

Environmental Conflicts, Mediation and Peacekeeping in Africa: Centralizing Women's Involvement for Sustainability

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Environmental Conflicts, Mediation and Peacekeeping in Africa: Centralizing Women's Involvement for Sustainability

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Abstract

This paper examines how environmental conflicts can be effectively managed in Africa for sustainability. The paper argues that Africa is highly susceptible to environmental conflicts. It discusses the causes and effects of environmental conflicts in Africa. Due to their negative impacts, the paper posits that effective environmental conflict management in Africa is necessary towards fostering sustainability. In addition, the paper argues that women are crucial agents towards sound management of environmental conflicts in Africa for sustainability. As a result, the paper explores how women can be effectively involved in environmental mediation and peacekeeping towards sound management of environmental conflicts in Africa for sustainability.

1.0 Introduction

Environmental conflicts are a major threat to sustainability. Environmental conflicts occur as a result of the various competing interests over access to and use of natural resources including land, water, minerals and forests¹. It has been argued that causes of environmental conflicts vary across the globe and their manifestations differ considerably². For example, 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

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¹ Muigua. K., 'Environmental Conflict Management in the Kenyan Context-Enhancing the Use of Alternative Dispute Resolution Mechanisms' Available at <https://land.igad.int/index.php/documents-1/countries/kenya/conflict-3/554-environmental-conflict-management-in-the-kenyan-context-enhancing-the-use-of-alternative-dispute-resolution-mechanisms/file> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

² Environmental Conflicts: Key Issues and Management Implications., Available at <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/environmental-conflicts/> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

level³. Further, environmental conflicts can manifest in various ways – including armed wars, genocide and peaceful disagreements at the local, national, regional or global levels⁴.

Environmental conflicts are prevalent all over the world. It has been observed that 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 issues⁵. If not well managed, environmental conflicts can fuel or worsen environmental problems including pollution, resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, climate change and environmental degradation⁶. According to the United Nations, conflicts can disrupt ecosystems, deplete natural resources, pollute the environment, and jeopardize the health of our planet now and in the future⁷. Environmental conflicts can also trigger violence, insecurity and destruction, particularly in states with weak governance, high levels of corruption, and existing ethnic and political divisions⁸.

In light of the foregoing, it has been argued that environmental conflicts are a major challenge affecting local, regional, national and global security and sustainability⁹. Environmental conflicts are expected to continue rising all over the world. For instance,

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Dukes. F., 'What we Know About Environmental Conflict Resolution: An Analysis Based on Research.' *Conflict Resolution Quarterly.*, Volume 22, Issue 1-2

⁶ 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 29/10/2025)

⁷ United Nations., 'How Conflict Impacts Our Environment' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/how-conflict-impacts-our-environment> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

⁸ 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 29/10/2025)

⁹ Environmental Conflicts: Key Issues and Management Implications., Op Cit

it has been argued that 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 conflicts¹⁰. Sound environmental conflict management including through cooperation, diplomacy, mediation and peacebuilding is therefore key in fostering sustainability¹¹.

This paper examines how environmental conflicts can be effectively managed in Africa for sustainability. The paper argues that Africa is highly susceptible to environmental conflicts. It discusses the causes and effects of environmental conflicts in Africa. Due to their negative impacts, the paper posits that effective environmental conflict management in Africa is necessary towards fostering sustainability. In addition, the paper argues that women are crucial agents towards sound management of environmental conflicts in Africa for sustainability. As a result, the paper explores how women can be effectively involved in environmental mediation and peacekeeping towards sound management of environmental conflicts in Africa for sustainability.

2.0 Environmental Conflicts in Africa: Causes and Consequences

Environmental conflicts are widespread all over Africa. For instance, the abundance of natural resources in Africa has been a major factor in fuelling environmental conflicts in the continent. It has been argued that while natural resources are key in fostering Sustainable Development, they are also increasingly acting as drivers of fragility, conflict and violence globally¹². Africa's abundant natural resources including arable land, water, forests, minerals, oil and gas have for many decades motivated and fueled armed

¹⁰ 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 29/10/2025)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding.' Op Cit

conflicts in the continent threatening peace, security, and stability¹³. As a result, Africa has been often associated with the 'resource curse' a situation whereby natural resources have hurt the prospects of several African national and regional economies by causing political corruption and feeding violence, wars and rebellion¹⁴. The resource curse phenomenon in Africa is characterised by poverty and slow economic growth in many resource rich countries, resource wars and conflicts including violent civil conflicts, and undemocratic regimes and political instability in a number of African countries¹⁵. It has been pointed out that Africa'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 regimes, inequitable benefit-sharing frameworks and unsustainable extraction of resources¹⁶.

In addition to the continent's non-renewable resources, Africa's renewable resources are also generating environmental conflicts¹⁷. In the quest towards energy transition, there have been increased investments in Africa's abundant renewable energy sources including wind, solar and geothermal energy¹⁸. Further, Africa's abundant green minerals including cobalt, lithium, nickel, manganese, copper and rare earth elements are being increasingly harnessed in the quest towards energy transition¹⁹. While these efforts

¹³ 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 (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

¹⁴ Maphosa. S.B., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: Unlocking the Economic Dimension of Peace-Building in Africa' Available at <https://africaportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/No.-74.-Natural-Resources-and-Conflict..pdf> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Mwanika. P.A.N., 'Natural Resource Conflict: Management Processes and Strategies in Africa' Op Cit

¹⁷ Albrecht. P., &, Gravesen. M.L., 'Three frontlines in Africa's resource conflicts' Available at <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/three-frontlines-in-africas-resource-conflicts> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Africa's Green Minerals Strategy., Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44539-doc-AGMS_Final_doc.pdf (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

are commendable and necessary in transitioning to clean energy, they are also triggering conflicts over access and control and land conflicts due to displacement of populations²⁰.

Climate change is also a major cause of environmental conflicts in Africa. It has been argued that climate change can trigger or worsen conflicts due to its impacts including displacement of people, increased food insecurity and depletion and degradation of vital resources including water and arable land²¹. Climate change has been identified as threat multiplier that is already causing food insecurity, water scarcity and resource competition, while disrupting livelihoods and spurring migration therefore contributing to conflicts²². Africa is highly vulnerable to climate change. It has been argued that climate change is threatening food security, ecosystems and economies, fueling displacement and migration and worsening the threat of conflict over dwindling resources in Africa²³. The adverse impacts of climate change including drought have resulted in competition over dwindling resources including water and grazing land therefore fuelling conflicts and violence²⁴. Further, the consequences of climate change such as land degradation, droughts, water scarcity, floods, storms and famines have led to an increase in environmental migration in Africa, a situation which exposed vulnerable populations to violence and conflicts with their hosts²⁵. Climate change therefore causes environmental conflicts in Africa. It has been argued that the consequences of climate change in Africa including recurrent droughts, irregular rainfall, severe floods, water scarcity and intensified desertification are disrupting livelihoods, fuelling migration, causing food

²⁰ Albrecht. P., &., Gravesen. M.L., 'Three frontlines in Africa's resource conflicts' Op Cit

²¹ United Nations Climate Change., 'Conflict and Climate' Available at <https://unfccc.int/news/conflict-and-climate> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

²² International Crisis Group., 'Climate, Environment and Conflict' Available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/future-conflict/climate-environment-and-conflict> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

²³ World Meteorological Organization., 'Africa suffers disproportionately from climate change' Available at <https://wmo.int/media/news/africa-suffers-disproportionately-from-climate-change> (Accessed on 29/10/2025)

²⁴ Environmental Conflicts: Key Issues and Management Implications., Op Cit

²⁵ Ibid

and water shortages and internal displacement therefore leading to inter-communal violence and conflict²⁶.

From the foregoing, it is evident that Africa is highly susceptible to environmental conflicts. It has been argued that when such conflicts are managed peacefully, they can be an essential part of progress and development by helping communities and nations define key issues such as access, control and use of natural resources²⁷. However, if not well managed, environmental conflicts can trigger violence, insecurity and destruction, particularly in states with weak governance, high levels of corruption, and existing ethnic and political divisions²⁸. With environmental conflicts being prevalent all over Africa, effective management of these conflicts is necessary for peace, stability and development. It has been argued that if left unchecked, environmental conflicts in Africa can worsen food insecurity, water shortages, migration, displacement of vulnerable populations and poverty undermining the continent's development efforts²⁹. Effective management of environmental conflicts in Africa is therefore necessary for sustainability.

3.0 Centralizing Women's Involvement for Effective Management of Environmental Conflicts in Africa

Environmental conflicts in Africa can threaten peace, security, stability and development. Environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding is therefore necessary in fostering development³⁰. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding is crucial in transforming local, national

²⁶ 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 29/10/2025)

²⁷ Brown. O., & Keating. M., 'Addressing Natural Resource Conflicts: Working towards more Effective Resolution of National and Sub-National Resource Disputes' Available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2015/06/addressing-natural-resource-conflicts-working-towards-more-effective-resolution-national> (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa> (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding.' Op Cit

and transboundary conflicts over the environment and natural resources into opportunities for cooperation and joint benefits towards development³¹. Environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding recognises that environmental threats can worsen existing conflicts and act as potential triggers for new conflicts concerning the environment and natural resources³². Therefore, peacekeeping and peacebuilding is vital in addressing environmental challenges for durable and sustainable peace by fostering environmental cooperation, addressing root causes of conflict, and promoting inclusive and equitable development³³. Environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding therefore provides an effective pathway towards addressing the relationship between environment and conflict³⁴. It focuses on cooperation, equitable access and use of natural resources, sustainable natural resource management and community resilience towards achieving lasting peace while fostering harmony between humanity and nature for Sustainable Development³⁵. Strengthening environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding in Africa is therefore vital towards effectively managing environmental conflicts for sustainability.

Mediation is an appropriate tool for environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding in Africa. Mediation is a voluntary, collaborative and consensus-based process and it therefore leads to resolutions and outcomes that are effective, longer lasting and more sustainable than adversarial processes or otherwise imposed outcomes such as litigation and arbitration³⁶. It has been argued that in environmental conflicts especially conflicts involving natural resources, sustainable outcomes are more desirable because the shared

³¹ Ibid

³² 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 30/10/2025)

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Environmental peacebuilding as a pathway to peace with nature., Available at <https://www.cgiar.org/research/publication/environmental-peacebuilding-as-a-pathway-to-peace-with-nature/> (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Available at https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/9294/-Natural_resources_and_conflic.pdf?sequence=2&%3BisAllowed= (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

benefits of these resources often cross tribal, societal, communal, and national boundaries³⁷. Mediation is suitable in managing environmental conflicts since it encourages consensus building and the participation of all stakeholders towards sustainable and durable outcomes³⁸. It has been argued that mediation is effective in addressing deep-seated and underlying issues in environmental conflicts therefore encouraging trust, reconciliation, harmony and peace among various stakeholders including indigenous and local communities, governments and investors³⁹.

Embracing mediation is therefore key for effective management of environmental conflicts in Africa. Mediation provides several advantages including neutrality, flexibility, confidentiality and collaboration thus ensuring an effective approach towards managing environmental conflicts, which are increasingly driven by resource scarcity and climate change⁴⁰. Mediation can also enhance environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding. It has been argued that by fostering collaboration, mediation preserves and strengthens relationships towards maintaining peace and stability at all levels⁴¹. Embracing mediation including community-based mediation processes can ensure lasting peace especially where tensions over natural resources persist⁴².

Utilising mediation is therefore key towards effective environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding in Africa. Consequently, it is imperative for African countries to strengthen their legal, policy, institutional and human capacities in order to enhance the

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ 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 30/10/2025)

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Mediation as a Tool for Resolving Environmental Disputes: An Evaluation., Available at <https://i-adrnigeria.org/mediation-as-a-tool-for-resolving-environmental-disputes-an-evaluation/#:~:text=This%20article%20explores%20the%20concept,negotiations%20can%20sometimes%20hinder%20progress.> (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² International Organization for Migration., 'Environmental Peacebuilding' Op Cit

use of mediation in environmental conflicts⁴³. Further, the participation of all stakeholders in mediation processes including women is key in addressing the root causes of conflicts and affording parties an opportunity to sustain and improve their relationships⁴⁴. According to UNEP, the contribution of women is vital for effective conflict prevention and peacebuilding in areas affected by environmental conflicts⁴⁵. The participation of women enhances the success of peace talks, the implementation of peace agreements and the sustainability of peacebuilding processes⁴⁶. It has been argued that through enhanced participation of women in environmental conflict management, it is possible to leverage on their differentiated knowledge and diverse perspectives, including existing coping capacities and sources of resilience for durable peace⁴⁷.

Strengthening the involvement of women in mediation processes is therefore key towards effective management of environmental conflicts for sustainable and long-lasting peace.

4.0 Conclusion

Environmental conflicts are prevalent in Africa undermining peace, security and sustainability. Environmental peacekeeping and peacebuilding is therefore key towards managing environmental conflicts for peace and sustainability in Africa. Mediation provides an appropriate forum for sound management of environmental conflicts in Africa for durable and lasting peace⁴⁸. It is therefore necessary to embrace and strengthen mediation in order to effectively manage environmental conflicts in Africa. Further,

⁴³ Muigua. K., 'Managing Natural Resource Conflicts in Kenya through Negotiation and Mediation.' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Managing-Natural-Resource-Conflicts-in-Kenya-through-Negotiation-and-Mediation.pdf> (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Women, Natural Resources and Peace' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/disasters-and-conflicts/environment-security/women-natural-resources-and-peace> (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Bridging the Gap: Gender-inclusive multi-track diplomacy as environmental peacebuilding., Available at <https://www.ecosystemforpeace.org/compendium/inclusion-3> (Accessed on 30/10/2025)

⁴⁸ Muigua. K., 'Managing Natural Resource Conflicts in Kenya through Negotiation and Mediation.' Op Cit

strengthening women's involvement in mediation processes is key towards effective environmental conflict management, peacekeeping and peacebuilding initiatives⁴⁹. Centralizing women's involvement is therefore crucial towards bolstering the role of mediation in environmental conflict management and peacekeeping in Africa for sustainability.

⁴⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Women, Natural Resources and Peace' Op Cit

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