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Geneva Peace Week 2021

Thematic Track Report

Creating a climate for
collaboration: Ways forward for
environment, climate change,
and peace

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Geneva Peace Week 2021 (GPW21) took place from 1-5 November 2021, featuring Online Workshops and a Digital Series that focused on four main thematic tracks. This report will summarize the key emerging insights from the 7 workshops and 7 digital series offerings within the thematic track, ***“Creating a climate for collaboration: Ways forward for environment, climate change, and peace”***.

In the face of global crisis, political will and resources are increasingly flowing into responses to climate change and environmental degradation. Research and practice at the nexus between peace, conflict, and the natural environment stretches back decades, but now more than ever, it must be amplified and integrated into responses at the international, state, and local levels. How might we communicate across disciplines, sectors, silos, and language, and collaborate in face of a growing crisis? Where and how are actors from these different, but linked, fields creating synergies and working together? How can they continue to mutually reinforce one another’s work while respecting their respective differences? This note summarizes the most important insights and points of discussion from GPW21.

Climate change does not directly cause violent conflicts, but rather amplifies a wide range of vulnerabilities mediated by factors such as inequality, inclusion, and governance, which can also be the antidotes to insecurity. Assumptions that climate change will inevitably increase competition for natural resources and lead to conflicts are overly simplistic, and evidence shows that factors such as inequality, governance, and inclusion play a larger role to both lead to insecurity and prevent it. In regions affected by climate disasters or with an abundance of natural resources, a lack of governance can leave a void that can be exploited by powerful local elites and even non-state armed actors, which can use religion and populist discourses as entry-points to promote their interests. Consequently, the lack of inclusive governance structures affects everything from the use and distribution of natural resources and the income they create to political participation and creation of economic opportunities, exposing vulnerable populations to increased tensions with potential to ignite a tinder box when coupled with extreme weather events. On the other hand, the discussions, including one on effective learning and assessment tools, made clear that understanding the genesis of insecurity also reveals the pathway towards peaceful and resilient societies: instead of focusing solely on risk factors, focus should be placed on what brings societies

together. The session on policy pathways suggested that the best way to defuse time-bombs is to ensure gender equality and social inclusion, strengthen social cohesion and relationships between groups through effective governance frameworks, increase access to livelihood opportunities and public services such as health and education, incorporate conflict management institutions, and empower local populations to become agents of change. Since locally led climate mitigation and adaptation projects can benefit local populations and create opportunities, if inequality, governance, and inclusion are addressed, climate change can become a vector for peace, not conflict.

Interdisciplinary, cross-sectoral collaboration is essential and will provide needed leverage to overcome the obstacles faced by the field. Definitions, data, and silos continue to pose challenges for funding, practice, and policy advancement. First, communicating the relationships between climate change, peace, environmental degradation, and conflict is complicated and should not be oversimplified. Across the sessions, there was no one, uniform label for the interconnections between natural resources, insecurity and the opportunities for sustainable peace; environmental peacebuilding, climate security, and other frames were used interchangeably. Data and tools also pose challenges. A session on effective learning and assessment tools articulated the importance of nuancing our understanding of data and acknowledging the limits of what data can provide (for example, how do we quantify the quality of conflict mechanisms? Can we?). And finally, funding institutions are often challenged by competing priorities and the complexity of climate change. Better collaboration can help to address all of these challenges. Dr. Olofunso Somorin of the African Development Bank argued clearly for that in the session on climate finance: “Money moves in the direction of partnerships.” Stronger partnerships are needed (i) from the side of investors, putting together investors that can take more risks to create investment pipelines so that others, less tolerant to risks, can follow, as well as (ii) from the perspective of local projects, since local partnerships can maximize the interconnectedness of peace, development and climate actors pushing adaptation forward. These partnerships can also address data deficits, leveraging the strengths of different kinds of actors from varying disciplines. Rather than debating the merits of the many different terminologies, the field’s multiplicity of voices can be leveraged as an opportunity to shape the future of the field. As the recently launched White Paper on the Future of Environmental Peacebuilding articulates: “Just as a diversity of species is needed in a landscape to ensure resilience and health, so too a diversity of voices and experience is essential if we are to build a resilient, dynamic ‘ecosystem’ for peace.”

An ideal role for Geneva and other “Global North” actors in environmental peacebuilding is in providing connections, visibility, exchange, and funding. Speakers and attendees alike repeated a strong refrain, citing inclusion as a central node in this work. Local leadership is not a new concept at Geneva Peace Week and environmental peacebuilding work is no exception. For example, a session (in French) on peace and governance in West Africa argued: if communities are not included in decision making processes around natural resources, particularly where governance is disputed, it can deepen tensions that foreground violent conflict. There are also elements of gender inequality, too, as women do not enjoy equal access to land in many places. But what is the role of Geneva? Local experts from Somalia in the event exploring climate change and security there clearly articulated that Geneva’s role is to raise awareness and visibility of local actors, diplomatically supporting efforts and exchange. If the session on climate finance argued that money moves in the direction of partnerships, how might we leverage Geneva in strategic partnerships that keep leadership at the local level? What structures must we build to achieve that vision? Future discussions at Geneva Peace Week could explore the operationalization of such an agenda.

Concluding connections: Three connection points can be drawn between these key points, paving the pathway towards more resilient societies by clarifying the roles of individuals and organizations. First, it is key to **connect actors to information.** Peacebuilding actors should have access to data and information on climate change and environmental stressors, to avoid that peace projects end up exacerbating climate vulnerabilities. Information should be made easily accessible for local populations as well, so that they can understand the risks of climate change and their role in adapting their own actions to avoid increasing environmental degradation. Educational content on the radio and other forms of media have proven effective in many contexts. In addition to peacebuilding actors and local populations, environmentalists and conservationists should also have access to proper training on conflict sensitivity, learning how to operate conservation in unstable regions without aggravating disputes. As previously highlighted, when information flows and actors understand their roles, climate change can harness cooperation instead of fuel instability.

The second connection point reflects on the role of international partnerships, especially the importance of **connecting local communities to Geneva.** Discussions with attendees who are working in their own communities in Somalia revealed that hubs like Geneva can provide connections and visibility to their projects, which is fundamental to facilitating access to funding and cross-cutting research. Conversely, Geneva-based



policy and decision makers can also profit from this close interaction by being able to learn and base their work on real experiences of people in the places that international actors euphemistically call “the field”. In other words, it allows for an invaluable reality check.

The third and last connection point refers to the need to **connect adaptation, peace, and development**. Constantly reminded by funders, community members, experts, and practitioners, operating in silos hurts efficiency and jeopardizes results. Investments in projects that integrate these fields by design need to be mainstreamed. Adaptation work cannot take place without comprehensive assessments of social and security risks, peace cannot put down roots when the environment, natural resources, and climate stressors are overlooked, and development cannot be more than a dream when a stable environment and human security are not granted. As a final thought, the words of a participant of the Berghof Foundation’s work in Somalia encapsulate all takeaways “we all know how conflict arises during droughts, and the guns are put down immediately after the rains come”.