



## **FROM BATTLEFIELD TO BIOSPHERE: Addressing conflict's role in the triple planetary crisis**

### Event Summary

On 28 February 2024, PAX organised a hybrid Green Room side event to the Sixth Session of the UN Environmental Assembly (UNEA-6), entitled "From Battlefield to Biosphere: Addressing conflict's role in the triple planetary crisis". As the theme of UNEA-6 centered around effective multilateral actions to tackle the planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution, the objective of the event was to highlight persistent contributions of armed conflicts to these interconnected global challenges, as well as to explore potential pathways to prevent, minimize and mitigate conflict-linked environmental impacts on the environment. To this end, the event's panel discussion brought together civil society groups, UN experts, academics and policy practitioners working on the intersection of environment, climate, peace and conflict.

### **Conflicts' contributions to the triple planetary crisis**

Opening the event, the moderator, **Christina Parandii, PAX's Senior Policy Officer for [Environment, Peace and Security](#)**, provided the context with an overview of direct and indirect consequences that armed conflicts have on the natural environment and people dependent on it. Despite the clear interconnection of the triple planetary crisis and armed conflicts' impacts, Ms. Parandii observed that many States attempt to draw a line between environmental discussions at UNEA in Nairobi and [security discussions](#) in other UN forums in New York and human rights topics in Geneva, raising the need to overcome such a fragmentation of approaches.

Elaborating on the interlinkage between the armed conflicts and the pollution crisis, **Dr. Marcos A. Orellana, Special Rapporteur on Toxics and Human Rights**, emphasized the long-term chemical and toxic remnants of wars. He referred to, among other examples, the contamination of the trenches in WWI, which continues to pose risks for food cultivation today. He also underlined the use of [depleted uranium](#) in Iraq, the destruction of oil refineries and industrial facilities in Sudan, and the use of glyphosate in Colombia to eradicate illicit coca bush plantations. Dr. Orellana also noted that debris from destruction of buildings also posed a serious toxic threat, such as asbestos that is released when buildings are destroyed during armed conflicts. The effects of chemical contamination resulting from armed conflict can [reverberate](#) for decades. In addition to toxics released during the conduct of hostilities, toxic impacts of armed conflict concern the whole lifecycle of war, including the design and testing of weapons. In this regard, Dr. Orellana spoke about [nuclear legacies](#), with their long-term impacts on victims of exposure to radiation after detonations, including Indigenous people in Australia and victims of US nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands. Lastly, Dr. Orellana addressed toxic threats to refugees and referred to the case of Roma people who were exposed to lead exposure in UN refugee camps in Kosovo.

Speaking about the relationship between biodiversity loss and armed conflict, **Alice Ruhweza, Senior Director for Policy Influence and Engagement at World Wildlife Fund (WWF) International** focused on the [nature-security nexus](#). She explained that nature loss often interacts with other social, economic, political and cultural drivers, which, taken together, exacerbate the conflict; simultaneously, conflict and insecurity contribute to nature loss. However, Ms. Ruhweza stressed that this nature-security nexus has not been understood sufficiently. She highlighted the need for political stability for sustainable resource management and the prevention of resource-based conflicts, as scarcity drives the competition over resources. Yet, conflicts cannot be prevented, resolved, or managed exclusively through



diplomacy, political negotiations, peacemaking, peacekeeping, and the use of force. They have complex causes (such as social inequality, state failure, human rights violations, resource predation), which require correlated solutions in areas including economic growth, good governance, human rights protection, environmental protection and conservation of nature. In the context of Ms. Ruhweza's work in Africa, she shared that governments, especially in fragile states, are under increasing pressure to sustainably manage natural resources and resolve conflicts around their ownership, management, allocation and control. This necessitates strengthening state institutions and enhancing their capacity.

Regarding the impacts of military activities on the climate crisis, **Ellie Kinney, Campaigner on Militaries and Climate Change at Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS)**, shared insights from her work on the [Military Emissions Gap](#) which monitors reporting of military greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. According to the best estimate, militaries are responsible for 5.5% of all GHG emissions globally, an estimate which excludes the impact of warfighting. According to [research](#) from The Initiative on GHG Accounting of War, GHG emissions from the first 18 months of Russia's war in Ukraine could be more than the annual GHG emissions from a highly industrialized country like Belgium. Recent estimates also suggest that emissions produced in the first two months of the war in Gaza equal 75 coal plants running for one year, while the climate impact of its rebuilding would be comparable to the annual emissions of New Zealand. Ms. Kinney highlighted the lack of transparency in military emissions reporting and stressed the importance of civil society in advocating for an internationally agreed method for such reporting, which would include emissions from armed conflict. This requires mainstreaming and addressing military emissions through the UNFCCC to increase accountability, and sustained engagement and collaboration between the climate and peace movements.

Elaborating on the legal angle of the [conflict-linked environmental damage](#), **Dr. Britta Sjöstedt, Senior Lecturer at Department of Law at Lund University**, explained that the law of armed conflict is concerned with the basic protection of people affected by war, while the protection of the environment is considered a secondary need, and therefore, is not sufficiently covered by the law on armed conflict. Dr. Sjöstedt noted that nonetheless there have been some shifts in the consideration of environmental protection in armed conflicts over the recent years, particularly triggered by long-term devastating impacts on the environment in the Vietnam war, including extensive use of Agent Orange, which has had a devastating impact on both people and the environment. Yet, due to national sovereignty concerns, states are often reluctant to tighten regulation of environmental protection in war – although indirectly it is protected by international law when its damage threatens civilian objects such as livelihoods. Dr. Sjöstedt emphasized that most environmental damage by war is uncertain and the consequences may only be noted many years after.

### **Opportunities for addressing conflicts' contributions to the triple planetary crisis**

As a segway to the second part of the discussion focused on potential pathways to address the above challenges, **Ms. Parandii** shared PAX's experience with collection and [documentation of data on environmental damage](#) in conflict through open-source information channels and earth observation. These data serve as the foundation for further advocacy around strengthening norms for protection, minimization, and mitigation of harm both on a grass root level and throughout the UN systems.

**Dr. Orellana** stressed the importance of preventing conflict in the first place by resorting to the peaceful settlement of disputes contemplated in the UN Charter. He also spoke about environmental law tools such as zoning, which would help states to locate military and industrial facilities away from urban centers. Dr Orellana also addressed the challenge of regularly updating the conventions and instruments dealing with chemical weapons. In addition



to improved legislation on weapons and the conduct of hostilities, he spoke about the need to improve guidance to the military on how to implement environmental considerations in military decision-making. Dr. Orellana further drew attention to the need for adequate schemes for assistance to victims, reparations, and environmental remediation.

**Dr. Sjöstedt** emphasized the need for both the effective enforcement of existing international norms related to the protection of the environment in armed conflict, and strengthening of international law, especially with regards to the intrinsic value of the environment. While most existing international norms consider the instrumental value of the environment to humans, there is an observable shift in the national, human rights, and indigenous laws, which take a more holistic approach to the relationship between people and nature. Such changes would inevitably affect international law of armed conflict, as testified by compensations that Kuwait via the UN Compensation Commission and the DRC via the International Court of Justice received for the purely environmental damage from the wars with Iraq and Uganda, respectively. Legislation at the national level can also influence international legislation, as demonstrated by the example of Colombia's granting nature rights and declaring indigenous territories as victims of conflict. Dr. Sjöstedt also sees potential for national judgements on ecocide by Russia in Ukraine. Moreover, there is an underused possibility to use the existing treaties and bodies for the environmental recovery phase of armed conflict.

**Ms. Ruhweza** focused on the importance of improving governance and the capacity of local and national institutions to resolve disputes over the degradation or depletion of natural resources. Even strong legislation is undermined by corruption and weak enforcement, as well as by unequal power relationships and lack of transparency, which exclude many people from decision-making. The rights of indigenous peoples, local communities and women often are not recognized, particularly around land ownership. Decisions made without consultation or serving only a narrow set of interests can lead to conflict, while short-term thinking can lead to high long-term costs. Ms. Ruhweza raised the need to look at the nature-security nexus from a holistic approach, which acknowledges that efforts to address national security and environmental degradation, including biodiversity loss, are interdependent and should go hand in hand. Actions should focus on shaping a comprehensive environmental security agenda that addresses the root causes of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, insecurity, and conflict.

**Ms. Kinney** stated that we are facing a vital moment for addressing the interlinkage between climate and conflict. Civil society is campaigning to increase awareness of conflict issues at UNFCCC COPs as robust, comparable, and transparent emissions reporting for militaries and improved accountability are crucial to move forward. Ms. Kinney shared the progress that has been made on this issue so far within the European Union and NATO, but warned that civil society needs to hold institutions accountable for their commitments and be prepared to call out greenwashing and empty promises. She encouraged academia to get involved in military and conflict emissions estimates, as this data is essential for science-based policymaking both nationally and internationally.