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**Responding to the effects of climate change in
institution-building efforts in fragile countries and
countries emerging from conflict**

Building strong institutions to link the environment and peacebuilding in conflict-affected countries

Note by the Secretariat

The Secretariat has the honour to transmit to the Committee of Experts on Public Administration the paper prepared by Committee member Paul Jackson.

* E/C.16/2023/1.



Building strong institutions to link the environment and peacebuilding in conflict-affected countries

Summary

At its twenty-first session, the Committee of Experts on Public Administration considered the issue of building strong institutions to combat climate change and its impacts and for the sustainable management, protection and restoration of natural resources. The Committee outlined the main institutional challenges for achieving Sustainable Development Goals 13, 14 and 15, including the lack of globally accepted standards for measuring biodiversity, the fragmentation of institutional arrangements for dealing with climate change and environmental protection, and the impacts of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. The Committee suggested potential ways forward for governments on the basis of, inter alia, the creation of incentives, the reform of taxes and subsidies, the establishment of metrics and a change in human behaviour.

The present paper builds on this approach while also elaborating on the specific subset of governance issues related to fragile and conflict-affected States. It seeks to draw attention to connections between the environment and peacebuilding, with particular reference to institutional challenges in fragile and conflict-affected countries.

The author recalls that it is inherently difficult and more complex to govern in insecure settings in conflict-affected countries, and governments may also lack significant capacity to cope. Despite this, public administration and institutions play an important role in developing integrated approaches to long-term development objectives amid the multiple challenges that countries emerging from conflict face, not least in balancing short-term needs for security with the longer-term requirements of sustainable development.

The present paper reflects on the recent history of debates on climate change and security within the United Nations system, which have evolved from having a focus on climate change and tensions over natural resources as conflict multipliers to a broader perspective that recognizes the role of dialogue around climate change in the development of more comprehensive peacebuilding approaches. The author recommends giving greater attention to the incorporation into such approaches of institution-building efforts that help address the impacts of climate change and improve environmental management.

I. Environmental insecurity, climate change and institution-building in fragile and conflict-affected countries

1. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes the environmental dimension of sustainable development in fragile and conflict-affected settings. The present paper discusses the implications of climate change and environmental objectives for institution-building in such settings.
2. The international community has long recognized the complexity of the relationship between the environment and conflict and security. The first ever meeting of the Security Council to examine linkages between climate change and insecurity was held in April 2007. Since then, the Council has continued to take steps to acknowledge that the two issues are related: in July 2011, another open debate on the matter was held; in March 2017, Security Council resolution 2349 (2017), highlighting the need to address climate-related risks to tackle the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin, was adopted; and in July 2018, a debate on understanding and addressing climate-related security risks was held. The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs also established a climate security mechanism in 2018.¹ In the report of the Secretary-General entitled “Our Common Agenda”, the Secretary-General makes a proposal along those lines, noting that the new agenda for peace could consider how to strengthen its support for regional capacities by expanding into new areas such as the effects of climate change on security.²
3. There is a growing awareness of the fact that climate change and environmental degradation can have a significant influence on conflict and human security, and inversely, that conflicts can significantly affect the state of the environment. Climate change and environmental degradation have affected and will continue to affect livelihoods and human security, with both the severity and type of impact varying according to context. Climate change and environmental degradation may also exacerbate or precipitate conflict in already fragile situations. However, although climate change can contribute to conflict, it is unlikely to be the sole cause and there may be cases in which it does not play a significant role.
4. Research on the link between the environment and security tends to be dominated by two main approaches, one focusing on environmental cooperation and the other focusing on resource risk. The approach that focuses on environmental cooperation views the spillover effects of environmental cooperation in a positive light, according to which cooperation on shared environmental concerns has implications for cooperation among groups on other issues, including peacebuilding. The approach that focuses on resource risk recognizes that resource inequity may lead to intra-State conflict and, therefore, stresses the role of conflict mitigation through environmental cooperation, treating the mismanagement of natural resources as a key threat with regard to conflict relapse.³
5. In the field of conflict and security, there has been a rapid increase in research on environmental aspects of peacebuilding. This approach integrates natural resource management into wider discussions on conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution

¹ Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Environment Programme, “Climate security mechanism: toolbox – briefing note” (New York, 2020).

² A/75/982, para. 89 (e).

³ This approach is associated with the Peacebuilding Commission, and research in this area has been made available through the environmental peacebuilding knowledge platform (www.environmentalpeacebuilding.org). See also other examples within the United Nations system at www.unep.org/explore-topics/disasters-conflicts/what-we-do/environment-security/environmental-cooperation-and.

and into broader recovery strategies. The overall aim of integrating environmental protection and cooperation into peacebuilding activities, known as “environmental peacebuilding”, is to strengthen community resilience in support of sustainable development or, as stated in Sustainable Development Goal 16, to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.

6. This implies that climate security risks can be mitigated by strengthening the capability of institutions in fragile and conflict-affected settings to adapt to climate change and effectively manage natural resources. Institutional mitigation requires significant bureaucratic and managerial capability, both to manage at the national and local levels and to participate meaningfully in international agreements aimed at mitigating climate change. The principles of effective governance for sustainable development established by the Committee of Experts on Public Administration therefore serve as an important point of reference in responding to climate change in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where good governance is desperately needed.

II. Climate change, fragility and security within the international system

7. The issue of climate change and security, specifically whether climate change should be discussed by the Security Council at all, has been the subject of controversy. Some Member States have indicated that such discussion interferes with the mandate of other United Nations bodies that are directly tasked with social and economic development or environmental protection.⁴

8. On 13 December 2021, the Security Council put to the vote a draft resolution on the security implications of climate change. The draft resolution emphasized the need for a comprehensive, United Nations-wide approach to address climate change and its effects and, if adopted, would have requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Council within two years a report on the security implications of the adverse effects of climate change in relevant country or region-specific contexts on the Council’s agenda, as well as recommendations on how climate-related security risks could be addressed. It would also have encouraged relevant United Nations peacekeeping operations and special political missions to deploy dedicated capacity, as appropriate, on climate security.⁵ However, the resolution was vetoed.

9. All Council members appear to recognize that climate change poses a threat to human existence. However, disagreement exists regarding what role, if any, the Council should play. The draft resolution was the culmination of a long process that began with the aforementioned first meeting of the Security Council to examine the linkages between climate change and insecurity, held in April 2007.

10. The absence of a Security Council resolution on security and climate change has not stopped the Organization from engaging positively with the core issue of how security and climate change are related. An influential, ambassadorial-level meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission was held in 2022 on the impact of climate change on peacebuilding in the Pacific region.⁶

11. The language used at the meeting reflected a significant change in approach. In discussing climate, peace and security, the Security Council continued to emphasize that climate change was a “risk multiplier”, the security implications of which needed

⁴ United Nations, “Climate change recognized as ‘threat multiplier’, UN Security Council debates its impact on peace”, UN News, 25 January 2019.

⁵ [S/2021/990](#).

⁶ United Nations, “Chair’s summary of the Peacebuilding Commission meeting on the Pacific Islands”, 31 May 2022.

to be managed, while also indicating that there was a need to focus on climate adaptation and resilience as avenues to build and sustain peace. As the concept note for the meeting stated, until that point, the climate and security discourse in the Security Council had focused on how the effects of climate change undermined international peace and security. Broadening the awareness of the Security Council of how climate, security and peacebuilding interacted would offer a basis for it to embrace additional tools and entry points to better achieve its mandate.

12. This represents a notable shift away from the view that climate change is an existential threat that significantly worsens conflict to the view that the mitigation of climate change in fragile and conflict-affected States could contribute to achieving a whole series of different dimensions of environmental peacebuilding.

III. Factors determining environmental peacebuilding

13. While there has been increasing interest in environmental peacebuilding, there has not been similar interest in developing clear empirical evidence for or a coherent theoretical approach to the subject, and most causal relationships between environmental conditions and social stability are poorly defined and difficult to verify.

14. Environmental peacebuilding involves three dimensions: physical security; livelihoods and economy; and stable politics and social relations.⁷

15. Physical security is frequently linked to access or lack of access to natural resources. Conflicts over land, water, fishery, forestry and other resources are common in insecure situations and may turn violent. Many violent groups secure direct access to plunderable natural resources, including timber, diamonds and metals, with the aim of funding insurgencies and further violence. Exclusionary control over resources, including diamonds, oil and gas, may also lead to violence as a result of corruption and alienation from governance. The reckless exploitation of resources, including deforestation and mining, may also cause threats to human security.

16. Insecure livelihoods and economic failure or weakness have long been identified as key variables in conflict that can also undermine post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. Unemployment and underemployment create pools of potential recruits, in particular young men, who may become the foot soldiers of violent movements. Local environmental resources are likely to suffer damage during conflict, affecting water security, land and infrastructure, as well as potential economic activity, including agriculture. Domestic markets for investment, agricultural inputs, machinery, cars and even food are also likely to be disrupted without significant government intervention or working governance mechanisms.

17. Stable politics and social relations are important in the development of institutional arrangements for the sustainable management of natural resources, including for managing access and economic exploitation, which also involves including or excluding related indicators. The management of shared resources requires systems of cooperation, including community groups and political actors.

18. An environmental peacebuilding approach implies that a capable government can contribute to the mitigation of climate change impacts and play a role in using the dialogue around climate action to support broader peacebuilding efforts. Strong institutions and effective governance underpin physical security, economic well-being and cooperative social relations and support political stability.

⁷ Tobias Ide and others, "The past and future(s) of environmental peacebuilding", *International Affairs*, vol. 97, No. 1 (January 2021), pp. 1–16.

19. Central to the approach of environmental peacebuilding is the ability of public institutions to take the lead in managing discussions and negotiations with various stakeholders in matters related to climate change.

IV. Impact of climate change on security

20. Negative environmental impacts and violence are challenges that are both affected by multiple factors. The use of a risk-based approach to situational analysis helps avoid strong claims that climate change is directly responsible for human insecurity while allowing an analysis to be carried out of when and how climate change may increase the risk of violent conflict.⁸ A risk-based approach to situational analysis may also facilitate more integrated policymaking by governments across issue areas.

21. While the three dimensions of environmental peacebuilding provide a useful conceptual overview for the design of policy interventions, a better understanding of the mechanisms through which strategies are developed and implemented is dependent on evidence of how climate change could affect the people living in vulnerable settings in the short, medium and long term.

22. That improved understanding of the underlying mechanisms and relationships may, in turn, be a good basis for developing interventions that contribute to environmental peacebuilding. The identification of pathways, as defined by Mobjork and others, provides some useful examples.⁹ The authors define the following four general types of pathways: (a) livelihoods; (b) migration and mobility; (c) armed group tactics; and (d) elite exploitation.

23. **Livelihoods pathway.** Climate change increases the risk of conflict through a number of livelihoods pathways, for example by reducing productive land or access to water, which particularly affects vulnerable groups such as those living in poverty, persons with disabilities, elderly persons, young people and women. Climate change may also adversely affect livestock and agriculture and exacerbate conflict – including violence against women – when access to natural resources, including renewable natural resources, is reduced. Rapid-onset disasters may also adversely affect resources in the short term (e.g., through floods and droughts) and the long term (e.g., through desertification). Nevertheless, conflict is not inevitable in such cases and there may be a possibility of dialogue and cooperation. In areas where governance mechanisms are weak and areas that have previously experienced conflict, however, the risk of violence is greater.

24. **Migration and mobility pathway.** Increased migration is one adaptation strategy for groups that have been adversely affected by climate change or conflict. Rapid-onset disasters, such as fires and floods, can lead to sudden increases in the displacement of people, which is a result of environmental degradation that can, in turn, contribute to such degradation. While conflict is not a result of migration per se, migration may increase the risk of conflict owing to an increased demand for natural resources, including land and water resources, as well as risks associated with rapid migration and social pressures.

25. **Armed group tactics pathway.** The behaviour of armed groups affects the dynamics of environmental change on the ground. Many groups have responded to climate change-related impacts by acting in an opportunistic way, for example by

⁸ Malin Mobjork and others, *Climate-related Security Risks: Towards an Integrated Approach* (Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2016).

⁹ Malin Mobjork, Florian Krampe and Kheira Tarif, “Pathways of climate insecurity: guidance for policymakers”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute Policy Brief (November 2020).

ensuring food security for insurgents in the face of scarce resources. In some cases, violent groups deliberately cause environmental degradation through the exploitation of natural resources. The availability of plunderable resources, such as minerals and metals, and resources that are easily smuggled, such as diamonds, can result in uncontrolled mining or damaging dredging in established forest areas. This was the case with conflict-related diamond trading in West Africa and the use of trees as plunderable resources in South and South-East Asia.

26. **Elite exploitation pathway.** The final pathway involves the direct exploitation of resources by political elites for their personal gain. Political elites can collaborate and take direct part in the looting of natural resources, greatly increasing the risk of wider conflict. In general, this may be riskier in areas with higher barriers to entry. Diamonds in West Africa, for example, are locally available and easy to find, whereas resources that require high capital investment restrict the number of participants and facilitate control by small elites. Oil is one such resource, as it requires extraction equipment, pipelines, storage and means to load ships. This does not preclude the illegal bunkering of oil resources, but it increases the risk of violence by those who are excluded from these networks.

27. All the pathways are context-specific, but there are clear roles for better governance within each of them to address the underlying drivers of conflict. Each pathway is tied to environmental grievances, and the routes out of conflict will require environmental peacebuilding to overcome those underlying drivers and lead to sustainable peace.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

28. The present paper has sought to add to the Committee's discussions on institutional challenges and opportunities related to climate change and the protection of natural resources. The paper recalls the findings of the twenty-first session and is intended to add a specific subgroup of policy recommendations relating to fragile and conflict-affected settings.

29. The paper recognizes that there is a close link between climate change, environmental impacts and conflict. Many conflicts are driven or sustained by, or result in, environmental degradation and, as such, conflict resolution and long-term sustainable development require a form of environmental peacebuilding that incorporates underlying environmental issues.

30. The paper has outlined three fundamental approaches to environmental peacebuilding based on security, livelihoods and politics. It has highlighted four potential pathways that increase the risk of conflict as a direct result of climate change: livelihoods; migration; armed group behaviour; and exploitation by political elites. All of these potential sources of increased risk can be mitigated, and governments have an important role to play in building public trust with regard to the environment following conflict.

31. The consequences of climate change and the risks of conflict interact with factors on the ground, resulting in unpredictable outcomes. Climate change, however, does not inevitably produce conflict, and there are usually different outcomes in different contexts. This suggests that governance may be a critical element in the causal relationship between climate change and conflict.

32. Potential policy approaches to environmental peacebuilding that the Committee may wish to consider include the following:

(a) **Better analysis.** This is required to understand underlying causes and mechanisms that will allow countries experiencing climate change and increased conflict risk to improve their programming and reporting to mitigate risks. Better information may also help differentiate between the short- and long-term goals of institutional peacebuilding efforts;

(b) **Coordinated policy thinking.** This can be encouraged through an environmental peacebuilding approach as environmental security encompasses the entire socio-ecological system as well as challenges that transect traditional governance boundaries, such as local and national boundaries;

(c) **Adoption of a climate-sensitive lens.** This is important as environmental peacebuilding requires recognition that climate change impacts and natural resource issues are at the core of conflicts. Efforts to tackle these challenges need to be recognized as a means of addressing underlying injustice;

(d) **Consideration of the needs of and challenges faced by women and vulnerable groups, such as young people, as part of environmental peacebuilding efforts.** This is crucial in order to prevent potential injustice, as such groups are the most vulnerable users of natural resources;

(e) **International collaboration and support.** These need to be enhanced, including through increased engagement within the United Nations peacebuilding architecture, with a special focus on supporting projects that promote climate resilience and adaptation in fragile and conflict-affected States. This approach could also offer enhanced opportunities for engagement with regional and subregional organizations to better cope with the transnational effects of climate change;

(f) **Increased application of the principles of effective governance for sustainable development.** These principles can help mitigate the long-term effects of climate change and reduce the risks of serious conflict arising from its environmental impacts, including competition over natural resources.
