

Solving twin crises



Margot Wallström, former European Commissioner for the Environment and former Foreign Secretary of Sweden, led an international expert panel at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute to study the intertwined risks of global environmental crises and conflict.



We read about risk and conflict in the headlines every day. How does environmental degradation play a role in conflict, peace and security?

We now have compound environmental crises and a darkening security situation interacting with other factors and the fallout of COVID-19. We have had two cataclysmic events occur in the last two years. The most serious pandemic in living memory has claimed millions of lives. And Russia's invasion of Ukraine has killed many thousands of people. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of state-based armed conflicts roughly doubled, to 56, as did the number of conflict deaths. On top of that, we are experiencing an acute environmental crisis that is making a return to stability much harder. Species are becoming extinct 10–100 times faster than in the last 10 million years. Around a quarter of all species are at risk of extinction, pollinating insects are in rapid decline, soil quality is falling, and natural resources such as forests and fish continue to be exploited at unsustainable levels.

Environmental degradation and climate change can undermine peace. Exact causality is difficult to prove; but, for example, water scarcity can lead to social unrest, inflame tensions and – in some circumstances – increase the likelihood of armed conflict. Nearly half of the world's 40 least peaceful countries are those experiencing the highest number of ecological threats.

We can point to several examples of this kind of interaction happening. Somalia has experienced drought and other effects of climate change, and when these combine with poverty, weakened governance and lack of preparedness, people have joined extremist groups. In Africa's Sahel region, a growing population, expansion of farmland and

drought have combined to push farmers and nomadic herders into direct competition for land and water resources. In Central America, climate change has weakened crop production, and combined with violence and corruption has driven migrants north, where they meet a securitized response at the United States border.

When it comes to protecting the environment, we cannot be proud of the results. Environmental damage, including climate change, mass extinctions and resource scarcity, affects the whole issue of peace and security. It is a formidable task that leaders must put at the top of the agenda, nationally and internationally. We're seeing extreme weather events all over the world. We're seeing rising sea levels. Just recently, we saw footage of a house floating away on the waves due to rising seas. And, if we talk about water availability, we can see too much water in some places and too little in others. Storms and heatwaves are becoming more common and more intense, and they reduce the yield of major food crops and increase the risk of large-scale harvest failures.

This is not the first time world governments have faced serious security and environmental threats. How can we think about tackling these factors simultaneously?

We must recognize that nature and peace are closely interlinked. We depend on nature for food. Is there a price to put on the loss of biodiversity? After only a few years without bees, we cannot survive on this planet. Leaders need to understand more fully the role of nature for supporting life on this planet, and also that it will affect peace. Most of the peacekeeping operations that the United Nations deploys

are also in countries highly exposed to climate change, as well as other acute environmental problems.

We have to ensure that measures to address environmental problems also contribute to peace, or at least do not increase conflict risks. By connecting these two issues, you are also investing in preparedness and resilience. Just as we are now preparing for how we tackle the next pandemic, we must address how we tackle the future extreme weather events, whether forest fires, storms or droughts. For example, to build resilience, we need more transboundary collaborations for water. Gone are the days when one country could say we will just solve this ourselves, or that we can just keep this within our borders. That is no longer true. Pollution knows no national borders. It follows the wind or a river. And the same is true for many other environmental and climate change impacts.

What can leaders and science researchers do to understand peacebuilding and the environment?




We have a date with history. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the first UN environment conference, which took place in Stockholm. Among other things it led to the creation of the UN Environment Programme. The conference was really more about ideas than practical solutions, but it emphasized that we share one Earth and that we need collective responses to planetary-level environmental problems. But what have we accomplished in 50 years? It's not a proud moment.

Countries that are the poorest need investment to deal with the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. We in wealthier countries have to make sure that we devote more of our budgets to help them. A healthy planet is also a precondition for stability, for prosperity and thus also peace and security.

The UN Security Council has the Peacebuilding Commission. We must make sure that its reporting from different conflict areas also includes the effects of climate change and environmental issues that could jeopardize peacebuilding work. We must finance peace, not risk; which means we have to make a fairer distribution of spending to support peace and environmental integrity. And we must be deliberately inclusive of young people and

Indigenous peoples in these important decisions. We have not learned how to live in peace with nature. We have misused and overused our resources. Some things we've done right, but the balance is not looking good, especially for climate change and biodiversity loss. We

cannot allow this to lead us into a more violent, unstable future.

Interviewed by **Lisa Palmer**  
Journalist, Washington, DC, USA.
 e-mail: lisaleschpalmer@gmail.com

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