



Briefing Note for the UN Security Council Ministerial Level Briefing on the “Maintenance of Peace and Security of Ukraine”

PAX, 22 September 2022

Conflict-Related Environmental Damage in Ukraine

Context and Background

Armed conflicts continue to have devastating direct and reverberating effects, with destructive impacts on ecosystems and civilian lives and livelihoods. Since February 2022, Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine has raised serious concerns about damage to the environment, with both immediate and long-term consequences to civilians and the ecosystems they depend on.

The increasing risks posed by military actions to civilians and their environment demonstrate the need for a more coherent, coordinated UN-system-wide approach through the establishment of an Environment, Peace and Security (EPS) agenda to improve international prevention, mitigation, and response efforts to environmental damage in conflicts, such as in Ukraine and beyond. Such an EPS agenda must prioritize: (1) preventing and minimizing the environmental and derived humanitarian consequences of conflicts; (2) identifying, monitoring and responding to environmental consequences; and (3) the inclusion of the environment as an essential component of sustainable peacebuilding programs. An EPS agenda would also complement and strengthen existing normative agendas discussed at the UN Security Council (UNSC), such as the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict, Sustaining Peace, and Women, Peace and Security agendas, among others.

The UNSC has increasingly recognized the important links between the environment-climate-conflict nexus in the last decade, including in an increasing number of Council [briefings and open debates](#), as well as through inclusion in a growing number of UN field mission [mandates](#). The UNSC should also strategically integrate and account for conflict-related environmental degradation in its briefings and consultations concerning the situation in Ukraine, exploring linkages between the environment and international peace and security, as well as more holistic approaches to protecting civilians in conflict and upholding international humanitarian and human rights law. A system-wide EPS agenda could be utilized as a foundation from which the international community could formulate a coherent and actionable response to conflict-related environmental degradation in Ukraine, coordinating with various UN agencies [currently working](#) on environmental issues within their own respective mandates.

Environmental damage and degradation in Ukraine

Environmental degradation in Ukraine following Russia’s military escalation seven months ago has been well [documented](#), with direct and indirect consequences to civilians.

The use of weapons, particularly the use of explosive weapons, and the wider breakdown of governance are issues posing serious environmental threats in Ukraine. As of 22 August, Russia has used approximately [3,500 cruise missiles](#) against Ukraine. Missile attacks and constant shelling have destroyed critical and civilian infrastructure. The bombing of oil refineries, industrial areas and agrochemical plants has created hundreds of local environmental hotspots that can lead to acute public health risks. Damage to water infrastructure, including [dams, water filtration](#) plants and sewage treatment facilities, has led to air pollution and the [contamination of water bodies](#) and fertile soils. The ongoing shelling of [nuclear](#) power plants increases the likelihood of a region-wide environmental catastrophe that could affect millions of people. The lack of access to clean water due to damaged



infrastructure has also posed serious public health risks to civilians, while damaged wastewater facilities risk the release of contaminated water. Damaged power plants also have had a detrimental effect on the environment, with significant risks to civilians. Furthermore, while the lack of electricity poses risks to the pumping systems in urban area sewage, civilians may be exposed to [coal mines and mines](#) storing toxic and radioactive waste.

Lastly, the destruction of build-up areas, the debris of military equipment, and the generation of [conflict-rubble](#) — often containing hazardous materials such as asbestos, heavy metals, and other toxic substances present in households, medical or industrial facilities — can pose direct and long-term health risks to those exposed.

Recommendations for UN Member States:

- **UNSC Members should raise concerns over conflict-related environmental degradation and the resulting risks and harm to civilians in their national interventions during Council briefings and consultations on the situation in Ukraine.** Such interventions should underscore the linkages between the humanitarian impacts of conflict-related environmental degradation in the conflict, particularly the harmful risks to civilians. Member States should further raise concerns over the environmental dimensions of the conflict in Ukraine in national interventions in all relevant debates and briefings across the UN system, including beyond the UNSC, such as in relevant discussions at the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly, as well as cross-cutting bodies like the Peacebuilding Commission in the future.
- **The Council should work towards adopting a comprehensive Environment, Peace and Security (EPS) agenda in order to improve prevention, mitigation, and response efforts to environmental and climate-related impacts and risks in Ukraine and other countries on the Council's agenda.** In collaboration with the Informal Expert Group on Climate Security, Council Members should regularize monitoring and reporting mechanisms on environmental and climate-related risks in at-risk and conflict-affected countries and establish a rapid response mechanism for urgent environmental risks scenarios, like the ongoing attacks in Ukraine, the urgent risks posed by the FSO Safer situation in Yemen, and other potential international EPS situations in the future.
- **Member States should call on the UN Secretariat to include the environment as a relevant topic to address in relevant conflict analysis, humanitarian responses, and peacebuilding efforts in Ukraine as a means to help save civilian lives, livelihoods, and infrastructure.** The Secretariat should be requested to provide briefings to the UNSC on the security implications of conflict-related environmental damage in Ukraine, including assessing wider environmental concerns around legacy pollution and possible long-term impacts on ecosystems and civilian lives and livelihoods.
- **Member States must strengthen the mandates of humanitarian and environmental response actors to address the environmental dimensions of armed conflict in their field operations and investigations through identification and analysis of data on environmental impacts.** This work can build on existing humanitarian and multilateral coordination systems working in Ukraine, including the work of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) for identification and analysis of data to better include environmental impacts. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) can also work with field-based UN entities and humanitarian actors through the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator system to provide analysis and inform joint humanitarian and environmental response and recovery efforts.