck, 2012). UCDP applies a strict definition of conflict events and a rigorous coding approach that ensures that every event is carefully vetted before inclusion to guarantee data quality (Eck, 2012).

## Climate-related disasters data

Information on climate-related disasters is drawn from the publicly accessible EM-DAT Database (Guha-Sapir, 2020) maintained by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) of the University of Louvain, Belgium. EM-DAT includes disasters that caused more than 10 fatalities, left more than 100 people in need of emergency assistance, and involved either the declaration of a state of emergency, or a call for international assistance. EM-DAT data are coded from a collection of sources such as United Nations agencies, governmental and non-governmental organizations, insurance companies, research centers, and the press (Guha-Sapir and Below, 2002). Being focused on humanitarian needs, EM-DAT data may fail to comprehensively cover disasters in developed countries that experienced high economic and material losses, but lower deaths and no call for international aid (Kousky, 2014). Despite this caveat, EM-DAT is to date the best source for consistent, cross-national data on climate-related disasters (Kousky, 2014). We exclude from the analysis disasters that are not strictly linked to climatic changes, e.g. earthquakes and epidemics, and we account only for climate-related ones, such as storms and droughts. The complete list of climate-related disasters considered in the analysis can be found in Table S2 in the SI.

## Results

The results of the forecasting models are presented in Figure 2. Map (a) illustrates the best predictive models for each country, averaged over the test sets in 2000-2019. As Figure 2 (a) shows, the best predictive model varies across countries worldwide. The *conflict* model is the best predictive model in conflict-ridden countries in Asia, such as India and Indonesia, and Latin America, such as Mexico, Guyana and Paraguay. The *conflict* model is also the best predictive model of vulnerability in most of the African continent, especially in Sub Saharan Africa, such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe but also in Northern Africa, such as in Nigeria, Tunisia, Lybia and Egypt. As many of these countries have been ravaged by long-lasting conflicts for many years, it is not surprising that vulnerability to subsequent hazards is best explained by the exposure to conflicts.
The *disaster* model is the best predictive one in several countries in Latin America, such as Uruguay and Ecuador, but also in Eastern African countries, such as Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Mozambique. Similarly, the *disaster* model is the best predictive model of vulnerability for many countries in the Eastern Europe/Middle East region, such as Israel, Jordan, Georgia, Armenia, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.
The *compound* model is the best predictive model on average across the world. The vulnerability of many large countries such as China, Australia and the Russian Federation, but also Sudan, Chad and Algeria, is best predicted by the compound impact of armed conflict and climate-related disasters.

Figure 2 (b) shows the Permutation-based feature importance for the *compound* model, from most to least important. Permutation-based feature measures how the model's accuracy responds to changes in the feature's values **A**s Figure 2 (b) shows, GDP per capita and disaster damages, along with conflict deaths, are the most important variables to predict vulnerability. This is in line with previous studies that attest a pivotal role of socio-economic development in driving vulnerability to climate hazards. The plot, however, also shows that disaster deaths and the number of disaster affected people are even more important than economic damages from disasters in predicting vulnerability. Although the feature importance scores do not represent the effect of an isolated predictor but rather account for all interactions across features, this result suggests that the impact of disasters on vulnerability go beyond strictly economic damages. The scatterplot in (c) shows that predictions from the *compound* model have the highest correlation with observed vulnerability. Consistently, the root-squared error (Figure 2 d) reiterates that the *compound* model is the best predictive model of vulnerability on average across all countries and test sets, immediately followed by the *disaster* model. The *disaster* model exhibits a slightly better performance than the *conflict* model, and all models are more accurate in predictions than the baseline, in line with our expectations. Broadly, however, all models have a tendency to under-predict vulnerability relative to the actual scores, as evident in Figure 2 c.

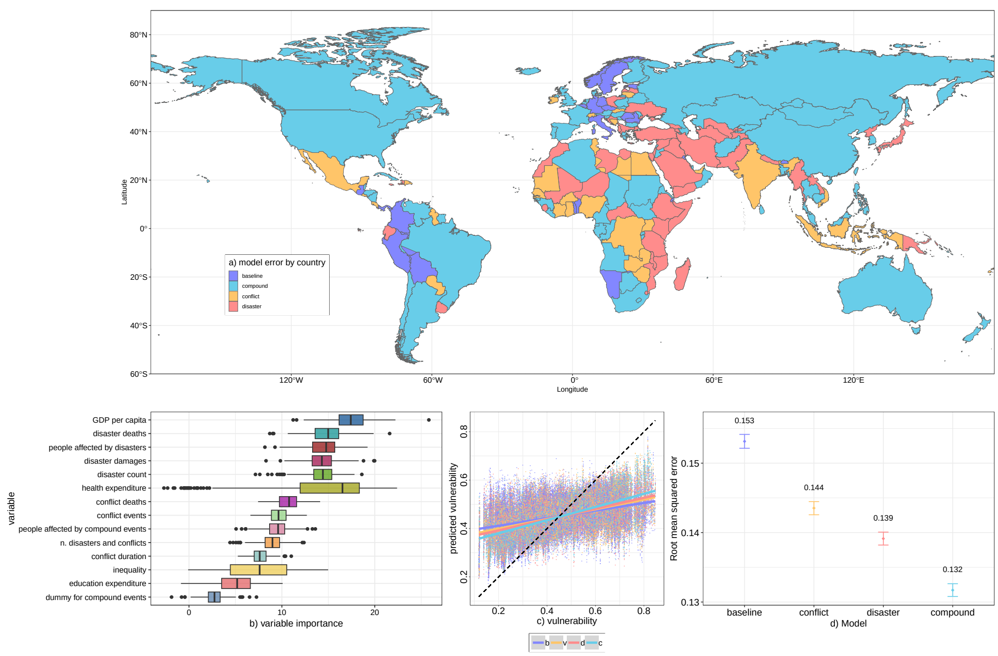


Figure 2. a) Best predictive model of 'disasters and conflict sensitive' vulnerability by country averaged over the test sets in 2000-2019; b) Permutation-based feature importance for the compound model; c) Scatterplot of predicted and actual 'disasters and conflict sensitive' vulnerability scores across models; d) Root-squared prediction error averaged across the test sets in 2001-2019. Model 'd': disaster; 'v': conflict; 'c': compound; 'b': baseline.

Figure 3 shows how predictors (x-axis) influence the prediction of vulnerability on average (y-axis) (Molnar, 2021). The Figure shows that when the number of people affected by both disasters and conflicts increases, societal vulnerability first increases on average, and then slowly declines when the number of affected people is higher than 0.003 points on a Box-Cox transformed scale (approximately 1.03 on the original scale). This suggests a possible adaptation effect: countries that experience armed conflicts and disasters may learn how or increasingly invest resources to cope with subsequent hazards as the number of affected people increase. For example, governments may be pushed by citizens to implement aid relief programs, adaptation initiatives, or increased investments to reduce vulnerability as more people are affected by disasters. A similar pattern is in fact observed for the number of disasters experienced in a country. The effect of economic damages related to disasters is also non-linear: when disaster-related damages increase, vulnerability increases at first and then decreases for damages higher than 5 on a Box-Cox transformed scale (XXX on the original scale). The number of conflict deaths, by contrast, is linearly related to the predicted vulnerability to climate hazards, indicating no such 'adaptation effect'. Disaster deaths and conflict duration also increase predicted vulnerability, although their effect is less substantial. These results overall suggest that countries' vulnerability is importantly impacted by the number of people affected by armed conflict and disaster events, beyond strictly economic damages, and that these effects are non-linear and persist over time.

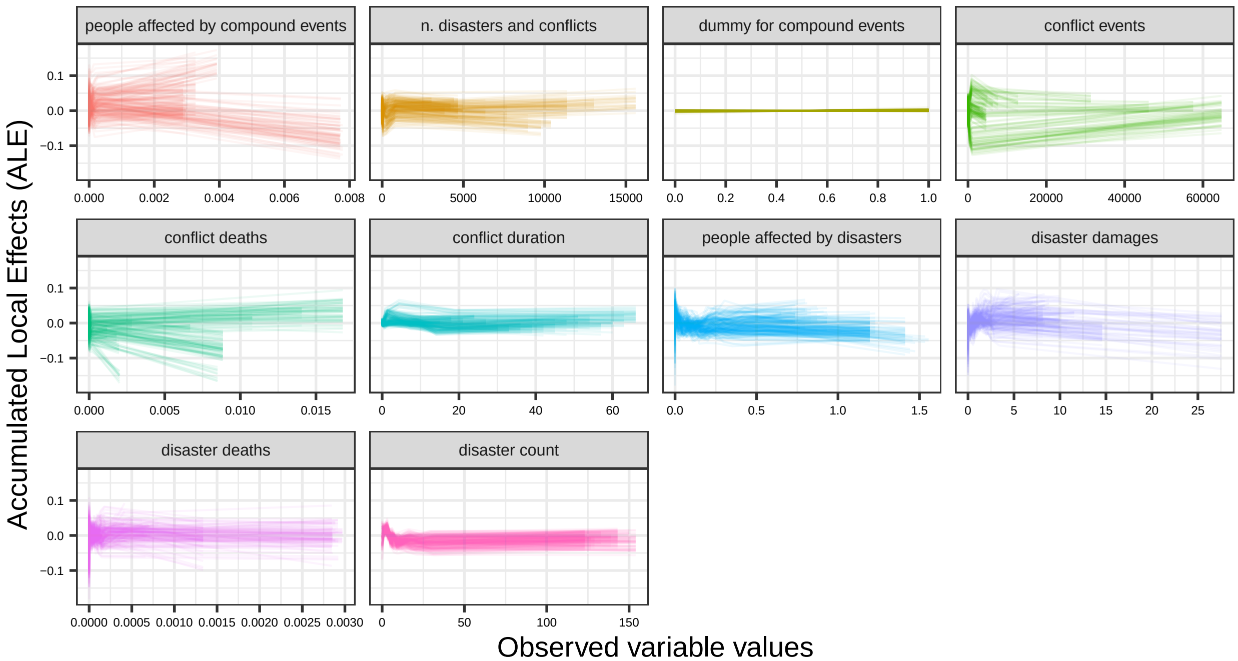


Figure 3. Accumulated Local Effect (ALE) plots for the compound model without baseline. For each predictor (x-axis), the plots show the relative effect of changing the predictor value on the mean prediction for the outcome (y-axis). All plots are centered at 0, and predictors are Box-Cox transformed.

## Sensitivity tests

We conduct a number of tests to verify the robustness of our findings. First, to evaluate whether the models are sensitive to the selected temporal specifications, we specify alternative versions of the models with 2-years lags of the predictors, a 3-years training period and a moving average with a rolling window $k$ equal to 3. Second, we test the sensitivity of our results by re-training and testing our models to predict an alternative operationalization of the vulnerability indicator. Specifically, we train and test alternative models topredict different ND-GAIN vulnerability sectoral scores for each country and year, as detailed in the SI. Lastly, as climate-related disasters data from EM-DAT may be endogenous to vulnerability, we replace the number of disaster events and economic damages in the disaster model with exogenous indicators of the severity of climate hazards, drawn from (Dellmuth et al., 2021). As these data are available only for the period 2003–2017, we restrict the timeframe of the analysis to the above period when performing this test. The results of these alternative specifications do not substantially differ from the main findings. Importantly, the result of the sensitivity test using the exogenous indicators of climate hazards severity confirm that the compound model is the best predictive model of out-of-sample vulnerability, followed by the conflict and the disaster model. All models are performing better than the baseline. Results of these tests are presented in the final section of the SI.

## Conclusions

We present the first systematic study of the impact of violence and climate-related disasters on subsequent levels of countries' vulnerability to climate hazards. By advancing our knowledge of the drivers of vulnerability, this study contributes to both the literature on climate security, and the scholarships on climate impacts, vulnerability and adaptive capacity.

We find that both armed conflict and climate-related disasters are associated with higher predicted country-level vulnerability to climate hazards. The *compound* model, accounting for the combined effect of both violence and climate-related disasters, predicts vulnerability more accurately than the models including conflict or disasters-related features alone, and all models perform better than a baseline that includes key drivers of vulnerability.

The findings illuminate that armed conflict and climate-related disasters' impacts on vulnerability go beyond strict economic losses, and persist over time, with a complex, non-linear effect. This suggests that policies aimed at mitigating the impacts of armed conflict and climate-related disasters may prove a fruitful strategy to decreasing countries' vulnerability to climate hazards. However, investigating how and under what conditions conflict and disasters affect vulnerability was outside the scope of this study. Another limitation of this country-year study is the use of an aggregated level of analysis that preempts a refined investigation of the spatial and temporal dynamics affecting vulnerability.

Some promising avenues for future research are thus to delve into the causal pathways connecting armed conflict, climate-related disasters, and societal responses, with a particular focus on the *human* dimension of the climate-conflict nexus, as well as to understand how these impacts spread and diffuse over space and time.

## Data availability statement

Data and replication code will be provided by the authors upon publication.

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