

Balancing Peace and Planet: UN Peacekeeping Operations in the Face of Environmental Concerns

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Source: International Peace Institute

Introduction

The United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations take place in the conflict-affected areas and even some of them are the world's deadliest places. Over the years, the peacekeepers have played a vital role in preventing the escalation of violence and protecting civilians. However, in these operations, the environment becomes vulnerable often because of the heavy vehicles, infrastructure building and wastes produced in these operations. Although, over the years,

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environmental concerns have been taken into consideration while conducting these operations, there are still some loopholes in the process. This paper will provide an overview of why environmental concern is necessary for these operations and how the operations have made the environment vulnerable. It will further focus on what has been done for the protection of the environment, and lastly, it will give some recommendations.

UN Peacekeeping Missions and the Importance of Protecting the Environment

UN peacekeeping missions are mostly deployed in places with scarce natural resources and fragile environmental conditions. In most cases, in a conflict situation or in a post-conflict one, the environmental problems remain significant. There can be a water crisis, negative effects of deforestation, or competition for natural resources. Especially in the African regions where most of the operations take place, there is a continuous struggle because of the natural resources. The host countries, in post-conflict situations, struggle to manage the natural resources of the country. In such a situation, showing concern about the environment through these missions will work in two ways. On the one hand, the desire to establish peace in the country will be getting easier as security has a deep-rooted connection with environment. On the other hand, it will uphold the reputation of the peacekeeping operations.²

Many of the conflicts are driven by the lack of proper management of the natural resources. The revenues come from the natural resources that fuel the conflicts. Thus, managing the natural resources properly can help mitigate the conflicts. For example, in Afghanistan, the government of Afghanistan, UNAMA, USAID, and UNOPS made a partnership and established the Afghan Conservative Corps (ACC). Ex-combatants and people who belong to vulnerable groups were hired under the ACC, and pistachio forests were provided to them for the improvement of their livelihood. This helped establish peace in the region.³

² “Environment and Natural Resources.” 2017. United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. 2017. Accessed January 24, 2024. <https://resourcehub01.blob.core.windows.net/training-files/Training%20Materials/003%20CPTM-EN/003-146%20Lesson%203.5%20Environment%20and%20Natural%20Resources.pdf>.

³ “Afghanistan: The ACC Livelihoods Project Successfully Continued Providing Critical Employment for the Rural Poor in 2009 - Afghanistan.” 2010. ReliefWeb. January 25, 2010. Accessed January 24, 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/afghanistan-acc-livelihoods-project-successfully-continued-providing-critical>.

At the same time, in every conflict, a huge number of people leave their countries and become refugees. To create a favorable condition in the home country for the refugees, a healthy environment needs to be assured. That is why environmental concerns are very important to be addressed.⁴ Lastly, peacekeeping operations are conducted for the betterment of a region in which is facing the disasters of a conflict or the aftermath of a conflict. In such conditions, the environmental concerns addressed in the operations can ensure the maximum outcome from the operations.

Threats towards the Environment

The UN peacekeeping operations, in many ways, threaten the environment and its natural resources. Some of these threats are outlined:-

Impact on available water: In many conflict areas, water is a scarce resource. So, when a UN peacekeeping operation is established in a country, the locals may consider them as their competitors for the resource. Especially in the case of water, the threat is more serious. At the same time, with the infrastructural development, the wastes coming out from the toilets, kitchens, and living places can make the water contaminated and toxic.

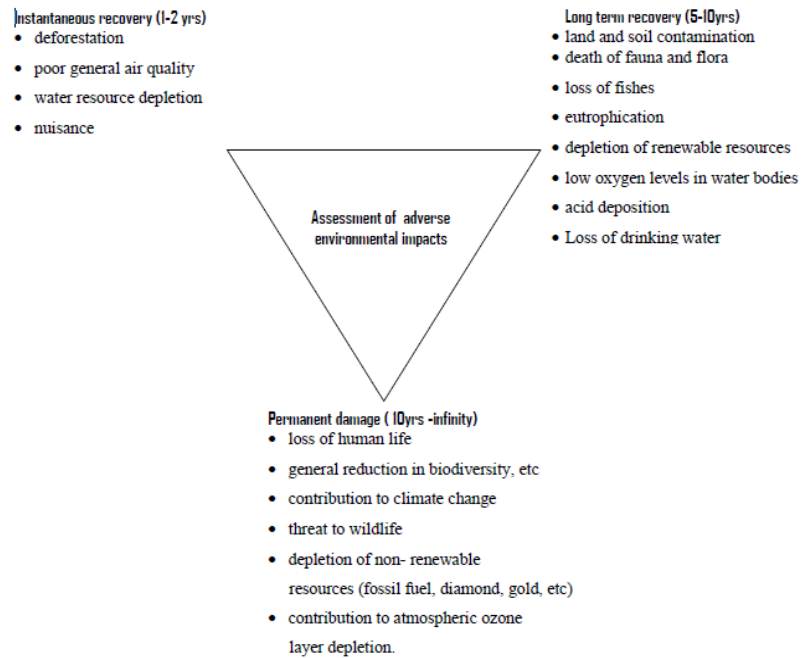
Heavy use of Energy: Heavy energy consumption can cause serious damage in the regions where peacekeeping operations take place. The heavy consumption of fuel is one of the main reasons that results in air pollution. The use of heavy vehicles, arms, jet fuel, petrol and diesel used in generators are some of the instances where the quality of air is getting worse.

Threat for wildlife: The operations can threaten the wildlife of a certain region. Changing the ecosystem through building new infrastructures, deforestation can cause major damage to the wildlife and the ecosystem. In many cases, natural habitats are cleared which can cause further damage to the environment and the wildlife.

The solid wastes: A huge number of solid wastes are produced in UN peacekeeping missions. Those can be food wastes, construction wastes, packaging materials, hazardous wastes (like-

⁴ “Environment and Natural Resources.” 2017. United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. 2017.

electric equipment, batteries). These solid wastes can be very harmful for the environment as well as the ecosystem.



(Source: Charlotte Asiedu, “Environmental Review of United Nations Peacekeeping ...,” DiVA Portal, 2010, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1312150/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.)

A Case Study: Haiti

In response to a devastating earthquake, a UN peacekeeping mission was sent to Haiti called MINUSTAH. Haiti was cholera-free until October 2010. The mismanagement of the waste-water in the Mirebalais camp resulted into a cholera epidemic in Haiti after the devastating earthquake. More than 10,000 people lost their lives and more than 800,000 people fell ill.⁵ Although the UN did not accept any legal responsibilities for that, later on, in 2016, Philip Alston, in his annual

⁵ Moloney, Anastasia. 2020. “A Decade after U.N.-Linked Cholera Outbreak, Haitians Demand Justice.” Reuters. October 23, 2020. Accessed January 25, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN2772RL/#:~:text=Haiti%20was%20cholera%2Dfree%20until,that%20can%20kill%20within%20hours>.

report had emphasized in this issue and claimed that the arrival of the Nepalese peacekeepers and the outbreak of cholera were interlinked.⁶



(Source: National Public Radio)

The then General Secretary Ban Ki-moon, in 2016, apologized on behalf of the UN and claimed that it was the “moral responsibility” for the UN to provide compensation for that. The organization agreed on setting up a trust fund worth \$400 million but even after more than a decade, the commitment was not met. Till 2020, the UN was able to raise only \$20.5 million and spent \$3.2 million. Besides that, a representative of UN’s special envoy for Haiti, Ramsey Ben-Achour, claimed that UN spent more than \$705 million to the development of health and sanitation infrastructure.⁷ UN claims that the investments have made a huge impact to fight cholera in Haiti. However, the people of Haiti are still waiting for that trust fund UN had promised.

So, on one hand, no one can deny the massive role UN peacekeeping missions play in mitigating conflicts. On the other hand, the mismanagements can cause severe consequences and can cause lives of thousands of people.

⁶ “Environment and Natural Resources.” 2017. United Nations Peacekeeping Operations. 2017.

⁷ Moloney, Anastasia. 2020. “A Decade after U.N.-Linked Cholera Outbreak, Haitians Demand Justice.” Reuters.

Greening the Blue

Over the years, environmental concerns have forced the UN to develop certain policies and institutions to address the environmental issues. The MINUSMA, in 2013 was the very first mission where there was a direct mandate about the environmental concerns in the mission.⁸ Later on, four other missions were conducted following the same procedure and having the direct mandates addressing the environmental issues. But addressing the environment in the peacekeeping missions has been developing for many years. Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS) have been developing this agenda for nearly a decade and in 2007, DPKO and DFS drafted their environmental policies for the missions and it was adopted after two years in 2009.⁹ United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) played a huge role in this process.

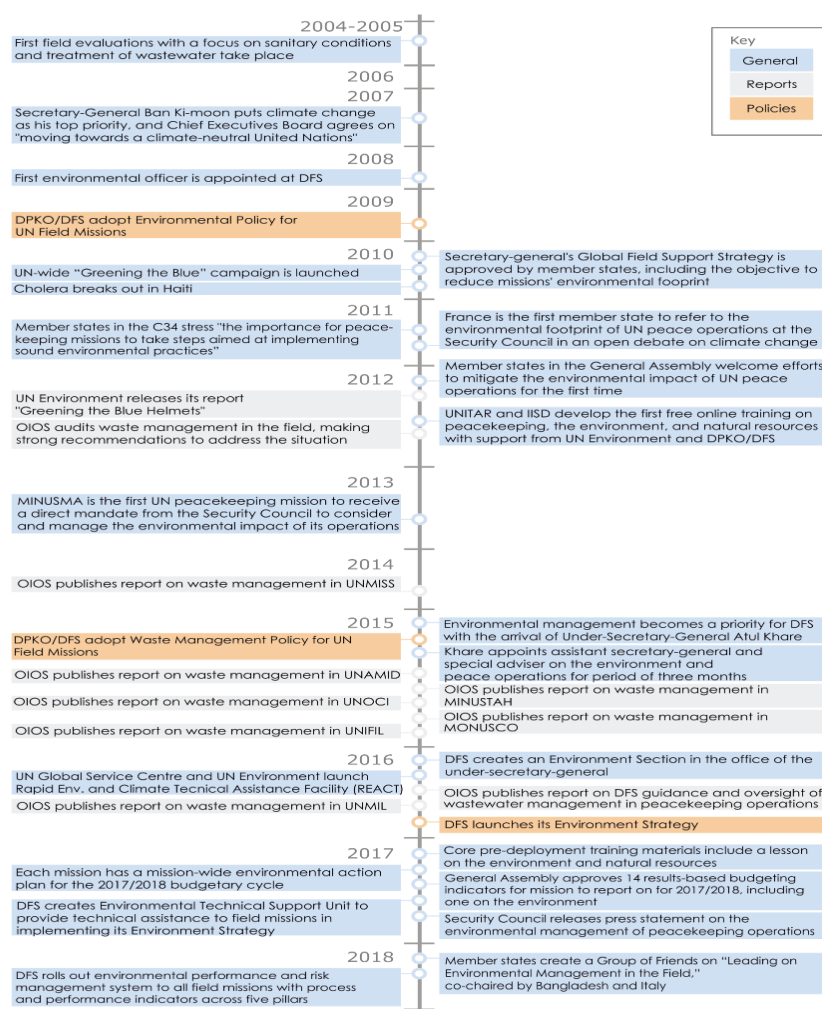


(Source: United Nations Peacekeeping)

⁸ Lucas Destrijcker, “Entry Points and Priorities for MINUSMA to Address Environmental and Climate Security in Mali,” *Weathering Risk*, 2022, https://weatheringrisk.org/sites/default/files/document/220207_Advisory%20note%20-%20MINUSMA%20environmental%20and%20climate%20security_Final.pdf.

⁹ Lucile Maertens and Malkit Shoshan, “Greening Peacekeeping: The Environmental Impact of UN ...,” International Peace Institute, 2018, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/1804_Greening-Peacekeeping.pdf.

There were further concerns as the environmental challenges are different in different countries. So, a comprehensive study had to be conducted in every mission differently. Issue of waste water, wastes from infrastructure development, solid waste, and hazardous wastes has been addressed under this development. The institutions have been playing a key role in monitoring the issues. At the same time, the issues of training the peacekeepers were raised by the UNEP and a training program had been initiated in 2012. Under the training program, the military, police and civilian troops are trained to maintain the mandates regarding the environmental concerns for sustainable and more effective outcome.¹⁰



(Source: Lucile Maertens and Malkit Shoshan, "Greening Peacekeeping: The Environmental Impact of UN ...," International Peace Institute, 2018, https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/1804_Greening-Peacekeeping.pdf.)

¹⁰ "UNEP to Train Blue Helmets on Environmental Challenges to Peace and Security," UN Environment, September 21, 2012, <https://www.unep.org/fr/node/6107>.

Through the years, there were more developments on this issue addressing various environmental challenges as it can be seen in the chart. DPKO and DFS are playing the major role along with the UNEP on this issue.

Recommendations

- Strict operational guidelines for environmental issues must be taken and in every single mission, the peacekeepers must follow those guidelines. Punitive measures should be declared for those who will breach the guidelines.
- The training program on environment for the peacekeepers should be made mandatory. Every peacekeeper has to abide by the strict guidelines and they must take the training where they will be taught how to maintain the guidelines in any conditions for sustainable and effective outcome. A general level of troops awareness must be created.
- Data on the environmental impacts should be collected systemically. This will ensure whether the guidelines are getting effective or not.
- Comprehensive indicators should be set in the long run. These indicators will show the impact of the missions on the environment and will help develop better guidelines in different scenarios.
- Strict environmental conditions should be set during camp establishment and its closure.

Conclusion

The peacekeeping missions with improved environmental concerns and guidelines can provide more for the conflict-affected regions. That is why, DPKO and DFS, over the years, have addressed the issues and challenges and thus, developing their policies and guidelines accordingly. With better and strict guidelines, on one hand, it can uphold UN's ambitions and promote its concern for the environment; on the other hand, the conflict situations can be dealt with in a better manner since environment and security are interrelated.