

Armed Conflicts, Environment and Human Rights

Draft Concept Note, Panel Event, 8 June 2022, 10-12 CET

In Geneva (Villa Moynier, Cassese room, 120B Rue de Lausanne) and online via Zoom

In recent years, the interlinkages between the natural environment and human rights, on the one hand, and environment and armed conflict¹, on the other, have been regularly addressed. The recently adopted Framework principles on human rights and the environment² rely on the fact that human rights are intertwined with the environment in which people live, and, subsequently, that environmental damage interferes with the enjoyment of human rights, such as the right to livelihood, right to health, right to food, right to water, right to private and family life, and very importantly, the recently recognized right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment, among others.

The Geneva Centre for Human Rights Advancement and Global Dialogue has undertaken to focus on how the environmental effects that occur, both during and after an armed conflict, have the potential to pose a serious threat to the livelihoods and even the existence of individual human beings and communities. Unlike many of the other consequences of armed conflict, environmental damage may be long-term and irreparable, with an inherent potential to prevent the effective rebuilding of society. The Geneva Centre therefore believes that it is of a paramount importance to place the **human rights of people that live in the affected communities at the centre of the debate** on the interlinks between armed conflict and the environment.

In armed conflict, **the impact on the environment can be direct**, through use of explosive, incendiary, chemical, toxic weapons or landmines, or through the destruction of natural environment to achieve strategic objectives, such as the destruction of a forest, hill, natural area or by using a scorched-earth policy as a military strategy. **The impact of conflict on the environment can also be indirect**, such as through the massive and durable contamination of soils by explosive remnants of war, the destruction of essential infrastructures such as water treatment and green energy sources, the collapse of governmental structures leading to an absence of policies and practices to protect the environment, and subsequent pillage and exhaustion of natural resources. **Conflict-related human displacement** can also have inadvertent environmental impacts, causing environmental degradation and damaging ecosystems.

The state of the environment, in turn, has a direct bearing on the welfare and well-being of people living in that region. Customarily, these are often the most **vulnerable groups that are worst affected**. The risks are particularly acute for indigenous peoples and traditional communities that depend on the natural environment for their subsistence; rural and poor populations relying on agriculture, displaced people, women, children, older persons, and people with disabilities.

¹ See Reports to the International Law Commission on Protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts: https://legal.un.org/ilc/guide/8_7.shtml (2014-2019)

² See Report of the Special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment: [A/HRC/37/59](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/rapporteur/docs/A/HRC/37/59) (2018)

The planned conference, therefore, seeks to address a series of questions, including:

- What are some of the widespread **patterns of environmental degradation** caused by armed conflicts, resulting in adverse implications for enjoyment of human rights?
- What are **the negative effects** of such deteriorated environments on human rights, particularly in the framework of the Sustainable Development Agenda?
- What can be the role of **governments, international organizations** and **civil society** in:
 - o adopting **preventive measures** at the national and international levels;
 - o **empowering local communities**, in particular vulnerable groups, to be active contributors in post-conflict rebuilding and reconstruction efforts;
 - o **strengthening environmental protection**, and addressing the resulting **human rights gaps**, in national and international normative and policy frameworks?

Format of the conference:

The 2-hour (10–12 am) hybrid online and in-presence conference will be divided into two panels: **on the normative and legal framework (1)**, and **on experiences from the field (2)**. Each panel will consist of a moderator and 4-5 panellists.

Follow-up:

A book publication, containing summaries of the panel proceedings, the Q&A sessions, an analytical think-piece on the lessons learned and ways forward and the full statements of the panellists, will be issued and distributed widely online, with hard copies to the panellists and to the Permanent Missions in Geneva. The publication will also be announced on social media platforms, with a link to the publication in the Geneva Centre's website.