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Youth and Environmental Security: Perspectives from Central Asia

by Mukhtar Amanbaiuly

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Executive summary

Environmental security challenges in Central Asia are becoming increasingly acute as the region faces the compounded effects of climate change, resource degradation, and water resource challenges. Yet, prevailing environmental security policies remain largely state-centric, prioritizing territorial integrity and strategic considerations. This approach reveals a significant gap: existing policy frameworks rarely reflect how environmental security is understood beyond the conventional understandings of security.

This policy brief draws on qualitative research to explore how young people understand and define environmental security. Grounded in human security and environmental scarcity frameworks, the study highlights perspectives that, while essential for long-term resilience and stability in Central Asia, are often missed in formal policy and decision-making processes. The results are based on semi-structured interviews with environmentally active youth (aged 18–30, n=11) from five Central Asian countries, using snowball sampling to capture diverse perspectives on environmental security.

The findings reveal that youth conceptualize environmental security as a multidimensional and interconnected issue that is structured around three core pillars: resource governance, disaster resilience, and climate change adaptation. Participants of the study emphasized fairness in access to natural resources, the importance of preparedness and community-level resilience to natural disasters, and the need for adaptive responses to climate change. Young people framed environmental security concepts in several terms, including vulnerability reduction, sustainability, and environmental justice.

By incorporating youth perspectives into environmental security policymaking, it becomes possible to increase the relevance, legitimacy, and effectiveness of policies. Recognizing young people as among the stakeholders of inclusive approaches developed by policymakers, is essential for developing human centred and long-term oriented environmental governance in Central Asia

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Why Study Environmental Security alongside Youth in Central Asia

In recent years, the intersection of environmental issues and security has emerged as a critical area of concern, particularly in regions vulnerable to ecological and socio-political instability.[2] In Central Asia, where traditional security discourse has historically prioritized threats such as terrorism and geopolitical rivalries,[3] there remains a significant gap in addressing non-traditional challenges, most notably, environmental degradation, climate change, and water scarcity.[4] While this approach has shaped environmental governance at national and regional levels, it often overlooks the social and human dimensions of environmental risk. As a result, these environmental security policies tend to prioritize short-term stability, posing substantial risks to regional stability and long-term development.

Existing scholarship on these issues remains largely concentrated within the natural sciences, with a strong emphasis on decarbonization pathways,[5] historical environmentalism,[6] international relations and

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1 https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7855-1522

2 Liebenguth, J. (2022). "Environmental security as a source of non-state legitimacy: An analysis of corporate governance." *Environmental Security Governance*, 1, 100133; Barnett, J. (2001). *The meaning of environmental security: Ecological politics and policy in the new security era.* Zed Books.

3 Nourzhanov, K. (2009). "Changing security threat perceptions in Central Asia." *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 63(1), 85–104.

4 Hermans, K., Djanibekov, N., Abdullaev, I. et al. (2024). "Future research directions for understanding the interconnections between climate change, water scarcity, and mobility in rural Central Asia." *Climate and Developmen*t, 1–10.

5 Sabyrbekov, R., Overland, I. and Vakulchuk, R. (eds.). (2023). *Climate change in Central Asia: Decarbonization, energy transition and climate policy.* Springer, Cham.

6 Bichsel, C. (2021). "The history of water politics in Central Asia." In R. Isaacs & E. Marat (eds.), *Routledge handbook of contemporary Central Asia* (1st ed., pp. 154-167). Routledge.

natural resources,[7] water levels modelling[8] and geoeconomics.[9] While these studies provide valuable insights into environmental governance in Central Asia, they often fail to conceptualize security dimensions of non-traditional security aspects. This leaves room for discussing environmental changes as a security issue rooted in social vulnerability and human well-being. As a result, it remains unclear how environmental security is understood on the ground and how everyday experiences of environmental threats are perceived by locals.

These challenges are experienced differently across communities and generations. However, it is important to note that young people will bear more of the long-term consequences of environmental degradation and climate change in the region.[10] Despite this, existing policy frameworks rarely reflect how environmental insecurity is lived and interpreted by youth. Understanding the experiences and perspectives of Central Asian youth has become increasingly important in the context of the region's transformation since gaining independence.[11] Laurelle shows that the current generation is more individualistic and market-oriented than their Soviet predecessors,[12] resulting in unique challenges such as unemployment, poverty, and migration in the region.[13] This generational shift significantly influences how young people perceive and engage with security challenges, often favouring decentralized and grassroots initiatives.

Interestingly, Central Asian youth have more experience in grassroot activism than other actors in society. This helps them show their

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7 Neafie, J., Amanbaiuly, M. and Akhmer, A. (2025). "The rising multiplex world order and regional order in Central Asia: A case study of the emerging role of the EU and its implications for Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy." *Economic Diplomacy*, 3(1), 41–51.

8 Xenarios, S., Gafurov, A., Schmidt-Vogt, D. et al. "Climate change and adaptation of mountain societies in Central Asia: uncertainties, knowledge gaps, and data constraints." *Reg Environ Change* 19, 1339–1352 (2019).

9 Zabanova, Y. (2023). "Towards a Geoeconomics of Energy Transition in Central Asia's Hydrocarbon-Producing Countries". In: Sabyrbekov, R., Overland, I., and Vakulchuk, R. (eds), *Climate Change in Central Asia: Decarbonization, energy transition and climate policy*. Springer, Cham.

10 Abibulloeva, A. and Amanbaiuly, M. (2024). "Youth involvement in climate issues in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan: Illusion or reality?" *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*. https://cabar.asia/en/youth-involvement-in-climate-issues-in-kazakhstan-and-tajikistan-illusion-or-reality

11 Bhat, M. A. (2018). *The sociology of Central Asian youth: Choice, constraint, risk.* Routledge.

12 Laruelle, M. (2019). "Introduction: "The Nazarbayev Generation: A Sociological Portrait." In M. Laruelle (ed.), *The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan*. Lexington Books.

13 Roberts, K. (2010). "Post-Communist youth: is there a Central Asian pattern?" *Central Asian Survey*, 29(4), 537–549.

positions in the society.[14] Recent studies have shown that generational differences in community shapes how key concepts are understood locally. For instance, Mussabalinova et al. (2025) demonstrate how different generations interpret the "nuclear past" in various forms.[15] As a result, it is important to integrate different generational perspectives, especially those from the youth, in security-related discourses.

This generational shift also influences how young people engage with security concepts *now* and should be included in the *present*. This shift has resulted in more emphasis on decentralized, community-driven, and justice-oriented approaches. International institutions also increasingly recognize this shift. Thus, this policy brief is anchored in existing international security frameworks that link youth participation, environmental protection, and comprehensive security, notably the OSCE Youth and Security Agenda and the UN Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) Agenda.[16] The Helsinki Final Act (1975) already frames *environmental protection* as a core element of security and explicitly stresses that effective environmental policy requires the engagement of all social groups, *"particularly youth"* through sustained educational effort.[17] While early YPS resolutions did not explicitly address environmental issues, the agenda has in practice increasingly recognized youth engagement in environmental action as integral to peacebuilding and human security. This evolution is formally reflected in UNSCR 2807 (2025), which explicitly acknowledges youth contributions to environmental protection alongside peace, development, and humanitarian efforts, providing a normative basis for integrating youth perspectives on environmental security into policy-making, including in Central Asia.[18] Furthermore, the OSCE concept of comprehensive security views environmental, human, and societal dimensions as integral to overall security. Young people often emphasize human–nature linkages more strongly, reflecting an understanding of security that closely aligns with the OSCE's

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14 Insebayeva, S., Amanbaiuly, M. and Akhmer, A. (2025). "Nuclear energy debate in Central Asia: strategic framing, public resistance and policy-making in Kazakhstan." *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 1–25.

15 Mussabalinova, A., Antimonov, A., Amanbaiuly and Durnev, N. (2025). "Socioeconomic development in the context of nuclear past: The case of Kazakhstan." *Development Policy Review*, 43, e70002.

16 United Nations. (2026). "Youth, peace and security: A guide." https://www.un.org/en/peace and-security/youth-peace-and-security-guide

17 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (1975). "Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (Helsinki, 1 August 1975)." https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/5/c/39501_1.pdf

18 United Nations Security Council. (2025). "Resolution 2807".

comprehensive approach.[19] Recognizing youth perspectives therefore strengthens the application of comprehensive security in practice, while reinforcing commitments under the OSCE Youth and Security Agenda and the UN YPS framework.

Thus, the analysis and recommendations discussed in this policy brief are based upon findings from semi-structured interviews with environmentally active youth (aged 18–30, n=11) from five Central Asian countries, using snowball sampling to capture diverse perspectives on environmental security.

Approaching Environmental Security in Central Asia from Youth Perspectives

Environmental security emerges from the dynamic interaction between human societies and changing natural systems as external threats to human well-being can originate not only directly from other people but also from *non-human activities:* environmental degradation, climate extremes, and resource stress. Scholars have highlighted how environmental change can lead to security risks traditionally associated with national or international politics. Mathews (1989) demonstrates how environmental crises can lead to mass displacement of people and conflict under the realist school of international relations and traditional security issues. Further, key findings from Homer-Dixon (1999) highlight that resource scarcity can result in violence due to a struggle over resources.[20] An alternative perspective suggests that conflict is driven not by resource scarcity, but by resource abundance. However, political ecologists argue that conflict does not arise simply from the presence or absence of natural resources. Rather, it emerges from struggles over the control over, access to, and distribution of, those resources[21] Meanwhile, recent trends highlight the role of climate diplomacy and environmental peace-building,[22] illustrating the field's transition from

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19 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2009). "The OSCE concept of comprehensive and co-operative security: An overview of major milestones (SEC.GAL/100/09)."

20 Homer-Dixon, T. F. (1999). *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*. Princeton University Press.

21 Peluso, N. L. and Watts, M. (eds.). (2001). *Violent environments*. Cornell University Press; Floyd, R. (2008). "The Environmental Security Debate and its Significance for Climate Change." *The International Spectator*, 43(3), 51–65.

22 Conca, K. and Dabelko, G. D. (eds.). (2002). *Environmental Peacemaking*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Ide, T. (2017). "Environmental peacebuilding: Towards a theoretical framework." *Cooperation and Conflict*, 53(3), 362–380.

deterministic models to complex, interdisciplinary frameworks. One of these frameworks highlights the intersection between human security and environmental security. The framework centres how environmental issues affect human well-being.[23] As defined by Barnett, the connection between human security and environmental security results from human vulnerability to environmental harm caused by anthropogenic activities.[24]

Based on the above-mentioned shifts, it is essential to rethink environmental security, focusing on minimizing human vulnerability under evolving changing environmental conditions. The findings of the policy brief support this, highlighting that sustainable and equitable governance of natural resources is central to environmental security as understood by youth participants. Respondents consistently identified access to critical resources – particularly water, forests, and arable land – as a prerequisite for long-term societal stability. They stressed that, when resource management fails to balance environmental sustainability with social equity, it can exacerbate resource scarcity and contribute to socio-political tensions, especially in regions already experiencing significant ecological stress.

The results also show that, from youth perspectives, environmental security is closely tied to resilience, defined as the ability to withstand and recover from environmental shocks. Participants emphasized that resilience depends not only on physical infrastructure, such as flood protection and early warning systems, but also on effective socio-economic preparedness, including the humanitarian response capacities of governments. The shared view that environmental security rests on *"the ability to recover quickly"* underscores resilience as a critical indicator of societal stability.

Finally, youth show a consensus view that climate change represents the most pervasive threat to environmental security. Climate change functions both as a direct source of instability and a multiplier of existing risks. Participants emphasized that climate impacts extend beyond ecological damage to directly undermine human safety and livelihoods. They pointed to consequences such as increased likelihood of landslides and biodiversity loss, which disrupt food and water systems, while disproportionately affecting vulnerable groups, including children and low-income communities.

23 Floyd, 2008.

24 Barnett, 2001.

In general, youth conceptualize environmental security as involving the protection of individuals and communities from environmental harm, with a strong emphasis on reducing vulnerability, ensuring access to essential resources, and safeguarding the well-being of both people and ecosystems. This understanding aligns with Floyd's (2008) human security framework,[25] which recognizes environmental degradation as a core security threat alongside armed conflict. As noted by Barnett and Pirages et al., environmental security gains relevance when it mitigates human vulnerability to environmentally induced risks, particularly those stemming from anthropogenic pressures.[26] The findings are also relevant within the OSCE concept of comprehensive security, positioning environmental, human, and societal dimensions at the core of overall security.[27]

Overall, youth must be recognized not merely as future beneficiaries of policy, but as key stakeholders in the policy-making process. Environmental security policies should therefore move toward participatory decision-making mechanisms that include young people. Aligning environmental security strategies with these principles can improve social cohesion, strengthen political legitimacy, and improve the effectiveness of responses to environmental challenges in Central Asia.

25 Floyd, 2008.

26 Barnett, 2001; Pirages et al., 2011.

27 OSCE, 2009.

Recommendations

Several policy recommendations can be made based on the findings of this study:

1. Youth participation in environmental policymaking should be institutionalized at national levels. Governments and relevant agencies are recommended to create formal mechanisms, such as youth advisory councils and consultative forums, that allow young people to contribute to the design, implementation, and evaluation of environmental security policies.

2. Environmental risk assessments should include human security indicators alongside technical and ecological metrics. Integrating factors such as age, gender, place of living (urban or rural), access to resources (both renewable and non-renewable), health impacts, and social inequality would enable policymakers to better capture the human dimensions of environmental security.

3. Education should be strengthened by explicitly linking ecological issues with security and social justice. Educational institutions and training programmes should equip young people with interdisciplinary knowledge that connects environmental issues with a broader discussion of social challenges.

4. Youth-led environmental initiatives and research should be supported. Support for these initiatives could take the form of funding schemes, capacity-building programmes, and/or mentorship opportunities that can empower young people to develop locally grounded solutions. That said, it is essential to avoid gatekeeping and ageism towards young experts in environmental policymaking.

5. Regional platforms for youth dialogue on environmental policymaking should be supported. Existing initiatives, such as the Central Asian Regional Ecological Centre's (CAREC) annual Central Asian Leadership Programme on Environment for Sustainable Development (CALP), offer a strong foundation for cross-border exchange among emerging professionals from civil society, government, and academia across the five Central

Asian countries. Integrating a dedicated environmental security component into such platforms would create valuable space for sharing experiences, building regional networks, and fostering a shared understanding of environmental risks from a youth perspective.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this policy brief highlights how young people in Central Asia understand environmental security through a human-centric and comprehensive lens, emphasizing vulnerability reduction, equitable access to resources, and resilience to environmental risks. Their perspectives closely align with human and comprehensive security frameworks, emphasizing climate change and environmental degradation as key threats to societal stability. Integrating youth perspectives into policy frameworks is therefore essential for developing more inclusive, effective, and forward-looking approaches to environmental security in the region.

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