

The Environment and Conflict in 2016: A Year in Review

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Despite of early signs of progress, 2016 saw damaging levels of wartime environmental damage. Will 2017 be any different?

Marking the UN's international day on conflict and the environment in November, the *Special Rapporteur* tasked with reviewing and developing the law protecting the environment before, during and after conflict [argued](#) that 2016 was “...set to be a milestone in global efforts to protect the environment in connection with armed conflict.” But it has also been a year where such efforts have seemed more vital and urgent than ever. This blog takes a look back at conflict and the environment in 2016, at the progress made and considers what should come next.

Fires from burning oil facilities are one of the most visible forms of wartime environmental damage; 2016 began in flames, and it will end in flames. Back in January, facilities in Libya's oil crescent were being [targeted](#) by Islamic State. The smoke plumes from the huge blazes at the storage sites at As Sidr and Ras Lanuf were visible from space, the attacks – branded an economic and environmental disaster by local emergency staff – were intended to help further destabilise the fragile interim government.

The year will close with another environmental disaster caused by oil, this time in northern Iraq where oil well fires, again started by Islamic State, have [burned for months](#) and with no end in sight. As of November, data from UNOSAT showed that 29 fires [were burning](#) near Qayyarah, and two oil slicks were travelling down a tributary of the Tigris.

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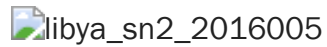
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Map illustrating satellite-detected fires and oil spills between September and November at and around Al Qayyarah, approximately 60km south of Mosul, Iraq. Credit: [UNOSAT/UNITAR](#)



Satellite photos of fires at oil production and storage facilities near Sidra, Libya. Image credit: [NASA](#)

25 years on from the last time

The fires in Libya, Iraq and also in Syria – where facilities have been targeted by all sides of the conflict – have served as a perverse marker of the 25th anniversary of the 1991 Gulf War. A reminder, were it needed, that while our understanding of the environmental causes and consequences of conflicts has grown, our formal systems of protection and response appear as weak today as they were 25 years ago.

But as 2016 began, there were modest signs of progress. States at the preparatory meetings for the second UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-2) were [considering](#) three draft resolutions on conflict and the environment: on the environmental consequences of human displacement from the Syrian conflict; on the need to assess Gaza's environment; and on the protection of the environment in all areas affected by armed conflict.

After months of mergers, disagreements and redrafts, the last of these, sponsored by Ukraine, was [passed by consensus](#) in May. Co-sponsored by a number of conflict-affected and Western States, in some ways it too marked an

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anniversary, that of the weak UN General Assembly [resolution](#) passed in response to the environmental disaster of the Gulf War in 1992. The UNEA-2 resolution is a significant step forward in many ways. Its scope, which includes the humanitarian consequences of environmental degradation, natural resources, displacement, protected areas, human rights, post-conflict assessments and assistance, is a world away from that passed in 1992. Both were products of their time, reflecting the concerns of States and civil society, but also the international community's knowledge and understanding of the issues at hand.

Untangling conflict and the environment

The often complex linkages between conflict, peace, environment and health were visible throughout 2016. For Colombia and its peace agreement, it meant costing up the [financial benefits](#) of peace – the health and environmental savings that could accrue if the deal were to pass. But peace seemed likely to also herald [new challenges](#) for Colombia's environment, biodiversity and human rights, from an anticipated expansion of the extractive industries, from accelerated deforestation and conflict over rural land rights.

In Syria, the health of children and communities is [being harmed](#) by pollution from makeshift oil refining. This coping strategy has flourished thanks in part to a chain of events initiated by policies intended to destroy and degrade the country's oil production and refining capacity, some of which had fallen into the hands of Islamic State. Satellite images have also [captured](#) the wholesale collapse of Syria's agricultural system as a result of displacement and insecurity. The latter completing the closely related story of [growing environmental pressures](#) in Syria's neighbours due to the influx of

people fleeing the conflict, a conflict that has now caused local, national and transboundary impacts on the environment.

Effective policy-making requires that we work to fully understand the causal linkages between conflict and insecurity, and environmental degradation and its impact on human health and ecosystems. While it may be tempting to present simplistic narratives – such as those proposed in relation to [Syria and climate change](#) – this year has shown just how important it is to comprehensively document and interrogate the evidence. One powerful example of this has been a new study on [conservation in conflict zones](#), which identified institutional collapse as the single greatest threat to wildlife.

Legal initiatives contribute to a sense of momentum

The complexity and scope of conflict and the environment was also apparent in a major legal development this year. The third report from the UN's [International Law Commission's](#) (ILC) ongoing study into the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts primarily dealt with the law applicable after conflicts. The report's draft principles cover everything from military bases, to peace operations, peace agreements, the rights of indigenous peoples and toxic remnants of war; with still [more topics](#) proposed for study by governments. The principles that the ILC is formulating are merging humanitarian, environmental and human rights law in an effort to clarify the disparate norms and practices that could provide a legal framework for enhanced protection.

Elsewhere, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court [announced](#) a new focus on the prosecution of individuals involved in the illegal exploitation of natural resources, deliberate environmental destruction,

and land grabbing. All problems associated with armed conflicts and a potentially useful contribution if the court follows through on the decision. Meanwhile the 33rd session of the UN Human Rights Council [heard from its *Special Rapporteur*](#) on the management and disposal of hazardous wastes, on the impact of toxic remnants of war on health and the environment. He recommended that States improve monitoring of such threats and ensure that remediation and assistance takes place.

These parallel legal and political pathways are providing a long-overdue framework for debate and State engagement on conflict and the environment. The renewed energy around the topic was clear on November 6th this year – the UN’s [international day](#) on conflict and the environment. The level of interest this year was a world away from previous years, with compelling statements calling for progress from the [UN Secretary General](#), the heads of [UNEP](#) and [UNOCHA](#), [governments](#), [experts](#) and [civil society](#).

Where next for conflict and the environment?

The question of “where next?” is currently being considered by a number of parties. Whatever the outcome, it remains the case that civil society will have an important role to play in working with international organisations and progressive States to encourage further progress. The momentum to date is the result of seven years of work and the conditions for advancing protection for the environment and civilians in relation to conflict come around rarely.

When this same question was posed to governments in 1992 in the wake of the Kuwaiti oil fires, the [response](#) mirrored the situation today: *“Some States felt that the existing rules were sufficient and what was needed was ensuring better compliance with them. However, most of the States represented thought*

it also necessary to clarify and interpret the scope of some of those rules, and even to develop other aspects of the law relating to the protection of the environment in times of armed conflict.”

But it cannot just be a question of law and compliance. Like that other cross-cutting issue gender, what seems to be required is effective environmental mainstreaming throughout the conflict cycle. Good work has and is being done with regard to [peacebuilding](#) and [humanitarian response](#) but more is needed. There are also strong arguments in favour of a more robust system of environmental response in the wake of conflicts. And of course more visibility and stigmatisation for the practices that can cause serious harm to the environment and human health. Vague objectives for now maybe, but they perhaps demonstrate one possible direction of travel. Civil society can continue to contribute through research and advocacy, in untangling and communicating complexity, and by engaging at key moments, but achieving substantive progress will require greater capacity and coordination than we have at present.

Work on conflict and the environment in 2017 should aim to signpost the direction of travel, and make more use of the parallel processes currently in play. If they can be identified and agreed, a clearer destination and mode of transport will allow a greater number of States and civil society to engage, something that will be vital if we are to make use of the momentum that has been created this year.

Photo of Sirda oil fires. Image credit: [NASA/Flickr](#)

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