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Climate and Security at the UN Security Council



Background

While climate change is rarely a direct cause of conflict, it is widely acknowledged that its effects can exacerbate important drivers of conflict and fragility and undermine international peace and security. Indeed, [a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute](#) found that 6 of the 10 biggest UN peace operations (by total international personnel) were in countries ranked most exposed to climate change.

The Climate and Security nexus has to date been a very controversial item on the UN Security Council (UNSC) agenda. Certain member states have advocated for its inclusion on the Security Council agenda, while others have disputed the legitimacy of discussing climate change at a body whose primary mandate is international peace and security. Instead, they advocate for treating climate change solely as a development issue under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. Russia and China are the main antagonists in relation to the inclusion of climate and security on the Security Council's agenda. In contrast, there is a strong consensus among the majority of Council members to address climate change as a security issue on the Security Council's agenda.

This explainer aims to provide an overview of the debate regarding the climate and security nexus at the UNSC. It highlights some of the ways in which climate change can undermine security; maps Ireland's efforts on climate and security and examines what Ireland can hope to achieve during its term, with a particular focus on its position as co-chair of the Informal Expert Group on Climate and Security with Niger.



The Implications of Climate Change for Security

Despite resistance from Russia and China, it is well documented that there are a multitude of ways in which climate change can contribute to conflict and undermine security.

Moreover, the extent to which climate change contributes to insecurity is in large part determined by the relative ability or inability of countries to adequately respond to the manifold challenges which arise. In other words, the consequences which climate change has on security will vary considerably between developed and developing countries. To take one example, the Netherlands and Bangladesh are both vulnerable to rising sea levels and the accompanying impacts on security. However, Bangladesh cannot compete with the wealth and resources of a country like the Netherlands. As such, the degree to which climate change contributes to insecurity in the form of conflict is very much dependent on a range of material factors.



Examples of ways in which climate change undermines security:



1. Climate change can create competition over scarce natural resources, such as land and water, which can lead to conflict.



2. Climate change can cause the deterioration of livelihoods, such as farming, and drive people into the arms of non-state armed groups as states struggle to mitigate the worst impacts of climate change on poverty. The growth of non-state armed groups in turn exacerbates insecurity.

Examples of ways in which climate change undermines security:



3. Climate change can contribute to food price spikes and food insecurity, which have been linked to the outbreak of conflict around the globe.



4. Climate change can lead to sea level rise, floods and infrastructural damage, which can destroy livelihoods, and cause forced displacement and migration, both internally and externally. As people affected by droughts in rural areas migrate to urban areas, the consequent strain on critical infrastructure can be a key driver of unrest and conflict.

Examples of ways in which climate change undermines security:



5. Climate change can cause droughts or rainfall shortages, which can expose women and children to increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence as they are forced to walk further to collect water.




6. Climate change creates a strain on demand for public services such as disaster assistance and humanitarian aid, which serves to compound inequality, marginalisation and weak governance.

Mapping Ireland's efforts on climate and security

The fact that all references to climate and security in UN Security Council resolutions to date have been in relation to African countries is evidence of the disproportionate security implications which climate change is having on the African continent. In addition, the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are facing some of the most severe impacts of climate related security risks.

During its tenure on the UNSC, Ireland will seek to frame its engagement on the climate and security issue by prioritising regions and countries most affected by climate change, particularly the Sahel, Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and SIDS.

- The Sahel region, which stretches across Northern Africa from the Atlantic Ocean in the West to the Red Sea in the East, is facing severe impacts of climate change. While the root causes of conflict in the Sahel region lie in human rights violations, discriminatory policies, weak governance and violence linked to armed groups, such as 'Boko Haram', climate change has exacerbated the situation. Ireland has a particular interest in this region as co-penholder on the West Africa and Sahel file (UNOWAS) during its term on the UNSC. Moreover, Ireland has contributed soldiers to the UN Peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUS-MA).



'Countries like Ireland that have the means have a responsibility to act first. In doing so, we must consider the quality of our climate finance as we work to increase its quantity.'

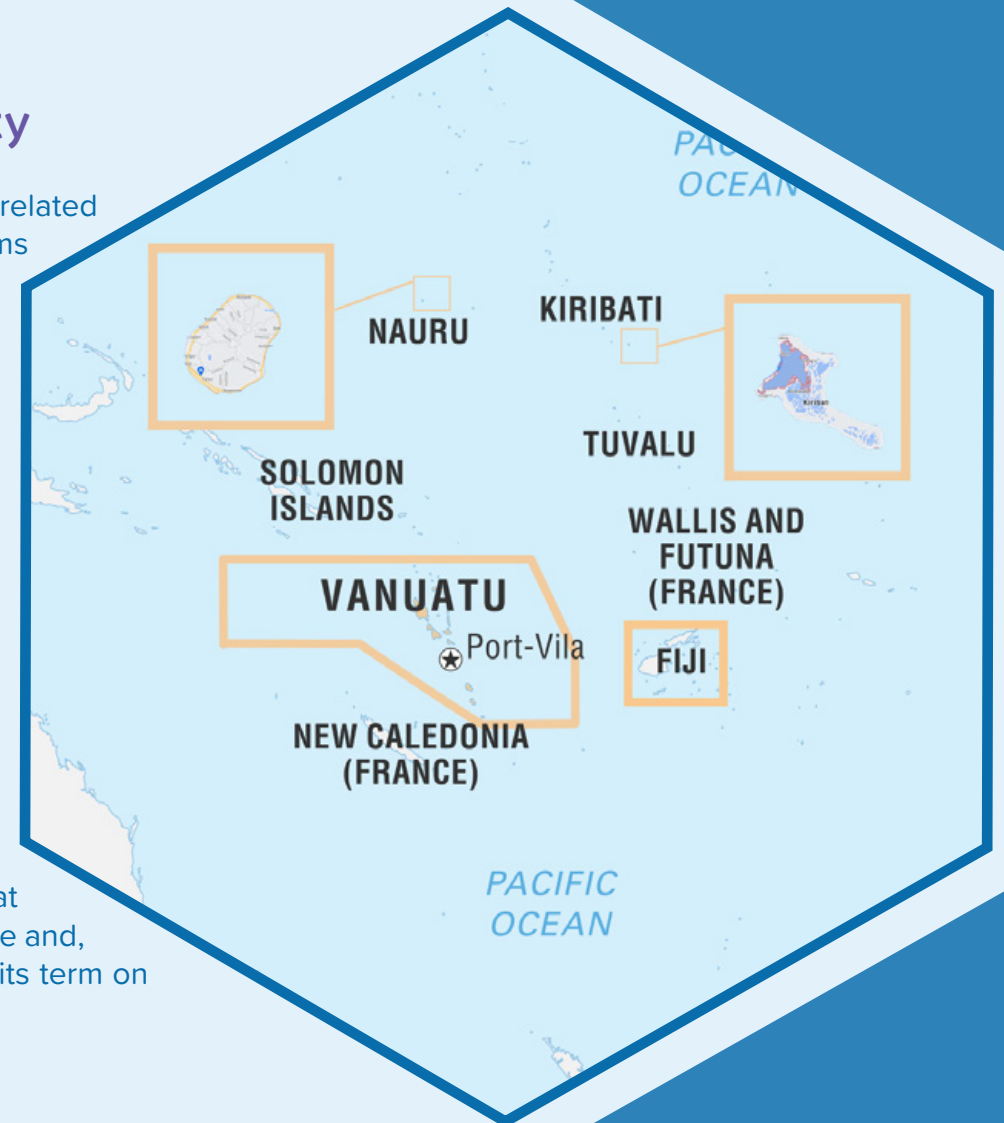
In this regard, in the lead up to COP26 and beyond, we must listen to and be guided by the voices of those most affected by climate change, particularly those in Least Developed Countries and in Small Island Developing States.'

Simon Coveney TD,
Minister for Foreign Affairs

Mapping Ireland's efforts on climate and security

- LDCs in the Horn of Africa region, such as Somalia, are experiencing climate-related security risks due to environmental degradation, fragile governance mechanisms and the presence of non-state armed groups. Forced displacement and related recruitment into extremist organisations, such as Al-Shabaab, has further exacerbated the situation by preventing aid from reaching millions of people in the worst affected areas. Ireland focuses most of its international development cooperation and climate action in LDCs by directing the vast majority of its climate financing towards climate action in LDCs. Ireland will seek to highlight the importance of scaling up climate financing in LDCs during its term on the UNSC.

- Small Island Developing States (SIDS), such as Fiji and Vanuatu, face some of the most intense impacts of climate change due to their susceptibility to natural disasters, limited natural resources and geographical isolation. The rising sea levels, natural disasters and fluctuating fish stocks pose an existential risk. Between 2016 and 2018, single tropical cyclone events have caused losses of 30% of GDP in Fiji and 64% of GDP in Vanuatu. Ireland provided funding to support the typhoon relief efforts in the Pacific island states of Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu in 2020. Moreover, in its Strategy for Partnerships with SIDS, Ireland has committed to providing €12m to the Ireland Trust Fund at the Asian Development Bank, to support SIDS on climate and disaster resilience and, as a small island state itself, is well placed to advocate on their behalf during its term on the UNSC.



What can Ireland hope to achieve as co-chair of the Informal Expert Group (IEG) on Climate and Security?

An Informal Expert Group on Climate and Security was established in July 2020 when ten members of the Security Council (Belgium, the Dominican Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Niger, Tunisia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the UK, and Vietnam) along with Ireland, Kenya and Norway issued a joint statement affirming that an Informal Expert Group would be convened “to assist the Council to achieve a more comprehensive and systematic approach on climate-security risks in situations on the ground”.

Ireland took on the joint responsibility with Niger of chairing the IEG for 2021, while Norway will take over as co-chair in 2022.

Ireland hopes to frame the discussion of climate and security in more positive terms by highlighting the peace dividends of climate action.

As conceptual debates at the UNSC on this subject have been divisive and sterile, Ireland may seek to highlight instead a number of practical and technical aspects to inject dynamism into the debate.

One example would be the creation of a Special Representative on Climate and Security, which has broad support among UNSC members and particularly from the SIDS.

Another priority will be to ensure the inclusion of climate advisors in peacekeeping missions which have a climate component in their mandates in order to increase the capacity for early warning and prevention of climate related crises.



What was the outcome of the first meeting of the IEG on Climate and Security?

In the first official meeting of the IEG on Climate and Security in March 2021, co-chaired by Ireland and Niger, opportunities for UN Peace Operations in the Sahel region were discussed. Four key lessons were highlighted as essential for ensuring better climate change adaptation, including:

- Integration of local knowledge and experience into UN Peace Operations by including local farmers, herders and researchers in the planning and implementation of climate change adaptation
- Better resource management, including the efficient use of land and water, the efficient use of funds and effective project implementation
- Increased skills development, including through improved practices such as drip irrigation and drought resilient crop varieties
- Conflict resolution and building on areas of best practice, such as mediation and including women and youth in conflict resolution processes from the earliest stages

While the prospects of reaching consensus on a Security Council climate and security resolution in the short term seems unlikely, it may be possible during Ireland's tenure in the next two years. In the short term, Ireland will seek to build on the work of UNSC members by establishing a strong foundation for a future resolution.



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