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‘UN reformer’ Guterres must do more on climate change

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Climate change risks are global and intersecting, so why doesn’t the UN do more to treat them that way?



UN secretary general António Guterres (Photo: US Mission Photo by Eric Bridiers)

By **Camilla Born**

Right now, the capability of the UN’s institutions to understand, prepare and respond to climate change risks is terrifyingly inadequate.

In Paris, nations reached agreement to mitigate against and adapt to climate change. It was an agreement between countries to take national action, but we live in a globalised world and climate change has global consequences. The Paris Agreement was never going to be enough.

The UN needs now to task global and multinational organisations with addressing climate impacts of global significance. In particular, it needs to prepare for potential conflict as a result of increased resource scarcity in fragile states, the fall-out of mass ice-melt on global sea level and the potential for states to resort to unsanctioned geo-engineering.

The UN system as a whole can and must do more to effectively manage climate-related risks to global peace and security. This becomes increasingly important as we begin to understand the true reality of climate impacts. The United Nations must change – and fast – as the risk of extreme impacts is growing by the day.

Here are four clear policy objectives the UN could establish.

First, climate change should be anchored at the heart of the secretary general’s UN reform agenda. António Guterres is pursuing a raft of reforms to improve the UN’s operations to deliver sustainable development and peace. Climate-related risks interplay with a range of the other challenges facing the organisation, from inequality and political instability to resourcing and programming.

Sidelining climate change is a mistake, and reforms that do not take into account a climate-changed future will be doomed to failure. With hurricanes, floods and droughts aplenty, the reality of climate change is already knocking loudly at the UN’s door.

Second, an ‘institutional home’ needs to be established to systematically address climate-related risks across all UN agencies and operations should be created under the auspices of the secretary-general. The cell could serve as an analytical task-force, translating the vast array of climate science and on-the-ground experience into digestible information for decision-makers. Agencies as well as political bodies, including the UN security council, would be advised on current and impending climate realities to improve their effectiveness and realign priorities.

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Third, this newly created unit should be mandated to conduct a climate risk assessment of all UN agencies and operations. There is little understanding of the strain the UN will experience from climate impacts. A climate risk assessment would identify the risks to UN effectiveness in maintaining peace and security. Furthermore, it would highlight priority areas for reform and guide resourcing.

Fourth, a special representative for climate security should be appointed to support political dialogue on climate-related security risks. The profound changes wrought by low carbon transition and climate impacts will involve tough political choices. An envoy would help elevate pressing concerns and convene actors to identify political solutions. For example, an envoy could gather nations and agencies with shared climate-related risks to reach agreement on resource sharing in the face of scarcity.

Time is running out and the world’s citizens are understandably growing anxious. As the fall-out from globalisation settles, [people are identifying climate change as the world’s gravest threat](#). To maintain the UN’s relevance and make good on its mission, [self-styled](#) ‘UN reformer’ Guterres must live up to his name and place climate change centre stage.

Camilla Born is a Senior Policy Adviser in Climate Diplomacy and Risk at E3G. She is currently working in collaboration with SIPRI to support Sweden’s membership of the UN Security Council.

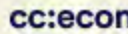
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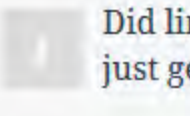
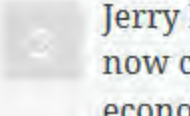
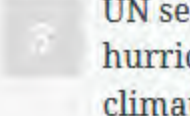
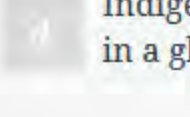
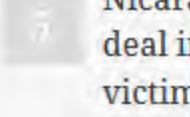
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