Climate Diplomacy
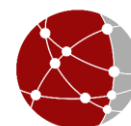
Climate change and security:
A SHORT Q&A

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Climate change and security: A short Q&A

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Why is climate change a UN Security Council concern?

- The climate crisis is a key **risk to global peace and stability**. It can act as a **risk multiplier** and **intensify conflict drivers** such as livelihood insecurity and socio-political grievances. The effects of climate change can aggravate and **prolong conflicts** and make it **harder** to reach and sustain peace.

- Since the UN Security Council (UNSC) has primary **responsibility for maintaining international peace and security**, addressing climate change - one of the **biggest security threats of the 21st century -** is at the core of its mandate. This extends to preventative measures, given that **article 1(1) of the UN Charter** assigns responsibility to the UN 'to maintain international peace and security, and to that end, take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace'.

- Because climate change impacts can create situations that disturb peace and stability such as volatile food prices and access to water, addressing climate change-related security risks are an important **dimension of agendas to sustain the peace, stabilise communities, and prevent conflict.**

> *"Climate change is a risk multiplier. It aggravates already fragile situations, including in humanitarian contexts where communities have limited capacity to cope with additional shocks. Climate change also feeds other drivers of insecurity and conflict."*
>
> - **Achim Steiner, Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme**

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How is climate change a threat to security?

- Climate change impacts such as increasing temperatures, drought, sea level rise, and more frequent and more intense extreme weather events such as hurricanes directly affect millions across the world. They are creating **more volatile food prices, increasing competition for natural resources and making livelihoods less secure**. This in turn can contribute to more conflict and fragility, in particular when interacting with other well-established conflict drivers such as inequality and marginalisation.

- Climate change is already threatening to reverse **economic growth and development gains** achieved over the past few decades. The resulting problems threaten to undermine social cohesion and governmental legitimacy, destabilising already fragile regions.

- Climate change creates additional demand for state services e.g. disaster assistance in the aftermath of storms, food aid, and safe management of displacement. When unmet, these needs can compound pre-existing grievances, over inequality, political marginalisation and unresponsive governments.

- Since climate impacts **put pressures on governance and might undermine stability and state legitimacy**, addressing these risks presents an important opportunity for stabilisation, state-building and redressing fractures to the social contract.

- While climate change can shape conflict dynamics, it should also be noted that any future peace will play out in a changing climate. Climate change affects many risks to and opportunities for peace. If policymakers want their peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding plans and strategies to be truly sustainable, they need to factor in climate change impacts at all policy stages: early warning and assessment, planning and financing, and implementation (mediation and peace support operations).

- The increase in climate change-related extreme weather events is already creating new demands for militaries in their capacity as first responders, as well as having profound and costly impacts on military installations and capacities, particularly on naval bases.

"The risks associated with climate-related disasters do not represent a scenario of some distant future. They are already a reality for millions of people around the globe – and they are not going away."

-    Rosemary di Carlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs

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What are the risks of inaction?

- Climate change interacts with existing, dynamic drivers of conflict such as poverty, inequality and marginalisation. Any effort to promote sustainable peace by addressing these root causes of conflict will not be durable if it fails to acknowledge this interaction and take into account how climate change will affect these dynamics, i.e. if it limits responses to the risks of yesterday rather than thinks of those of tomorrow. **If climate change is left out of risk assessments of fragile communities affected by climate change, there is a very real risk that peacebuilding efforts will make existing drivers of conflict worse.**

- Ignoring climate change-related security risks in stabilisation can inadvertently increase risks rather than reduce them. For example, in the Lake Chad region, military stabilisation efforts overlooked climate risks and in fact increased people's climate vulnerability. This contributed to increasing grievances towards the state and creating a governance vacuum that armed groups such as ISWAP filled by providing alternative sources of livelihoods. Such missteps may undermine stabilisation efforts, cede power to armed groups and lock regions into a conflict trap.

- Omitting future climate change impacts in peace negotiations, for example when allocating climate-sensitive natural resources such as water and arable land between conflicting parties, can mean that peace-making and political settlements may not hold up when environmental conditions change.

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Why is addressing climate impacts important when a country is in the midst of a conflict?

- Climate change is rarely among the most important direct drivers of conflict. Yet its impacts are often connected to these drivers. Therefore, peacebuilding efforts are likely to be less effective, to prove unsustainable or even to create adverse **unintended consequences** if climate impacts are ignored in the analysis of, or response to, the main conflict drivers.

- Natural resource competition and tensions over natural resources often feed into conflict. If these issues are ignored or tackled without accounting for a changing climate, e.g. if climate change impacts are left out of water sharing agreements, competition and tension might worsen and escalate into conflict.

- If peacebuilding missions do not help provide for disaster risk reduction in vulnerable regions, they are less effective. In Haiti, for example, a long sequence of natural disasters has severely reduced the capacity of people to cope and recover, often creating situations of protracted displacement. In turn, this has fuelled already existing political instability, creating a vicious cycle that persists despite extensive international efforts to build peace in the country.

- **Breaking such vicious cycles** would not only benefit affected countries and populations but also reduce the burden on the international community in terms of dealing with protracted crises. As the Dominican Republic put it in the concept note distributed ahead of the UNSC open debate on 25 January 2019, mitigating climate impacts "could help alleviate [protracted emergencies that form the core of the UNSC's agenda] and reduce these threats to international peace and security."

- People living in countries in conflict are disproportionately vulnerable to climate risks, as conflicts limit their adaptive capacity by harming assets required to facilitate adaptation, such as institutions, markets and livelihood. Climate shocks can have major humanitarian consequences on communities struggling to cope with an armed conflict, further impoverishing them, leading to greater food insecurity, health problems and forcing many to move for their survival. Working to strengthen the resilience of these communities and their institutions to climate risk and providing relevant responses when a disaster strikes is therefore critical.

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Is the scientific evidence on whether climate change causes conflict sufficient to justify action?

The question is not whether climate change causes conflict but how climate change affects all stages of the conflict cycle. Many studies show that climate change can be a risk multiplier – that it can aggravate existing tensions and compound the effect of more immediate drivers of instability such as inequality, lack of freedom and weak institutions.

Other studies emphasise the role of governance over environmental change. However, focusing on a contradistinction between environmental change and governance can be unhelpful in shaping adequate responses, which need to account for the linkages between environmental stresses and governance challenges. Numerous regional or country-based UN political missions and programmes report that climate-related security risks affect peace and development on the ground. In response, implementing agencies are already actively seeking ways to address the climate-related security risks they encounter at field level.

- There is broad consensus in climate-conflict research that the effect of climate change on conflict is neither linear nor direct. Rather, it is mediated by social, economic and institutional factors and often characterised by 'tipping points'. There is also broad consensus that climate-related security risks depend on the specific context.

- Behind the debate over causality is often the argument that governance factors are more important than environmental factors in causing conflict. This is academically an important and perfectly legitimate point to investigate, but it should not obscure the fact that both types of factors are often intertwined in fragile situations, e.g. environmental degradation and weak natural resource governance combine to create fragility. For policy-making, it is the response that is crucial – and there is broad (implicit) agreement that improving (natural resource) governance is critical in fragile situations.

Remaining uncertainties and knowledge gaps do not justify inaction. A security policy that demands perfect certainty before initiating precautionary measures is wishful and unlikely to succeed. The precautionary principle implies taking action before adverse impacts manifest, as long as the risk is plausible and the action does no harm.

- The existing body of literature shows that climate-related security risks are relevant, particularly in already fragile contexts. Waiting for stronger evidence that climate change aggravates conflict would reduce response options, leave higher risks and less time to deal with them, and risk creating more protracted conflict.

- Context-informed action on climate-related security risks can be considered **no-regret options**: these include better assessing the risks for specific situations and contexts, making societies more resilient and advancing sustainable development.

> *"Climate change creates major stress, especially in fragile situations where governments have limited means to help their population to adapt. […] [Thus,] "addressing climate change remains at the core of early conflict prevention strategies".*
>
> -   **World Bank, 2018 Pathways for Peace report**

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Does the UNSC encroach on the UNFCCC's mandate by acting on climate risks?

- No. By acting on climate-related security risks, the Council **lives up to its own mandate**, as stipulated in Article 24 of the UN Charter, which gives the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.

- The General Assembly has made it clear that it does not see UNSC action on climate-related security risks as infringing on the prerogatives of other UN bodies: in its resolution 63/281, adopted on 3 June 2009 without a vote, **the General Assembly requested that relevant organs of the United Nations "intensify their**

efforts in considering and addressing climate change, including its possible security implications." It also requested that Secretary-General submit a comprehensive report to the Assembly on this issue. In response, in 2009 the Secretary-General, in his report A/64/350, emphasised the "threat multiplier" effects of climate change on international peace and security. This clearly implies that these climate-related security risks fall under the UNSC's mandate.

- This mandate does not imply that the UNSC alone can resolve these threats. The **threats are multi-dimensional:** they emerge through the interaction of a changing climate with other socio-economic, institutional and governance challenges.

…And how should the UN system deal with these risks?

- Meaningful progress can therefore only be achieved if climate-related security risks are addressed across the board: the entire UN system must act to reduce these risks, in accordance with the respective mandates of the UN bodies, but with a shared vision of sustaining peace and sustainable development. This implies climate-proofing peacebuilding and humanitarian action (e.g. by WFP) and ensuring conflict sensitivity of low-carbon development and adaptation initiatives (e.g. by UNDP, UNEP or UNSIDR).

- It is therefore important that UN bodies coordinate their work and exchange expertise to find solutions for the many challenges on the climate change and security agenda.

- The **'Climate Security Mechanism'**, which brings together UNDP, DPPA, and UNEP, constitutes important progress to that end, e.g. with a view to improving early warning systems and promoting integrated climate-security risk assessments.

- **National and subnational actors** should support the efforts of the UN system with climate- and conflict-proof action. This implies cascading responsibilities down to the project level. Such action would be inspired, legitimised and enabled if the UNSC unequivocally recognised climate-related security risks.

> *"We are determined to fully mobilise the UN capacity to understand and respond to climate-related security risks at all levels. We are increasing our climate-related security risk assessments and management strategies. […] We count on the Security Council to do its part to help humankind keep pace.""*
>
> - Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the UN

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What action exactly should the UNSC take?

- Security Council action on climate-related security risks is necessary in order to facilitate progress on three levels:

  1. **To develop stronger analytical capacity with integrated risk assessment frameworks, and thereby facilitate and incentivise institutional action to systematically address climate change-related security risks within the UN system;**

  2. **To foster on-the-ground action to address climate-related security risks by engaging with affected states and regional organisations, within and beyond the UN system; and**

  3. **To raise global awareness of how addressing climate-related security risks can advance the global prevention and stabilisation agendas, leveraging the visibility of the UNSC.**

- In order to achieve progress in this regard, the Security Council should decide on a raft of activities that leverage the UNSC's critical role in providing guidance to global peacebuilding efforts. These include:

  a) Requesting systematic consideration of climate-related risks and opportunities in UN early warning, assessment and planning processes and across conflict prevention tools, stabilisation plans and regional strategies and actions.

  b) Requesting that the UN Secretary-General conduct a study on the linkages between climate change and the challenges to peacebuilding and sustaining peace, the climate and environmental dimensions of peace processes and conflict resolution, and climate mainstreaming in UN peacekeeping missions.

  c) Calling for the inclusion of a climate perspective in mediation, peace negotiations and political settlements, specifically pertaining to the allocation of natural resources to conflicting parties. Specifically, this could be proposed through building knowledge and capacity within the DPPA Mediation Unit.

  d) Incorporating a climate perspective into peacekeeping operations and considering climate in special political missions.

  e) Calling for improved institutional capacity to assess and address climate-related security risks within and beyond the UN system, specifically by bolstering the Climate Security Mechanism to develop and promote the use of UNSG-endorsed tools and approaches for addressing climate-fragility risks.

  f) Providing training for the UN and member states on climate security risk assessment and management and emphasising the importance of including climate and environmental considerations in peacekeeping and peace-building measures