

Towards Sustainable Development and Harmony: Appraising Environmental Peace- Building in the African Context

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Environmental Conflicts in Africa: Causes and Effects.....	5
3.0 Fostering Environmental Peace-Building in Africa towards Sustainable Development and Harmony.....	8
4.0 Conclusion	12
References	14

Towards Sustainable Development and Harmony: Appraising Environmental Peace-Building in the African Context

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Abstract

This paper critically examines environmental peace-building in the African context. The paper argues that fostering environmental peace-building in Africa is crucial in light of the prevalence of environmental conflicts in the continent. The paper discusses the causes and effects of environmental conflicts in Africa. It observes that environmental conflicts undermine the pursuit of Sustainable Development and harmony with nature in Africa. As a result, the paper argues that bolstering environmental peace-building in Africa is necessary towards achieving Sustainable Development and harmony between humanity and nature. It examines ways through which environmental peace-building can be strengthened in Africa for people and planet.

1.0 Introduction

Achieving Sustainable Development is a vital agenda for the global community towards ensuring harmony between people and planet. It has been observed that Sustainable Development provides an effective approach towards creating and maintaining the conditions under which humanity and nature can exist in productive harmony to support present and future generations¹. In order to achieve this goal, Sustainable Development envisions development that meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs². Sustainable Development focuses on promoting environmental protection and conservation,

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¹ United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'What is Sustainability.' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/sustainability/learn-about-sustainability> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

² World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Oxford, (Oxford University Press, 1987)

economic development and social equity towards ensuring human progress without engaging in the harmful environmental trade-offs that historically accompany socio-economic growth³.

It has been observed that the environment supports Sustainable Development by providing the resources and ecosystem services that ensure human well-being, economic growth, and social progress⁴. For example, the environment provides natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable, assimilates waste, sustains life by providing crucial genetic and biodiversity functions, and also offers aesthetic services⁵. The environment acts as a direct source of food, water, clean air, energy and natural medicines thus supporting human health and well-being⁶. In addition, the environment also supports economic growth and livelihoods in key sectors including agriculture, forestry, mining, fisheries and tourism⁷.

Fostering environmental sustainability is therefore important towards harnessing the power of nature and healthy ecosystems for development. Environmental sustainability entails conserving the environment and natural resources and protecting global ecosystems in order to ensure that the environment supports health and wellbeing, now and in the future⁸. Environmental sustainability envisages the condition of resilience, balance, harmony and connection that allow humanity to meet its requirements without surpassing the capacity of its supporting ecosystems and without harming biological

³ Fitzmaurice. M., 'The Principle of Sustainable Development in International Development Law.' *International Sustainable Development Law.*, Vol 1

⁴ Environment and Sustainable Development., Available at <https://ncert.nic.in/textbook/pdf/keec109.pdf> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

⁵ Ibid

⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Frequently Asked Questions' Available at <https://www.unep.org/frequently-asked-questions#:~:text=Environment%20constitutes%20one%20of%20the,each%20of%20the%2017%20SDGs> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ What Is Environmental Sustainability?., Available at <https://sphera.com/resources/glossary/what-is-environmental-sustainability/> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

diversity⁹. It focuses on meeting the resource and services needs of current and future generations without compromising the health of the ecosystems that provide them¹⁰. However, it has been observed that the ideal of environmental sustainability is threatened by several factors including environmental conflicts which undermine harmony between people and planet¹¹. Promoting environmental peace-building is therefore important towards Sustainable Development and harmony with nature.

This paper critically examines environmental peace-building in the African context. The paper argues that fostering environmental peace-building in Africa is crucial in light of the prevalence of environmental conflicts in the continent. The paper discusses the causes and effects of environmental conflicts in Africa. It observes that environmental conflicts undermine the pursuit of Sustainable Development and harmony with nature in Africa. As a result, the paper argues that bolstering environmental peace-building in Africa is necessary towards achieving Sustainable Development and harmony between humanity and nature. It examines ways through which environmental peace-building can be strengthened in Africa for people and planet.

2.0 Environmental Conflicts in Africa: Causes and Effects

Environmental conflicts are a major concern challenging local, national, regional and global security¹². It has been observed that environmental conflicts occur as a result of competing interests over access to, use and management of natural resources including land, water, minerals and forests¹³. Causes of environmental conflicts range from

⁹ Khan. N. H., 'Ecodesigning for Ecological Sustainability' *Frontiers in Plant-Soil Interaction.*, 2021. Pp 589-616

¹⁰ World Commission on Environment and Development., 'Our Common Future.' Op Cit

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Disasters and Conflicts' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/europe/regional-initiatives/disasters-and-conflicts> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

¹² Environmental Conflicts., Available at <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/environmental-conflicts/> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

¹³ 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->

disagreements over control over natural resources such as fossil fuels, forests, land, water and minerals to contestations over natural resources at the global, regional, national, local, community and household level¹⁴. It has been pointed out that various stakeholders including states, local communities, private developers and non-governmental organisations have different views on how to access and utilize the environment and resources¹⁵. Consequently, when these views clash, environmental conflicts are abound to arise¹⁶.

It has been argued that the occurrence and intensity of environmental conflicts increases as natural resources become scarcer, depleted, and degraded due to threats such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable extraction of natural resources¹⁷. Environmental conflicts are a common occurrence in Africa. It has been observed that Africa's abundant natural resources including arable land, water, forests, minerals, oil and gas have for many decades, motivated and fueled armed conflicts in the continent threatening peace, security, development, and stability¹⁸. Environmental conflicts in Africa are driven and worsened by scarcity over natural resources such as land, pasture, water, minerals, fisheries, and minerals, a situation that is intensified by climate change,

[1/countries/kenya/conflict-3/554-environmental-conflict-management-in-the-kenyan-context-enhancing-the-use-of-alternative-dispute-resolution-mechanisms/file](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 18/03/2026)

¹⁴ Environmental Conflicts: Key Issues and Management Implications., Available at <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/environmental-conflicts/> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

¹⁵ The Intergovernmental Authority on Development., '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 18/03/2026)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Scheidel. A et al., 'Environmental Conflicts and Defenders: A Global Overview.' *Global Environmental Change*, 63 (2020)

¹⁸ 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 18/03/2026)

environmental degradation and biodiversity loss¹⁹. Despite being endowed with natural resources, Africa has for many decades suffered from resource-based conflicts²⁰. It has been observed that the ‘*resource curse phenomenon*’ is widespread in Africa which refers to the paradox that countries endowed with natural resources tend to be embroiled in conflicts and have incidences of poverty (Emphasis added)²¹. It has been observed 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 water²².

Environmental conflicts are a major threat to Sustainable Development and harmony with nature in Africa. It has been observed that when environmental 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 resources²³. 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 divisions²⁴. According to the United Nations, environmental conflicts can disrupt ecosystems, deplete natural resources,

¹⁹ How is climate change driving conflict in Africa?., Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/how-climate-change-driving-conflict-africa> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

²⁰ Muigua. K., Wamukoya. D., & Kariuki. F., ‘Natural Resources and Environmental Justice in Kenya.’ Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2015

²¹ Henri. A., ‘Natural Resources Curse: A Reality in Africa.’ *Resources Policy*, Volume 63, 2019

²² 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 18/03/2026)

²³ 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 18/03/2026)

²⁴ Ibid

pollute the environment, and jeopardize the health of our planet now and in the future²⁵. In addition, it has been observed that environmental conflicts can trigger violence, insecurity and destruction, particularly in states with weak governance, high levels of corruption, and existing ethnic and political divisions²⁶.

In particular, it has been observed 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 efforts²⁷. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) observes that as the global demand for natural resources continues to grow, and the impacts of climate change intensify, competition over natural resources is set to intensify, a situation that could spiral into more environmental conflicts²⁸. Environmental peace-building is therefore vital towards Sustainable Development and harmony with nature in Africa.

3.0 Fostering Environmental Peace-Building in Africa towards Sustainable Development and Harmony

Environmental peace-building is vital towards Sustainable Development and harmony with nature in Africa. The prevalence of environmental conflicts in the continent threatens peace, human security and development while also fuelling environmental degradation due to competition over scarce resources²⁹. With Africa facing mounting and worsening environmental threats including climate change, biodiversity loss and

²⁵ United Nations., 'How Conflict Impacts Our Environment' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/peace-and-security/how-conflict-impacts-our-environment> (Accessed on 19/03/2026)

²⁶ 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 18/03/2026)

²⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Our Work in Africa' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/our-work-africa> (Accessed on 18/03/2026)

²⁸ 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 18/03/2026)

²⁹ Mwanika. P.A.N., 'Natural Resource Conflict: Management Processes and Strategies in Africa' Op Cit

unsustainable resource extraction, environmental conflicts are set to intensify in the continent as resources become scarcer³⁰. Investing in environmental peace-building is therefore a prerequisite for Sustainable Development and harmony in Africa.

It has been observed that environmental peace-building provides a framework that addresses the complex interaction between conflict, environmental degradation, and governance by fostering sustainable natural resource management and community resilience³¹. Environmental peace-building integrates the principles of sustainable natural resource management in conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery in order to build resilience at the local, national, regional and global levels towards Sustainable Development³². It has been observed that environmental peace-building recognises that environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and poor resource governance can worsen existing conflict dynamics and act as potential triggers for new conflicts³³. The goal of environmental peace-building is therefore to identify the triggers of environmental conflicts, foster cooperation on resource use and management, and address the root causes of environmental conflicts for inclusive and equitable development³⁴. According to UNEP, environmental peace-building provides a platform to transform local, national and transboundary conflicts over natural resources and the environment into opportunities for confidence building, cooperation, sustainable use and joint benefit for people and planet³⁵.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Sylvester. J., Castro Nunez. A., 'Environmental peacebuilding as a pathway to peace with nature' Available at <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/items/a92f405a-0244-4e7c-8081-3b4fcf421868> (Accessed on 19/03/2026)

³² Environmental Peacebuilding., Available at <https://www.environmentalpeacebuilding.org/> (Accessed on 19/03/2026)

³³ 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 19/03/2026)

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding.' Op Cit

Promoting environmental peace-building in Africa therefore provides a platform to transform environmental conflicts and disputes into a platform for sustainable resource use, cooperation and joint benefit towards Sustainable Development and harmony. In order to actualise this ideal, it is imperative to invest in conflict prevention through sound environmental governance. For example, it has been argued that enacting and implementing robust environmental laws and policies, building effective environmental institutions and involving all stakeholders including indigenous peoples and local communities in decision-making processes can reduce the incidence of environmental and natural resource-based conflicts in Africa for peace and prosperity³⁶. In particular, it has been observed that environmental governance processes that embrace the participation of all stakeholders including local communities are vital in environmental peace-building³⁷. Through this approach, it is possible to harness indigenous and local knowledge towards ensuring sustainable resource management and tackling threats such as biodiversity loss and climate change thus mitigating the drivers of environmental conflicts³⁸. Bolstering environmental governance including through the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities is therefore necessary towards environmental peace-building in Africa.

It is also vital to embrace appropriate conflict management strategies in order to strengthen environmental peace-building in Africa. It has been correctly noted that strategies that encourage collaboration and cooperation are more suitable in

³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Rule of Law: Tracking Progress and Charting Future Directions.' Available at https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/43943/Environmental_rule_of_law_progress.pdf?sequence=3 (Accessed on 19/03/2026)

³⁷ Egeruoh-Adindu. I., 'Leveraging Indigenous Knowledge for Effective Environmental Governance in West Africa.' Available at <https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=121949#:~:text=Indigenous%20knowledge%20systems%20such%20as,effective%20in%20promoting%20environmental%20sustainability> (Accessed on 19/03/2026)

³⁸ Ibid

environmental peace-building³⁹. It has been observed that in conflicts involving natural resources, sustainable outcomes are more desirable since the shared benefits of these resources often cross tribal, societal, communal, and national boundaries⁴⁰. Collaboration over the ownership, management, and use of natural resources is therefore critical to peace and stability⁴¹. Mediation and negotiation have been identified as appropriate strategies in environmental peace-building due to their focus on collaboration⁴². Mediation and negotiation allow different stakeholders including local communities, developers and the state to collaborate and agree on issues such as access, allocation and use of natural resources, benefit-sharing and management practices⁴³. Mediation and negotiation are appropriate techniques in managing environmental conflicts since they encourage consensus building and the participation of all stakeholders towards sustainable and durable outcomes⁴⁴. These techniques are 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 investors⁴⁵. Embracing collaborative strategies such as mediation and negotiation is therefore vital towards environmental peace-building in Africa.

³⁹ 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 (Accessed on 19/03/2026)

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² 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 19/03/2026)

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ 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 19/03/2026)

⁴⁵ Ibid

Effective environmental peace-building in Africa also requires the involvement of all stakeholders. For example, it has been observed that by ensuring environmental peace-building efforts are conducted in an inclusive and participatory approach, it possible to ensure sustainable outcomes that are accepted by all stakeholders for resilience, peace and stability⁴⁶. For example, involving local communities in peace-building efforts can foster a sense of ownership, acceptability and responsibility in conflict resolution thus ensuring effective compliance with decisions⁴⁷. In addition, it has been argued that the participation of women is vital for effective conflict prevention and peace-building in areas affected by environmental conflicts⁴⁸. By maximizing the participation of women in environmental peace-building, it is possible to leverage on their differentiated knowledge and diverse perspectives, including existing coping capacities and sources of resilience for durable peace⁴⁹. Involving all stakeholders, including local communities and women, in environmental peace-building in Africa is therefore an effective pathway towards durable and sustainable outcomes for people and planet.

4.0 Conclusion

The prevalence of environmental conflicts in Africa is a major threat to peace, security, environmental sustainability and development. Investing in environmental peace-building is therefore necessary towards Sustainable Development and harmony with nature. It is imperative to pursue this ideal by strengthening environmental governance in Africa for conflict prevention⁵⁰; utilising collaborative approaches including mediation and negotiation in environmental conflict management⁵¹; and involving all stakeholders

⁴⁶ International Organization for Migration., 'Environmental Peacebuilding' Op Cit

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ 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 19/03/2026)

⁴⁹ Bridging the Gap: Gender-inclusive multi-track diplomacy as environmental peacebuilding., Available at <https://www.ecosystemforpeace.org/compendium/inclusion-3> (Accessed on 19/03/2026)

⁵⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Rule of Law: Tracking Progress and Charting Future Directions.' Op Cit

⁵¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Op Cit

Towards Sustainable Development and Harmony: Appraising Environmental Peace-Building in the African Context

including women and local communities in peace-building efforts⁵². Environmental peace-building in Africa is an ideal worth pursuing towards Sustainable Development and harmony.

⁵² United Nations Environment Programme, 'Women, Natural Resources and Peace' Op Cit

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