

# **Environmental Conflict Management in Africa: Seeking Peace, Justice, Harmony and Reconciliation for Posterity**

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**Kariuki Muigua**

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## **Environmental Conflict Management in Africa: Seeking Peace, Justice, Harmony and Reconciliation for Posterity**

**Kariuki Muigua\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper critically discusses how environmental conflicts can be effectively managed in Africa. The paper argues that Africa is highly susceptible to environmental conflicts. It examines the causes and effects of environmental conflicts in Africa. The paper further argues that environmental conflicts are a major threat to peace, stability, security and Sustainable Development in Africa. Consequently, the paper posits that effective environmental conflict management in Africa is necessary towards Sustainable Development. The paper examines how peace, justice, harmony and reconciliation can be embraced towards effective environmental conflict management in Africa for posterity.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

The environment is a major source of conflicts. It has been argued that environmental conflicts are on the rise all over the world threatening global, regional, national and local security<sup>1</sup>. Nearly every community, locality, region and even nations find themselves embroiled in occasional disputes over public land use, private land development, water quality or quantity, air quality, protection of habitats and species, waste disposal, use and management of natural resources, environmental hazards and climate change among other issues<sup>2</sup>. Environmental conflicts can therefore be broadly defined as social conflicts

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental Conflicts: Key Issues and Management Implications., Available at [https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/environmental-conflicts/#:~:text=The%20association%20between%20the%20environment,\(Wallenstein%202007:15\)](https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/environmental-conflicts/#:~:text=The%20association%20between%20the%20environment,(Wallenstein%202007:15).). (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>2</sup> Dukes. F., 'What we Know About Environmental Conflict Resolution: An Analysis Based on Research.' *Conflict Resolution Quarterly.*, Volume 22, Issue 1-2

related to the environment<sup>3</sup>. Further, environmental conflicts have also been defined as conflicts caused by the environmental scarcity of a resource due to human-made disturbance of its normal regeneration rate<sup>4</sup>.

It has been observed that the causes of environmental conflicts vary across the globe and their manifestations differ considerably<sup>5</sup>. For instance, causes of environmental conflicts range from control over vital environmental resources such as fossil fuels, water and minerals to contestations over natural resources at the global, regional, national, local, community and household level<sup>6</sup>. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), factors such as environmental degradation, inequitable access to natural resources and the transboundary movement of hazardous materials can lead to environmental conflicts and pose a risk to national security and human health<sup>7</sup>. Environmental conflicts usually arise out of the complex interactions between nature and human systems<sup>8</sup>. It has been observed that environmental conflicts are not a new phenomenon and have existed since antiquity due to the fact that all civilizations have experienced some sort of antagonism between humanity and nature<sup>9</sup>. In the modern era, environmental conflicts commonly manifest themselves in relation to tangible problems including pollution, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, climate change and

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<sup>3</sup> Scheidel. A et al., 'Environmental Conflicts and Defenders: A Global Overview.' *Global Environmental Change*, 63 (2020)

<sup>4</sup> Libiszewski. S., 'What is an Environmental Conflict?' Available at [https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/What\\_is\\_Environment\\_Conflict\\_1992.pdf](https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/What_is_Environment_Conflict_1992.pdf) (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>5</sup> Environmental Conflicts: Key Issues and Management Implications., Op Cit

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Disasters and Conflicts.' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/europe/regional-initiatives/disasters-and-conflicts> (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>8</sup> Eskjaer. M.F., & Horsbol. A., 'New Environmental Controversies: Towards a Typology of Green Conflicts' Available at <https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/15/3/1914#:~:text=In%20a%20modern%20context%2C%20environmental,resources%20%5B10%2C11%5D>. (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

environmental degradation<sup>10</sup>. It has been argued that environmental conflicts can manifest in various ways – including armed wars, genocide and peaceful disagreements at the local, national, regional or global levels<sup>11</sup>.

Environmental conflicts are undesirable since they undermine peace, security and Sustainable Development. For example, transboundary pollution and environmental degradation can disrupt peaceful relations between neighbouring states which share a common resource<sup>12</sup>. In addition, involuntary and forced migration due to water scarcity, environmental degradation and inequitable access to land resources can also threaten stability and peace among neighbouring communities<sup>13</sup>. Further, it has been argued that environmental conflicts especially those involving natural resources can trigger violence, insecurity and destruction, particularly in states with weak governance, high levels of corruption, and existing ethnic and political divisions<sup>14</sup>. Environmental conflicts are expected to continue rising globally. For example, it has been argued that while natural resources are key to achieving Sustainable Development, they are also increasingly acting as drivers of fragility, conflict and violence<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, as the global population continues to rise, the global demand for natural resources continues to grow, and the impacts of climate change continue to intensify, the competition over natural resources is set to increase, a situation that could spiral into more environmental conflicts<sup>16</sup>. Environmental conflicts have devastating impacts especially in poor societies since they are less able to buffer themselves from environmental scarcities and the social crises they

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Environmental Conflicts: Key Issues and Management Implications., Op Cit

<sup>12</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Disasters and Conflicts.' Op Cit

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Mwanika. P.A.N., 'Natural Resource Conflict: Management Processes and Strategies in Africa' Available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/136685/PAPER216.pdf> (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding.' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/disasters-and-climate-change/environmental-security/environmental-cooperation-and#:~:text=International%20law%2C%20environment%20and%20conflict,and%20reliance%20on%20conflict%20resources> (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

cause<sup>17</sup>. Effective management of environmental conflicts is therefore key towards Sustainable Development.

This paper critically discusses how environmental conflicts can be effectively managed in Africa. The paper argues that Africa is highly susceptible to environmental conflicts. It examines the causes and effects of environmental conflicts in Africa. The paper further argues that environmental conflicts are a major threat to peace, stability, security and Sustainable Development in Africa. Consequently, the paper posits that effective environmental conflict management in Africa is necessary towards Sustainable Development. The paper examines how peace, justice, harmony and reconciliation can be embraced towards effective environmental conflict management in Africa for posterity.

### **Conflicts in Africa: Causes and Effects**

Environmental conflicts are a common occurrence in Africa. For instance, natural resource-based conflicts have been a frequent phenomenon in Africa for many decades<sup>18</sup>. Africa's abundant natural resources including arable land, water, minerals, oil and gas have played a major role in defining much of Africa's public arena, including power politics, and resource distribution strategies<sup>19</sup>. However, they have also motivated and fueled armed conflicts in Africa threatening peace, security, and stability<sup>20</sup>. There have been numerous armed conflicts and civil wars in several resource rich countries in Africa including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Liberia, Nigeria, Sudan and

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<sup>17</sup> Homer-Dixon, T.F., "Environmental scarcities and violent conflict: evidence from cases," *International Security* 19, No. 1 (1994): 5-40 at p. 6

<sup>18</sup> Muigua. K., Wamukoya. D., & Kariuki. F., 'Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Mwanika. P.A.N., 'Natural Resource Conflict: Management Processes and Strategies in Africa' Op Cit

<sup>20</sup> International Institute for Sustainable Development., 'Climate change and conflict: Lessons from Community Conservancies in Northern Kenya' Available at [https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/climate\\_change\\_conflict\\_kenya.pdf](https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/climate_change_conflict_kenya.pdf) (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

South Sudan<sup>21</sup>. It has been argued that most of the internal conflicts in Africa can be linked to exploiting natural resources – from high-value resources such as timber, diamonds, gold and oil to scarce resources such as fertile land and water<sup>22</sup>. In some cases, natural resources have also provided a parallel political economy for fueling wars and conflicts in Africa such as the illegal exploitation of diamonds during the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone<sup>23</sup>.

Climate change is also a major cause of environmental conflicts in Africa. The environmental effects of climate change, especially the depletion of natural resources create conditions that increase the risk of violent conflict<sup>24</sup>. Climate change has been identified as a threat multiplier which can increase human security issues such as food and water scarcity while also leading to (violent) conflicts in climate-vulnerable regions and countries<sup>25</sup>. It has been correctly noted that African economies and the livelihood of many communities in the continent are heavily reliant on natural resources<sup>26</sup>. The impacts of climate change in Africa including recurrent droughts, irregular rainfall, severe floods, water scarcity and intensified desertification are disrupting livelihoods, fuelling migration, causing food and water shortages and internal displacement thus leading to inter-communal violence and conflict<sup>27</sup>. It has been argued that climate change is threatening food security, ecosystems and economies, fueling displacement and

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<sup>21</sup> Henri. A., 'Natural Resources Curse: A Reality in Africa.' *Resources Policy*, Volume 63, 2019

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'In Sudan, Conflict and Environmental Decline go Hand in Hand' Available at [https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/sudan-conflict-and-environmental-decline-go-hand-hand#:~:text=United%20Nations%20Environment%20Programme%20\(UNEP,as%20fertile%20land%20and%20water](https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/sudan-conflict-and-environmental-decline-go-hand-hand#:~:text=United%20Nations%20Environment%20Programme%20(UNEP,as%20fertile%20land%20and%20water). (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>23</sup> Mwanika. P.A.N., 'Natural Resource Conflict: Management Processes and Strategies in Africa' Op Cit

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Froese. R., & Janpeter. S, 'The Nexus of Climate Change, Land Use, and Conflicts' (2019)

<sup>26</sup> Climate induced conflicts: Sources of insecurity in Africa., Available at <https://amaniafrica-et.org/insights-on-the-psc-session-on-climate-induced-conflicts-sources-of-insecurity-in-africa/#:~:text=The%20changing%20rainfall%20patterns%20and,with%20better%20availability%20of%20resources>. (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

migration and worsening the threat of conflict over dwindling resources in Africa<sup>28</sup>. Due to climate change, conflicts over scarce productive land, water, and pasture have intensified in Africa<sup>29</sup>.

Africa is therefore highly susceptible to environmental conflicts. The continent's abundant natural resources including arable land, water, fisheries, minerals, timber, oil and gas have been a major source of conflicts due to corruption, weak governance, inequitable benefit-sharing frameworks and unsustainable extraction of resources<sup>30</sup>. Further, climate change is fuelling conflicts over scarce natural resources in Africa while also triggering displacement and migration of populations increasing the likelihood of conflicts<sup>31</sup>. Environmental conflicts are undesirable in Africa. Such conflicts are a major threat to peace, stability, and development in the continent<sup>32</sup>. It has been argued that if left unchecked, environmental conflicts in Africa will worsen food insecurity, water shortages, migration, displacement of vulnerable populations and poverty undermining the continent's development efforts<sup>33</sup>. It is therefore important to foster effective environmental conflict management in Africa for posterity.

### **3.0 Towards Effective Environmental Conflict Management in Africa**

Environment conflicts are prevalent in Africa undermining peace, security, stability and development. Effective environmental conflict management is therefore vital towards Sustainable Development in Africa. It has been argued that addressing the linkages between the environment, conflict and peace-building in Africa is key in influencing

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<sup>28</sup> World Meteorological Organization., 'Africa suffers disproportionately from climate change' Available at <https://wmo.int/media/news/africa-suffers-disproportionately-from-climate-change> (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Mwanika. P.A.N., 'Natural Resource Conflict: Management Processes and Strategies in Africa' Op Cit

<sup>31</sup> Climate induced conflicts: Sources of insecurity in Africa., Op Cit

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'In Sudan, Conflict and Environmental Decline go Hand in Hand' Op Cit

<sup>33</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa> (Accessed on 02/09/2025)

long-term development outcomes<sup>34</sup>. In order to achieve this ideal, it is imperative to foster peace, justice, harmony and reconciliation.

Peace is a vital element in the quest towards effective environmental conflict management<sup>35</sup>. It has been argued that building peace is key towards effective environmental governance that can reduce conflict and ensure security from local to global levels<sup>36</sup>. Further, it has been pointed out that effective management of environmental conflicts and threats can promote sustainable peace by fostering cooperation, addressing root causes of conflict, and promoting inclusive and equitable development<sup>37</sup>. Environmental conflicts often undermine human security, fuel poverty and inequality, and impede long-term development and stability<sup>38</sup>. Seeking peace is therefore necessary towards effective environmental conflict management in Africa.

In addition, seeking justice is crucial towards effective environmental conflict management in Africa. For instance, it has been argued that environmental conflicts can be mitigated when every person has the right to access to natural resources; not to suffer disproportionately from environmental policies, laws and regulations; and the right to environmental information, participation and involvement in decision-making<sup>39</sup>. These

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<sup>34</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Building resilience to disasters and conflicts' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/regional-initiatives/building-resilience-disasters-and-conflicts> (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>35</sup> International Union for Conservation of Nature., 'IUCN CEESP Environment and Peace Thematic Group' Available at <https://iucn.org/our-union/commissions/group/iucn-ceesp-environment-and-peace-thematic-group#:~:text=research%20and%20...-Overview,that%20damage%20environments%20and%20ecosystems>. (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> International Organization for Migration., 'Environmental Peacebuilding' Available at <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11411/files/documents/2023-12/iom-somalia-environmental-peacebuilding-infosheet.pdf> (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Ako. R., 'Resource Exploitation and Environmental Justice: the Nigerian Experience' Available at <https://www.elgaronline.com/display/edcoll/9781848446793/9781848446793.00011.xml> (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

are fundamental tenets of environmental justice<sup>40</sup>. Environmental justice provides a platform for accountability towards the protection of rights and the prevention and punishment of wrongs related to the disproportionate impacts of environmental challenges on the poor and vulnerable in society including climate change, pollution and degradation of ecosystem services, and from inequitable access to and benefits from the use of natural assets and extractive resources<sup>41</sup>. Seeking justice is therefore key towards effective environmental conflict management by enabling vulnerable and disadvantaged groups to secure their right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment<sup>42</sup>.

In addition, it has been argued that harmony is key in balancing competing needs including environmental protection, social equity, and economic development in order to ensure sustainable outcomes by preventing conflicts over competing needs for natural resources and ensuring cooperation among all participants including the public and private sectors, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and local communities<sup>43</sup>. Harmony ensures sound protection of the environment and natural resources, effective management of environmental and natural resource conflicts, consensus and cooperation in environmental decision-making, and accountability in environmental decision-making<sup>44</sup>. Seeking harmony is thus important for sound environmental conflict management in Africa. Further, reconciliation is vital in addressing deep-seated issues, building trust among parties to conflict and ensuring collaboration among various stakeholders including indigenous peoples for sound environmental governance<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Justice: Comparative Experiences in Legal Empowerment' Available at <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Environmental-Justice-Comparative-Experiences.pdf> (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Haque. M., 'Environmental Governance.' Available at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318166768\\_Environmental\\_Governance](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318166768_Environmental_Governance) (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> European Institute of Peace., 'Report Launch: Environmental Pathways for Reconciliation in Yemen' Available at <https://www.eip.org/report-launch-environmental-pathways-for-reconciliation-in->

Reconciliation is necessary in integrating local voices in environmental conflict management and preventing conflicts from escalating to violence<sup>46</sup>.

Seeking peace, justice, harmony and reconciliation is therefore vital in the quest towards effective environmental conflict management in Africa.

In order to achieve these tenets, there is need to embrace Appropriate Dispute Resolution (ADR) processes for sound environmental conflict management in Africa<sup>47</sup>. ADR processes including negotiation, mediation, conciliation and arbitration contain certain attributes that are suitable in promoting effective environmental conflict management through peace, justice, harmony and reconciliation. For example, negotiation, mediation and conciliation can enhance collaboration over the ownership, management, and use of natural resources thus minimising the likelihood of conflicts while also fostering peace, harmony and stability<sup>48</sup>. Further, it has been argued that negotiation and mediation processes – which are voluntary and consensus-based – tend to lead to resolutions and outcomes that are longer lasting and more sustainable than adversarial processes or otherwise imposed outcomes<sup>49</sup>. ADR processes can also enable parties to environmental conflicts to come up with creative remedies over and above traditional remedies available in litigation thus leading to long-term and sustainable outcomes<sup>50</sup>. In addition, by encouraging consensus building and participatory approaches towards conflict

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[yemen/#:~:text=Tensions%20and%20disputes%20relating%20to,unreachable%20to%20the%20local%20population.](#) (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Grad. F.P., 'Alternative Dispute Resolution in Environmental Law.' *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law* Volume: 14, Issue 1

<sup>48</sup> United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Available at [https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/NRCMediation\\_UNDPAUNEP2015\\_0.pdf](https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/NRCMediation_UNDPAUNEP2015_0.pdf) (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Higgs. S., 'The Potential for Mediation to Resolve Environmental and Natural Resources Disputes.' Available at [https://www.acctm.org/docs/The%20Potential%20For%20Mediation%20to%20Resolve%20Environmental%20\\_CONNOR-Higgs\\_.pdf](https://www.acctm.org/docs/The%20Potential%20For%20Mediation%20to%20Resolve%20Environmental%20_CONNOR-Higgs_.pdf) (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

management, ADR processes including mediation, negotiation and conciliation can promote harmony, peace and reconciliation towards effective management of environmental conflicts<sup>51</sup>. These processes can also address deep-seated and underlying issues in environmental conflicts thus encouraging trust, reconciliation, harmony and peace among various stakeholders including indigenous communities, governments and investors<sup>52</sup>.

ADR processes are also suitable in ensuring access to justice in environmental conflicts. These processes provide an accessible, flexible, expeditious, cost-effective, and responsive approach towards managing environmental conflicts and are therefore suitable in fostering justice<sup>53</sup>. It has been argued that ADR is an appropriate tool for individuals and communities to give their own voices, to share in decision-making, and to promote innovative solutions in respect of environmental problems towards actualising environmental justice<sup>54</sup>. ADR processes such as mediation, negotiation and conciliation can foster collaboration, cooperation and participation in environmental governance, decision making processes and conflict management for environmental justice<sup>55</sup>. Embracing ADR processes is therefore necessary in fostering justice towards effective environmental conflict management.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Environmental conflicts are prevalent in Africa. These conflicts undermine the quest towards Sustainable Development in the continent. Effective environmental conflict management in Africa is therefore a key agenda towards posterity. Utilising ADR

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<sup>51</sup> Muigua. K., 'Attaining Environmental Justice through Alternative Dispute Resolution.' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Attaining-Environmental-Justice-through-Alternative-Dispute-Resolution.pdf> (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>52</sup> Ibid

<sup>53</sup> Muigua. K., 'Attaining Environmental Justice through Alternative Dispute Resolution.' Op Cit

<sup>54</sup> Environmental Law Institute., 'A Community Guide to Using Alternative Dispute Resolution to Secure Environmental Justice' Available at <https://www.eli.org/environmental-governance/community-guideusing-alternative-dispute-resolution-secure-1> (Accessed on 03/09/2025)

<sup>55</sup> Ibid

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processes including negotiation mediation, conciliation and arbitration can foster sound environmental conflict management in Africa by promoting peace, justice, harmony and reconciliation<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Muigua. K., 'Attaining Environmental Justice through Alternative Dispute Resolution.' Op Cit

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