

From Word to Deed: Implementation of UNEA-3 Resolution on Conflict Pollution.

Global awareness on the toxic consequences of conflicts gained new momentum in December 2017, when the United Nations Environmental Assembly adopted a new resolution by consensus on *Pollution mitigation and control in areas affected by armed conflict or terrorism*. The focus of this resolution, submitted by the Government of Iraq and co-sponsored by Ukraine and Norway, is the wide range of destructive environmental impacts caused by armed conflicts and terrorism. Iraq had to deal with the hazardous legacy of the fight against the so-called Islamic State, which applied scorched-earth tactics in their nihilistic attempt to destroy everything in their retreat. The ongoing fighting left towns and cities in rubble, while collapse of governance further compounded environmental issues. This policy brief will briefly explore concrete steps States can take to guide discussions and implement the resolution in order to make actual progress on pollution mitigation.

Conflict affected states are dealing with many humanitarian priorities to which environmental destruction and pollution related health risks are an extra and complicated burden. Tackling these risks should deserve more attention in humanitarian response and post-conflict reconstruction programs, however, this rarely happens. Organisations such as UN Environment are often understaffed, overburdened, and underfunded to carry out the necessary identification and analysis work that should set in motion the needed remediation in support of national authorities.

The language in the preamble and the operational paragraphs in the resolution provides useful anchor points that highlight both specific issues unique to conflict pollution as well as stepping stones for implementation of specific policies. As recognized in the **Preambular Paragraphs**, conflict and terrorism can lead to environmental damage and depletion of natural resources, which can hinder reconstruction and impact lives and livelihoods of civilians, while pollution can affect in particular those in vulnerable situations such as children, persons with disabilities, elderly people, and internally displaced people.

However, as reflected in the language, more data is

needed to identify where and what type of conflict pollution has occurred, and how to remediate these affected areas. This was particularly the case in Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine, where limited access to conflicted-affected areas hindered adequate response. Such data can support highlighting the wider issues related to conflict, environmental damage, and pollution. Moreover, information collection, sharing, and promotion of key concerns will help provide an improved overview of particular risks associated with environmental damage and natural resource depletion in conflict areas.

For the **Operational Paragraphs**, we have identified a number of key issues associated with conflict pollution that can be operationalised and implemented. To start a dialogue on implementing the resolution, we have provided **four recommendations** that States, together with relevant authorities, UN bodies, international organisations, and civil society, can implement to protect civilians against harm born from conflict pollution and further improve protection of the environment during and after armed conflict.

Recommendations

In order to make a meaningful change, PAX believes in setting concrete and ambitious goals. Below are four key recommendations on implementation of the conflict pollution resolution, which States can report on for the fourth session of the UN Environmental Assembly in 2019

- **Awareness raising.** OP 2 states the need for awareness raising on environmental damage and pollution. States can provide an overview during UNEA-4 on their effort to include messaging around this topic in a) statements given in relevant UN and other forums on this topic, e.g. the UN General Assembly, donor conferences for conflict-affected States, and discussions around the work of the International Law Commission's on protection of the environment in armed conflict b) inclusion of concerns on conflict pollution in foreign policy documents on conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction programs and c) provide a robust statement on November 6, the International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict.
- **Review existing military practices and guidelines.** OP 3 and 4 can be implemented through a State practice angle. States can review their own military guidelines, and improve the environmental impacts of targeting practices in armed conflict, which can help prevent the release of hazardous chemicals and/or other pollutants, minimize environmental damage, and critically review their Additional Protocol I Article 36 policies. States can also minimize the environmental 'bootprint' of their operations by critically reviewing military waste management programs, which can result in the prevention of pollution of rivers and water reserves.
- **Improve cooperation and response.** OP 5 and 6 can best be operationalized through direct or indirect support to affected States, as they often lack sufficient funding, expertise, and capacity to tackle specific environmental health risks born from conflict pollution. This can be done through providing available data that can help identify potential environmental hotspots; by supporting clean-up and remediation programs of conflict-pollution; supporting health and environmental awareness programs through local authorities and communities; and promoting scientific research programs on the wider health risks associated with conflict pollution. Wider strategies can be developed in cooperation with relevant (inter)national expert organizations, which can result in the development of a broader applicable mechanism for dealing with, identification, assessment, clean-up, and remediation of conflict-born pollution and limiting environmental damage.
- **Support UN Environment.** States can contribute to or strengthen their support for both the Executive Director and the work his organization undertakes with regard to information, expertise, funding, specific data on environmental threats, or remediation work provided to affected States.