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Assessment, monitoring and early warning: state of the environment

Environment and Security: a Global Agenda for UNEP

Note by the Executive Director

Summary

The annex to the present note provides information on the activities of UNEP in integrating conflict prevention. The annex has been issued without formal editing.

* UNEP/GC.23/1.

Annex

1. Introduction

1. There is increasing evidence that environmental neglect, mismanagement and decline increase the probability of conflict and thereby pose a risk to human and even national security. Unsustainable land management practises, environmental pollution and global atmospheric change are having significant impacts on human systems. Improper mining practises bring the danger of hazardous waste spills and cross-border pollution. The lack of integrated and environmentally sound river basin management causes downstream pollution, water shortages or flooding. Uncontrolled hunting and poaching devaluates tourist attractions and deprive people of income and livelihood. In short, ignoring environmental problems and imperatives puts stress on human relations and may increase the probability of violent conflict.

2. From a different perspective, military conflicts and wars do not respect environmental limitations or imperatives. UNEP's post-conflict assessment work has demonstrated that after a war, a costly and much needed process of restoring the environment is needed.

3. The degradation of shared natural resources and transboundary environmental pollution can both lead to international tension and, in some cases, political instability. Often environmental stress is not the major source of political instability, but it can be an important contributing factor. There is also considerable evidence that environmental cooperation helps to ease political tensions, and create an atmosphere of peace, stability and cooperation.

4. With political interests increasingly focusing on prevention or resolution of conflicts, there exists an opportunity for UNEP and other environmental organizations to promote environmental cooperation with an emphasis on its value for conflict prevention and resolution.

2. UNEP's mandate

5. The mandate for the UN and UNEP in the area of environment and security derives from the UN Secretary General, who in his report A/55/985-S/2001/574 to the General Assembly and the Security Council reminds that "conflict prevention is one of the primary obligations of Member States set forth in the Charter of the United Nations". The report emphasizes that "one of the principal aims of preventive actions should be to address the deep-rooted social-economic, cultural, environmental, institutional and other structural causes that often underlie the immediate political symptoms of conflicts". In July 2003, the General Assembly responded with resolution A/RES/57/337 calling upon all UN relevant organs, organizations and bodies "to consider, in accordance with their respective mandates, how they could best include a conflict prevention perspective in their activities, where appropriate" (para. 11).

6. In his report A/58/323 to the General Assembly, on the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, the Secretary General affirmed that:

"the more immediate concern for most of our fellow human beings is with 'soft threats' to their security, such as those posed by environmental problems ... and simple poverty, which makes people more vulnerable to threats of almost every kind" (para 32).

and that:

"the implications of the security of a number of natural resources, the mismanagement or depletion of such resources and unequal access to them should also be recognized as potential causes of conflict and should be more systematically addressed as such by the international community".

7. An additional source of mandate for UNEP on environment and security is the Montevideo Programme III, which addresses linkages between security and the environment, and encourages the "consideration of environmental issues in policies, law and institutions related to national, regional and global security".

8. UNEP has recognized the connection between environmental change and security for over 30 years. The organization helped convene the negotiations that resulted in the 1977 Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques, or ENMOD Treaty, in response to the controversial use of defoliants in Southeast Asia in the 1970s. Environment and security concerns featured prominently in *Our Common Future*, the 1987 report that set the agenda for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. UNEP sponsored research by the world's leading peace research institutes on environment's contributions to conflict and instability is on-going. Beginning in the late 1990s, the organization has conducted post-war environmental impact assessments in several parts of the world. Finally, UNEP's Regional Office for Europe has partnered with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Organization on Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) to identify environment and conflict hotspots in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

3. Understanding environment, conflict and cooperation

9. The relationship between environmental degradation and political instability is poorly understood. This is true whether the connection is between environment and security or, more specifically, between environment and violent conflict. Accordingly, policymakers have not developed reliable interventions to address these relationships. The international community — including the United Nations — increasingly recognizes that these gaps in our understanding also prevent us from developing cooperative mechanisms for peace building and conflict prevention. There is a need for more systematic assessment of the links between environment and security and a more careful consideration of the important links between environmental degradation/resources and development.

10. The Secretary-General's concerns that were outlined above are shared by national governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and scientific institutions. In 2003, UNEP surveyed these actors about their environmental assessment needs as part of its Governing Council's effort to strengthen the scientific base of the organization. All four categories of respondents ranked environment and conflict as one of the most important thematic areas poorly covered by "existing global environmental assessments".

11. Some of the key issues that need to be addressed to better understand environment, conflict and cooperation include: situating problems in broader context; engaging with literature on conflict and cooperation; conducting fine-grained, micro-level analysis; improving analysis of environmental effects of violent conflict; testing the claim that environmental conservation supports cooperation; studying the urban dimension; clarifying links between demography and environmental security; advancing the debate between scarcity and abundance theories; developing analytical tools that can integrate knowledge about vulnerability and capacity; and expanding methodological tools to include qualitative methods and new visualization technologies. Additionally, these five approaches need to be assessed as to their efficacy in improving policymaking: determine which conservation strategies promote cooperation; integrate development and environmental policy; incorporate environmental security into urban development and planning; deepen understanding of environmental policies in post-conflict situations; and rigorously assess the effectiveness and sustainability of policy interventions.

12. To date, efforts to address environment and conflict have been relatively undeveloped, and surprisingly few major international institutions have attempted to tackle this agenda collaboratively. Recommendations from recent workshops organized by UNEP have stressed that assessments and early warning systems integrate environmental variables more completely and effectively. While early warning of conflict, rather than early warning of significant environmental change, clearly extends beyond UNEP's mandate, dialogue with the early warning community can enable the environmental community to share input with these larger assessment and early warning systems. The capacity of the international system to monitor and assess conflict and cooperation on environmental issues is low, because there are few incentives to carry out high-quality assessments or monitoring exercises; the necessary data are not available; and there is not enough experimentation, testing, and innovation of new methodologies.

13. The field of environment, conflict, and cooperation is a complex issue that only empirical data, multi-level analysis, interdisciplinary cooperation, and integrated assessment can sort out. Thus an analytical framework must be built to sever the bonds linking environmental conditions to violent conflict while using mutual dependency on environmental resources as pathways to confidence-building and cooperation.

4. Environment and security in operation

a Post-conflict assessment

14. In a post-conflict context, proper environmental management is essential for reconstruction efforts and long-term peace and stability. To achieve this objective, the UNEP Post-Conflict Assessment Unit (PCAU) was established in 2001 to conduct strategic assessments of post-conflict environmental problems. The assessments identify immediate risks to human health and livelihoods, and provide recommendations on priorities for clean-up, sustainable resource use and for strengthening environmental governance.

15. Since the development of the programme, UNEP PCAU has conducted post-conflict activities in Afghanistan, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq, Liberia, the occupied Palestinian territories, Serbia and Montenegro, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. UNEP has also joined the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) process as the focal point for environmental issues in Haiti, Iraq, Liberia and Sudan. Technical advice and information management services is being provided by UNEP to the United Nations Compensation Commission (UNCC) concerning various environmental compensation claims from the 1991 Gulf War.

b Pre-conflict early warning

16. The challenge of building peace, confidence and cooperation around environmental problems and challenges involving security risks emerged strongly in Europe, a continent undergoing drastic political changes after the split-up of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and with an expanding European Union. Following an increasing number of requests from countries or groups of countries for assistance in assessing and addressing “conflict-prone environmental problems”, UNEP, UNDP and OSCE combined their interests, capacity and expertise in devising, launching and implementing a response strategy, entitled the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC).

17. ENVSEC aims at using the environmental arena for conflict prevention work and vice versa. It seeks to create and implement win-win opportunities which advance and protect peace and the environment at the same time while promoting and securing development patterns which are sustainable in the long run. The Initiative combines the mandate and operational powers of OSCE in the area of cooperation and security, of UNDP in promoting sustainable livelihoods and of UNEP in assessing and addressing environmental change.

18. NATO’s Public Diplomacy Programme joined ENVSEC as an associate, bringing in expertise on the border between research, State security and social and environmental imperatives.

19. To date, ENVSEC has adopted a relatively “light” and straightforward approach to help address environment-security interactions in regions, countries and subregions in Europe:

- from ASSESSMENT, participatory identification, mapping and prioritization of environmental problems posing security risks and offering challenges or opportunities for cooperation,
- through OUTREACH (awareness-raising, early warning), POLICY exchanges and joint programming and fundraising, “implanting” environmental factors in political decision-making and allocation of funds (among national Governments, foreign aid agencies),
- to CAPACITY-BUILDING and IMPLEMENTATION, promoting and catalysing specific solutions for the identified security-relevant environmental problems on the ground.

20. The approach leans on UNEP’s expertise in assessment, including both the “slow and continuous” competence of the Division of Early Warning and Assessment and the rapid approach used in post-conflict settings. ENVSEC assessments are usually “nested”, so that after a general-level regional exercise (such as in Central Asia, the Balkans or the Caucasus at large) follows an in-depth evaluation of specific environment-security “hot spot” areas or dimensions (Ferghana valley in Central Asia, disputed Nagorny Karabakh area in the Caucasus, cross-border risks from mining in South-Eastern Europe). Assessment is, however, only one element in the “pipeline approach” of ENVSEC, directly leading to the following steps and in practice helping define their priorities.

21. During the “post-assessment” steps, UNEP continues to play a role in areas of its core expertise such as early warning, outreach and awareness-raising, and legal and institutional capacity-building, while other areas of capacity-building and implementation are taken on by partners with more appropriate resources, such as UNDP and OSCE with their strong field presence or NATO with its conveyor of R&D projects. All organizations however remain involved in decision-making on priorities and next steps, and as much as resources allow directly participate in activities led by others.

22. One interesting consequence of the European approach has been that ENVSEC by its “security face” has attracted a stable interest of circles not normally paying much attention to environmental issues, such the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in both recipient and donor countries. ENVSEC consultations and processes involve much wider networks than Ministries of the Environment alone, including in addition to MoEs and MFAs also Health, Defence, Industry, Agriculture, Internal Affairs and National Security authorities. Thereby ENVSEC makes a significant contribution to “mainstreaming” the environment in governmental policies and programmes. It is also easy to envisage that the private sector may in the future play a more significant role in ENVSEC, for instance in relation to mining issues in the Balkans or industrial activities in Central Asia.

23. All in all, the approach has allowed UNEP to:

- extensively use its existing core expertise in assessment and environmental capacity building in a new and innovative context;
- play a catalytic role conflict prevention and environmental improvement by partnering with relevant organizations which have complementary mandates and resources;
- attract attention and catalyse responses to vital environmental concerns from within much broader circles than typically constitute UNEP’s usual readership.

24. In the long run, UNEP’s profile and visibility as well as impact through addressing and hopefully resolving real concerns can be expected to grow, and to be increasingly acknowledged and recognized.

25. Both in Europe and elsewhere, the ENVSEC approach directly complements the highly successful work of UNEP’s Post-Conflict Assessment Unit, which addresses the other side of the environment – conflict – environment cycle, looking at the impacts on the environment and creation of capacities to mitigate them following a conflict, in the unfortunate event that a conflict could not after all be avoided.

5. Future outlook

26. Based on its analysis and assessment of the environment and security nexus and the positive development of the ENVSEC initiative in Europe and Central Asia, UNEP intends to strengthen its role and involvement in the area while expanding the scope of application of its work.

27. UNEP’s regional offices, in close cooperation with DEWA and their outposts, being close to the real problems of “their” countries, are natural entry points. Many of them already see the advantages of structuring some of their activities along the environment-security dimension. Informal consultations with ROLAC and ROWA easily reveal environment-security issues, opportunities and relevant processes in these regions. In Africa, where UNEP is increasingly engaged in environment-security issues, the theme becomes potentially highly relevant in the context of NEPAD implementation and strengthening the security dimension of the African Union. (An Africa-focused conference “Understanding Environment, Conflict and Cooperation” was co-sponsored by RONA in Washington D.C. on 6 October 2004.) There are certainly environment-security issues in the Arctic, where some of the Arctic Governments are keen to explore and address them.

28. Following the logic described above, under consideration are a number of elements of setting UNEP’s global agenda for environment and security, including the following:

a Global environment-security assessment, mapping exercise and awareness raising campaign

29. Assessments done in a participatory and politically-sensitive manner to identify, analyse, explain and highlight general issues and priorities on the global scale in an easily understandable manner. (One opportunity may be to link such an exercise with the GEO process).

30. The “environment and security” brand will have to become known and public launches of “flagship products” and targeted publicity must visualize and promote globally the value of the initiative.

b Regional assessment, consultations and work programmes for implementation

31. A global “matrix” of issues and priorities vis-à-vis regions and countries will open doors for moving the follow-up work into the regions with a view to building and operating necessary partnerships (e.g., with security organizations with roles similar to that of OSCE in Europe, regional development banks etc.). Regional-scale environment-security assessments will help UNEP and its regional partners define concrete priorities for operations, focusing implementation, awareness and resource mobilization efforts on the identified problems and “hot spots”. In that follow-up work, UNEP can play both a catalytic and implementing role, similar to the experience in Europe.

c Management, coordination and innovation

32. Within UNEP, a “special assignment” team, with adequate human power and resources, can facilitate the process working as both the “engine” and an interface between the Headquarters, substantive divisions and regional offices.

d Understanding environment, conflict and cooperation

33. UNEP should continue to link with underlying research and analysis of environment-security linkages, through collaboration and organization of think tanks, research institutes and other parts of the scientific community.
