

Mediating Natural-Resource Based Conflicts in Africa: Examining the Place of Culture in the Process

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Mediating Natural Resource-Based Conflicts in Africa: Examining the Place of Culture in the Process

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Abstract

This paper critically examines how mediation can be utilised for effective management of natural-resource based conflicts in Africa. The paper argues that mediation is an appropriate process towards sound management of natural-resource based conflicts in Africa for peace, security and Sustainable Development. It discusses the key features of mediation that make this process ideal in managing natural-resource based conflicts both globally and in Africa. Due to its advantages, the paper argues that it is necessary to embrace mediation in order to effectively manage natural-resource based conflicts in Africa. In addition, the paper explores how culture can be integrated in the process towards appropriately mediating natural resource-based conflicts in Africa for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Natural resource- based conflicts are being witnessed all over the world due to various competing interests over access to and use of natural resources such as land, water, minerals and forests¹. While natural resources provide economic, social and environmental benefits towards Sustainable Development, they are also increasingly acting as drivers of fragility, conflict, instability and violence². With the global population continuing to rise, the global demand for natural resources is expected to increase, a

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¹ Muigua. K., 'Environmental Conflict Management Institutions and Approaches.' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/EnvironmentalConflict-Management-Institutions-and-Approaches.pdf> (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding.' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/fresh-water/disasters-and-climatechange/environmentsecurity/environmentalcooperationand#:~:text=International%20law%2C%20environment%20and%20conflict,and%20reliance%20on%20conflict%20resources> (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

situation that could trigger more natural resource-based conflicts³. Further, climate change is fuelling the scarcity of vital natural resources including water and arable land, triggering competition and conflicts over these resources⁴.

Africa is highly susceptible to natural resource-based conflicts. Despite being endowed with natural resources including water, arable land, fisheries, oil, gas, forests, minerals and wildlife, Africa has over the years suffered from resource-based conflicts which undermine Sustainable Development by affecting economic development and sustainability⁵. The '*resource curse phenomenon*' is widespread in Africa. This refers to the paradox that countries endowed with natural resources tend to be embroiled in conflicts and have high incidences of poverty⁶. It has been argued that natural resources in Africa have played a significant role in many violent conflicts by being used to finance armed wars and conflicts⁷. Due to these challenges, it has been pointed out that in most cases, natural resources have hurt the prospects of several African national and regional economies by fostering political corruption and feeding conflicts, violence and rebellion⁸. Natural resource-based conflicts in Africa are undesirable. In some cases, natural resource-based conflicts can be useful in helping communities to clarify interests and needs and in reducing possible injustices or inequities in resource distribution⁹. However, most natural resource-based conflicts have to be addressed effectively and in good time since they can upset local livelihoods by undermining trust among stakeholders and increasing insecurity, violence and resource degradation¹⁰. When resolved peacefully,

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Muigua. K., Wamukoya. D., & Kariuki. F., '*Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Kenya.*' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

⁶ Henri. A., '*Natural Resources Curse: A Reality in Africa.*' *Resources Policy*, Volume 63, 2019

⁷ 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 29/09/2025)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization., '*An Introduction to Natural Resource Conflicts, Collaborative Management and Sustainable Livelihoods*' Available at <https://www.fao.org/4/a0032e/a0032e04.htm#:~:text=Natural%20resource%20conflicts%20are%20disagreements,or%20inequities%20in%20resource%20distribution> (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

¹⁰ Ibid

natural-resource based conflicts can be an essential part of progress and development¹¹. However, natural resource- based conflicts can also trigger violence, insecurity and destruction, particularly in states with weak governance, high levels of corruption, and existing ethnic and political divisions¹². In Africa, natural-resource based conflicts have often resulted in violence, civil wars, human security challenges and underdevelopment thus undermining the quest towards Sustainable Development in the continent¹³. Effective management of natural-resource based conflicts in Africa is therefore vital for Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines how mediation can be utilised for effective management of natural-resource based conflicts in Africa. The paper argues that mediation is an appropriate process towards sound management of natural-resource based conflicts in Africa for peace, security and Sustainable Development. It discusses the key features of mediation that make this process ideal in managing natural-resource based conflicts both globally and in Africa. Due to its advantages, the paper argues that it is necessary to embrace mediation in order to effectively manage natural-resource based conflicts in Africa. In addition, the paper explores how culture can be integrated in the process towards appropriately mediating natural resource-based conflicts in Africa for Sustainable Development.

2.0 The Suitability of Mediation in Managing Natural-Resource Based Conflicts

Mediation is a process of conflict management where conflicting parties gather to seek solutions to the conflict, with the assistance of a third party who facilitates discussions and the flow of information, thus aiding in the process of reaching an agreement¹⁴.

¹¹ 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 29/09/2025)

¹² Ibid

¹³ Maphosa. S.B., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: Unlocking the economic dimension of peace-building in Africa' Op Cit

¹⁴ Muigua. K., 'Resolving Conflicts through Mediation in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2nd Edition., 2017

Mediation is usually a continuation of the negotiation process since it arises where parties to a conflict have attempted negotiations, but have reached a deadlock¹⁵. As a result, parties involve a third party known as a mediator to assist them continue with the negotiations and ultimately break the deadlock¹⁶. It has been pointed out that a mediator does not have the power to impose a solution upon the parties but rather facilitates communication, promotes understanding, focuses the parties on their interests, and uses creative problem solving to enable the parties to reach their own agreement¹⁷.

Mediation is an appropriate and viable process in managing natural-resource based conflicts. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), mediation is a voluntary and consensus-based process and it therefore leads to resolutions and outcomes that are longer lasting and more sustainable than adversarial processes or otherwise imposed outcomes such as litigation and arbitration¹⁸. It has been argued that in conflicts involving natural resources, sustainable outcomes are more desirable because the shared benefits of these resources often cross tribal, societal, communal, and national boundaries¹⁹. Mediation is therefore suitable in managing natural resource-based conflicts due to its potential to build and maintain long-term sustainable relationships between parties through collaboration which often involves joint management of resources²⁰.

¹⁵ Bercovitch, J., 'Mediation Success or Failure: A Search for the Elusive Criteria.' *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 7, p 289

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ 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 29/09/2025)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ From curse to opportunity: Mediation of natural resource conflicts., Available at <https://voelkerrechtsblog.org/from-curse-to-opportunity-mediation-of-natural-resource-conflicts/#:~:text=Each%20natural%20resource%20sector%20%E2%80%93%20be,the%20needs%20of%20the%20parties>). (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

It has been argued that natural resource-based conflicts often vary from other types of conflicts due to several reasons including their political sensitivity and technical nature²¹. Due to its key attributes including flexibility, party autonomy and a focus on collaboration, mediation is well-suited to the peculiar needs of natural-resource based conflicts by taking into account the respective needs of the parties, multiple forms of evidence and the social, economic and political interests at stake in natural-resource based conflicts²². It has been argued that mediation can foster effective management of natural resource- based conflicts by building consensus and collaboration²³. This process can help stakeholders of natural resources to identify ways to maximize shared benefits and address common problems and challenges together²⁴. Through collaboration, natural resources can be treated as a platform for cooperation that transcends religious, ideological, political, or tribal differences, which can be leveraged to tackle more challenging problems down the line²⁵.

Mediation is also appropriate in managing natural-resource based conflicts since it enables parties to address the root causes of such conflicts. It has been argued that mediation addresses deep-seated and underlying issues in environmental and natural-resource based conflicts therefore encouraging trust, reconciliation, harmony and peace among various stakeholders including indigenous communities, governments and investors²⁶. Mediation is vital in understanding root causes of natural-resource based conflicts and the interaction of natural resources with other conflict drivers therefore leading to more sustainable and long-lasting outcomes²⁷.

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Antonia. E., & Benedikt. K., 'Negotiation and Mediation Techniques for Natural Resource Management.' Available at <https://iwrmaactionhub.org/node/1988/printable/pdf> (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

²⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Op Cit

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ 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 29/09/2025)

²⁷ From curse to opportunity: Mediation of natural resource conflicts., Op Cit

Mediation is therefore an effective process in managing natural-resource based conflicts. It has been identified as a valuable conflict resolution strategy capable of addressing both technical and political complexities in natural-resource based conflicts²⁸. For instance, since it is a voluntary technique that requires mutual consent, mediation is well-suited to politically-sensitive natural resource conflicts²⁹. Instead of imposing a solution or outcome on one or all sides, mediation enables all participants in the conflict to collaborate towards mutually satisfactory and long-lasting outcomes³⁰. Further, by building and maintaining trust among parties, mediation fosters long-term cooperation that is vital for sustainable management of natural resources³¹.

Despite its appropriateness in managing natural-resource based conflicts, it has been pointed out that mediation is usually underutilized undermining effective management of natural-resource based conflicts³². It is therefore imperative to enhance the use of mediation for sound management of natural resource-based conflicts both globally and in Africa.

3.0 Embracing Culture for Effective Mediation of Natural Resource-Based Conflicts

Mediation is a viable and appropriate process in managing natural-resource based conflicts in Africa. This process can enhance collaboration over the ownership, management, and use of natural resources thus minimising the likelihood of conflicts while also fostering peace, harmony and stability³³. Further, mediation is ideal in addressing the root causes of conflicts thus ensuring long-lasting and sustainable

²⁸ Mazzei. C., 'Mediation as a tool in addressing natural resources threats' Available at https://unicri.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/012_mediationasatool.pdf (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Ibid

³² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Op Cit

³³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Op Cit

outcomes³⁴. According to the United Nations, the premise of mediation is that in the right environment, parties in conflict can improve their relationships and move towards cooperation³⁵. Mediation therefore has the capacity to strengthen relationships and build trust within and among groups, increase the capacity of communities, organizations and institutions to solve problems, contribute to strengthening the institutional arrangements that regulate access to and use of natural resources, and foster increased flows of income and benefits through improved access to and management of natural resources³⁶.

It is therefore imperative to embrace mediation for effective management of natural resource-based conflicts in Africa. This process is particularly important in helping parties identify ways to maximise and share resource benefits therefore preventing and fostering effective management of natural resource- based conflicts³⁷. It is therefore necessary for African countries to strengthen their legal, policy, institutional and human capacities in order to enhance the use of mediation in natural resource-based conflicts³⁸. Further, effective mediation of natural resource-based conflicts requires the participation of all stakeholders in mediation processes including local communities, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), governments at all levels and investors³⁹. This provides an opportunity to address the root causes of conflicts and afford parties an

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ United Nations., 'Guidance for Effective Mediation' Available at https://unrcca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/dpa_msu_guidance_english_web.pdf (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

³⁶ Food and Agriculture Organization., 'Negotiation and Mediation Techniques for Natural Resource Management' Available at http://www.antoniocasella.eu/restorative/Castro_Engel_2007.pdf (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

³⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Mediation Can Prevent, Resolve Natural Resources Disputes New UN Guide Launched.' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/pressrelease/mediation-can-prevent-resolve-natural-resources-disputes-new-un> (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

³⁸ 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 29/09/2025)

³⁹ Muigua. K., 'Managing Environmental Conflicts through Alternative Dispute Resolution.' Available at <https://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Managing-Environmental-Conflicts-through-Alternative-Dispute-Resolution-1.pdf> (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

opportunity to sustain and improve their relationships⁴⁰. In addition, for mediation to be effective in managing natural resource- based conflicts, there is need to understand the root cause of the conflict, the interaction of natural resources with other conflict drivers, the broader political economy, and the entry-points for a mediated solution⁴¹.

Further, in order to effectively mediate natural resource-based conflicts in Africa, it is vital to appreciate and embrace the role of culture. It has been argued that culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution⁴². For instance, culture affects the ways we name, frame, and attempt to tame conflicts⁴³. Further, culture can define boundaries to a conflict, thus determining the participants and course of conflicts⁴⁴. Culture therefore plays a significant role in shaping how individuals approach conflicts and the strategies they use to resolve them⁴⁵.

Most African cultures are anchored by values aimed at promoting social cohesion⁴⁶. The culture, customs and traditions of African communities emphasise harmony/togetherness over individual interest and humanness as expressed in the African philosophy of *Ubuntu/Utu*⁴⁷. Conflicts of all kinds including natural resource-based conflicts are therefore seen as a threat to the social fabric that holds communities together. Communities therefore developed appropriate conflict management strategies

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners.' Op Cit

⁴² LeBaron. M., 'Culture and Conflict' Available at https://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture_conflict (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Worchel. S., 'Culture's role in conflict and conflict management: Some suggestions, many questions' *International Journal of Intercultural Relations.*, Volume 29, Issue 6 (2005)

⁴⁵ Yamini. S et al., 'Culture and Conflict Management Strategy: The Mediating Role of Instrumental Concerns' Available at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00220221241312414> (Accessed on 29/09/2025)

⁴⁶ Awoniyi. S., 'African Cultural Values: The Past, Present and Future' *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa* , Volume 17, No.1, 2015

⁴⁷ Muigua. K., 'Alternative Dispute Resolution and Access to Justice in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

towards effectively managing conflicts and maintain peace and harmony⁴⁸. Conflict management in Africa has since time immemorial taken the form of informal negotiation, *mediation*, conciliation and arbitration among other techniques which are administered by institutions such as the council of elders⁴⁹. These techniques are anchored in the culture and customs of the people of Africa and are considered appropriate in managing disputes by creating consensus, facilitating reconciliation, fostering peace, harmony and cohesion and giving prominence to communal needs over individual needs in line with the African philosophy of *Ubuntu/Utu*⁵⁰.

Due to the role of culture in conflict management, effective mediation of natural resource-based conflicts in Africa involves fostering peace, dialogue, harmony, reconciliation and *Ubuntu*⁵¹. It has been argued that all cultures and societies have mechanisms for enabling dialogue between groups and for mediating disputes towards ensuring peace⁵². Existing local and traditional processes and institutions for building consensus and resolving resource disputes can therefore offer opportunities for integrating environmental and natural resource aspects towards effectively mediating natural resource-based conflicts⁵³. It is therefore imperative to embrace the role of informal and customary dispute resolution processes and bodies in order to effectively mediate natural resource-based conflicts in Africa for peace and prosperity.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Kariuki. F., 'Conflict Resolution by Elders in Africa: Successes, Challenges and Opportunities.' Available at <http://kmco.co.ke/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Conflict-Resolution-by-Elders-successes-challenges-and-opportunities-1.pdf> (Accessed on 06/08/2025)

⁵⁰ Muigua. K., 'Alternative Dispute Resolution and Access to Justice in Kenya.' Op Cit

⁵¹ Awoniyi. S., 'African Cultural Values: The Past, Present and Future' Op Cit

⁵² From curse to opportunity: Mediation of natural resource conflicts., Op Cit

⁵³ Ibid

4.0 Conclusion

Mediation is an effective and valuable approach towards managing natural resource - based conflicts in Africa. It is therefore necessary to strengthen the use of mediation towards sound management of natural resource -based conflicts in Africa⁵⁴. Further, it is imperative to integrate culture in mediation processes in Africa by fostering peace, harmony, reconciliation and Ubuntu and utilising customary and indigenous systems of conflict management⁵⁵. Mediating natural resource-based conflicts in Africa is therefore a practical and appropriate approach for peace and prosperity.

⁵⁴ Muigua. K., 'Managing Natural Resource Conflicts in Kenya through Negotiation and Mediation.' Op Cit

⁵⁵Awoniyi. S., 'African Cultural Values: The Past, Present and Future' Op Cit

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