

Thematic two-pager on climate security – SG’s report on sustaining peace

Climate change is proceeding at a relentless pace. Millions of people around the world are already experiencing its effects, both through slow-onset changes such as temperature increase, desertification and sea level rise, and rapid-onset events such as floods, heatwaves and drought. The effects of climate- and environmental change extend beyond the domain of the environment and into the political and social realm. These effects do not automatically turn into security risks. However, through interactions with existing social, economic and demographic pressures, climate change can multiply risks, exacerbate drivers of insecurity and threaten efforts to prevent conflict and sustain peace. With this in mind, the Secretary-General has called the climate emergency a danger to peace.

The changing climate can affect peace and security in different ways. More severe and frequent extreme weather events such as floods, storms and droughts can undermine livelihoods and trigger mass displacement. Changing growing and grazing seasons may threaten the viability of existing arrangements governing transhumance and pastoralism patterns, which in turn can fuel local conflict. Sea level rise creates unprecedented questions regarding sovereignty, national identity and maritime boundaries. Increasing water scarcity may put pressure on transboundary water sharing arrangements and increase tensions between neighboring states. A perceived lack of economic prospects due to the changing environment has also lowered the opportunity costs of criminality and recruitment into extremist groups.

The impact of climate change on peace and security is highly contextual and largely depends on the coping capacity and existing vulnerabilities of states and communities. The risks of adverse effects are greatest where institutions are unable to manage climate stress and where underlying vulnerabilities are pronounced. The impact also varies between population groups: women, men and youth are affected in different ways. Gender inequalities constrain women’s ability to adapt to the challenges brought on by climate change. Meanwhile, climate change represents a major threat to the socio-economic stability of youth.

It is clear, however, that climate change does not discriminate nor limit itself to developing countries. Given the latest science, climate chaos will eventually arrive at the doorstep of all parts of the world.

Climate related security risks and the United Nations

The challenge presented by climate change to international peace and security underlines the importance of taking climate change into account across United Nations’ activities on prevention and sustaining peace. The sustaining peace resolutions call for a more coherent United Nations system that addresses threats to international peace and security by working across the different pillars. Climate-related security risks are one such area that requires coordinated action as they have impact on sustainable development, human rights and the prospect for lasting peace.

Efforts to address the interlinkages between climate change, prevention and sustaining peace have made progress on several fronts. At the political level, the topic has fully arrived in the international policy discourse and is regularly debated by the main bodies of the United Nations. The Security Council held an open debate on climate and security in January 2019 and has recognized “the adverse impact of climate change among other factors on stability” in resolutions and presidential statements in eight country-specific and regional contexts. The High-Level Political Forum and the Climate Action Summit in 2019 have also paid attention to the issue, and climate security featured in other international fora, including at the Pacific Islands Forum, the African Union and the European Union.

With eight of the ten countries hosting the most multilateral peace operations personnel also ranking among the countries most exposed to climate change, United Nations peace operations and special political missions find themselves at the frontlines of the fight against climate-related security risks. Examples of innovative responses include a partnership of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission for the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) with FAO and IOM on transhumance; the joint work of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank on climate science data in the region; drought prevention and response activities by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM); and the efforts in water diplomacy by the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA).

Across the board, efforts are ongoing to incorporate the effects of climate change into United Nations policies and mechanisms for early warning and prevention. Regional prevention strategies, strategic reviews of peace operations and special political missions, Common Country Analyses, and Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks provide critical entry points for integrated analysis and coordinated action. Peace and security activities are becoming more climate informed and development and climate change policies are increasingly sensitive to their broader implications on social and political factors. There is growing awareness of the potential for National Adaptation Plans, Nationally Determined Contributions and other high-level climate action policies to generate synergies with peacebuilding objectives.

At the operational level, the interlinked nature of climate-related security risks has fostered collaboration across traditional policy areas, resulting in a more regular exchange of good practices and the adoption of integrated approaches to risk assessments as well as project design and implementation. The creation of the joint DPPA, UNDP and UNEP Climate Security Mechanism (CSM) in October 2018 is an example of this cooperation. The Mechanism provides a small but dedicated capacity to connect and leverage existing resources and expertise across the United Nations system to address climate-related security risks more systematically. The Mechanism has invested in building partnerships with stakeholders from within and beyond the United Nations, including the creation of a Community of Practice with 20+ United Nations entities. It has also developed a toolbox to enhance the consideration of climate change in early warning and prevention work and to assist field offices with risk assessments and response strategies.

Challenges ahead

Despite the progress in addressing climate-related security risks, much more remains to be done. Climate stresses and shocks will likely become more intense and frequent in the future. Understanding not only the bio-physical impacts on individuals and communities but also their contribution to broader political and social change (such as the possible decline of certain economic sectors, increase of urbanization or more volatile food prices) will be necessary. In most locations, substantial social, economic and political transition will be required due to the detrimental physical consequences of climate change. Our collective response frameworks need to be more comprehensive and better equipped to deal with the cross-cutting effects and expansive timeframes of climate change. Effective action needs to be coordinated and fine-tuned to ensure no one is left behind. It must comprise climate-sensitive conflict prevention and peacebuilding to strengthen resilience against climate risks as well as conflict-sensitive climate adaptation to avoid undermining stabilization and peacebuilding efforts. A better global evidence base and shared understanding of effective strategies and approaches is vital to accelerate progress.

No single actor is equipped to handle tasks of such complexity alone. For the United Nations and the international community to be successful in addressing climate-related security risks, strategic

partnerships need to be consolidated to foster awareness and mobilize capacity. The challenge does not only lie in the complexity of the issue, but also in its pressing urgency. The most viable solution long-term is ambitious climate action, beginning with the full implementation of the Paris Agreement. But in the meantime, as climate change advances, its repercussions will continue to grow, including on peace and security. Our strategic and operational frameworks need to be able to cope with these changes and deliver effective solutions in a climate changed world.