

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to attend this important session here today on behalf of the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and to share UNICRI's experience in preventing and combating crimes that affect the environment

As you are aware, working closely with Member States and non-state actors, UNICRI is mandated to carry out specialized training, field activities, policy advice and technical assistance using the findings and conclusions of our action-oriented research in the fields of crime prevention, criminal justice, and counter-terrorism.

This of course also includes our work to address crimes that affect the environment.

While my colleague last Monday described how transnational organized crime groups - as an example - are involved in the production of illicit pesticides and the related health and safety hazards for farmers and consumers, I will, however, describe an example of a UNICRI research focusing on how change in environment or climate change may affect crime, or as reflected in our research, how climate change and related social vulnerabilities serve as push factors for radicalization and violent extremism, and what can be done to address or reduce the negative affect from climate change on radicalization.

As you are aware, there have been an increasing focus on what the impact of climate change could have on the global security, in particularly when it overlaps with fragility and past and current conflicts. Consequences of climate change may well erupt into geopolitical tension and instability, undermining peace, security and development.

More recently, while discussing the activities of Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin, Security Council Resolution 2349 recognised climate change as one of the factors affecting the stability of the region, “through water scarcity, drought, desertification, land degradation, and food insecurity.”

Furthermore, several studies have looked into the relationship between climate change and violent extremism.

I believe that in general the most common conclusion is that the connection between the two is not direct linear, but that climate insecurity can exacerbate fragile contexts, basically acting as a ‘risk multiplier’ and potentially triggering conflicts when combined with other root causes of violent extremism such as lack of state authority, widespread inequality, low public participation and other grievances.

For instance, in their Regional Strategy report (2018), the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the African Union Commission explained how Lake Chad has diminished drastically because of climate change related desertification, which resulted “in the loss of traditional livelihoods and a propensity for populations to explore alternative livelihoods, including violent extremism”.

Concerning the Sahel, which is the focus of our research, for example the UN Special Representative and Head of UNOWAS has warned that in this region continuous attacks by extremist groups occur, undermining peace and security, and confirmed that climate change is exacerbating social tensions.

This was also echoed by for example by The African Union Peace and Security Council that emphasized the importance of adopting a “climate-sensitive planning dimension in peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction and development efforts to prevent any relapse to armed conflicts in fragile communities”

Indeed, the Sahel's economic reliance on farming and pastoralism, which in turn are linked to the environmental conditions of the region, has led to a situation of climate insecurity.

The region is heavily and increasingly affected by higher temperatures, extreme weather events and variable rainfalls and, despite some regional disparities, the region's climate change adaptive capacities are rather low.

These conditions, together with a rapid population growth, have aggravated the competition for resources between farmers and pastoralists, who turned to each other's practices to increase their incomes, consequently affecting the latter's migratory routes.

This has resulted in intercommunal tensions and grievances, to which institutions are not always in the position to respond in a timely manner, or to which in some cases they reacted with policies benefiting farmers over nomadic herders, undermining government legitimacy amongst the latter.

The link between climate risks and terrorist groups recruitment mechanisms has also been recognised by different studies that identified different ways how climate change could indirectly create fertile space for non-state-armed-groups to operate.

This includes UNICRI's own initiative on Countering Radicalization and Violent Extremism in the Regions of Sahel and Maghreb where "Unfair distribution or unequal access to natural resources" and "access to natural resources compromised due to climate change" were also identified as two of the main grievances reported by local communities to UNICRI.

This study also demonstrated how certain grievances related to climate change, such as the scarcity of fundamental resources, might function as catalysts to exacerbate security-related issues, including social and ethnic tensions, engagement into violent extremist groups and irregular movements of people.

All these factors can have a spill over effect on the most vulnerable and ultimately result into further instability and conflicts. Indeed, most of the surveyed participants have been or know someone who has been in a conflict related to access to agricultural areas or livestock farming.

Other similar studies also demonstrate how non-state armed groups may be able to offer alternative incomes when traditional livelihoods are affected or are able to weaponize natural resources, by controlling fertile land or dams, and as such enhancing their influence.

In other words, and as reflected in this report, to enhance the region's resilience against violent extremism, it is necessary to address the underlying causes of this phenomenon.

Accordingly, partnering with SWISSAID, UNICRI has recently launched a more comprehensive research on how climate change or climate insecurity impact social cohesion and how related social vulnerabilities serve as push factors for radicalization, presence of terrorism and related recruitment mechanisms, focusing on regions and areas of in particularly the Sahel region,

In parallel, we will at the same time try to identify good practices to better address such challenges to support the development of P/CVE policies and actions that take into consideration cross-cutting and context-specific climate-related challenges.

As the research includes the involvement of key stakeholders, including local and national authorities, representatives of youths, nomadic and sedentary actors, women, traders and local institutions, we expect that this will lead to the identification of communities most impacted by social and climate vulnerabilities and to an improved understanding how these tensions might function as drivers for engagement into violent extremist groups at local level.

This will also give a better understanding of the reasons why peasant-pastoral societies are no longer an economic option for young people and what should happen to reverse this trend and to create an effective alternative to armed groups' income offers, taking into account the climate-related challenges.

I expect that we will be to release the final report during the spring that will include analysis on how climate insecurity and related food security, livelihood adaptations, competition for resources and (seasonal) migration affect radicalization and community resilience to terrorism recruitment.

Moreover, the report will also include good practice examples to address the above challenges and outline recommendations aimed at guiding future P/CVE initiatives, projects and actions in the region.

In conclusion, our research, data and lessons learned tell us clearly that there is a need to better understand and carry out in-depth analysis of the role climate change and degradation of natural resources have in exacerbating local conflicts and weakening governance as well as its linkages with radicalization and violent extremism.

The role of international cooperation is therefore crucial to help mitigating the impact that climate change and crimes against the environment are producing on Member States and particularly on local communities already exposed to the threat of violent extremism. By sharing our knowledge, international tools and practices we can make the difference.

I feel confident that coming together to share our knowledge and expertise in this important fora as the one today takes us one step closer to our goal, and I look forward to sharing the findings and conclusions of the report, and to work with all of you in implementing its recommendations.

I thank you all and wish you an engaging and thought-provoking session.