

W O M E N W I T H O U T B O R D E R S

CLIMATE CHANGE AND TERRORISM – A NEW ALLIANCE?

*The Case for Reviving Multilateralism and
Re-Imagining Hard Power**

A POLICY PAPER BY

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THE POLICY CONTEXT.

The world is at an inflection point in the global race to find solutions to the mounting climate change crisis. In this policy paper, the authors apply an integrated approach to point to the apparent neglect of a climate change focus in conjunction with broader dynamics, including geopolitical conflict, gender-based violence, and disaffected youth vulnerable to violent extremism. While studies have tended to focus on the role of 'climate insecurity' as a risk multiplier, few view it as a direct driver of violent extremism. A growing evidence base notwithstanding, the link between climate change and violent extremism continues to be viewed with hesitation. Contemporary counterterrorism and preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) approaches are mainly confined to direct causal factors geared towards prevention and reaction. However, shifting peace and security developments call for a closer examination of innate causal factors, such as the impact of climate change on violent extremist recruitment and resurgence. Existing policies are insufficient in addressing the impact of climate change. More recent research in pursuit of mitigating strategies is pointing to the nexus between climate-related disasters and heightened vulnerability to violent extremism. A chief concern and direct consequence are the rising susceptibility of adolescents and young adults to violent extremist ideologies. Against this background, the authors argue that the interplay between terrorism, organised crime, and climate change—and specifically how it appears to be fuelling violent extremist engagement—warrants our full attention.



THE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.

While UN Member States must once again more fully embrace multilateral work, international organisations like the UN should reconsider their spending priorities that still focus too heavily on traditional 'hard' security issues (e.g. military preparedness and non-proliferation, arms control, disarmament, and counterterrorism). If resources were to be reallocated to reflect current developments, the authors propose that policymakers consider the following seven recommendations:

- 1. Implement climate change mitigation efforts to address violent extremism.*
- 2. Integrate local, regional, and global gendered P/CVE approaches into climate change action plans.*
- 3. Fund, develop, and grow international and sub-regional organisations' climate change networks.*

4. *Create more sub-regional activities and dialogues for exchanging ideas, comparing context-specific dynamics, and sharing climate change implementation outcomes.*
5. *Supplement assistance with resources by going beyond short training interventions.*
6. *Reframe economic and security issues in an integrated manner as a driver of violent extremism and climate change.*
7. *Facilitate civil society engagement in existing expert-driven efforts on climate change in P/CVE.*

THE UNADDRESSED NEXUS BETWEEN SOFT AND HARD SECURITY THREATS?

A renewed sense of optimism in the fight against climate change following the COVID-19 lockdown era turned out to be short-lived. Just as efforts in addressing the climate crisis fell short of the mark, so did alleviating global poverty, solving water shortages, and coordinating collective conservation ambitions. In hindsight, the pandemic ended up exacerbating a myriad of issues, with radicalisation among them. Prolonged periods of isolation at home, for instance, made individuals more susceptible to disinformation rabbit holes.

Despite the gloomy outlook, successful multilateral meetings have the potential to build consensus. Tackling climate change requires a collective decision to embark on security work with unexpected partners, and to consider restructuring the resource sharing burden—namely by tapping into hard security funds to support work on the underlying conditions leading to a rise in violent extremism. The recent resurgence of populist ideas and policies have hampered political will to redirect a portion of hard power resources to addressing the root causes of violent extremism. Adding to this, community capacity building, educational programmes, and youth empowerment initiatives, for example, tend already to be viewed overwhelmingly as separate to traditional security

capacity building. In our view, the dual approach should strongly complement each other to effectively mitigate risk factors. Terrorism remains one of the most lethal transnational threats to peace and security; hence, the need for a unified effort cannot be underestimated.

“ *On climate change, multilateral bodies must seize the chance to breathe life back into conflict prevention and confidence-building tools* ”

Multilateralism should address the interrelated nature of both hard and soft power on the one hand, and various crises on the other hand. It must go beyond focusing merely on

traditional threats by linking these to non-traditional security threats (e.g. climate, water, and natural habitat).¹ These are inter-connected and pressing peace and security concerns, the world over. Non-traditional and traditional threats together act as a Molotov cocktail. While traditional security concerns have given rise to a large counterterrorism architecture in the wake of the ‘War on Terror’, non-traditional security concerns remain comparatively underexposed and unaddressed.

On climate change, multilateral bodies must seize the chance to breathe life back into conflict prevention and confidence-building tools, which can serve as a valuable resource and partner for regions most at risk. While current global disagreements feed the reluctance to embrace preventive diplomacy when addressing climate change and violent extremism, there should be a forward-looking call for leadership to expand the definition of transnational and non-traditional security challenges as core work. Moreover, the linkages between the effects of

¹ At present, the trend remains bleak to make this shift. UN Climate Change Conference demonstrated mixed constructive engagement by oil, coal and gas producers; UN, COP26: “Together for our planet,” COP28, 2023, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/cop26>

‘Record Number of Fossil Fuel Lobbyists Allowed to Attend COP28 Climate Talks, Campaigners Say’; Frost Rosie, “COP28 Record fossil fuel lobbyists, Europe’s deadly emissions and cooling pledges on day 6,” (Euronews, 2023), 1. <https://www.euronews.com/green/2023/12/05/cop28-record-number-of-fossil-fuel-lobbyists-at-un-climate-conference-campaigners-say>

climate change and the risks of recruitment to violent extremism are now well known. The evidence base has grown substantially over the last two decades, owed to a sizeable pool of experts, data, and research pointing to this nexus.² We can thus move from calls to understand the issue towards translating research into action.

A GLIMPSE OF THE TRENDS IN AFRICA

As the Horn of Africa and the Sahel grapple with pervasive security threats, terrorism and climate change are working in alarming harmony. Yet early warning detection mechanisms and conflict analysis are failing to adequately capture this relationship. The Al-Qaeda affiliated group Al-Shabaab is based in Somalia but has spill-over effects on recruitment dynamics across East Africa. The Kenyan coast and Somali border are prime examples of such high fragility areas.

“ *Terrorism and climate change are working in alarming harmony* ”

Research recommendations increasingly are proposing climate-related disasters and recruitment trends could be tackled in tandem by addressing grievances and vulnerabilities, especially at the local level. Heightened marginalisation and deepening grievances—which have been fuelled considerably by the climate crisis—appear to rank at the top of community push factors favouring radicalisation. Communities, in turn, have become more susceptible to extremist ideologies in these spill-over areas.

² See for example; Bourekba Moussa, “Climate Change and Violent Extremism in North Africa,” Spotlight Study (Barcelona Centre for International Affairs CIDOB, 2021), 15-16. <https://www.cascades.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CASACADES-Case-Study-Violent-extremism-and-climate-change-in-North-Africa-Moussa-Bourekba-CIDOB-Oct-2021.pdf>

Further, “The US Department of Defence has longstanding efforts on the impact of changing climate conditions on defence infrastructure and the operating environment; Burke Sharon, “Achieving Climate Security, Discussion Paper 23-006,” (United States Institute of Peace USIP, 2023), 24. https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/dp_23-006_achieving-climate-security.pdf

In 2019, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute made the case that traditional approaches to conflict resolution in Somalia have been weakened in part due to conflict and climate-related migration of traditional mediators. In territories controlled by Al-Shabaab, the vacuum left by Somalia's traditional legal system known as 'Xeer' is typically replaced by extremist ideologies.³ Similarly, a study by UNDP found that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) increase the propensity to violence and can motivate young people to seek belonging to armed groups.⁴ Overall, synergies between terrorism, organised crime, and climate change are now favouring a rise in violent extremism. Equally, cross border influx occasioned by climate change is a weak link to regional peace and security. Terrorist groups in the aforementioned borders are now also purportedly engaging in illicit cross-border trade which provides a breeding ground for money laundering and regional extremist group financing.⁵

With climate change leading to a more rapid and widespread displacement of communities and families, IDP camps intended to offer shelter to IDPs have become fertile recruiting grounds, particularly for disillusioned youth. The issue has continued to escalate with the spread

³ Eklöw Karolina and Krampe Florian, "Climate-Related Security Risks and Peacebuilding in Somalia," SIPRI Policy Paper No. 53, (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2019), 19. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/sipripp53_2.pdf

⁴ UNDP, "Journey to Extremism in Africa, Drivers, Incentives and Tipping Point for Recruitment" (United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa 1 UN Plaza, New York, NY 10071, 2017), 86. <https://journey-to-extremism.undp.org/content/v1/downloads/UNDP-JourneyToExtremism-report-2017-english.pdf>

⁵ NCRC, "Fighting Crime through Research, Borderland Related Crimes and Security Threats in Kenya," Report No. 13, (National Crime Research Centre Nairobi; Printed in Kenya 2018), 2. <https://crimeresearch.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Borderland-related-Crimes-and-Security-Threats-in-Kenya-Summary-of-Findings-and-Recommendations-1.pdf>

DoD, Climate Risk Analysis, (Department of Defence, 2021), 9. <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Oct/21/2002877353/-1/-1/0/DOD-CLIMATE-RISK-ANALYSIS-FINAL.PDF>

of disinformation and false narratives.⁶ While the Kenyan government has instituted local structures such as community policing (Nyumba Kumi)⁷, unregulated social media propaganda has helped to undermine such interventions. Porous borders and ethnic strife further complicate matters. These circumstances not only impede community resilience but also increase risk factors that intersect through climate change.

INTERSECTION BETWEEN CLIMATE CHANGE AND GENDERED TRENDS

Gender inequalities intensify vulnerability to climate change impacts, which in turn jeopardise hard-won gains on women’s rights. It is agreeable that the climate crisis is a threat to everyone. However, it does not affect everyone to the same extent, and too often magnifies gender inequalities. Gender and identity can either undermine or support security resilience in response to shocks. More broadly, climate “uneven vulnerability” and gender inequality overlap to shape women’s adaptation and resilience. Highly gendered inequality and unequal

power dynamics intersect with the added impact of climate change to influence recruitment and radicalisation. The unbalanced gendered rights, roles, opportunities, and cultural norms expose women, men, boys, and girls to

“ *Highly gendered inequality and unequal power dynamics intersect with the added impact of climate change to influence recruitment and radicalisation* ”

⁶ Freund Alexandra, Krueger Joachim, Lewandowsky Stephan, Oberauer Klaus, Stritzke Werner, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Violent Conflict from Iraq and the “War on Terror” to Future Threats to Peace, ed. American Psychologist 68 (7): DOI: 10.1037/a0034515 Pub Med, (Research Gate, 2013), 487-501.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257837873_Misinformation_Disinformation_and_Violent_Conflict_Fro_Iraq_and_the_War_on_Terror_to_Future_Threats_to_Peace

⁷ Nyumba kumi is a structure within community policing where houses are clustered in 10’s and a representative (chairperson) is selected amongst them to jointly monitor security threats for enhancement of intelligence and Early Warning Systems; Njagi Peterson, “Nyumba Kumi Initiative a Critical Analysis,” *Securitization of the everyday* 1167403 (European Consortium for Political Research, 2024), 1. <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/55236>

varied levels of vulnerability and resilience to climate risks. Economic and ecological developments have disproportionately affected women. Regrettably, the high gender Inequality Index score in most African countries further aggravates the situation. There is fear that cross-border migration will increase as climate effects put added stress on internally displaced populations already struggling under poor governance, violent conflict, and environmental degradation. Borders affect women and men differently in terms of restriction of movement, access to resources, and opportunities. The drivers and consequences of migration have a strong gendered dimension, linking it to entrenched and systemic gender-based discrimination and violence against women.

All the above, coupled with overlapping identities place additional strain on women's agency and decision making, representation, empowerment, adaptation, and resilience. Traditional security approaches fail to address unique needs of women, which in turn, can expose them to manipulation.⁸

⁸ GOK, "Kenya Country Position Paper to The Sixty-Sixth Session of The Commission On The Status of Women CSW66" (Government Press Services 2022), 4. <https://gender.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CSW-66-Kenya-Position-Paper-Final-CSW-31.March-2022.pdf>

USAID, "Gender Analysis & Strategy Report for Turkana and Samburu Counties," (USAID 2021), 12-14. <https://www.advancingnutrition.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/Gender%20Analysis%20and%20Strategy%202021-09-17.pdf>

UNDP, "Gender-Responsive Climate Change Actions in Africa," Technical Working Paper," (African Group of Negotiators, 2023), 12. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-12/gender-responsive_climate_action_in_africa_final.pdf

Obuyi Rehema, "Role of Women in Countering Violent Extremism"- The Case of Kwale County, Kenya, *International Journal of Peace, Education and Development*, 7(2): 121-127, (RENU Publishers, 2019), 123-125. <https://renupublishers.com/images/article/IJPEDv7n2f.pdf>

THE CLIMATE CRISIS, VIOLENT EXTREMISM, AND RESOURCES

Accelerating current efforts and implementing new ones that involve more fundamental shifts in systems and practices can help address current risks and prepare for future impacts. The preceding analysis highlights how climate change considerations have yet to be adequately incorporated into fragility or violent extremism assessments. In view of the multi-faceted nature of causal factors and rapidly evolving trends, timely and fresh perspectives and approaches are required to foster resilience, mitigation, and adaptation. Considering the dynamic and constantly evolving nature of threats, this policy paper seeks to refute the

“ *Elevating awareness around the symbiotic relationship between the climate crisis and extremism is an important step towards building an effective and responsive peace and security architecture* ”

claim that current approaches are sufficiently ‘holistic’ and integrated. Radicalisation and recruitment have divergent drivers that are benefiting in no small measure from the escalating climate crisis. The trend is clear, with

studies rendering action on this interlink of paramount importance to inform new and adapt current policies.

Elevating awareness around the symbiotic relationship between the climate crisis and extremism is an important step towards building an effective and responsive peace and security architecture. Reaching consensus multilaterally among UN member states would help to align national priorities and set the stage for future engagement with regional organisations. Fortunately, the call to action among experts in the field is already underway, with a notable think tank publication recently calling on the Security Council to make climate change a standing item on its agenda.⁹

⁹ Jay, A.K., A.R. Crimmins, C.W. Avery, T.A. Dahl, R.S. Dodder, B.D. Hamlington, A. Lustig, K. Marvel, P.A. Méndez-Lazaro, M.S. Osler, A. Terando, E.S. Weeks, and A. Zycherman, “Understanding risks, impacts, and responses,” In: Fifth National Climate Assessment. Eds. Crimmins, A.R., C.W. Avery, D.R.

Resource limitations can be overcome by enlisting traditional security organisations to add climate change to their portfolio of work and requesting that they ‘burden share’ by reallocating funds to addressing the range of underlying conditions and root causes. This will be a rightsizing while benefiting local communities. It takes billions, not millions, to mitigate climate change. It necessitates developing synergies between the stakeholders seeking to mitigate climate change and those working to build community resilience.¹⁰

The comparatively disproportionate resource allocations put towards traditional security are a perilous distraction from future threats that have yet to be considered in and reflected by hard-security budgets. There is still time to combat and mitigate these disparities, but the window of opportunity is closing fast. Beyond merely shifting our security focus, we must revive the culture of cooperation among international multilateral security organisations to break up the destructive and increasingly harmonious relationship between climate change and violent extremism.

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Easterling, K.E. Kunkel, B.C. Stewart, and T.K. Maycock, U.S. Global Change Research Program, (Washington, DC, USA, 2023), 10. <https://doi.org/10.7930/NCA5.2023.CH1>

¹⁰ Day Adam and Krampe Florian “Beyond the UN Security Council: Can the UN General Assembly tackle the climate-security challenge” (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute sipri 2023)35-36. <https://www.sipri.org/research/peace-and-development/climate-change-and-risk/climate-change-and-security>



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Women without Borders (WwB) is an international non-profit organisation headquartered in Vienna. Since 2001, WwB has been building capacity through women leadership and empowered dialogue efforts to address gender-based violence and violent extremism, the world over.