

Climate Change, Social Stress and Violent Conflict
State of the Art and Research Needs
International Conference, KlimaCampus, Hamburg University, 19/20. November 2009

Abstract

Climate change, peacekeeping and perspectives for UN reform

Bo Kjellén, Peter Wallensteen
Stockholm Environment Institute, Sweden

Over the last twenty years a new kind of global threats has appeared, linked to the human impact on the immensely large natural, life-supporting systems of the planet. These threats cannot be linked to any state or group of states: they are part and parcel of economic development and unsustainable lifestyles. They have given rise to a new kind of diplomacy, with specific characteristics, based on the fact that we cannot negotiate with the threatening forces to make them go away.

Since the threats are global, they have to be tackled in a global organization; and the United Nations has increasingly been called upon to manage environmental problems. The general, normative UN Conferences on the global environment in Stockholm 1972, Rio de Janeiro 1992, and Johannesburg 2002, have permitted the nations of the world to measure the importance of the issues and structure response measures. But the impact on national policies has been limited, and it has proven necessary to seek more stringent action through legally binding treaties.

The Framework Convention of Climate Change (FCCC) and its Kyoto Protocol constitutes the most elaborate and ambitious effort to tackle a major survival issue of this kind. The new diplomacy for sustainable development has got a concrete basis for common action to meet the threat of global climate change, based on scientific evidence provided by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Our paper will give a short history of the FCCC and present perspectives for the future in the light of the forthcoming Conference of Parties in Copenhagen.

Alongside these new developments the traditional threats of conflicts and war, in particular involving nuclear weapons, continue to haunt international security policy. To control nuclear proliferation is a major element in efforts to reduce the risks for conflicts that could threaten the future of mankind. Furthermore, since the end of the Cold War global and regional institutions have had to face a series of internal armed conflicts, leading to new understandings of peacebuilding and state fragility. The United Nations remains a cornerstone in peacekeeping and peacemaking. In the paper we will briefly review the arguments in favour of preventive action and post-conflict peace-building, and the particular role of the United Nations in this context.

The United Nations remains the central institution for international action both on traditional threats and on the new environmental threats, such as climate change. Furthermore, there is increasing concern that climate change in itself will lead to greater instability in the international system. We believe that there is as yet little evidence that it could lead to direct conflict between states. However, such issues as migration, water stress, resource conflicts, particularly involving traditional and new energy sources as all countries strive for low-carbon development, could weaken state authority and increase risks for internal conflicts that could grow into the international arena. We will review some of the recent studies in this regard.

These various elements present new challenges for the UN. The organization must be capable to assist states to manage new types of conflict in an open and constructive manner; in particular the international emphasis on peacebuilding needs to include considerations of environmental stress. In addition, it is imperative also to strengthen the central UN institutions to permit rational management of old and new threats and conflicts at the global level. We believe that the UN will need to be better equipped to tackle these challenges, and that there is at present a strong case for institutional reforms. A blueprint already exists in the 1995 report of the Commission on Global Governance "Our Global Neighbourhood". To promote the reform efforts in the 60th UN General Assembly 2005-2006 practical suggestions were put forward, notably by the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Changes. We wish to use our own diverse and long experience of UN work on conflict resolution, peacekeeping, preventive action, sustainable development, and climate change to review and develop the Commission's and the Panel's proposals in the light of present developments.