

European responses to transboundary climate impacts and insecurity

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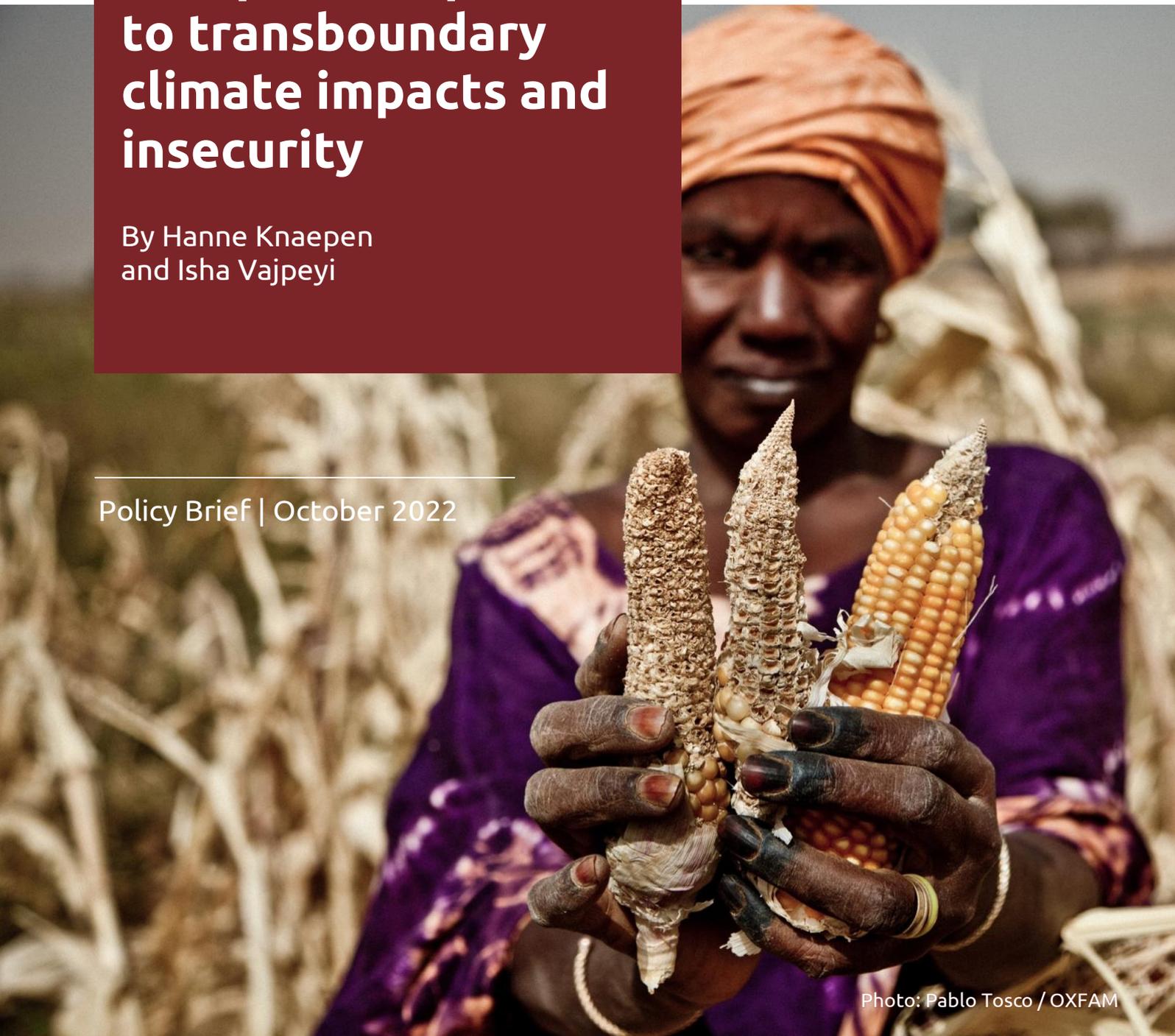


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Summary

The impacts of climate change can aggravate security risks across international borders. In both the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Sahel, climate change has been indirectly linked to insecurity and violence. As climate impacts are likely to worsen in the coming years, negative geopolitical implications for Europe can be expected, such as massive humanitarian crises and security challenges in neighbouring regions.

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has added references to climate change and transboundary climate impacts to its key policies and strategies, including those on security. However, a gap remains between rhetoric and effective action to achieve the much-needed comprehensive approach. The reasons can be found in institutional fragmentation, policy incoherence and the lack of understanding of how the EU's own green transition process can adversely affect partner countries, for example, in the MENA region and the Sahel.

This paper makes ten recommendations for how the EU and its partners can move towards a more comprehensive approach to climate security and more effective adaptation to transboundary climate impacts. The proposals include support for stronger decentralised governance systems and inclusion of local communities in responses to climate security risks, as well as increasing adaptation finance dedicated to fragile regions.

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Introduction

The reach of climate change impacts has become increasingly evident in recent years, with extreme rainfall, storms, melting glaciers, droughts, floods and wildfires. These affect crop yields, as just one example, and in combination with other factors, can aggravate political and social tensions. They can also ignite geopolitical rivalries, disrupt international trade and financial markets, and displace vulnerable populations across borders. Such outcomes are known as cascading, or transboundary climate impacts. However, these impacts are complex. It can therefore be difficult to fully grasp how climate insecurity and transboundary climate impacts experienced outside of Europe might affect Europe. Moreover, policy ownership for these types of impacts has not yet been fully designated within the European Union (EU) context (Hildén et al. 2020). This is a concern, as transboundary climate impacts are set to increase in the near future. According to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), heightened global warming and the impacts of climate extremes, particularly drought, increase the risk of intrastate violence in vulnerable countries (IPCC 2022). The report goes on to point out that many of the global hotspots of human vulnerability are in Africa. The global COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine have further made it clear that disruption of economies, businesses and global supply chains can threaten the security and livelihoods of people far away from where the risk originated (Iacobuță & Onbargi 2022). Such events, and their geopolitical ripple effects, require European governments to consider how to respond to transboundary climate impacts that affect the security of countries in their vicinity.

Since the early 2000s, the EU has added references to climate change to its foreign and security policy frameworks (Lazard & Youngs 2021). The transboundary aspect of climate impacts is also captured in major policies of the EU, such as the European Green Deal. Yet, there is no doubt that the climate security challenges which threaten Europe, via cascading effects, have not yet been sufficiently captured in EU policy and practice. Hence, addressing transboundary climate impacts on security, emanating both outwards from the EU and inwards from beyond the EU's borders, remains a challenge.

This brief examines transboundary climate impacts in Europe originating in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Sahel. It then discusses how climate security and transboundary climate impacts feature in key European policies. Afterwards, it looks at why the EU's approach to transboundary climate impacts and insecurity has been rather piecemeal and reactive, despite the general acknowledgement of such effects within EU policies. Finally, it presents 10 policy recommendations for greater resilience in the current context.

Transboundary climate impacts in Europe, originating in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the Sahel

The MENA region is extremely susceptible to climate change, as it is the most water-scarce region in the world. Climate change impacts here already pose a threat to security and contribute to conflict in the MENA countries. However, climate adaptation and resilience building have been low on the region's policy agenda (Lahn & Shapland 2022). Furthermore, the MENA region's reliance on food imports exposes it to shocks, such as supply-side restrictions and rising international food prices. The food crisis that affected the region in 2010 is a case in point. Driven in part by extreme weather and production failures in breadbasket regions such as Russia and China, soaring food prices became a trigger for political protests in import-dependent countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. The protests were met with harsh responses and crackdowns by the region's governments, which led to further discontent and growing inequalities, and produced fertile grounds for violent extremism to thrive (Bourekba 2021; Knaepen 2021). Yet, political unrest in the MENA region can have far-reaching geopolitical consequences for Europe, too, not least regional destabilisation and massive displacements of populations (Detges & Foong 2022).

The Sahel is another region that is already affected by climate change impacts. Droughts, severe rainfall and flooding are set to become more profound here in the coming decades. This poses risks for livelihoods, food security and relations between states and communities. At present, more than 70% of the Sahel's population is engaged in agriculture, which is primarily rainfed and subsistence-based, alongside pastoralism and fishing. In 2030, most employment opportunities are expected to still be in the agricultural sector (Monnier & Maiga 2022). At the same time, however, climate change will constitute an increasing threat to agricultural yields, which could lead to worsening food insecurity affecting, in particular, vulnerable rural communities, such as women and marginalised groups, which already have greater difficulty in coping (Puig Cepero et al. 2021). Research has found that climate change is a key driver of communal violence in the Sahel, in interaction with food insecurity, resource management constraints, governance challenges and the marginalisation of pastoralist communities (Puig Cepero et al. 2021). Ultimately, this complex security situation could lead to forced mass displacements, intensified regional migration and, to a lesser extent, more migration towards Europe.

Transboundary climate impacts and insecurity within EU policies and strategies

The 2003 European Security Strategy labelled climate change as a security risk (Council of the European Union 2003). Since then, the EU and its member states have included climate change and environmental degradation in most of their security strategies and policies (Brown et al. 2020). Table 1 presents a non-exhaustive list of security policies and strategies, indicating whether the climate-security nexus and transboundary climate impacts feature in these documents, and if so how. The table also includes the EU's key climate-related strategies, such as the European Green Deal (2019) and the EU Adaptation Strategy (2021), alongside programming documents that were formulated within the framework of the EU's new financial instrument for Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation – the so-called NDICI-Global Europe. The multi-annual indicative programmes (MIPs) map how the EU will spend funds allocated under its long-term budget and the political orientation of programming. The NDICI-Global Europe was created in the framework of the EU's 2021-2027 multi-annual financial framework (MFF) and sets an overall spending target of 30% for climate purposes, out of a total of €79.5 billion. The policies in Table 1 were selected as they were discussed at a CASCADES thematic workshop in September 2021 (For more details, see the final box at the bottom of this brief).

Table 1. Key European policies and strategies, what they say about the climate–security nexus and transboundary climate impacts. Source: Authors.

Policy or strategy	What does it say about the climate–security nexus?	Do transboundary climate impacts feature?
European External Action Service (EEAS) Global Strategy for the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy (2016)	The strategy views climate change as a threat multiplier with the potential to exacerbate conflicts. It also embeds climate risks within a concerted, “integrated approach to conflicts and crises”, designed to deploy the EU’s full range of policy tools to prevent and respond to global security threats	Yes. The strategy states, “our security at home depends on peace beyond our borders”. It acknowledges that tackling climate change requires cross-border cooperation. Also, it states that the EU will enhance its support to regional and sub-regional organisations in Africa and the Middle East on issues such as water and food security and climate.
EU Migration and Asylum Package (2020)	The EU’s “new pact” on migration and asylum recognises that climate change and security (together with other societal challenges, such as demography and inequality) impact migration. It describes these interconnections as “a major phenomenon and global challenge for the years to come”.	Yes. The document states explicitly that building stable and cohesive societies, ensuring peace and security, and addressing climate change (among others) can “help people feel that their future lies at home”, and that development cooperation is a key tool to achieve these outcomes.
EEAS Climate Change and Defence Roadmap (2020)	The roadmap provides detailed operational steps to address climate insecurity, including strengthening partnerships and multilateralism, and capability development.	Yes. It recognises that climate change might have geopolitical impacts, including increasing threats to international stability and security. It also mentions support to African countries for enhancing the capabilities of their security services to respond to disasters.
EEAS Concept for an Integrated Approach on Climate Change and Security (2021)	This document views climate change as a risk multiplier and urges an integrated approach in EU external action. It aims for the full integration of climate and security in all EU instruments and policies. A list of concrete actions is proposed, including strengthening the links between early warning, analysis and action.	Yes. The document conveys a strong understanding of transboundary climate impacts, giving examples of how climate change can exacerbate pressure on natural resources, undermine livelihoods and potentially lead to instability and conflicts in regions including the Sahel and Central Asia.

<p>EU Strategic Compass for Security and Defence (2022)</p>	<p>This document, through which the EU's 2016 Global Strategy is to be implemented, presents climate change as a threat multiplier. It argues for an integrated approach to security that combines diplomatic and economic instruments and close cooperation with various partners. It also proposes a list of actions such as lowering the environmental footprint of military missions.</p>	<p>Yes. The document states that climate change is a proven driver of instability and conflict, from the Sahel to the Amazon and the Arctic region. It observes that all these challenges are multifaceted and interconnected: "Our security is at stake, at home or overseas."</p>
<p>EU European Green Deal (2019)</p>	<p>The Green Deal recognises climate change as a significant threat multiplier and source of instability. It emphasises the need to consider climate policy implications in the EU Common Security and Defence Policy. In the Green Deal, the EU commits to work with partners to increase climate and environmental resilience.</p>	<p>Yes. The Green Deal states that drivers of climate change and loss of biodiversity are not confined by national borders. It urges the EU to use its influence, expertise and financial resources with its neighbours and partners to work towards sustainable growth. There is also a specific reference to the EU's comprehensive strategy with Africa.</p>
<p>EU Adaptation Strategy (2021)</p>	<p>The strategy states that climate change and security are interrelated and promotes adaptation at a global scale as a key tool to prevent climate-related conflicts.</p>	<p>Yes. Climate change impacts are said to have transboundary effects that include Europe. There is a specific focus on adaptation in Africa, in small island developing states (SIDS) and in least-developed countries (LDCs).</p>
<p>EU Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy (2021)</p>	<p>The policy makes no mention of the climate–security nexus.</p>	<p>No. The knock-on effects of climate change are not specifically mentioned. The policy, however, does consider irregular migration and the need to address it.</p>
<p>European Parliament and the Council Towards a Comprehensive Strategy with Africa (2020)</p>	<p>The strategy recognises climate change as a cause of instability.</p>	<p>Yes. It states that migration and forced displacement will continue to present both challenges and opportunities for the EU and Africa. The strategy warns that adaptation to climate change and environmental degradation will increase population displacements, and states that intensified</p>

		cooperation with Africa is needed to tackle these issues.
Multi-annual Indicative Programme (MIP) on Peace, Stability and Conflict Prevention (2021-2027)	The MIP states that climate change can threaten the foundations of peace and stability. It also underlines the critical role of the EU in addressing threats related to climate change, stability and peace.	Yes. The MIP observes that climate change can act as a threat multiplier. For instance, forced displacements and increased competition for resources can lead to food insecurity, inequalities and discrimination, which can trigger conflict.
MIP Global Challenges (2021-2027)	The MIP views climate change as a “pressing” and “disruptive” global threat “that require[s] better multilateral coordination and global solutions”.	Yes. It discusses the role of climate change in exacerbating migration and population displacements around the world.

Table 1 demonstrates that climate change has largely been integrated into Europe's security policies and strategies. Policies in other areas, such as the European Green Deal, the Migration and Asylum Package, and the Adaptation Strategy, also recognise the links between climate change and insecurity. Moreover, all MIPs prioritise both climate action and conflict- or crisis-affected countries (Knaepen 2022). According to Bunse et al. (2022), the majority of Council Conclusions produced between 2017 and 2022 refer to the climate–security nexus (Bunse et al. 2022). The 2016 Global Strategy for the EU's Foreign and Security Policy elevates climate security risks to a centrepiece of EU defence, development and peacebuilding policy priorities (Michel 2021). Yet, there remain some policies, such as the EU's Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy (2021), that make no mention of climate security, and thus also bypass the transboundary character of climate impacts.

Despite the tendency to include climate impacts in EU policies, the EU's approach to climate security has remained rather reactive and piecemeal. According to Youngs & Lazard (2021), Europe needs to display more systematism regarding climate insecurity and geopolitics to respond adequately to the complex climate-related challenges it faces. Thus far, no comprehensive understanding of climate factors has as yet been fully integrated into the EU's external conflict, governance and development policies. This is due to a lack of both financial resources and institutional cooperation (Youngs & Lazard 2021). Institutional fragmentation, in particular, has hampered the realisation of an integrated approach. There has been little cooperation between the various departments of the European Commission, such as the Directorate-General (DG) for Climate Action and the DG for International Partnerships, or between them and the European External Action Service (EEAS), which is the EU's diplomatic arm. Furthermore, neither climate security nor resilience have a clear institutional home in the EU architecture. EEAS officials have not always been able to fully capture EU member states' priorities, vested interests and strategies on climate security. For instance, while Poland and Slovenia have been mainly concerned with immediate threats to national security

in the current geopolitical climate, other countries, including Sweden and Germany, would like to shift the debate on climate security towards a more technical discussion about how to counter climate-related security risks (Bunse et al. 2022).

The lack of a fuller integration of the climate–security nexus in EU policies is also due to a general de-emphasis on good governance and institution-building in interventions in the foreign policy domain, such as development. For example, projects in fragile developing country contexts tend to focus on addressing physical resource scarcity. Thus, the initial aim of development cooperation is to increase the supply of, or facilitate access to, physical environmental goods, such as food and clean water. The need to consider the socio-political context in which development cooperation takes place has been acknowledged in recent years, but such context sensitivity has not always been successfully implemented. There are various reasons for this, not least, the short-term character of project implementation. This can mean interventions bypass the politics and governance of the supply of environmental goods in a developing context. To counter this, policy thinking needs to go beyond the technical, and physical aspects, to understand also how interventions themselves can create a potential for conflict – for example, if land values rise when water supply infrastructure is built.

More broadly, the full operationalisation of the European Green Deal will have direct and indirect effects on other regions of the world. In particular, the EU's new green economic model could generate drivers of insecurity elsewhere. An example is the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which some consider to be a deeply unfair and unilateral EU foreign policy imposed on developing countries without consultation. A major concern is that this and other European climate policies pose a threat to industrial development in Africa and the Middle East, and eventually could price goods out of global markets. Another example is the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy, which aims to promote climate-resilient and sustainable European agri-food systems. The strategy, however, could result in diminished agriculture in Europe due to the more stringent production standards. This could lead to rising European agricultural imports and reduced exports, with the knock-on effects of higher international food prices and increased global food insecurity, both of which can trigger conflict (Dekeyser & Woolfrey 2021).

Recommendations for the EU to support resilience-building in the face of transboundary climate impacts and insecurity

The climate–security nexus and transboundary climate impacts feature prominently in various EU policies and strategies. However, there is room to more effectively implement their statements in practice. Moreover, since climate change-related challenges are multiplying, especially in the MENA region, as well as further away in the Sahel, transformative actions are urgently needed now to build climate-resilient economies and societies in these regions. Yet, how can Europe achieve a more comprehensive approach to climate security risks? To help answer this question, this brief concludes with 10 recommendations of ways that the EU institutions and EU member states can more adequately address climate insecurity and support resilience building in partner countries beyond the EU’s borders.

- 1. Reduce knowledge gaps, exchange lessons learnt and best practices, and organise training.** Education and outreach can help spread an understanding of how climate change and security are interrelated and promote work towards cross-sectoral responses to climate insecurity and transboundary climate impacts. A concrete action in this regard would be to include climate impacts as a key part of the [European global conflict risk index](#).
- 2. Facilitate effective, sustainable and long-term cooperation on the ground.** All interventions in partner countries and regions should be context-sensitive and take care not to undermine adaptive capacities. In the Sahel, for example, interventions might entail capitalising on the complementarity between agriculture and pastoralism. This could be done by investing in irrigation systems and crops, and through political commitments to support pastoral livelihoods and mobility. In the MENA region, it could mean helping the region devise adaptation options to enhance water security in the water-intensive agricultural sector, for example, by conducting joint risk assessments and prioritising data sharing.

- 3. Redefine peacebuilding strategies by adopting an ecological approach.** The time is ripe for a reconceptualisation of development and peacebuilding to include the promotion of local biodiversity and ensure that conflict management is built into the use of natural resources. This also implies the need for the EU to enter into deeper partnerships or establish new ones with countries holding a substantial share of the critical resources that Europe needs for a clean energy transition.
- 4. Support advancements in cross-border cooperation on climate adaptation and resilience building.** This should include joint knowledge creation and management, economic integration, cross-border mobility, regional security challenges like terrorism, and conflict mediation over shared rivers. For instance, concerning that last point, the EU could build on the work done by the [UNECE Water Convention](#).
- 5. Help strengthen decentralised governance systems and inclusion of local communities in responses to climate security risks.** Particularly in fragile regions, local inclusion is a crucial building block for equitable access and sustainable management of water, food and energy resources. Concretely, this means supporting inclusive governance with increased involvement of the private sector, civil society and marginalised groups, including women and youth, while addressing structural challenges such as corruption.
- 6. Work towards a more assertive mainstreaming of the security dimension throughout all EU policies.** In particular, policies related to migration and resilience building need to be consistent. Migration should be seen as a coping strategy for vulnerable communities and a way to adapt and improve livelihoods. In the Sahel, for example, the EU can promote mobility as a coping strategy in light of the changing climate. In the MENA region, the EU could rethink its cooperation with neighbours, such as Turkey, on migration. More broadly, the EU should rethink its immigration policies in light of climate insecurity.
- 7. Ensure more effective, systematic dialogues within its own institutions.** Stronger dialogues are needed both across the EU institutions, including the EEAS, and with the EU member states, as well as interregional dialogues involving the EU, NATO, the UN and the OSCE on the links between climate change and insecurity. Within regions of concern, it is advisable to work closely with policymakers, civil society and academia when tackling climate insecurity risks, to ultimately define a common approach.
- 8. Increase adaptation finance.** Funding for adaptation can be increased by leveraging finance from the private sector and European development finance institutes and development banks. In addition, conflict areas and fragile settings need to be assured access to these resources.
- 9. Use funds for peacebuilding and security and climate finance coherently, and pool resources.** More collaboration at the EU level will ensure more impact while avoiding duplication of efforts on the ground. The Team Europe approach, originally established to improve coherence in the EU's global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, could promote a coordinated response to climate insecurity by the EU, its member states and their implementing agencies and development banks.

10. **Work towards a comprehensive nexus approach.** In the domains of development planning and resource management – encompassing land use, mobility, water, energy and waste – a nexus approach considers both sustainability of resources and climate resilience. Furthermore, the EU should manage the adverse, unintended effects of its own green transition, ensuring that future CBAM revenues are reinvested to support clean economic development in partner countries. In other words, the EU should strive for broader ecological security. This will require coherent, linked internal and external policies and a comprehensive strategy to promote the global systemic change necessary for lasting security.

Climate insecurity is no longer merely a foreign policy issue. Climate change is a trigger for political, economic and societal instability, both within the EU and beyond the EU's borders. A reading of European policies and strategies demonstrates that this is now widely understood. However, the EU needs to quickly move from rhetoric to action, and implement a comprehensive approach to effectively tackle climate-related security risks in partner countries, particularly in the MENA region and the Sahel.

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