



# Climate Change and Peace Operations

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## What can UN peace operations, designed primarily to supervise cease-fires and rebuild states after civil wars, do to protect the environment and combat the effects of climate change?

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In its [statement of principles](#) for peace operations, United Nations (UN) members commit themselves to sound environmental management and solutions in field missions. Nevertheless, what can UN peace operations, designed primarily to supervise cease-fires and rebuild states after civil wars, do to protect the environment and combat the effects of climate change? There are three potential roles that UN peace operations could play in this area, although ultimately their impact is likely to be limited.

### 1. Responding to Conflict

First, UN peace operations might be deployed to deal with conflict precipitated by environmental change. This presumes that there is a connection between such change and the outbreak of violence, something that empirical research has yet to demonstrate clearly. Peacekeepers could be deployed to areas at risk of conflict in what is known as "preventive deployment." Preventive deployment consists of stationing troops in an area to deter the onset or

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prevent the spread of war or other violent conflict. Preventive deployment is an important part of the recent High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) assigned by the UN Secretary-General to review UN peace operations.

With respect to climate change, this would involve deploying peacekeepers to areas of severe famine, droughts, or other serious environmental conditions that are thought to trigger future armed conflict. The logic is that such deployment would reduce the chances that violence would break out and provide an interlude in which policy adjustments by the national government or the international community could eliminate the threat of conflict.

Although the idea has some appeal, it is unlikely to occur. Such an initiative presumes well-developed and effective early warning systems that permit the accurate prediction of when and where armed conflict is likely. The UN has such capacities in a series of problem areas including famine, earthquakes, and tsunamis, but lacks similarly robust structures for predicting how these are tied to the onset of violent conflict, and in particular linked to climate change. Current capacities by other organisations (e.g. EU) or non-governmental organisations are not sufficient to fill this gap.

Even given accurate early warning, there is also the presumption that the international political will to act on such information also exists. Many states will be put off by being labelled as sites for potential armed conflict (especially involving internal conflict), and there are serious sovereignty issues raised by external intervention in those circumstances. Organisations, such as the UN or others, are also notoriously crisis-driven, and in that environment it is difficult to muster political support and resources for problems that are not yet fully manifest.

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## 2. Peacebuilding

A second role for UN peace missions is in the realm of peacebuilding, specifically (re)building the infrastructure of a country typically in the aftermath of a civil war. This can include transportation networks, systems that supply water, and electrical grids. The (re)building of infrastructure has the potential to mitigate pollution and other elements that contribute to climate change or exacerbate its consequences. This would largely be through adopting strategies that limit resource consumption in the future. It might be tempting, and less expensive in the short-term, to simply repair extant, inefficient systems. By taking on extra expense and lengthening the time to completion, however, peacebuilders could reduce the carbon footprints of the revised or new infrastructure. For example, newer electrical delivery systems employing the latest technology could reduce the loss of energy from leakage. Irrigation systems that rely on drip technology rather than older systems would reduce water usage. Energy systems based on wind power rather than coal or wood are renewable as opposed to contributing to global warming and deforestation.

Relatedly, peace operations promote economic development in post-conflict contexts. Many of the principles and goals of sustainable development, already part of the UN, could be added as a central part of peacebuilding strategies and reflected in mission mandates. This goes beyond existing requirements for field missions merely to report regularly on environmental concerns. It also means that the various partners in the peacebuilding enterprise (e.g., NGOs, international banks, states) must share this commitment. Ultimately, peacebuilding efforts in post-conflict situations represent the best opportunities for UN peace operation to deal with climate change.

## 3. Reducing Environmental Impacts

Third and finally, peace operations can reduce their own environmental impact in the loci of deployment by employing sustainable practices and limiting their carbon footprints. A decade ago, the UN adopted an [environmental policy](#) for field missions. It covers areas such as waste, energy, water, hazardous substances, wild animals and plants and cultural and historical resources management. This is part of the broader “[Greening the Blue](#)” initiative that is designed to create a climate neutral UN. When viewed in broader perspective of the leading sources of carbon emissions – mainly industrial states – UN peace operations have a [comparatively tiny footprint](#). Nevertheless, efforts to reduce emissions are likely to have symbolic value, and indeed that might be the primary goal for peace operations.

The UN is already taking steps to reduce its own carbon footprint through changes in the ways that it conducts its field missions; thus far, these are largely symbolic ventures. More important would be mainstreaming climate change strategies into a variety of peacebuilding missions. Presently, such efforts are only in the nascent stage.

### **Mainstreaming climate strategies**

What would have to change for peacekeepers to play a more expansive and effective role? First would be a macro-level shift in the orientation of the UN Security Council and peacekeeping away from traditional security conceptions to those involving [human security](#). The framing of climate change has already made such a shift, but the Security Council is behind in addressing broader security issues, even as rhetoric might have changed. The shift away from the violence-climate change nexus toward the human consequences of climate change provides a stronger causal connection for justifying concerted action and one that allows peacekeeping to be integrated better with peacebuilding

efforts by other agencies. A general orientation shift is important, but it would need to be accompanied by some climate change mandates under which peacekeepers could play important roles. Incorporating climate change into a “responsibility to protect” regime, for example, would not only advance the subject on the UNSC agenda, but provide the normative basis for preventive or early action.

Facilitating climate change to be more in the purview of the Security Council constitutes only a first step to involve peace operations further in environmental concerns. The development of an independent capacity for data collection, modelling, and early warning systems provides the infrastructure to make proper and timely decisions for peace operation authorisation once climate change is on the agenda. If other UN agencies and NGOs bring climate change mitigation and adaptation programs to peacebuilding in post-conflict environments, this opens up the opportunities for coordination with peace operations, without expecting the latter to carry out functions for which they are not well-suited. Such coordination requires advance planning among different actors, but such networks are already present in peacebuilding operations and therefore these mechanisms offer the best prospects for UN peacekeeping to enhance its footprint in climate change responses.

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Image credit: [United Nations Photo/Flickr](#).

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