

**Special Event on Climate; Impacts and Threats**  
**19 October 2009**

~  
**Event Summary**

The Special Event entitled Climate; Impacts and Threats was organized by the [Division for Sustainable Development, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs \(UNDESA\)](#). The event was chaired by Chairperson of the Second Committee, H.E. Mr. Park In-kook, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the UN, and discussion was framed by five distinguished panelists: Geoffrey Dabelko Director, Environmental Change and Security Programme, Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars; Professor Simon Dalby, Carleton University, Department of Geography and Environmental Studies; Rolph Payet, Special Advisor to the President of the Republic of Seychelles; Margareta Wahlstrom, Assistant Secretary-General for Disaster Risk Reduction and Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General for the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action in the Secretariat for the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction; Nicholle (Koko) Warner, Head of the Environmental Migration, Social Vulnerability, and Adaptation Section at the United Nations University Institute for Environment and Human Security (UNU-EHS).

*Opening*

The chair opened the meeting by noting the recent report of the Secretary General [Climate change and its possible security implications](#) (A/63/L.8/Rev.1 ) and emphasizing the need for climate threat ‘minimizers’, especially sustainable development. To frame the ensuing dialogue, the Chair posed five key questions to participants:

- (1) How can it be assured that policymakers effectively address climate-related threats?
- (2) What key factors will determine whether or not climate change will threaten security?
- (3) How can climate change be prevented from becoming an emergent security threat?
- (4) How can institutions be strengthened to help vulnerable nations build climate resilience?
- (5) What can the international community do to help build better risk management systems?

*Panel Presentations*

Ms. Margareta Wahlstrom opened the panel discussion by discussing disaster risk reduction and climate risk management. She noted that, along with disaster risk, the cost of disasters is rising, and that the poorest of countries and of people are those most vulnerable. Poverty, however defined, is a driver of vulnerability. She emphasized that a new institutional outlook based on integration is needed to address climate impacts, and that this would entail understanding environmental or disaster related issues as development problems.

Ms. Wahlstrom said that insufficient international cooperation must be overcome, and that all countries have to develop an action plan based on the [Hyogo Framework for Action](#). She

highlighted that considerable literature shows that investments in better infrastructure, while costly initially, pay off in the long-term. Greater public awareness and education is needed to garner support for such investments, especially costly collective investments in disaster risk reduction.

The distinguished panelist also identified issues and actions on which the international community should focus now, in order to avoid escalating threats to human security in the future. She elaborated specifically on how water shortages and ecosystem destruction will affect food and livelihood security in some of the world's largest economies. Water shortage, she noted, has the potential to be particularly socially destabilizing. She also pointed to the positive examples of countries successfully collaborating on warning systems, especially those in Asia.

In conclusion, Ms. Wahlstrom outlined action points, noting the need to prioritize them. She called for an acceleration of political and financial investments in risk reduction; a scaling-up of the pace of development of green energy sources for economic growth; a focus on both rural livelihoods and food security as well as urban areas, which are growing rapidly and can become centers of unrest. Finally, she asked that a special focus be given to those territories that risk losing their land to the impacts of climate change, like small islands and low-lying countries.

Geoffrey Dabelko, the second panelist, discussed five points amplified in current climate debates. First, he noted that the international community must bring the climate change dialogue, especially discourse on threat multipliers like drought and food insecurity, down to the ground level where the impacts will be felt. He emphasized that building resilience and adaptation capacity on the ground would assist in efforts to assure peace and stability.

Secondly Mr. Dabelko asked that attention be paid to *rates of change* of resource availability or of other climate impacts as well as resource scarcity and abundance per se. He noted that institutions have a hard time keeping up with rapid rates of change, and that they needed to be better prepared to deal with scenarios where, for instance, glacial melting causes increased flows of water followed by severe drought in later years. He cautioned that building trans-boundary water and resource institutions now would be advantageous and easier than delaying until resource scarcity was felt.

Mr. Dabelko then asked how climate change mitigation could contribute to conflict and peace. He cited the example of bio-fuels and their negative impacts on food security and land conversion. He suggested that institutions for trans-boundary water management and trans-boundary 'peace parks' could be used to promote collaboration and capture the peace building benefits that arise from countries' mutual dependency on resources.

Mr. Dabelko also observed that climate change would pose additional challenges to transport and rescue platforms provided by the military. Such services might be needed more often in the future, and humanitarian missions in a warmer world might be more difficult. He also noted that "greening the military" could reduce its vulnerability as well as contribute to greenhouse gas mitigation.

Lastly, the distinguished panelist pointed out that wealthy states were also vulnerable to climate change, and that all countries, as well as the UN, have a strong stake in responding to the crisis.

Rolph Payet began his presentation with a discussion on how to frame the debate on human security and climate change. He gave examples of how climate change impacts like sea level rise affect both development and human security. A loss of territory from sea-level rise translates to a

loss of identity, a loss of ability to exercise rights, and this, he noted, is a security issue. Secondly, he highlighted that if ecosystem services fail, so do economic systems, and it follows that human life support systems are also jeopardized.

He emphasized that the real cost of climate change lies in the fact that we are all victims. Citing such examples as the shifting Italian-Swiss border, the loss of homelands in the Carteret isles, and the heavy climate burden on the poor, Dr. Payet said that there would be no victors. In the sovereignty versus responsibility debate, he noted that sovereignty would find its limits in the collective welfare of all people in all countries. He pointed out that to date there had been a combination of policy and economic failures – with the impacts of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans a prime example. Poorer countries and people tend to lose more as a percentage of GDP from natural disasters than their developed counterparts, he explained, and do not have insurance schemes or the ability to withstand repeated disasters.

Dr. Payet also gave a typology of what he termed the victims of climate change, pointing out the SIDS dilemma. He noted that developed countries and developing countries having invested in infrastructure would suffer high financial burdens from climate impacts, though only the latter would suffer a high human cost. With limited infrastructure to be damaged, Least Developed Countries (LDCs) would have a low financial burden but a high human cost. In SIDS, he explained, the human dimension of climate change was at its most critical because this group of states were middle income countries and among the most ecologically and economically vulnerable in the world.

In conclusion, Dr. Payet encouraged participants to imagine a future with a new world map drawn by climate change.

The fourth panelist, Nicholle (Koko) Warner discussed United Nations University (UNU) empirical research on climate change and migration. She presented a range of predictions on the number of climate migrants, from 50-700 million by 2050. She pointed out that there was no agreement on what the actual number of migrants would be, but that there was a chance to minimize it.

Ms. Warner then posed and answered several questions:

- What will climate change mean for migration?
  - All available estimates suggest the number of migrants will be in the tens of millions or more, surpassing any historical precedent.
- Do we know what we need to know?
  - No.
- How can we understand the dynamics?
  - We still have little empirical knowledge of links between environmental change and population mobility.
- What are the most compelling questions?
  - Who are the environmental migrants?
  - What environmental degradation plays a role in migration?
  - Why do some people stay and some leave degraded areas? She noted that the people most dependent on environment for their livelihoods are most likely to migrate.

Ms. Warner then gave a ‘world tour’ providing information and stories from various countries and regions.

She pointed out that the largest irrigated agricultural system in the world lies traverses India and Pakistan, and that the international community could not wait to find out what the impacts would be on human security and migration if and when this watershed is lost. She said the Sahel region would likely have water availability up to 2080, but that what matters is not merely how much rain falls but when it comes. Too much rain at the wrong times washes away soils and crops.

In Mexico, the most densely populated areas may experience up to 50% drying by 2080, and the issue is whether people who want to return home are able. She noted that regional policies will play an important role, especially where migration is a form of adaptation. In a similar example, she discussed how in the Nile Delta people will be squeezed by both advancing sea levels and desertification. She also highlighted how human trafficking was linked to environmental migration in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, an area also threatened by sea level rise. She also called attention to Bangladesh and the Ganges Delta, where 150 million people are experiencing sea-level rise and the effects of melting Himalayan glaciers. Finally she ended her 'tour' with the Small Island Developing States (SIDS), discussing the cases of Tuvalu and the Maldives, which are preparing to lose lands to sea-level rise and wave action.

In conclusion, Ms. Warner said that countries must work together and provided six key messages for decision makers; Avoid dangerous climate change; Focus on human security with proactive approaches; Invest in resilience; Prioritize the most vulnerable; Include mitigation and adaptation strategies; Close the gaps in protection for refugees.

The final speaker, Simon Dalby concluded the panel with a discussion on how to think about climate change. He began by pointing out that the classic carbon dioxide diagram is the history of our lifetime. A new era, he termed the Anthropocene, began in the late 1900s and shows how humanity has changed the planet. He cautioned that we are now no longer able to predict how the earth will respond to our activities and that dealing with climate change is also about handling a host of other changes. He referenced UNEP's fourth [Global Environmental Outlook](#) report.

In his next point, Mr. Dalby emphasized that humanity is living in an increasingly artificial world, and that these changes are both inadvertent and deliberate. Globalization, he noted, is an increasingly physical process where dams are built, materials relocated and humans are rearranging the biosphere. Since we have become an urban species, we must address the vulnerabilities of our cities to disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the Mumbai floods of 2005. He stressed that thinking through the artificial circumstances is key to thinking about how to prepare for climate change hazards. Infrastructure must be kept intact if cities are to remain functional, including the distribution of food, fuel, electricity and water.

Mr. Dalby closed his talk by quoting the philosopher Pericles who said that "we can't predict the future but have to prepare for it." With this he urged countries to think about what treaties and protocols should be in place before disasters strike, for example, before the Himalayan glaciers melt. Addressing resource scarcity is crucial to preventing conflict, as will be technology and development, he concluded.

### *Question and Answer Session*

With the conclusion of panel presentations, the chair opened the floor to questions and dialogue from Member States. Bangladesh suggested that because environmental refugees are victims that they not be referred to as a security threat. Sierra Leone requested a response to current publications disputing that humanity has induced climate change. Jamaica highlighted that all

countries are vulnerable, and that they should collaborate based on their different capacities, noting the particular adaptation constraints of small islands States. Pointing out that a 2 degree Celsius increase in temperature could submerge some SIDS, Barbados asked how far current proposals in the UNFCCC go towards protecting these people and communities. Sweden commented that the panel had opened up a new field of work for the UN and queried how the UN and other institutions could realign their capacity with these new needs. Denmark asked how Member States could support the UN's role in this area.

In continued dialogue, Japan requested that the panel elaborate on what should be done at the national versus the community level to address security issues. The Republic of Korea asked the experts to point out the most critical challenge in integrating climate change policy into development strategies. The Asian-African Legal Consultative Organization recalled the need to address the root question of mitigation and deep emissions cuts, while Indonesia stressed that the issue of oceans needed to be integrated into climate change deliberations. The Solomon Islands asked how the international community could garner the political will to move negotiations forward quickly. The Russian Federation closed the floor by calling for a greater diversity of views to be reflected in the panel.

In responses to these queries, Ms. Margareta Wahlstrom noted that IPCC reports say that longer term trends on climate change impacts and on disasters are unclear. She pointed out that the IPCC is launching a report on extreme events that will be released in 2011. She also said the most costly conflicts today are floods, which are largely climate induced, and to expect more of the same, more uncertainty, and more extreme events based on IPCC and science.

Ms. Wahlstrom also pointed out that climate change was introduced as an element that caused disasters in the internationally adopted Hyogo Framework. She noted that methodologies are being developed to address natural disasters and, if applied, they will function as adaptation measures. She also congratulated countries that are integrating climate change and disaster risk reduction strategies, and agreed that a new terminology is needed to describe the future.

Geoffrey Dabelko agreed that countries have different historic responsibilities. He suggested that isolated adaptation offices would not be helpful, given the need to mainstream and fully integrate climate change throughout all ministries. He added that adaptation and mitigation needed to be addressed simultaneously and in an incremental approach.

Rolph Payet pointed out that more than 30 years of research shows that there is a human footprint on climate change. He emphasized, and Simon Dalby agreed that the most important thing to do is address climate change, whether or not it is human or naturally caused.

Koko Warner concluded the question and answer session by asking stakeholders to reduce risk instead of only responding to it and urging countries to consider social vulnerability because the poor are those most vulnerable to disasters.