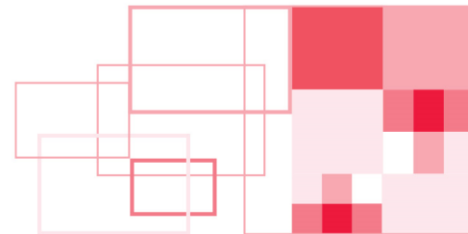


**International Conference
of Ombuds Institutions
for the Armed Forces**

15ICCOAF



Conference Statement



The 15th International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces

18-20 June 2023, Vienna, Austria

Conference Statement

As the International Conference of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces (ICOAF) enters its fifteenth year, the conference continues to promote the exchange of experiences and good practices, as well as foster increased cooperation among ombuds institutions.

Jointly hosted by the Austrian Parliamentary Commission for the Federal Armed Forces and DCAF – the Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, the 15th ICOAF took place in Vienna from 18-20 June 2023.

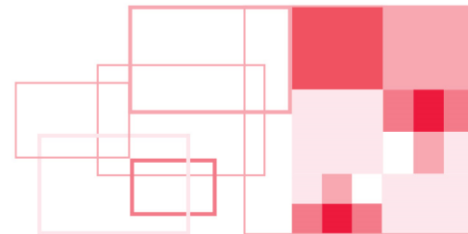
Throughout the conference, ICOAF was able to further consolidate and strengthen its role as a platform to promote democratic oversight of the armed forces and prevent maladministration and human rights abuses.

This conference statement serves as a compilation of good practices and key reflections discussed during the conference and does not serve as an obligation for conference participants to act upon nor to implement said practices. Ombuds institutions possess specific and unique mandates, and therefore not all good practices may be relevant to all conference participants.

The Conferees declare the following:

Introduction

1. Building on the successes of the previous fourteen International Conferences of Ombuds Institutions for the Armed Forces in Berlin (2009), Vienna (2010), Belgrade (2011), Ottawa (2012), Oslo (2013), Geneva (2014), Prague (2015), Amsterdam (2016), London (2017), Johannesburg (2018), Sarajevo (2019), a virtual conference (2020), a hybrid conference hosted from Canberra (2021), and Oslo (2022), the 2023 conference addresses the role of ombuds institutions in governing the impacts of climate change on the armed forces.
2. We recognise that ICOAF has established itself as an important international forum to promote and strengthen democratic oversight of the armed forces, with

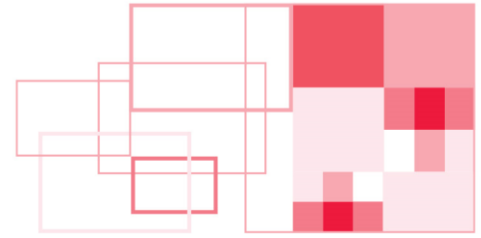


participants sharing common aspirations towards preventing maladministration and human rights abuses.

3. Recognising that each national context is unique, we underline the importance of ongoing international dialogue among ombuds institutions to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms within and by the armed forces.
4. 15ICOAF is the first conference dedicated to the role of ombuds institutions governing the impacts of climate change on the armed forces and participants call upon each other to keep each other informed through DCAF of relevant policy shifts, investigative efforts, as well as significant complaints in the realm of climate-related impacts on the armed forces.

The Nexus of Climate Change and Security – Implications for the Armed Forces

5. Participants acknowledged the *cross-cutting nature* of the climate crisis, with increasingly salient security implications. These are multi-layered, complex, emerging, and contain a gendered dimension, and they unfold in national, regional, and international contexts. Climate change – as a *threat multiplier* – interacts with other political, social, and economic stresses to compound existing tensions, thereby affecting political stability, food security, economic growth, and human mobility. Climate-related security implications are universal – to greater and lesser degrees.
6. Confronted with the *security implications of climate change*, armed forces across the globe are compelled to reckon with a new reality that fundamentally affects their mandate and modus operandi. Pertinent implications of climate change for the armed forces are evident in risks and vulnerabilities to critical military infrastructure, combat readiness, and operational effectiveness, which strain military resources and amplify operational demands.
7. Participants noted that change processes owing to climate-related security implications within the armed forces centre around (1) commitments to reduce their carbon emissions and negative impact on the natural environment, (2) adaptations required to maintain operational capability, and (3) the expanding scope and corresponding scale of military deployments to assist civilian

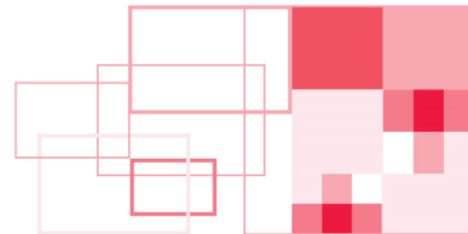


authorities in their response to climate-related crises and disasters, both at home and abroad.

8. Security sector actors are crucial agents with the potential to prevent, mitigate, and resolve climate and environmental security crises, or, conversely to compound their adverse effects. As such, good security sector governance and reform plays a decisive role to ensure security sector actors, in particular the armed forces, to mitigated and alleviate rather than exacerbate the challenges of climate change, which may be irreversible.

Acclimatising the Armed Forces – What Role for Ombuds Institutions?

9. The approach by ombuds institutions should be centred on the people they are mandated to advocate for and protect.
10. Participants noted the importance of ombuds institutions in advising the armed forces on new possibilities that are not perceived as hampering their mission, including, long term solutions in green infrastructure such as innovative climate neutral barracks and the provision of food and beverages that reduce the carbon footprint. These solutions can be used as a force multiplier and will support climate awareness.
11. Ombuds institutions are a critical element in strengthening good security sector governance. Entrusted with the task of oversight, ombuds institutions build accountable, transparent, participatory, responsive, and effective state bodies. Through this lens, strengthening the capacity of ombuds institutions to be able to effectively govern and oversee climate-related changes within the armed forces is of paramount importance.
12. *In the realm of greening defence*, ombuds institutions are well positioned to monitor, evaluate, and report on efforts by the armed forces – to the degree that this lies within their mandate. This includes, among others, considerations of adequate training for personnel to adjust to new technologies and military infrastructure; the implementation and monitoring of sustainability frameworks, policies, and strategies; as well as scrutiny of their funding and the distribution of military resources. However, it also requires ombuds institutions to establish and consolidate their expertise on issues of sustainability and de-carbonisation for them to act as credible agents in holding governments and their sustainability commitments accountable.



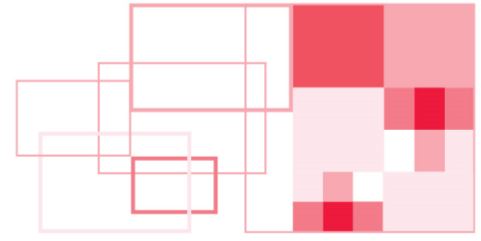
13. As the *armed forces adapt to operate under extreme and adverse climatic conditions*, ombuds institutions are of vital importance to prevent maladministration and protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of armed forces personnel. Ombuds institutions can ensure adaptive changes are aligned with the welfare and rights of service members and can further act as valuable sources of knowledge, best practices, and experiences to maximise synergies between sustainability and operational readiness. Fulfilling this role will include scrutiny of the testing and training programmes, military equipment, and the conduct of military exercises, among others.
14. Against the backdrop of *the expanding scope of deployment settings*, in particular to assist civilian authorities in their response to climate-related crises and disasters, ombuds institutions can play a role to improve civil-military relations, assess the adequacy of prior training and utilised equipment during the operation, and raise concerns on how such deployments risk overstraining military capacities.

Greening Ombuds Institutions

15. Against the backdrop of international commitments to reduce carbon emissions and the destructive impact on the natural environment, ombuds institutions themselves can contribute to addressing climate change challenges by minimising their own environmental impact and carbon footprint.
16. Participants noted that ombuds institutions – vested with the authority and capacity to do so – are encouraged to integrate climate-related considerations within their operations and activities. Measures herein revolve around the areas of waste and energy management, procurement and travel policies, as well as assessment and monitoring efforts regarding their institutional ecological footprint.

The Armed Forces and Mental Health

17. Armed forces personnel are at a high risk of suffering from mental health issues, due to high levels of exposure to stress, trauma, and the risk of injury or death. These mental health issues manifest, among others, in depression, anxiety, post-

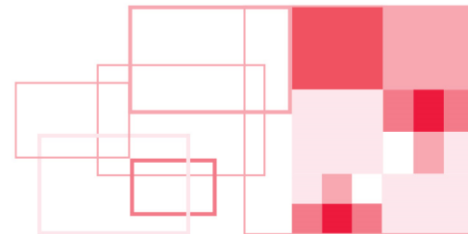


traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and substance abuse. Left untreated, these invisible wounds have severe consequences, heightening the risk of suicide among current and former service members.

18. Against the backdrop of high rates of mental health issues within the military, participants underlined the importance of ombuds institutions in taking on an active role to encourage and strengthen efforts within the military to provide mental health support. This includes, among others, investment in preventative measures; initiatives to de-stigmatise mental health issues and care; increasing mental health resources available to service members and their families; long-term mental health support frameworks for service members and veterans; as well as improving access to said mental health support frameworks during and after deployment. Domestic operations in support of civil authorities should equally be considered in the context of mental health.
19. Participants noted the value for ombuds institutions to establish monitoring capacities to gauge the state of affairs of mental health issues within the military, emphasizing the value of robustly assessing the efficacy of mental health responses.

Shifts in Defence Policy and Consequences for Ombuds Institutions

20. Participants acknowledged shifts in the geopolitical landscape within the past years, marked by uncertainty, complexity, and flux. Amongst these changes, states are revisiting their security and defence policies and adjusting them to the emerging new world order. Environmental challenges and coinciding security implications will further generate new geopolitical challenges.
21. Significant impacts of shifting power dynamics, rising economic tensions, and increased environmental challenges, are manifest in security and defence policies around the world. They include, among others, (1) increased military spending, (2) greater emphasis on territorial defence, and (3) an increased focus on hybrid warfare. These changes will be directly felt by members of the armed forces and thereby carry relevance for the work of ombuds institutions.
22. Anticipating these shifts and understanding the underlying trends that drive them will be crucial for ombuds institutions to effectively fulfil their mandate and redirect attention towards emerging gaps. This includes, among others, enhancing the capacity of ombuds institutions to maintain effective oversight of larger



defence sectors, revisiting training regimes on rules of engagement, establishing ethical guidelines for contexts characterised by hybrid warfare.

Conclusions

23. ICOAF is a platform to exchange information, good practices and experiences among the ICOAF partner institutions. The participation of over 100 100 participants, representing around 40 countries, is evidence of the platform's growth. It calls upon DCAF to explore future avenues to strengthen effective cooperation.
24. Participants call upon DCAF to continue its efforts in providing support to individual participating institutions, particularly through capacity-building exercises and peer-to-peer exchange.
25. Participants request DCAF to continue exploring how the international exchange of information and experiences between ombuds institutions can be further enhanced, particularly when it comes to peace operations, while at the same time respecting the particularities of national legal and institutional frameworks of ombuds institutions.
26. Participants re-iterated the importance of applying a gender lens throughout issues addressed on ICOAF's agenda, including, among others, considering the different impacts of armed forces adapting to climate change on gender, the gendered dimension of mental health issues, as well as addressing prevailing gender inequalities through defence reform.
27. ICOAF remains open to relevant institutions from countries that have not participated at previous conferences.
28. Aligned with the theme of the conference, participants noted the importance of organising future ICOAF conferences guided by the principle of sustainability.
29. The sixteenth ICOAF will take place in Berlin, Germany from 30th September to 2nd October 2024.

Vienna, 20 June 2023