WAR PREVENTION
It is the primary prevention of health damage

ISDE Italia

Introduction

Doctors for the Environment – ISDE Italy considers war one of the most serious preventable determinants of death, disease, environmental destruction, and inequality.
Its effects are not limited to the direct victims of armed conflict. The destruction of health systems and civilian infrastructure, the disruption of healthcare, hunger and food insecurity, forced migration, psychological trauma, impoverishment, and the loss of social networks produce health consequences that can last for years and span generations.
War is also an environmental and climate crisis. It contaminates air, water, and soil, destroys ecosystems and biodiversity, generates debris and hazardous waste, compromises the resources on which populations' health depends, and produces greenhouse gas emissions through military activities, fighting, the destruction of infrastructure, and subsequent reconstruction.
Added to this is a further effect: conflicts absorb economic resources, institutional capacity, and political attention that could be allocated to health protection, prevention, reducing inequalities, mitigation, and adaptation to the climate crisis.
This interaction takes on particular urgency today. Global climate policies remain insufficient to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement. Adaptation is essential to protect populations from the current and future impacts of climate change, but it cannot replace mitigation: rapid, deep, and sustained reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and a progressive transition away from dependence on fossil fuels are necessary.
Each further increase in warming increases the risks to health, ecosystems and societies and makes its effects more difficult to contain.
This is why preventing war is primary prevention.
This position is part of the framework of the Italian Constitution, which in Article 11 repudiates war as an instrument of aggression against the freedom of other peoples and as a means of resolving international disputes and, in Article 52, recognizes the duty to defend the homeland and affirms the democratic nature of the organization of the Armed Forces.

1. War, health, environment and climate

War affects the main determinants of health: water, food, housing, environment, security, social relationships, economic conditions and access to healthcare.
Its environmental and health effects can persist long after the cessation of hostilities, leaving future generations with contamination, degraded ecosystems, destroyed infrastructure, disability, psychological suffering, and long-lasting economic and social costs.
Added to these effects is the climate impact of military activities. Quantifying it is still plagued by significant uncertainties and gaps in data availability and comparability. An estimate by the Conflict and Environment Observatory and Scientists for Global Responsibility attributes a footprint equal to approximately **5.5% of global greenhouse gas emissions** to the global armed forces and their supply chains. This estimate is of the military sector's overall footprint, not just that of ongoing wars, and does not fully include emissions from combat, destruction, and reconstruction, which are particularly difficult to quantify.
This lack of data does not justify inaction: rather, it necessitates comprehensive, transparent, and comparable public reporting of military emissions and, to the extent scientifically estimable, those associated with conflict and reconstruction.
Protecting the environment and the climate from war means protecting health.

2. Disarmament, conflict prevention and human security

If war is a determinant of disease and death, diplomacy, conflict prevention, arms control, non-proliferation, and disarmament are also tools for health prevention.
Security policies and large military investment programs must also be evaluated for their health, environmental, climate and social effects and for their opportunity cost compared to the investments needed for health, education, research, combating inequalities, climate mitigation and adaptation.
Disarmament is a policy of prevention and security.
Disarmament does not mean denying the right to individual and collective defense recognized by international law, nor the duty of institutions to protect populations from aggression.
This means affirming that a security policy must also reduce the risk of war, prevent escalation, strengthen political and diplomatic instruments, and develop civilian capacities for conflict prevention, mediation, and management.
Nuclear disarmament is particularly urgent. The existence of arsenals capable of producing catastrophic humanitarian, health, and environmental consequences poses a threat to present and future generations.
Furthermore, security cannot be reduced to its military dimension. Contemporary threats also include climate crisis, pandemics, food and water insecurity, poverty, inequality, technological and cyber risks, ecosystem degradation, and forced migration.
For this reason, it is necessary to expand the tools through which societies build security, enhancing, alongside the defense tools provided by law, diplomacy, international cooperation, prevention, civil protection, civilian peace corps, the resilience of health and social systems, and organized forms of civil and nonviolent defense.
It is this notion of **human security** that ISDE believes should take a central role in public policy.

3. War, responsibility and democracy
Decisions about war, armaments, and security can have consequences that impact entire populations and future generations.
The human, health, environmental, and economic costs particularly affect civilians, children, the elderly, the sick, people with disabilities, and socially and economically vulnerable communities.
At the same time, increased military production and spending can generate significant economic and industrial interests. This makes transparency in the relationships between public decision-makers and the arms industry, the prevention of conflicts of interest, and democratic control over decisions affecting security and defense essential.
The health, environmental, climate, and social consequences of decisions must be made known and assessable by the community.
Decisions that impact the lives of present and future generations require transparency, accountability, and democratic participation.

4. Freedom of conscience and rejection of war
Freedom of conscience is an essential component of a culture of peace.
Conscientious objection, draft evasion, and desertion are legally distinct conditions and should not be confused. Their classification and consequences depend on national and international law and specific circumstances.
Refusal to fight, however, raises a fundamental question for any democratic society: **what protection should be afforded to individual conscience when a person is required to participate in the use of armed force and, potentially, take the lives of others or put their own at risk?**
International human rights law recognizes a relationship between conscientious objection to military service and freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.
ISDE believes that situations of conscientious objection, reluctance, and desertion must be considered in accordance with applicable law and assessed individually, taking into account the specific circumstances and without automatic moral criminalization.
Of particular importance is the refusal to participate in war crimes, acts contrary to international humanitarian law or serious violations of human rights.

5. Protect civilians and recognize the right to defense without making war permanent
Aggression and resistance are not equivalent.
Rejecting war as a means of resolving disputes does not mean being indifferent to aggression, occupation, or violations of fundamental rights.
Attacked populations retain the rights recognized by international law. Resistance can take civil, political, and nonviolent forms, and, under the conditions provided for by international law, even forms of armed defense.
Recognizing this principle does not prevent us from simultaneously pursuing another essential objective: preventing war from becoming permanent and military escalation from being considered the only available instrument.
The immediate priority must be the protection of civilian populations, children, the wounded and sick, health facilities and workers, systems essential to the survival of the population and, as provided for by international law, the natural environment.
Protecting those who suffer aggression and working towards a cessation of hostilities are not incompatible goals.
We must assert the law and protect populations while simultaneously maintaining open the political and diplomatic tools capable of stopping the violence.

6. The responsibility of medicine and public health

Medicine cannot limit itself to treating the victims of war.

Faced with a determinant capable of producing large-scale death, disability, psychological suffering, environmental contamination, hunger, forced migration, and the destruction of healthcare systems, the medical and scientific community has a responsibility to study, document, and communicate its effects and to contribute to their prevention.

This also includes assessing indirect consequences: the disruption of prevention and treatment programs, increased inequalities, effects on children's mental health and development, environmental deterioration, climate impacts, and the diversion of resources from health systems and other prevention policies.

Taking a stand on the health and environmental consequences of war does not mean replacing political institutions in their own decisions.

It means exercising a specific responsibility of medicine and public health: **identifying and helping to prevent avoidable causes of illness, disability, and death.**

ISDE Italy ASKS

In line with these six principles, ISDE calls on Italian, European and international institutions:

1. War, health, environment and climate

To assess and disclose the health, environmental, climate, and social impacts of military policies and major defense investment programs.

To promote **comprehensive, transparent, and comparable public reporting of armed forces' greenhouse gas emissions** and, to the extent scientifically estimable, emissions associated with conflict, infrastructure destruction, and reconstruction.

To systematically include climate, environmental, and health impacts in military policy assessments and post-conflict reconstruction programs and to support independent research on these issues.

2. Disarmament, conflict prevention and human security

To strengthen mediation, preventive diplomacy, international cooperation and multilateral institutions for conflict prevention and resolution.

To relaunch multilateral, verifiable and transparent policies of arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation, with particular urgency for nuclear weapons.

To publicly assess the opportunity cost of military spending compared to the investments needed for health, prevention, education, research, reduction of inequalities, climate mitigation and adaptation.

To invest more in civilian security tools: conflict prevention, mediation, cooperation, civilian peace corps, civil protection, and organized forms of civil and nonviolent defense.

3. War, responsibility and democracy

To ensure transparency in relationships between public decision-makers, the arms industry, and economic interests linked to the production and trade of weapons.

To make accessible to citizens comprehensive information on the health, environmental, climate, social, and economic consequences of major security and armaments decisions.

To strengthen democratic tools for information, control, and participation in decisions that can have long-term consequences, paying particular attention to the younger generations who will inherit their effects.

4. Freedom of conscience and rejection of war

To ensure effective protection of conscientious objection in accordance with applicable international standards and to individually assess, in accordance with national and international law, the conditions of draft evaders and deserters.

To pay particular attention to situations where refusal of military service is related to freedom of conscience or refusal to participate in war crimes, violations of international humanitarian law or serious violations of human rights.

5. Protection of civilians, health and the environment

To ensure and promote respect for international humanitarian law and the protection of civilian populations, with particular attention to children, the elderly, the sick, persons with disabilities and other vulnerable populations.

To protect healthcare facilities, equipment, and workers, as well as essential civil infrastructure for water, food, energy, assistance, and public health.

To strengthen environmental protection during and after conflicts and to integrate the prevention of environmental and climate damage into the processes of cessation of hostilities, reconstruction and reparation.

6. Responsibility of medicine and public health

To recognize the effects of war and preparation for war as a relevant issue for public health and scientific research.

To support independent systems for monitoring and documenting the direct and indirect consequences of conflict on mortality, morbidity, mental health, maternal and child health, health systems, the environment, and climate.

To encourage the participation of health institutions, scientific societies, and health professions in the preventive assessment of the impacts of policies that may increase the risk of conflict and of strategies designed to prevent it.

CONCLUSIONS

War is not a natural disaster. It arises from human decisions, conditions, and processes and can therefore be prevented.

Preventing it means acting before armed violence becomes inevitable: reducing the risk of conflict and escalation, strengthening diplomacy and international law, pursuing arms control and disarmament, developing civilian security and defense tools, protecting health, the environment, and the climate, and recognizing freedom of conscience.

The urgency is heightened by the climate crisis. War and rearmament do not occur in a world separated from global warming: they produce emissions, destroy ecosystems and infrastructure, make populations more vulnerable, and compete for the economic and political resources needed for ecological transition, health, and prevention. At the same time, the climate crisis, resource scarcity, inequality, and social fragility can contribute to worsening conditions of instability.

Recognizing all this does not mean confusing peace and passivity.

It means **recognizing the rights of those who suffer aggression and, at the same time, working to ensure that war does not become the permanent condition through which societies seek security.**

For ISDE:

Peace is primary prevention;

conflict prevention is prevention; disarmament is prevention; environmental and climate protection is prevention; human security is prevention; freedom of conscience is prevention.

Medicine treats the victims of war. Public health must help prevent them.

Essential References

1. **Constitution of the Italian Republic**, articles 11 and 52.
2. **World Health Organization (WHO)**, *Stopping attacks on health care*; *Attacks on Health Care Dashboard*.
3. **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** , *Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict* , 2020.
4. **United Nations – International Law Commission**, *Protection of the Environment in Relation to Armed Conflicts*, 2022; UN General Assembly Resolution 77/104.
5. **OHCHR**, *Conscientious Objection to Military Service*.
6. **UNHCR**, *Guidelines on International Protection No. 10: Claims to Refugee Status related to Military Service*, HCR/GIP/13/10.
7. **UNEP**, documentation on the environmental impacts of armed conflict.
8. **UNODA**, documentation on the humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons and disarmament.
9. **Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Additional Protocols**.
10. **Conflict and Environment Observatory (CEOBS) – Scientists for Global Responsibility**, *Estimating the Military's Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions*, 2022.
11. **CEOBS**, *A Framework for Military Greenhouse Gas Emissions Reporting*.
12. **IPCC**, *Climate Change 2023: AR6 Synthesis Report – Summary for Policymakers*.
13. **UNEP**, *Emissions Gap Report 2025: Off Target* .
14. **Stefania Divertito**, *War and Climate: The Ecocide That's Destroying the Earth*, Il Saggiatore, 2026.

September 2026