

STRENGTHENING THE
HUMAN DIMENSION OF
CLIMATE CHANGE IN
THE OSCE'S POLICY

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Background: Current OSCE Climate Policy

While Participating States pledged to conduct environmental cooperation through the founding 1975 Helsinki Final Act, very few OSCE documents have addressed climate change since. The first explicit mention of climate change only dates back to 2007 when the OSCE issued the Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security. It recognized the linkages between the environment and security and acknowledged climate change as a long-term challenge (MC.DOC/4/07, p.1).

Since then, the OSCE's small but growing interest in addressing climate change has translated into a series of decisions that mention or tackle the adverse consequences of climate change. These include the 2009 Decision no. 5/09 on "Migration management," the 2009 Decision No. 6/09 on "Strengthening dialogue and cooperation on energy security in the OSCE area," the 2013 Decision no. 5/13 on "Improving the environmental footprint of energy-related activities in the OSCE region" and the 2014 Decision no. 6/14 on "Enhancing disaster risk reduction."

The OSCE has worked to address climate change through its "comprehensive concept of security" (MC.DEC/3/21, p. 1). The OSCE has indeed identified "risk clusters" of particular relevance to the region's security, such as agriculture and tourism; energy; mining and mining waste; emigration and mixed movement; health; transboundary rivers; forests and illegal logging (Rüttinger, 2021, p. 10). In 2018, the OSCE also launched an extra-budgetary project on "Strengthening responses to security risks from climate change in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia." Illustrating this dominantly security-oriented discourse, the OSCE aims to 1) identify and map potential climate-security hotspots, 2) develop and implement climate change and security risk reduction measures, 3) raise awareness of the linkages between climate change and security, and 4) conduct a gender analysis in the region. (Rüttinger, 2021, p. 9).

To address security risks, the OSCE carries out fieldwork, such as participatory assessments of potential security risks stemming from climate change in the OSCE region, the identification and mapping of vulnerable geographical areas, as well as the development of transboundary adaptation measures for shared ecosystems. The recent Decision 3/21 on "Strengthening Cooperation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change" is the first to substantively address climate issues. It marks a strong shift in the OSCE's narrative and signals a push for greater engagement on environmental change.

Despite signaling deep concerns about climate change and advocating for stronger cooperation, the latest Decision 2/31 does not mandate institutions to take specific climate action. Furthermore, while the OSCE recognizes that “addressing this challenge requires the widest possible international cooperation, as well as at the regional level,” the organization has not set any international climate commitments for its Participating States (MC.DEC/3/21, p. 1).

This policy paper thus argues that **the OSCE should strengthen its role in addressing climate change by endorsing a cross-dimensional approach to this challenge, as well as integrating human and climate justice considerations to its traditional climate-security work.** Along these lines, the OSCE must scale up its climate policy and commitments, strengthen the mandate of its institutions, enlarge its activities beyond the field of climate security, as well as promote and protect environmental and human rights.

Climate Change and Human Rights

A human approach to climate change entails adopting the language of climate justice. Climate justice is an intersectional discourse that emphasizes the social, political, economic, and ethical dimensions of climate change and related environmental problems. It focuses on the way climate risks threaten individuals’ and communities’ everyday life and the way they should be protected, considering the pre-existing macro and micro inequalities, as well as the unequally distributed consequences of climate change.

Human rights not only represent a tool to strengthen climate change adaptation and mitigation but should also be protected in the face of climate change’s impacts. On the one hand, core civil and political rights, such as freedom of expression, participation in public debates, and freedom of assembly, are key to enabling individuals to advocate for stronger and more efficient climate policy. On the other, climate change’s impacts threaten human rights, including socio-economic and cultural rights as well as political and civil rights such as the rights to culture, to tradition, to food, to life, the right to private family life, and freedom from discrimination.

Against this backdrop, the right to a healthy environment has now gained worldwide recognition and is enshrined in more than a hundred national constitutions. The United Nations Human Rights Council built on this momentum and enshrined the right to a healthy environment through Resolution 48/13 on 8 October 2021 (UNGA, 2021, p.1). More recently, efforts have been directed to seeking the recognition of the right to a stable climate, as a combination of existing human rights affected by the climate crisis and of States’ procedural obligation, as well as duty to protect their citizens (Bachelet, 2022).

Gaps in OSCE Climate Policy

Leaving aside the climate justice discourse and human rights, the OSCE's climate activities are predominantly framed through a securitized lens. Although the organization's mandate is dedicated to sustaining international security, this does not preclude acknowledging and actively promoting the human aspect of the climate crisis. In fact, a more human and cross-dimensional approach to climate change challenges would further contribute to reinforcing international peace and stability.

Concepts and issues, such as climate and environmental justice, environmental human rights, as well as the protection of environmental defenders, remain absent from the OSCE's climate policy. While the latest Decision 2/31 did mention participating States' engagement with "civil society" and called for the effective participation of women in climate-related decision-making processes, human rights were not explicitly mentioned (MC.DEC/3/21, p. 3).

Moreover, even as the OSCE widely acknowledges that climate change constitutes a security risk, this has yet to translate into a coherent climate policy and organizational State commitments. The OSCE Participating States have signaled their readiness to cooperate on environmental issues. In 2019 for example, fourteen of these States launched an informal OSCE Group of Friends of Environment to strengthen cooperation on environmental issues as part of a broader objective to prevent conflicts, build mutual confidence, and promote good neighbourly relations. Yet, despite the OSCE's strong efforts to map climate risks and security hotspots, Participating States are not compelled to address the identified issues and, more generally, to adhere to the OSCE's climate policy.

Recommendations

In light of the aforementioned analysis, the OSCE should:

- **Set specific climate commitments for its Participating States.**

Although the OSCE frequently refers to United Nations' climate objectives, it has no climate commitments comparable to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement. Since the OSCE acknowledges that it serves as a platform for political dialogue on risks associated with climate change, it should use this template to set out a stronger climate policy. In its 2007 Madrid Declaration on the Environment and Security, the OSCE explicitly recognized climate change as a long-term challenge and acknowledged that the organization has "a complementary role to play within its mandate in addressing this challenge in its specific region" (MC.DOC/4/07, p.1) In light of such words, the OSCE should explicitly state what this

complementary role entails in practice through adopting a set of climate commitments and objectives.

- **Adopt an integrated and cross-dimensional approach to environmental and climate issues in the OSCE institutions' mandates.**

The OSCE must integrate the examination of climate change challenges under each of its three dimensions. A cross-dimensional approach to climate change entails examining the challenges it raises under various aspects of its activities, ranging from conflict prevention, border management, and economic growth to good governance, human rights and democratization. In certain aspects of the OSCE's activities, climate change considerations are left completely ignored, despite the phenomenon's cross-dimensional impacts. For example, climate change is a conflict multiplier, which should therefore be specifically tackled under the OSCE's political-military pillar. Where environmental and climate change issues are already addressed, the security approach should integrate human considerations. For example, the OCEEA's overarching objective of security and stability in the OSCE region through international cooperation on economic and environmental issues should endorse a more human approach to achieve such an end. In sum, climate change issues should be examined from every angle of the OSCE's "comprehensive concept of security," in addition to the increased space granted to a human approach to climate change.

- **Strengthen the promotion and protection of environmental human rights in the OSCE's human dimension.**

In the 1992 Helsinki Summit Declaration, the OSCE Participating States have set as the basis for participation cooperation in the OSCE, the "respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, democracy, the rule of law, economic liberty, social justice and environmental responsibility." (OSCE, 1992, p. 2) In promoting respect for human rights, ODIHR monitors participating governments' compliance with their human dimension commitments. In light of such a mandate, it should further ensure that Participating States consider and comply with the environmental aspect of human rights. ODIHR currently covers a vast spectrum of issues, such as freedom of religion, freedom of assembly and association, migration, non-discrimination, and the prevention of torture. It does not specifically address the human dimension of environmental and climate degradation. Environmental rights should be a distinct issue as part of the spectrum of issues which the OSCE covers, given the climate threats, risks and impacts on all aspects of this spectrum and of human society.

- **Acknowledge the role played by local environmental defenders and afford greater protection to them.**

While the OSCE has called on its Participating States to engage in dialogue with civil society stakeholders, it holds no protection for environmental defenders, nor any wording for their role. Furthermore, while ODIHR assists national authorities in fulfilling their commitments to specifically protect human rights defenders by monitoring their ability to operate and conduct advocacy and by building their capacity through education and training in human rights, it does not address the situation of environmental defenders. Given ODIHR's mandate and commitment to engaging with civil society, this protection should logically be extended to environmental defenders and environmental rights defenders. Lastly, the OSCE has been supporting the establishment and operation of Aarhus Centers since 2002 to assist the governments in implementing the Aarhus Convention. Thus, since the OSCE upholds the legally binding principles of access to environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making and access to justice through these centres, it should therefore consider the important role of environmental defenders in this participatory environmental governance.

Conclusion

The OSCE has already signalled growing political interest in addressing the adverse effects of climate change. It has also accomplished great progress in identifying and understanding the security dimension of climate change.

In this context, the OSCE has yet to translate these efforts into stronger climate mitigation and adaptation measures in the region, starting from clearly specifying what the OSCE's envisioned "complementary role" in addressing climate change entails in practice and in terms of climate commitments (MC.DOC/4/07, p.1). The OSCE and its Participating States should therefore endorse a cross-sectional approach to climate change and ensure that the various areas of the OSCE's work implement measures to prevent and respond to the adverse effects of climate change. This means integrating climate change considerations within the mandates of its institutions and bodies.

Notably, the OSCE would gain from addressing climate change beyond the field of security per se and adopting a socio-economic and political approach to climate change. As a matter of fact, this approach would contribute to stronger international peace and stability. Greater efforts should therefore be directed towards promoting and protecting environmental rights as standalone human rights. As part of this endeavour and within ODIHR's mandate, the organization should logically extend the protection it affords to human rights defenders to environmental and environmental rights defenders.

Thus, a cross-dimensional to climate change as well as the integration of human considerations to the OSCE's current conceptualization of climate change through a security lens can only strengthen the organization's climate policy.

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