Climate Crisis and Security on a Large and Small Scale: The Role of Civil Society

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Emphasizing the crucial importance dealing with climate change on a global and local level to prevent global security issues, the text highlights the important role of civil society, especially environmental groups, in addressing security concerns. In this regard the impact of climate change on economies, supply chains, and social stability is discussed, urging cooperation between governments and civil society for a sustainable change. The text also looks at potential security challenges from climate-related problems and stresses the need to follow the rule of law. Additionally, civil society groups can strengthen security through community teamwork, sharing resources, and resolving conflicts. In conclusion examples illustrate how environmental groups and the military can work together to address climate issues and improve security.

Introduction

In 2023, extreme weather events again hit many places around the world. This would not occur in such numbers and intensity without the advancing climate crisis. In Canada, forests burned from June to September, leaving a devastated area of more than 160,000 km² (Eisenberg et. al., 2023), which is the area of Austria and the Czech Republic combined.

From India to Vietnam, there were countless unprecedented heat waves in 2023, and the Mediterranean region experienced heavy rain, tidal waves and flooding. These are just some of the weather extremes that broke records in 2023 alone. The bad news is: It is not going to get better. The good news is: It will not get much worse if humanity intervenes.

If we continue down the fossil-fuel- and resource-exploiting economic path, we are heading for the ecological tipping points, the consequences of which will put our civilisation in its current form under heavy pressure (Potsdam Institut für Klimafolgenforschung, 2023). The international community will

face massive problems, first and foremost security problems. If the supply chains of the globalised world at their end no longer spit out the goods that are sold (especially in the Global North), there will be huge economic losses – unless a **restructuring of the economy to a system that works within planetary boundaries** is achieved by then. Should this not be the case and the economy and thus jobs, sources of income and access to essential goods become massively scarce or dry up, the first social discord will occur. If vital resources such as drinking water or fertile farmland are also threatened, entire regions will face a massive security problem. This is already a reality in several regions of the world, such as around Lake Chad, which is severely affected by climate change (Kamta, 2020). Conflicts over scarce resources can shake the internal stability of countries and lead to violent clashes along ethnic or religious lines.

Security as a civil society issue

Security for people in the way we are organised (in states, regions, municipalities, communities) is a civil society issue to the core. Although the issue of security is first and foremost located at the state and supranational level, which has an advantage for organising security agendas (armed forces, intelligence services, the police, justice system, and prison regime, international organisations, services of general interest, etc.), security is carried out by civil society organisations on a large scale: volunteer fire brigades, civil defence associations, countless organisations in the field of violence prevention, women's shelters, child protection institutions, social and human rights organisations, to name just a few areas. A more recent idea is that environmental protection organisations also deal with the issue of security. With the daily task of debunking and exposing pollution and greenwashing, advocating for laws to protect the environment and implementing projects to preserve nature and biodiversity, the ever-worsening situation of climate and biodiversity raises the question of what happens when the tipping points are reached, ecosystems as we know and need them no longer function and natural disasters increase. As described above, the consequences of a lack of climate and environmental protection are a security risk for communities, states and all continents.

So everything for humanity depends on whether we can stop the climate from heating up. At the moment, it looks like it is going to get worse for a while, even if we manage to change course. Even if we stop all carbon emis-

sions today, the climate crisis will have a long-term impact. For example, the sea level will continue to rise for centuries (IPCC, 2023). Either way, big changes are needed for people and society, if they are made now, we have a chance of a society that is inclusive, can reduce resentment through fairness and functions within planetary boundaries. This goal can only be achieved if governmental as well as civil society organisations work together and actively support society in this great transformation. Part of this is also to prepare for the fact that, as it looks now, our climate will continue to deteriorate for quite some time.

On a large and small scale

Science currently predicts a global average warming of about +2.9°C (Climate Action Tracker, 2023; IPCC, 2023; UNEP, 2023) with existing policies and actions. If the international community fails to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, a much higher temperature rise is possible. First and foremost, the industrialised countries are obliged to act. A +2.9°C scenario would be a catastrophic situation for humanity – it would affect all people around the world, not to mention ecosystems with all their fauna and flora. **This scenario must be prevented by all means**, by each individual state and especially the states with the currently and historically highest greenhouse gas emissions: by reducing them as quickly as possible. Climate targets for emission reduction (in different efficiency) exist in the majority of these states (Net Zero Tracker, 2023), but they fall short of what is necessary. As the UNEP Emissions Gap Report shows there are excess emissions of 23 Gt CO_2e by 2030 for a 1.5°C pathway. There is also a substantial 'implementation gap' highlighted by the UNEP emissions gap report (UNEP, 2022). The G20 members alone fall short of delivering their nationally determined contributions (NDC) by 2.6 bn tonnes of CO_2 by 2030. So, the gap can be partly closed by actually implementing what has already been promised.

There are, of course, different scenarios for different parts of the world. Before swathes of land dry out completely, sufficient food supplies are no longer possible in many areas and people are forced to leave their homes in large parts of the world (as is already the case in many regions), the climate crisis will have a massive impact on our economy. Taking Europe as an example, it will probably massively affect the supply of food from Italy, Spain and the entire Mediterranean region (Lange, 2020). If the economy as we

know it in Europe, and which our individual lives are based on, partially or completely collapses due to supply chains that no longer function, social and political questions will have to be asked. Ideally before that happens, ideally now.

In doing so, it is important to think on a large and small scale. Take the pyramid of Needs (Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung Baden Württemberg, Fachbereich Jugend und Politik, 2017) as a starting point, in which the basic needs, such as food, drink and sleep, are immediately followed by individual security needs. In a changing world, these needs are actually or perceived to be under pressure. This can be exploited by populist and antidemocratic parties or movements to divide society and secure support for simple answers that are supposed to restore the sense of security (Bayerlein & Metten, 2023). In the process, there is always a scapegoat to blame. In the worst case, rising popularity of these antidemocratic and populist parties and movements culminates in the undermining of the rule of law. Such a scenario is also possible in a climate scenario that massively restricts people's lives and thus curtails their need for security. Safeguarding the rule of law must be the top priority in a state's strategic security planning. The changes brought about by the climate and biodiversity crises will have a massive impact on this.

If the rule of law is eroded, the essential question is: If the state can no longer guarantee the security of most of its inhabitants, how do you organise communities on a small scale so that their security needs are met? Let's assume that in a country the food supply through supermarkets no longer exists, you can no longer work in the supermarket or many other industries to earn money, but for example, you have a piece of land where you can grow potatoes. What is the point in having a potato field with enough fertile soil and water (and pollinating insects) if you do not have a rule of law that guarantees that your land will continue to be yours so that you can dispose of the food planted on it? We should probably have to look at other countries and regions where this situation is already a reality. People will find their gaps and niches, but it will not work out for everyone.

In situations where the rule of law is not functioning properly, different factors and capabilities are crucial to ensure the security of a community. Organised civil society and its impact from small to large plays an important role in such a scenario as well as in prevention:

Community cooperation and solidarity are an important precondition to prevent the erosion of the sense of security and the rule of law. A strong community that sticks together and where individuals support each other is more resilient to populism and extremist movements (Boeri et. al., 2018). Community spirit and solidarity can help to ensure the security of the members of a society and also in communities (villages, neighbourhoods, homes, family). This is supported by civil society organisations. Shared commitment and personal relationships are the origin of trust, solidarity, respect and cohesion.

Local governance structures and local self-organisation are also important to lead the community, make decisions and use resources effectively. There is an encouraging trend right now towards energy communities at a very local level. People on the community level are joining together to generate and purchase their electricity collectively. This model has already celebrated some success (Sansom, 2023) and will be the future of energy supply. (Nevertheless, there must be state structures to ensure the technical supply with supra-regional grids). At the moment, it is mainly civil society organisations and start-ups that are tackling this issue of energy communities.

Numerous NGOs and civil society organisations are also working on **how resources are distributed** and who has access to them: The efficient use and distribution of limited resources such as food, water, medicine and other essentials is crucial for community survival. Today, the foundations for this are being laid when organisations that have made the fair distribution of resources their mission are successful. The questions of who has access to sufficient basic needs and the needs for social participation are at the centre of this. Of course, this is also about the question of poverty and wealth as well as the distribution of paid and unpaid work in a society.

If life is to be organised more locally, **communication and information exchange** between communities and society as a whole is essential in order to find out about threats to security in good time. Effective communication is essential to coordinate emergency plans and keep the community informed. This is where an organised state comes into play, but also other actors who disseminate information. Civil society organisations and organised communities also have a role to play here: Trust in information coming from people you trust is particularly high (Statista, 2017). The community should also be well prepared to respond to natural disasters, conflicts or other crisis

situations. This includes developing emergency plans and conducting regular exercises. Here, there is a need in society for government security institutions to train and educate people already.

An important basic need is **health care and first aid**. Basic first aid skills are already being taught by civil society organisations. On the one hand, access to health care is essential and must be ensured as much as possible, even in a society that no longer lives by normative laws and rules we have in today's Europe. There will have to be access to medical knowledge on the one hand and access to technologies on the other. Cooperation between the state and civil society on this issue in preparation for what the climate scenarios say is coming will be essential for the security of our society.

Even in small-scale organised societies there are conflicts. Here, **conflict resolution and mediation** are a central task that must be established in a community. The ability to resolve conflicts peacefully within the community is crucial to reduce tensions and ensure the security of all members. Here we can learn a lot from violence prevention centres, mediators and victim protection institutions. Societies need to uphold laws and human rights, so the rule of law as an overarching institution is essential.

What **education and skills** will we need to survive in a 2-3°C hotter world? Community members should have the necessary skills and knowledge to take care of themselves and minimise possible dangers. These can be very different skills depending on the circumstances. Those mentioned above, such as thinking and acting in community and solidarity, are essential in any case. It could be agricultural and manual skills, as well as psycho-social and caring skills, and other practical skills that ensure life and survival in an insecure world. On the one hand, upgrading craft and care professions in our society would be an important step; another step would be a different organisation of gainful employment towards more time for voluntary engagement and community work, in which care work in families, among friends, among neighbours as well as craft and agricultural skills often play a greater role than in a job. People in civil society get involved in clubs and other associations to run community gardens and food sharing, to build a house together, to take care of the elderly. This requires time and resources. We can also invest in these right now by giving this kind of work a much higher priority and enabling people to have a good life away from 40 hours of gainful employment.

These security-related areas, with no guarantee of completeness, would also be important parameters for a prosperous and secure development of society in a future scenario in which humanity is not heading for a climate catastrophe. However, at the moment we are in this scenario, and it is essential - and this is the most important statement in this text – to **prevent the climate catastrophe at all costs**! Society and politics cannot avoid developing long-term strategies to preserve resources, protect the environment and the climate and create the transformation to a sustainable way of life.

Politicians have the task of creating and implementing laws on climate and environmental protection based on the scientific facts, and the economy needs these laws to provide planning security and to steer innovation and economic development in a sustainable direction. The security institutions such as the military and the police have the task to think strategically about security scenarios and to develop plans together with science to strengthen society with regard to threat scenarios. In all this, it is advisable and even essential to involve civil society. Whether in citizens' councils such as the Climate Council in Austria or in cooperation with NGOs, successful strategic planning for the future will depend on the good cooperation and political will of these institutions.

Examples of cooperation between an environmental NGO and the military

A cooperation between an environmental protection organisation or initiative and the military may seem unusual at first glance, but there are certainly ways in which they can jointly contribute to environmental and climate protection. Even though most environmental organisations and initiatives are rooted in the peace movement of the 1970s, which rejected large aspects of state armed forces, the world has changed and the environmental movement in large parts also recognises the importance of exchanging ideas with different institutions and, if it is beneficial to the cause, to cooperate. Like in every cooperation, an NGO must always be extremely careful not to be tokenised, nor to be used for greenwashing!

In general, the following are possible areas where environmental organisations and the military can achieve mutual advancement in climate protection issues:

At global scale, the military accounts for 5.5% of global CO_2-emissions according to experts' estimates. Despite this, they are almost always excluded from climate protection plans and targets (Scientists for Global Responsibility, Conflict and Environment Observatory, 2022). If the military takes a **pioneering role in climate neutrality**, this has several advantages: On the one hand, it increases the pressure on other, especially governmental, institutions to take climate action, and on the other hand, it makes the armed forces more resilient if they are no longer dependent on fossil fuels. Of course, care must be taken here to also minimise dependence on complex global supply chains. The military can invest in renewable energies, self-sufficient emission-free energy production and promote the use of energy-efficient technologies. This could include installing solar energy systems on military bases, using wind power or switching to lower-emission means of transport. Sufficiency – the question of how much is really needed – plays a crucial role here. As in all areas, the ultimate goal must be **energy savings**!

The military usually has considerable research resources at its disposal. Cooperation with an environmental organisation could bring **development and promotion of environmentally friendly technologies and innovations**, including those that benefit civil society and communities – keyword: energy self-sufficiency.

The military and its research institutions are the key actors for **analysing security risks** caused by the climate and biodiversity crisis and their impact on national and international security. Better access to and exchange of data between the military and NGOs can bring immense benefits to both sides. On the one hand, the environmental organisations can use these data to better support their own demands towards policy-makers and, on the other hand, they can contribute new aspects to these assessments and analyses with their knowledge of civil society and their expertise in the field of environment. This could include the identification of conflict hotspots within environmental and climate issues such as water scarcity or food insecurity.

The issue of **training and awareness-raising** could also work both ways in a cooperation between the military and civil society environmental organisations: Through cooperation, the military could better raise awareness within civil society regarding the security issues that the climate crisis entails. At the same time, it could use the expertise of an environmental protection organi-

sation in its own training courses. Young people in particular are very interested in climate and environmental protection. To reach this group in both civil society and the military, cooperation could make a difference.

A military aware of climate issues can contribute to more effective climate protection at the political level with its advisory function. Being able to draw on the experience and needs of civil society can prove to be an advantage for a comprehensive view of this highly relevant security policy issue. The sharpened view of civil society would also be an advantage in the course of exchanges with other states at the diplomatic level.

In a cooperation between a political civil society organisation, as environmental protection organisations usually are, and the military, it is important that such a cooperation is based on mutual respect, trust, clear goals and transparent communication. Both parties should bring their respective strengths and resources to bear in order to contribute effectively to climate protection together.

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