

Fostering Conflict Prevention, Resolution, Harmony and Sustainability in Environmental Governance

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Harmony and Sustainability in
Environmental Governance**

Kariuki Muigua

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Fostering Conflict Prevention, Resolution, Harmony and Sustainability in Environmental Governance

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Abstract

Peace is vital tenet in the quest towards Sustainable Development. The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development acknowledges that there can be no Sustainable Development without peace and no peace without Sustainable Development. However, the ideal of peace is threatened by conflicts that are prevalent globally. The environment is also a victim of conflicts as evidenced by widespread environmental degradation during armed hostilities and conflict situations. Environmental conflicts therefore affect the ideal of sound environmental governance and sustainability. In addition, poor environmental governance fuels conflicts undermining peace and sustainability. This paper critically examines how to foster conflict prevention, resolution, harmony and sustainability for sound environmental governance towards Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Peace is necessary for Sustainable Development. According to the United Nations, peace is a fundamental precondition for social and economic development¹. Without peace, societies are often plagued by conflict, violence, and instability, which can hinder progress and result in the loss of lives and resources therefore undermining Sustainable Development². The advancement of human rights, social justice, and Sustainable development are all dependent on the pursuit of peace³. The United Nations 2030 Agenda

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¹ United Nations., 'Goal 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions' Available at <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/peace-justice/> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

² Ibid

³ Mustafa. G., & Jamshed. U., 'Peace: A Conceptual Understanding' Available at Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370062968_Peace_A_Conceptual_Understanding (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

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for Sustainable Development⁴ acknowledges that there can be no Sustainable Development without peace and no peace without Sustainable Development. It seeks to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence towards Sustainable Development⁵.

Peace is also crucial for environmental sustainability. For instance, a stable, harmonious, and peaceful society fosters effective environmental stewardship, and a healthy and sustainable environment supports social stability towards peace⁶. Where there is no peace such as in war zones and areas of political instability, environmental degradation is often witnessed⁷. In such areas forests are destroyed, natural resources including water sources are contaminated, and wildlife is driven away⁸. The environment is therefore often jeopardised and harmed during armed hostilities and conflict situations and reduced to a silent casualty of war⁹. Armed hostilities and conflict situations often lead to environmental degradation or destruction, with long-lasting effects that contribute to the increased vulnerability of the affected populations¹⁰. Parties to armed hostilities and conflict situations usually adopt tactics that damage the environment such as polluting water resources, torching down crops and forests, poisoning soils, and killing animals in order to gain military advantage¹¹.

⁴ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Whaley. J., 'The Connection Between Peace and Environmental Sustainability' Available at <https://mooreliberationtheology.com/connection-peace-environmental-sustainability/> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Palarczyk. D., 'Ecocide Before the International Criminal Court: Simplicity is Better Than an Elaborate Embellishment' *Criminal Law Forum.*, Volume 34, pp 147-207 (2023)

¹⁰ Geneva Environment Network., 'Protecting the Environment in Armed Conflict' Available at <https://www.genevaenvironmentnetwork.org/resources/updates/protecting-the-environment-inarmed-conflict/> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

¹¹ Ibid

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Sound environmental governance is therefore undermined by conflicts. Environmental and natural resource- based conflicts are prevalent all over the world as a result of the various competing interests over access to and use of natural resources such as land, water, minerals and forests¹². These conflicts undermine peace and Sustainable Development¹³. Sound environmental governance and effective management of conflicts is therefore crucial towards Sustainable Development. This paper critically examines how to foster conflict prevention, resolution, harmony and sustainability for sound environmental governance towards Sustainable Development.

2.0 Environmental Governance: Opportunities and Challenges

Governance refers to the institutions, structures, and processes that determine who makes decisions, how and for whom decisions are made, whether, how and what actions are taken and by whom and to what effect¹⁴. Governance can also be described as the exercise of political and administrative authority at all levels to manage a country's affairs¹⁵. It involves the mechanisms, processes and institutions, through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences¹⁶.

In the environmental context, governance involves understanding how decisions related to the environment are made and whether resultant policies and processes lead to environmentally and socially sustainable outcomes¹⁷. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), environmental governance entails policy, rules and

¹² Muigua. K., 'Environmental Conflict Management Institutions and Approaches.' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/EnvironmentalConflict-Management-Institutionsand-Approaches.pdf> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Bennett. N., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental Governance: A Practical Framework to Guide, Design, Evaluation, and Analysis' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/conl.12600> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

¹⁵ United Nations., 'Governance and Development' Available at https://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Think%20Pieces/7_governance.pdf (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Bennett. N., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental Governance: A Practical Framework to Guide, Design, Evaluation, and Analysis' Op Cit

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norms that govern human behavior in respect of the environment and it also addresses who makes decisions, how decisions are made and carried out, the scientific information needed for decision-making and how the public and major stakeholders can participate in environmental decision-making¹⁸. Environmental governance has also described as the set of regulatory processes, mechanisms and organizations that influence environmental actions and outcomes¹⁹. This concept comprises of a wide range of legal and other tools employed in both the private and public sectors to foster sound environmental protection²⁰.

Sound environmental governance is crucial in fostering sustainability. Effective environmental governance aims to manage individual behavior or collective actions in pursuance of public environmental goods and related societal outcomes²¹. It also seeks to ensure that rules, policies and processes related to the environment lead to environmentally and socially sustainable outcomes²². According to UNEP, sound environmental governance at the global, regional, national and local levels is vital towards a healthy and prosperous planet for all, now and in the future²³. Effective environmental governance is also key towards promoting environmental justice, and upholding human rights including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment for current and future generations²⁴.

¹⁸ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/west-asia/regional-initiatives/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

¹⁹ Lemos. M.C., & Agrawal. A., 'Environmental Governance' *Annual Review of Environmental Resources.*, Volume 31, 2006, pp 297-325

²⁰ Environmental Law Institute., 'Environmental Governance' Available at <https://www.eli.org/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

²¹ Bennett. N., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental Governance: A Practical Framework to Guide, Design, Evaluation, and Analysis' Op Cit

²² Ibid

²³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Governance' Op Cit

²⁴ United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering Inclusive and Effective Governance Systems that Champion Environmental Justice and Sustainability' Available at <https://www.undp.org/nature/our-work-areas/environmental-governance> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

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Strengthening environmental governance at all levels has been identified as an engine for Sustainable Development as well as a platform for peace and justice²⁵. As a result, there have been calls to pursue sound environmental governance that is effective, equitable, inclusive, responsive, and robust²⁶. Further, effective legal, institutional, and policy frameworks at all levels are crucial in strengthening environmental governance and protecting and restoring our planet towards a sustainable tomorrow²⁷. Sound environmental governance is particularly important in light of mounting environmental problems facing the planet including the depletion of natural resources, environmental degradation, desertification, drought, freshwater scarcity, environmental pollution, loss of biodiversity, and climate change²⁸.

Despite its crucial role in fostering sustainability, achieving effective environmental governance remains a challenge globally. In most countries environmental governance systems are strained, with marginalized groups including indigenous peoples, local communities and women often excluded from environmental decision-making²⁹. Limited resources, weak institutions, and the lack of political will to prioritize environmental conservation are also major challenges undermining the ideal of sound environmental governance especially in Africa³⁰. These shortcomings in global, regional, national, and local systems of environmental governance frameworks are worsening

²⁵ Muigua. K., 'Securing Our Destiny through Effective Management of the Environment.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2020

²⁶ Bennett. N., & Satterfield. T., 'Environmental Governance: A Practical Framework to Guide, Design, Evaluation, and Analysis' Op Cit

²⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Law and Governance' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/environmental-law-and-governance> (Accessed on 10/03/2025)

²⁸ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' Op Cit

²⁹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering Inclusive and Effective Governance Systems that Champion Environmental Justice and Sustainability' Op Cit

³⁰ Tsiotery. M., & Zafimahova. C., 'Environmental Governance in The Division of Roles International Institutions and Government Institutions in African Countries' *Journal of Management and Administration Provision*, Volume 2, No. 2 , (2022), pp 58-64

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environmental problems including the triple planetary crisis of biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change³¹.

In addition, poor environmental governance is also fueling environmental conflicts. These conflicts arise due to unfair distribution of environmental costs and benefits and disagreements concerning access to and use of natural resources³². Environmental conflicts can take the form of political, social, economic, ethnic, religious, or territorial conflicts, or conflicts over resources or national interests, or any other type of conflict triggered by environmental degradation such as pollution and the impacts of climate change³³. It has been observed that nearly every community finds itself embroiled in occasional disputes and conflicts 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 among other issues³⁴. Environmental conflicts are therefore a common phenomenon and involve fundamental issues including individual and community health, racial and ethnic justice, the integrity or destruction of whole ecosystems, and the economic or cultural viability of human communities³⁵. According to 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 health³⁶.

³¹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering Inclusive and Effective Governance Systems that Champion Environmental Justice and Sustainability' Op Cit

³² Muigua. K., 'Environmental Conflict Management Institutions and Approaches.' Op Cit

³³ Muigua. K., 'Understanding Environmental Conflicts: Causes and Manifestations' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Environmental-Conflicts-Causes-and-Manifestations.pdf> (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

³⁴ Dukes. F., 'What we Know About Environmental Conflict Resolution: An Analysis Based on Research.' *Conflict Resolution Quarterly.*, Volume 22, Issue 1-2

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Disasters and Conflicts.' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/europe/regional-initiatives/disasters-and-conflicts> (Accessed on 18/01/2025)

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Environmental conflicts have therefore emerged as key issues challenging local, regional, national and global security³⁷. Poor environmental governance is playing a major role in environmental conflicts globally. For example, in Africa, mismanagement of the proceeds of natural resources including minerals has led to the proliferation of armed conflicts and other criminal activities, while the political, military, and bureaucratic elites have remained the beneficiaries of these resources³⁸. Further, proceeds from illegal activities in the natural resources sector including illicit financial flows, illegal logging, illegal trade in wildlife and illegal mining of resources have been used to fund a series of wars and conflicts in Africa³⁹. In addition, poor governance of natural resources in the extractive industry is fueling conflicts globally due to inadequate engagement of communities and stakeholders in development processes, unfair distribution of the benefits, costs, risks and responsibilities associated with the extractive industry, impacts on the environment, communities, and the local and national economies, and corruption and diversion of funds to satisfy individual gains at the expense of national and community interests⁴⁰.

Poor environmental governance is therefore fueling environmental and natural resource-based conflicts. When the environment and natural resources are poor governed, it can be a source of conflicts particularly in areas with underlying social and political instability⁴¹. Poor management of natural resources in the face of environmental crises can therefore increase the risks of conflict⁴². On the other hand, armed conflicts can undermine sound environmental governance by causing environmental degradation with long-lasting effects that contribute to the increased vulnerability of the affected

³⁷ Bob. U., & Bronkhorst. S., 'Environmental conflicts: Key issues and management implications' Available at <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajcr/article/view/63307> (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

³⁸ Fagbadebo. O., Binza. M., Kabange. M., 'Resource-Based Conflicts in Africa' Available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-25151-1_6 (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ The United Nations Interagency Framework Team for Preventive Action., 'Extractive Industries and Conflict' Available at https://globalprotectioncluster.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Extractive_Industries_and_Conflict_Guidance_Note_Practitioners_2010_EN.pdf (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

⁴¹ Muigua. K., 'Understanding Environmental Conflicts: Causes and Manifestations' Op Cit

⁴² Geneva Environment Network., 'Protecting the Environment in Armed Conflict' Op Cit

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populations⁴³. Environmental and natural resource- based conflicts can be useful in helping a community to clarify interests and needs and in reducing possible injustices or inequities in resource distribution⁴⁴. However, most environmental and natural resource-based conflicts have to be addressed effectively and in good time or they will upset local livelihoods by undermining trust among stakeholders and increasing insecurity and resource degradation⁴⁵. As a result, it is imperative to ensure that action on the environment is part of conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peacebuilding strategies since there can be no durable peace if the natural resources that sustain livelihoods are destroyed⁴⁶. Fostering conflict prevention, resolution, harmony and sustainability in environmental governance is therefore vital for peace and prosperity.

3.0 Fostering Conflict Prevention, Resolution, Harmony and Sustainability in Environmental Governance

It is imperative to foster conflict prevention, resolution, harmony and sustainability in environmental governance. Poor environmental governance can worsen existing conflicts and act as a potential trigger for new conflicts⁴⁷. Strengthening environmental governance and addressing environmental challenges can promote sustainable peace by fostering cooperation, addressing root causes of conflict, and promoting inclusive and equitable development⁴⁸.

Conflict prevention in environmental governance involves sound management of the environment and natural resources in order to avoid conflicts related to access, use, and

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Food and Agriculture Organization., 'An Introduction to Natural Resource Conflicts, Collaborative Management and Sustainable Livelihoods' Available at Available at <https://www.fao.org/4/a0032e/a0032e04.htm#:~:text=Natural%20resource%20conflicts%20are%20disagreements,or%20inequities%20in%20resource%20distribution> (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Geneva Environment Network., 'Protecting the Environment in Armed Conflict' Op Cit

⁴⁷ International Organization for Migration., 'Peace and Stability through Green Environment, Green Governance and Green Economy Action in Unstable and Newly Recovered Areas in Somalia' Available at <https://environmentalmigration.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1411/files/documents/2023-12/iom-somalia-environmental-peacebuilding-infosheet.pdf> (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

⁴⁸ Ibid

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management of natural resources, or those related to environmental degradation⁴⁹. On the other hand, conflict resolution in environmental governance involves effective, efficient, peaceful and expeditious management of conflicts for peace and Sustainable Development⁵⁰. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) processes including mediation and negotiation have been identified as vital towards fostering conflict prevention and resolution in environmental governance⁵¹. In environmental and natural resource-based conflicts, sustainable outcomes are more desirable because the shared benefits of these resources often cross tribal, societal, communal, and national boundaries⁵². Collaboration over the ownership, management, and use of natural resources is therefore critical to peace and stability⁵³. 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 outcomes⁵⁴. Mediation and negotiation are therefore suitable processes towards conflict prevention and resolution in environmental governance due to their potential to foster collaboration in the ownership, management, and use of natural resources while also providing an appropriate forum for effective management of conflicts⁵⁵.

Collaborative management of natural resources involves joint decision-making by all stakeholders including the government, local communities, and the private sector in

⁴⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Available at https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2022/09/naturalresourcesandconflic_1.pdf (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Muigua. K., 'Resolving Natural Resource Based Conflicts in Africa through Negotiation and Mediation' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/articles-publications/resolving-natural-resource-based-conflicts-in-africa-through-negotiation-and-mediation/> (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

⁵² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Op Cit

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ Ibid

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relation to natural resource access and use⁵⁶. Through this, it is possible to strengthen environmental governance through informed and inclusive decision-making that enhances the process of resource management, making it more responsive to the needs of all stakeholders⁵⁷. It is therefore necessary to embrace ADR techniques such as mediation and negotiation for effective conflict prevention and resolution in environmental governance through collaboration and cooperation⁵⁸.

Fostering harmony in environmental governance entails balancing competing needs including environmental protection, social equity, and economic development in order to ensure sustainable outcomes by preventing conflicts over competing needs and ensuring cooperation among all participants including the public and private sectors, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and local communities⁵⁹. Harmony in environmental governance focuses on sound protection of the environment and natural resources, effective management of environmental and natural resource conflicts, promoting consensus and cooperation in environmental decision-making, and ensuring accountability in environmental decision-making⁶⁰. Fostering harmony is therefore crucial for sound environmental governance.

Sustainability in environmental governance involves protecting and conserving the environment and the natural resources on which human well-being depends for the benefit of current and future generations⁶¹. It involves tackling environmental challenges such as biodiversity loss, pollution and climate change in order to uphold human rights

⁵⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization., 'An Introduction to Natural Resource Conflicts, Collaborative Management and Sustainable Livelihoods' Op Cit

⁵⁷ Ibid

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Haque. M., 'Environmental Governance.' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318166768_Environmental_Governance (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Agrawal. A et al., 'From Environmental Governance to Governance for Sustainability' Available at <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S259033222200269X> (Accessed on 11/03/2025)

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including the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in order to meet the needs of current and future generations as envisaged by the concept of Sustainable Development⁶². It is therefore necessary to strengthen environmental governance in order to effectively combat environmental challenges, promote environmental justice, human rights, and sustainability for current and future generations⁶³.

4.0 Conclusion

Sound environmental governance is vital towards Sustainable Development. However, the ideal of sound environmental governance is undermined by conflicts, exclusion and marginalisation of certain groups from environmental decision-making, and environmental challenges including climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss⁶⁴. Fostering conflict prevention, resolution, harmony and sustainability in environmental governance is therefore an urgent and achievable target for peace and prosperity.

⁶² United Nations Development Programme., 'Environmental Governance: Bolstering Inclusive and Effective Governance Systems that Champion Environmental Justice and Sustainability' Op Cit

⁶³ Ibid

⁶⁴ Ibid

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