



The humanitarian impact of combined conflict, climate and environmental risks

Highlights and recommendations from a high-level side event at the 75th United Nations General Assembly

Katie Peters and Mairi Dupar

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Key messages

- Climate hazards have a disproportionate impact on people who are already socially and economically vulnerable – the very people who are likely to be receiving or in need of humanitarian assistance. Climate shocks aggravate pre-existing inequalities and expose weaknesses in risk management and protection systems.
- Humanitarian agencies are already considering how to respond. Their ideas and initiatives for meeting the challenge are on a continuum, from incremental changes to business as usual to a complete overhaul of humanitarian systems.
- We recommend the following specific actions, at a minimum:
 - Humanitarian agencies need to ‘green’ their operations by establishing a baseline environmental footprint and ambitious long-term plans for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and environmental damage. They should set and work towards interim targets and milestones, and monitor and report progress against these, putting the humanitarian system on the road to truly climate-compatible and environmentally sustainable relief.
 - Partnerships between meteorological organisations and humanitarian actors are required to scale up delivery of ‘anticipatory action’ to avoid and minimise climate-related damage, particularly in conflict contexts.
 - Accelerated investment is essential to enhance disaster risk governance systems in conflict contexts.
 - Existing legal instruments should be utilised to strengthen protection, particularly for displaced populations and children.
 - Further financial, technical and political support is required to strengthen the Climate Security Mechanism.

Introduction

The intersection of conflict, climate change and environmental risk has been the subject of academic research for more than two decades. It has featured in reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and been the subject of a plethora of media articles. It has been hotly debated at the United Nations (UN) Security Council and scrutinised by the world's largest military powers. However, little space has been dedicated to exploring the implications for the humanitarian sector.

The UN General Assembly (UNGA) ministerial event 'The humanitarian impact of combined conflict, climate and environmental risks' on 25 September 2020 marked an important step forward in focusing governments, donors and aid agencies' attention on these intersecting risks (see Box 1).

Summarised below are core themes from the UNGA75 event, with extracts from official statements submitted by government, UN and humanitarian agencies. It should be noted that multiple delegates voiced the ideas presented below but for brevity we have included only one citation to illustrate each point

Box 1 The UNGA75 event

Since the turn of the century UNGA and the UN Security Council have been discussing the impact of environmental degradation and climate change on conflict and security, a subject championed by various Member States (including Belgium (2020), for example). Efforts to better understand the operational implications have ramped up since the Climate Security Mechanism was established by three UN agencies in 2018 to address interlinkages among climate change, peace and security in the UN system (UN DPPA, n.d.); and individual humanitarian agencies have convened stakeholders across the globe to consider the policy, financing and operational responses required (e.g. Peters et al., 2019).

In September 2020, in a UN Security Council session organised by Niger on the humanitarian effects of environmental degradation and peace and security, Peter Maurer, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) President, warned of the 'tightrope of survival' facing people living under conflict and disproportionately affected by climate shocks and environmental degradation.

As a continuation of this broader momentum, on 25 September 2020, as part of the 75th Session of UNGA, a ministerial-level event was convened on 'The humanitarian impact of combined conflict, climate and environmental risks'. Co-organised by Belgium, the European Union (EU), Niger and the ICRC, the event brought together representatives from countries experiencing humanitarian crisis as well as those who frequently respond. More than 30 Member States and humanitarian organisations submitted statements, with many more in attendance: testament to the desire to address this pressing challenge (Dupar, 2020).

Chaired by Katie Peters, Senior Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and opened by H.E. Mr Janez Lenarcic, European Commissioner for Crisis Management, and H.E. Mr Philippe Goffin, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Defence, Belgium, the event included a keynote speech from Mark Lowcock, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). A panel debate brought together H.E. Mr Al Moustapha Garba, Minister of Environment, Niger; Mr Filippo Grandi, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); ICRC President Mr Peter Maurer, and Mrs Abby Maxman, CEO of Oxfam America. Interventions from government delegates and humanitarian agencies from across the globe were shared.

- A recording of the event can be accessed at: <https://webcast.ec.europa.eu/the-humanitarian-impact-of-combined-conflict-climate-and-environmental-risks>.
- The full statements are available at: www.odi.org/publications/17738-humanitarian-impact-combined-conflict-climate-and-environmental-risks.

The scale of the challenge: where climate, environment and climate risks collide

We know that strategic thinking and action on the climate–environment–conflict nexus is urgently required by and with humanitarian actors, from political leaders who release public funds and set the direction of humanitarian response, to humanitarian agencies delivering action on the ground. There is also a need for ‘a deeper analysis of combined conflict, climate and environmental risks and vulnerabilities, and for further reflection on how humanitarian responses should adapt to bolster the resilience of the most vulnerable communities’ (Maldives statement, 2020). This is necessary because ‘the humanitarian impact of climate change remains one of the least understood dimensions of the climate crisis’ (ibid.). Indeed, the collective sentiment was that ‘the links between climate change and humanitarian impact have for too long been neglected’ (Sweden statement, 2020).

This is surprising given the scale of the challenge, as highlighted by the high-level speakers:

- ‘Of the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change, 13 of them were countries with a UN coordinated humanitarian response plan last year, and almost all are experiencing violence, instability or armed conflict’ (Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Mali, Myanmar, Niger, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen) (Mark Lowcock, Emergency Relief Coordinator, OCHA statement, 2020).
- Put another way, ‘Today 12 of the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change are also reeling from conflict’ (Peter Maurer, ICRC President, 2020).

Climate variability and change interact with existing vulnerabilities and drivers of conflict, and with the patterns of risk that shape humanitarian needs. The complexity of the interrelationships between different shocks and stresses has become more obvious in the context of Covid-19. It is no longer sufficient to understand and act on individual hazards. An integrated approach is needed.

For many governments, UN agencies and humanitarian actors the world over, ‘the common connection between conflict, climate change and environmental degradation is risk. To reduce vulnerability and exposure, we need to understand and address this relationship in a systemic way’ (UNDRR statement, 2020). As risks cascade and interact, it is necessary to ‘adopt multi-hazard, comprehensive and integrated risk management approaches’ (ibid.) – the logic being that coherent action on this nexus of risks will enable resilience (ibid.).

In moderating the event, ODI proposed that acting to manage multiple threats effectively and simultaneously may require a reform of the global crisis architecture. It may require humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors to work far more closely together.

Exploring the links

Many interventions explored the links, including changing vulnerabilities, natural resource and food scarcity, disaster risk in conflict contexts, specific intersectional impacts, and the amplification of risks owing to Covid-19.

Displaced and conflict-affected people are more vulnerable to climate shocks

An increasing body of empirical evidence shows that people living in situations of armed conflict or other situations of violence are especially vulnerable to climate shocks; conflict erodes the integrity of institutions and communities and decreases resilience, which in turn makes communities more vulnerable to additional shocks (e.g. climate shocks) (Peters et al., 2020). Climate hazards have a disproportionate impact on people who are already socially and economically vulnerable – the very people who are likely to be receiving or in need of humanitarian assistance. Climate shocks aggravate pre-existing inequalities and expose weaknesses in risk management and protection systems.

Displacement from climate-related disasters calls for humanitarian responses that are very similar to traditional refugee situations (UNHCR statement, 2020). Increasingly, these displaced people are mixing with existing refugee flows, requiring greater capacity on the part of humanitarian agencies to meet their basic needs. The destinations

for displaced people are often climate-stressed locations in their own right (ibid.). Indeed, people displaced by conflict are often then exposed to hazards such as droughts, floods, storms and heat.

Humanitarian organisations should be concerned because the impact of climate variability, climate change and disasters will increase humanitarian needs and worsen the challenges faced by communities struggling to survive because of conflict, insecurity or poverty. Preventive measures and actions must be taken, and scaled up, to save lives. More attention is also needed towards environmental protection in destinations that receive migrants, as well as the climate-affected locations they have left behind.

Climate variability and change can contribute to natural resource scarcity and, in turn, spur conflict

Evidence shows that, in some places, climate variability and change is among the drivers of natural resource scarcity and food insecurity (combining with other, direct drivers of scarcity, such as unsustainable land management). Scarcity of natural resources can, in turn, cause more overt competition for resources and increase the risk of instances or escalation of violent conflict. Climate change is therefore considered a ‘risk multiplier’.

Tensions around the use of water and land may contribute to forced displacement and limit the opportunities for voluntary return – heightening people’s vulnerability to further shocks and stresses (Spain statement, 2020).

Affected communities can become more vulnerable to recruitment by criminals and insurgent groups as they compete for scarce resources (Belgium statement, 2020). Afghanistan is a case in point: climate shocks are deepening poverty, increasing recruitment by armed groups and worsening water scarcity. Together, these phenomena are driving increased communal violence (Afghanistan statement, 2020).

Conflict also worsens food insecurity

Food insecurity, even famine, can be caused by climate shocks, and then ‘conflict makes this worse’ (United Kingdom statement, 2020). Violent conflict can prevent households from reaching their fields and accessing their crops. Millions of people face hunger across northeast Nigeria, the

Sahel, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen: these are all areas where climate and environmental risks coincide with violent conflict. More than 40% of countries facing food crisis confront the double burden of climate change and armed conflict (Norway statement, 2020).

As the adverse effects of climate variability and change increase, vulnerabilities compounded by conflict will grow. There is a need for deeper analysis of how humanitarian responses should adapt and bolster people’s resilience. There is also a need for increased awareness of how international humanitarian law can be enforced to protect the environment in contexts of armed conflict, and so protect the means of subsistence for civilians.

Climate-related disaster and conflict risk

The impact and increasing frequency of climate-related disasters in conflict contexts was frequently cited in the session as a primary concern, in which the identification and attainment of durable solutions is increasingly difficult as conflict and natural hazard-related disasters intersect (Afghanistan statement, 2020). This includes where conflict-affected communities with unmet protection needs become increasingly vulnerable to climate-related disasters (Norway statement, 2020). For example, ‘In Yemen, one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises, the situation intensified in the first half of the year when ongoing conflict, high Covid-19 infection rates combined with some of the worst flooding in years. [Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre] IDMC’s recent report shows that more than 160,000 people were newly displaced by conflict and drought in the first half of 2020’ (NRC statement, 2020).

Furthermore, as stressed by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and others, ‘Climate change is also projected to increase disaster displacement risk as extreme weather events become more frequent and intense. Other risk factors, such as rapid and unplanned urbanisation, population growth, poverty, and weak governance will also feed the risk and heighten the needs of those affected. In many countries we have seen how resilience decreases and displacement risks increase with every shock and stress – such as drought, violence, poverty – that a community is exposed to’ (NRC statement, 2020).

The challenge of cumulative risk was also stressed by Turkey (statement, 2020), which highlighted that ‘the interplay of climate-related disasters and conflicts are real and are becoming more common. People in conflict zones are not only forced to move from their homes due to conflict but are also forced to move more than once due to weather-related difficulties’. However, while ‘We have gradually accepted that there is an interplay between disasters, climate change and environmental degradation. This recognition has not yet officially transformed itself to a universally accepted and adapted response by humanitarian actors’ (ibid.). What is required is greater investment in disaster risk reduction in conflict contexts. Indeed, ‘within the scope of disaster risk reduction we should focus our efforts on how to develop schemes of resilience for countries that are prone to climate-related disasters. And, to provide mechanisms that will allow people in low-developed countries and areas of conflict to prepare for such disasters’ (ibid.).

Some field projects are already getting to grips with the ‘multiple disasters’ faced by communities (Oxfam statement, 2020). This means creating partnerships that promote economic security, environmental sustainability and peacebuilding simultaneously.

Gender, youth and other socially related vulnerabilities

Intersectional risks and impacts were also highlighted. People with less access to power and resources, such as women, indigenous people and children, face greater risks from environmental and linked shocks (Oxfam statement, 2020).

Even if there is no open, weaponised conflict, women and children often suffer insidious, hidden harms. For example, aid agencies note peaks in gender-based violence and child marriage at times of natural resource scarcity (Save the Children, Oxfam statements, 2020).

There is an urgent need for more and better gender- and child-centred responses. Among emergent good practice in this area, which could yield lessons for others, is the Government of Belgium’s partnership with Oxfam to help young people achieve economic security and peace in the Lake Chad region (Belgium statement, 2020).

The amplification effect of Covid-19

Finally, the challenge of Covid-19 was repeatedly stressed: ‘The ongoing pandemic has hit populations all over the world with devastating force. Many countries have also suffered a hard blow to their economy. In light of that, some may be reluctant to spend money on addressing climate change. However, that would be a costly mistake’ (Sweden statement, 2020).

Covid-19 is having negative repercussions across the world, with the economic downturn it has triggered having a disproportionate impact on the poorest, stoking socio-political tensions and putting into question the viability of climate finance commitments to address climate risks (Quevedo et al., 2020). Moreover, ‘Covid-19 has further fuelled both economic and social tensions in conflict or post-conflict situations, with serious implications for the most vulnerable populations’ (Maldives statement, 2020). In addressing these risks, ‘recovery from crises must not be driven by a zero-sum game of economy versus environment, or even health versus economy. As we recover from the Covid-19 crisis, we must adapt so that our systems are more resilient to future crisis. We must also assist countries experiencing the adverse effects of conflict and climate change to build back better, so that we may continue to progress towards a fair, equitable and sustainable future’ (ibid.). Covid-19 also presents an opportunity to ‘build back better’, investing in green economic recovery as an avenue to tackle unemployment, inequality and environmental degradation.

Action on the climate–conflict nexus: from dealing with increased caseloads to an overhaul of humanitarian systems

The moderator for the event, Katie Peters of ODI, reflected on humanitarian professionals’ experiences and ideas on how to deal with these compound risks. She argued that responses can be seen as lying on a continuum: from incremental changes to business as usual to a complete overhaul of humanitarian systems. Where governments and agencies choose to sit on this continuum depends in part on their mandate, operating context and

the maturity of national crisis and disaster risk management systems to deal with complex risks. This idea of a continuum has been used below to share ideas for action on the nexus, illustrated by extracts from official statements.

Preparing for increased humanitarian caseloads

At one end of the continuum, bilateral and multilateral agencies and non-governmental organisations are making changes to business as usual, by stepping up to the increasing humanitarian caseloads associated with changing hazards and risks in conflict and post-conflict contexts. This includes the rise in climate-related risks.

Governments and UN and humanitarian agencies were concerned with how to handle this. The discussion explored: how to better understand the impact of climate stresses on patterns of violent conflict? How to provide sufficient humanitarian response to slow- and sudden-onset climate hazards in conflict-affected contexts? How can humanitarians deal with conflict arising from climate stressors and environmental degradation, and their impacts on livelihoods and food security?

Insight from statements

- ‘Humanitarian actors are on the front line of these complex crises. They already have the difficult task of getting aid to those who need it. Of identifying needs and planning logistics. They now face the added complexity of having to anticipate needs arising from these inter-linked impacts’ (EU statement, 2020).
- ‘We need better and more focused support to humanitarian organisations, who are already struggling to cope with cumulative impacts of climate risks and conflicts, while being cautious of the environmental footprint of humanitarian interventions’ (Slovenia statement, 2020).
- The humanitarian sector will need to increase its capacity for dealing with larger numbers of displaced people overall, as those displaced by climate-related disasters mix with other flows of refugees (UNHCR statement, 2020).
- ‘Families are at risk of climate shocks and [conflict] with Covid. Malnutrition and starvation will soon be a reality. In recent

times, many saw education disrupted due to malnutrition and conflict. Covid has disrupted an entire generation ... many in conflict situations and especially girls risk never going back to school. Displacement increases risks of child labour, and girls, of child marriage. We call on donors to respond to these acute needs’ (Save the Children statement, 2020).

Scaling up early action before hazards strike

Other actors called for moving beyond business as usual humanitarian interventions, recognising that these provide only a partial response to the challenges posed by the climate–conflict nexus. Many argued that solutions lie in accelerating anticipatory action (e.g. Germany statement, 2020), whereby disaster agencies use forecasts about the likely impacts of a climate hazard to take early measures to avoid loss and damage. These measures can range from evacuating people out of harm’s way, to taking protective measures for property and assets, to distributing cash to households identified as vulnerable. There is substantial potential to scale up pilot initiatives for anticipatory action and expand their geographical coverage – and a need to design preventative measures for adoption in conflict contexts. Other proposals for strengthening the humanitarian architecture included addressing gaps in data management and ‘impact forecasting’ by combining data on climate, environment and violence, and strengthening disaster risk management systems in conflict contexts.

Insight from statements

- OCHA stressed how early action saves lives and money. Using increasing forecasting capacity, pre-positioned financing can be triggered ahead of a climate hazard to fund anticipatory action. This is already a priority, with the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) providing allocations of this kind (OCHA statement, 2020).
- ‘We need to improve early warning and preventive action tools and conflict-forecasting models to include climate information into conflict analyses and operational plans. We also need to integrate conflict analysis into climate scenarios, as well as mitigation and adaptation efforts. We

should increase investment in disaster risk reduction, preparedness to climate shocks, resilience work, adaptive capacities and strengthened conflict sensitivity across the entire system' (Finland statement, 2020).

- There is a 'need to improve early warning, risk analysis and enhancing UN system capacity to address current challenges related to Covid-19, climate-related security risks and operational response. Design climate-sensitive conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding interventions. We therefore welcome the increased attention and debates on this matter within the UN [Security Council] SC' (Slovenia statement, 2020).
- 'Investing in new human centred technologies to improve climate risk forecasting, ensuring that countries affected by conflict have the tools to anticipate and prevent climate stress' (Slovenia statement, 2020).
- Alongside greater investment in early warning systems, risk reduction, and anticipatory capacities, '[The International Organization for Migration (IOM), with UN partners] is playing its role in supporting countries to strengthen preparedness and climate risk reductions and management, and support community stabilisation and recovery' (IOM statement, 2020).
- 'Where [humanitarian work] used to be exclusively response-driven, it now also needs to anticipate and focus on strengthening resilience of vulnerable communities' using data and analysis to 'further our understanding and develop innovative tools' (Belgium statement, 2020).
- 'Solutions that integrate early warning tools, forecast-based anticipatory action, prevention and preparedness strategies to build resilience ... We are exploring innovative schemes to support communities in becoming more resilient, such as risk-based financing for anticipatory action or adapted models of insurance. And we are working to ensure that our humanitarian response lays the foundations for a sustainable and long-term recovery' (EU statement, 2020).

Rethinking the humanitarian system

More radical propositions may be needed to ensure that the humanitarian system is sufficiently equipped to address the climate challenge. The intention of such changes would be to encourage and enable humanitarian actors to support the transformation of development trajectories towards net-zero and climate-resilient pathways. The moderator, Katie Peters, put forward some ideas for what this could entail. This could require humanitarian actors to set and achieve ambitious, net-zero emissions targets and 'climate-proofed' operational goals (where climate risks are identified and managed over the timeframe of the investment). This could include, importantly, a changed way of working to assist people to move into secure and adaptive low-carbon, environmentally sustainable futures. People should be partners in climate-compatible development – instead of being 'beneficiaries' or mere recipients of short-term relief. Furthermore, transformation of the sector would require humanitarian agencies to intentionally incorporate longer-term peacebuilding goals into their work. Although it was challenging to articulate what such changes could look like, we did hear a number of ideas from government and agency representatives.

Insight from statements

- '[W]e need to address the root-causes and be transformative – Switzerland supports communities to invest in environmental regeneration, sustainable management of land, water and forests; be it in rural or urban areas or around camp settlements. This requires context specific in-depth analysis and understanding of underlying socio-economic vulnerabilities and calls for empowerment, inclusion and equality of vulnerable people' (Switzerland statement, 2020).
- '[W]ithin the scope of disaster risk reduction we should focus our efforts on how to develop schemes of resilience for countries that are prone to climate-related disasters. And, to provide mechanisms that will allow people in low-developed countries and areas of conflict to prepare for such disasters' (Turkey statement, 2020).
- OCHA pointed to the need to scale up adaptation finance, invest in risk reduction

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- and risk management, and support social safety net systems (OCHA statement, 2020).
- Slovenia pointed to the need to invest in adaptation and resilience-building, including at the community level, which is critical to conflict prevention (Slovenia statement, 2020).
 - Niger called for the implementation of ambitious targets to halt land degradation, in order to prevent ecosystems from degrading further and forcing people's displacement, and investing in agricultural enrichment activities and other income-generating activities, such as sustainable harvest of non-timber forest products. Niger urged concrete policy measures and incentives to promote the use of diverse and more resilient cropping systems, climate-smart agriculture and the promotion of economic opportunities for migrants returning to their home locations – for those displaced by climate and conflict (Niger statement, 2020).
 - Redressing gender-based discrimination and empowering women and girls should be at the heart of humanitarian responses, in recognition that 'people with less access to power and resources – such as women, indigenous people and children – face greater risks. The impacts of climate-related shocks are felt most profoundly in fragile contexts, where climate acts as a "threat multiplier", both aggravating existing larger-scale conflicts and affecting lower-scale communal violence' (Oxfam statement, 2020).
 - On solutions, Oxfam emphasised the importance of partnership with and support to local humanitarian actors on the 'frontline', and the need to channel more resources to local organisations, especially local women's groups dedicated to combined peacebuilding and humanitarian activities. This message was reinforced by the United Kingdom, pointing to the need to enhance the role of women in conflict prevention (United Kingdom statement, 2020).

'Green' environmental considerations

'Greening' the humanitarian system

In complement to the diversity of perspectives on the actions required to address this nexus, commitment to emissions reduction was

repeatedly reaffirmed in the session. UNHCR, for example, spoke of the need to 'ensure a reduction of our own carbon footprint; a smaller footnote that should not be forgotten' (UNHCR statement, 2020). Many humanitarian donors and operational agencies have for some time been 'greening' their operations, as well as considering more specifically the environmental impact of humanitarian operations. Norway noted its commitment to climate mitigation, and promoting sustainable and environmentally friendly humanitarian operations. Furthermore, many states recognised the need for coherence, as 'actions taken in response to climate or environmental emergencies should be complementary to our long-term mitigation and adaptation efforts' (Malta statement, 2020).

Protecting the environment

Conflict can further degrade the natural environment through the active destruction of animal and plant life – e.g. via the use of incendiary devices or defoliating agents – or through pollution that harms people and other species directly or indirectly – e.g. via spillage or release of chemical substances. Conflict can also harm the environment and its biodiversity by changing the movement of people and their use of natural resources. For example, movements of armed groups or displaced people into previously undisturbed habitats may reduce the survival prospects for species that are susceptible to human disturbance: either due to direct exploitation (e.g. increased hunting or harvesting of fragile species) or indirect effects (e.g. species' feeding or breeding efforts fail due to increased human disturbance).

- There is a need to better enforce international humanitarian law 'to regulate environmental damages deriving from conflicts' (Slovenia statement, 2020).
- The ICRC released an updated 'Guidelines on the protection of the natural environment in armed conflict', highlighting that 'international humanitarian law can provide a framework for designating areas of particular biological diversity as demilitarised zones during armed conflict, and can protect these fragile hotspots from additional degradation' (ICRC statement, 2020).

Commitments from the floor

As part of their formal statements, many governments, donors and agencies made concrete commitments to action (see Box 2).

Recommendations

There is broad consensus that urgent action is required to address linked climate change, conflict and environmental risks ‘in a coherent and interlinked manner, fostering an integrated approach across the humanitarian–development–peacebuilding nexus in a system-wide approach’ (Finland statement, 2020).

Durable solutions are required that demand working in coherence across the humanitarian, development and peace dimensions (Austria, Switzerland statements, 2020).

This is not just a technocratic exercise. The importance of political will to address causes of conflict and bring about peace was also stressed (Egypt statement, 2020), alongside the need to uphold commitments to the protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law (Austria statement, 2020).

In concluding the event, Katie Peters of ODI noted that a changed humanitarian system needs to be placed within a broader collective effort:

- to keep average global temperature rise as low as possible, to limit climate change-induced damage to land, water, oceans and related ecosystems;
- to advance climate-resilient development in conflict contexts, which at a minimum avoid locking in high-emission pathways for the future; and
- to more effectively manage the number and compounding nature of sudden- and slow-onset risks in conflict contexts, by strengthening disaster risk management systems and capacities.

Above all, we need the patient, and intentional, fusion of environmental protection and restoration work with conflict resolution and the cultivation of economic and political stability.

Box 2 UN Member State and UN and humanitarian agency commitments

The following commitments were made as part of the UNGA75 event:

- As part of its upcoming UN Security Council membership for the 2021–2022 term, Ireland committed to focus on the interplay between climate and security, both through its position in the Council and in other forums within the UN. It committed to work with Niger to continue to call for a UN Special Representative on Climate and Security.
- Austria doubled its humanitarian budget in 2020 owing to the humanitarian impact of Covid-19 and the impacts of climate change, and pledged to take into account within this the relationship between climate change, conflict and environmental risks.
- Norway committed to increase support for climate adaptation and resilience, with a focus on food security. Norway also committed to supporting Niger’s efforts on the climate–environment–conflict intersection.
- Germany committed to maintaining its efforts to operationalise the UN Security Council’s Informal Expert Group as part of a broader effort to understand the complex interdependency of different risks.
- Sweden, together with the UN World Food Programme (WFP), UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) and the Swedish Red Cross, co-hosted the Stockholm high-level meeting on ‘Addressing the humanitarian impact of climate change’ on 21 October 2020.
- UNDRR (2020) highlighted their new report *Scaling up disaster risk reduction in humanitarian action*, which outlines concrete recommendations including on dealing with linked climate- and conflict-related risks.
- Afghanistan, Austria and Ireland made commitments to address the gendered aspects of linked climate and conflict risk.

Action for the twenty-first century

The following are specific recommendations for political leaders who set the ambition for humanitarian response, and for the agencies responsible for delivering it:

- Humanitarian agencies have significant opportunities to green their operations. This has several distinct facets:
 - First, humanitarian agencies can establish a baseline carbon footprint (if they have not already done so) and monitoring processes and action plans for reducing this footprint over time. The nature of rapid-reaction emergency relief missions – involving inherent uncertainty about where and when missions will need to be deployed and the sheer diversity and complexity of supply chains and procurements – creates some challenges for establishing the baseline and processes to reduce emissions over time. However, initial action and learning by public and private agencies can and should be accelerated (see, for example, a recent study on the environmental footprint of humanitarian assistance commissioned by the European Commission (DG ECHO) (Brageon and Crowley, 2020)). Even where longer-term relief efforts are addressing protracted crises, where the locations of interventions are well known (for example, Lake Chad basin), there may be substantial challenges and trade-offs involved in greening supply chains due to the immaturity of ‘eco-friendly’ suppliers in proximate markets. Again, this is an area for further scoping, rapid trial and assessment, and learning.
 - Second, the very fast shift in the economics of renewable energy technologies deserves a special mention for the opportunities it offers to cut costs and emissions. The dramatically lower cost of renewable energy technologies such as solar photovoltaic and solar water heating has made them more financially attractive than many fossil fuel alternatives (such as diesel generators), and they are also operationally reliable and convenient. They avoid deleterious local pollution effects that pose public health hazards (e.g. diesel spills, unburned hydrocarbon and particulate matter in air pollution, in addition to the nitrous oxides and carbon dioxides that drive global warming).
- Third, the environmental impact of humanitarian aid agencies’ work goes far beyond their greenhouse gas emissions, and pertains to their environmental impact or footprint more broadly. At the point of humanitarian service delivery, avoiding and remediating environmental pollution, including solid waste management and disposal, requires measurement, monitoring and action plans. From a broader, integrated perspective, the environmental impact of entire supply chains (with its implications for procurement standards and practices) is also important. Opportunities for humanitarian agencies to drive down environmental impacts of procured goods and services from cradle to grave and support the ‘circular economy’ include measures to reduce plastic use, especially single-use plastic where feasible; utilise recycled and recyclable or biodegradable products where possible; ensure products in the supply chain are Forest Stewardship Council-certified or otherwise avoiding deforestation; and support the protection of biodiversity-rich habitats.
- One of the most important steps humanitarian agencies can take is to establish teams of in-house environment and energy experts to champion the development and implementation of environmental policies and report on progress to senior management. They can also form a sector-wide cadre of environmental professionals to drive understanding and operational excellence.
- There is a need for partnerships between meteorological organisations (public and private) and humanitarian actors to scale up delivery of ‘anticipatory action’, particularly in conflict contexts. In some regional and national contexts, seasonal forecasting and near-term weather forecasts have substantially increased in accuracy in recent years: the Greater Horn

of Africa Climate Outlook Forum (GHACOF) is one example (WISER, 2020). Improved meteorological and impact forecasts provide a substantial opportunity for donors and aid agencies to identify where and when an extreme weather event is likely to occur, and how people and assets could be affected. This can enable them to fast-track personnel, supplies and, where appropriate, cash transfers to affected communities, to avoid foreseeable losses and damage from forecast extreme events. In some regions, the skill of meteorological and impact forecasts is still weak, due to a combination of poor meteorological observation and monitoring infrastructure and lack of skills training and funding (including much of sub-Saharan Africa) (WISER, 2020). Sustained investment in weather and climate information services is imperative. This includes long-term donor commitment to put these services on a sustainable footing and to support effective anticipatory action in the low-income and conflict-affected contexts that need it most (Wilkinson et al., 2018; Dupar et al., forthcoming).

- The delivery of climate-compatible and environmentally sustainable relief and development requires an urgent focus on the specific intersectional needs of children, adolescents, women and socially disadvantaged groups, such as indigenous people, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities. Their voices and concerns remain insufficiently heard. At times of crisis, the risks they face are different from those of adult and able-bodied men. Specific legal instruments may need to be strengthened or more strongly enforced to protect their rights. Women's and children's roles and responsibilities in crisis situations – as shaped by social and cultural norms – are also different from adult men's, especially with regard to the management of water and other natural resources such as fuel wood, and their exposure to environmental contaminants may also differ. Work to improve the environmental sustainability of humanitarian interventions should collect gender- and age-disaggregated data and commit agencies to developing gender-, ability- and age-responsive delivery plans.
- Managing disaster risk proactively through strengthened disaster risk governance systems in conflict contexts is urgently required. Donors investing in climate and disaster risk management should consider how to adapt or create new initiatives for contexts of armed and violent conflict, and to do so in ways that not only engage non-government actors but also support governments and national disaster management agencies seeking to achieve the ambitions set out within their national disaster risk reduction strategies. In complement, the Sendai Framework Monitor should be utilised to track progress on the Sendai Framework in contexts of armed conflict and violence, supported by independent assessments. UNDRR and governments could take this forward during the coming decade of implementation. Operational support is also required to 'conflict-sensitise' disaster risk management interventions, and to devise effective means to cope with increased climate-related disaster impacts in conflict contexts. Building on the recommendations in Peters (2019) on disaster risk reduction in conflict contexts would be a useful starting point.
- Existing legal instruments can be utilised to strengthen people's protection, given that the climate emergency is linked in several ways to displacement (UNHCR statement, 2020). Population movements create gaps in legal protection for displaced people. Governments could do a lot more to apply the 'useful elements' in existing legal instruments to address these gaps. For example, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1969) and the Organization of American States' Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (1984) both contain provisions that could be used to address protection gaps more effectively (ibid.).
- The task of reforming the humanitarian sector to adequately address the links

between climate change, environmental degradation and conflict, and the potential for humanitarian aid agencies to contribute to solutions – both via in-situ operations and via their broader operations and supply chains – requires an international action plan with governments’ political backing and involvement, coordination at the UN level, and active participation by public and private humanitarian agencies. The scope of ambition and multi-stakeholder involvement should be similar in scope to – for example – the five-year Lima Advanced Work Programme on Gender and Gender Action Plan in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process. The UN Secretary-General should consider reporting more regularly and comprehensively to Member States on the impact of climate change in a multi-risk context, and devise a climate, environment

and conflict action plan. This would require cross-agency and multi-stakeholder participation at the UN High-Level Political Forum, given its relevance across the Sustainable Development Goals.

- Finally, further financial, technical and political support is required to strengthen the Climate Security Mechanism (UN DPPA, n.d.). The Climate Security Mechanism was formed in 2018 with the support of Sweden, Norway, Germany and the UK. It brings together the UN Development Programme, Department for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and UN Environment Programme to address links between climate change, peace and security in the UN system. It has already generated a toolbox, but there is vast potential for the profile and application of its work to be scaled up. A UN Special Envoy for Climate Security should also be appointed.

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ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ

+44 (0)20 7922 0300
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