

Ubuntu, Harmony and Justice: Resolving Conflict Over Natural Resources through Mediation for Peace and Prosperity

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper discusses how conflicts over natural resources can be effectively resolved for peace, prosperity and development. The paper observes that natural resource-based conflicts are prevalent all over the world undermining the pursuit of Sustainable Development. The paper discusses the causes and effects of conflicts over natural resources. Due to their negative impact on peace and development, the paper posits that effective management of natural resource-based conflicts is a fundamental global ideal. In particular, the paper notes that mediation is an appropriate mechanism in managing natural resource-based conflicts due to its focus on Ubuntu, harmony and justice. The paper discusses how mediation can be appropriately and effectively utilised in resolving conflict over natural resources through Ubuntu, harmony and justice for peace, prosperity and development.

1.0 Introduction

Natural resources are substances and materials occurring in nature that humans depend on for survival, livelihoods, economic development, and environmental benefits¹. In addition, it has been observed that natural resources are substances that occur on Earth and are formed solely through natural processes without human intervention². Natural resources include water, land, minerals, forests, and fossil fuels such as oil, coal, and natural gas³.

It has been observed that natural resources form the foundation of human societies, supporting our survival, livelihoods, economic activities, and overall well-being⁴. For example, natural resources provide humanity with crucial and life-supporting services including food, water, energy, clean air and medicines therefore fostering human health and well-being⁵. In addition, natural resources including oil, gas, forests, land, water and minerals are at the heart of economic and social progress, providing raw materials for many industries while also supporting

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¹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Natural Resources' Available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/query-list/n/natural-resources> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

² Natural Resources | Definition, Types & Examples., Available at <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-are-natural-resources-definition-lesson-quiz.html> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Natural Resources' Op Cit

⁴ What Are Natural Resources?., Available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-46720-2_1 (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

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

livelihoods of billions of people across the world⁶. Further, natural resources provide critical environmental benefits including through supporting biodiversity, regulating ecological balance, mitigating climate change, minimizing the impact of disasters, and regulating global life-support systems⁷. Through these environmental benefits, natural resources ensure the well-being of both people and planet.

Natural resources are therefore key in unlocking Sustainable Development due to their economic, social and environmental benefits. In particular, resource-based development has been identified as a major approach to development all over the world where nations and regions utilize their natural resource endowments as the primary driver of socio-economic growth and prosperity⁸. Consequently, it has been correctly observed that the abundance of natural resources is a great advantage for a country's economic and social development, while resource shortage is associated with underdevelopment⁹. However, despite their role in driving Sustainable Development, natural resources are also increasingly driving conflicts all over the world¹⁰. Effective management of natural resource-based conflicts is key towards peace, development and prosperity.

This paper discusses how conflicts over natural resources can be effectively resolved for peace, prosperity and development. The paper observes that natural resource-based conflicts are prevalent all over the world undermining the pursuit of Sustainable Development. The paper discusses the causes and effects of conflicts over natural resources. Due to their negative impact on peace and development, the paper posits that effective management of natural resource-based conflicts is a fundamental global ideal. In particular, the paper notes that mediation is an appropriate mechanism in managing natural resource-based conflicts due to its focus on *Ubuntu*, harmony and justice. The paper discusses how mediation can be appropriately and effectively utilised in resolving conflict over natural resources through *Ubuntu*, harmony and justice for peace, prosperity and development.

⁶ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Natural Resources and Development' Available at <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/natural-resources-and-development.html#:~:text=If%20well%20managed%2C%20oil%2C%20gas,economic%2C%20social%20and%20environmental%20hazards>. (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁷ Thomas. M., 'The Crucial Role of Natural Resources in Preserving Earth's Environment' Available at <https://www.interestjournals.org/articles/the-crucial-role-of-natural-resources-in-preserving-earths-environment-100494.html> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁸ Natural Resources & Regional Economic Development | Comparative Examples., Available at <https://study.com/academy/lesson/natural-resources-regional-economic-development-comparative-examples.html> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁹ Bridge. G., 'Natural Resources' *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, 2009., pp 261-268

¹⁰ 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 28/10/2026)

2.0 Conflicts over Natural Resources: Causes and Effects

Conflicts over natural resources are prevalent all over the world. The United Nations observes that many conflicts around the world, both violent and non-violent, are fuelled and motivated by disagreements over access, use and management of natural resources such as land, water, minerals, oil and gas, and forest resources¹¹. In addition, it has been observed that natural resources, especially arable land, water and vegetation, are increasingly affected by environmental threats such as climate change, which worsen resource scarcity and impacts livelihoods triggering disagreements and conflicts¹². Competition over natural resources has been identified as a major cause of mounting and escalating conflicts especially at local, national and regional levels¹³. In particular, it has been observed that control over vital and valuable natural resources like diamonds, oil, and water has directly caused or compounded violence across the world¹⁴. In other cases, selling lucrative resources has financed or prolonged conflicts rooted in entirely separate issues¹⁵. In particular, it has been observed that proceeds from illegal activities in the natural resources sector including illicit financial flows, illegal logging, illegal trade in wildlife and illegal mining of resources such as ‘blood diamonds’ have been used to fund a series of wars and conflicts in Africa including civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone in the late 20th century and early 21st century¹⁶.

Natural resources can therefore trigger or worsen conflicts. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) notes that while natural resources are key to achieving Sustainable Development, they are also increasingly acting as drivers of fragility, conflict and violence¹⁷. Conflict over natural resources usually arises from various competing interests over access to and use of natural resources such as land, water, minerals and forests¹⁸. Conflicts over natural resources can occur at different levels. For instance, the main issue could be disagreement over access to or control over the natural resources that people depend on for their livelihoods and

¹¹ United Nations., ‘Conflict and Natural Resources’ Available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/conflict-and-natural-resources> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

¹² Ibid

¹³ Council on Foreign Relations. ‘Resource Conflicts, Explained’ Available <https://www.cfr.org/education/learn/reading/resource-conflicts-explained> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ 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 28/10/2026)

¹⁷ 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 28/10/2026)

¹⁸ Muigua. K., ‘Environmental Conflict Management Institutions and Approaches.’ Op Cit

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well-being¹⁹. At another level, conflicts over natural resources can relate to more deeply rooted issues such as recognition, rights, and identity²⁰. It has been observed that conflict over natural resources usually express disagreements about distribution of resources, inequalities, land rights and governance issues²¹. These conflicts are a common feature especially in the Global South, and reflect the widespread dependence on access to natural resources for local livelihoods²². UNEP notes that as the global population continues to rise, the global demand for natural resources continues to grow, and the impacts of climate change intensify, competition over natural resources is set to increase triggering more resource-based conflicts²³.

Natural resources such as land, water, forests, minerals, and oil are important sources of livelihoods, income and influence for countries and communities around the world²⁴. However, when natural resources are poorly managed or inequitably shared, or when business operations are implemented without due consideration for context and communities, they can contribute to tensions that can escalate into violent conflict, or worsen pre-existing conflict dynamics²⁵. In addition, population growth and environmental degradation are intensifying competition over already scarce resources, such as land and water, and climate change threatens to increase such competition even further²⁶.

It has been observed that 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 distribution²⁷. When resolved peacefully, natural-resource based conflicts can be an essential part of progress and development²⁸. However, on the other hand, if not appropriately resolved, natural resource- based conflicts can trigger violence, insecurity and destruction²⁹.

¹⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations., 'An introduction to natural resource conflicts, collaborative management and sustainable livelihoods' Available at <https://www.fao.org/4/a0032e/a0032e04.htm> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ The Nature and Causes of Natural Resources Conflicts., Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13296.9?seq=1> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

²² Ibid

²³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Environmental Cooperation and Peacebuilding.' Op Cit

²⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners.' Available at <https://wedocs.unep.org/rest/api/core/bitstreams/96252274-e72f-48c3-8518-2c0d77e25ae4/content> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization., 'An Introduction to Natural Resource Conflicts, Collaborative Management and Sustainable Livelihoods' Op Cit

²⁸ 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 28/10/2026)

²⁹ Ibid

Effective management of conflicts over natural resources is therefore necessary for peace, prosperity and development.

3.0 Resolving Conflict over Natural Resources through Mediation for Peace and Prosperity

Mediation has been defined as a non-adversarial and collaborative process through which an impartial third party helps parties in a dispute reach a resolution through interest-based negotiation³⁰. Mediation has also been defined as 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 agreement³¹. It has been observed that mediation is usually a continuation of the negotiation process since it arises where parties to a conflict have attempted negotiations, but have reached a deadlock³². As a result, parties involve a third party known as a mediator to assist them continue with the negotiations and ultimately break the deadlock³³.

Mediation in general contains several advantages that makes it an ideal and appropriate process in conflict management. For instance, mediation is associated with informality, flexibility, efficiency, confidentiality, party autonomy and the ability to promote expeditious and cost-effective management of conflicts making it an appropriate process in dispute resolution³⁴. In addition, due to its focus on collaboration and cooperation, mediation can promote sustainable and long-lasting outcomes that adequately address the root causes of conflicts and repair and even strengthen relationships³⁵. According to the United Nations, the premise of mediation is that in the right environment, parties to a conflict can improve their relationships and move towards cooperation³⁶.

Harnessing the attributes and features of mediation is key towards effective management of conflict over natural resources for peace, prosperity and development. In the context of environmental and natural resources conflicts, mediation is an effective process since it can accommodate different parties, it is a flexible process that can be effectively applied across different contexts, and its voluntary nature increases the parties level of comfort with it and the

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners.' Op Cit

³¹ Muigua. K., 'Resolving Conflicts through Mediation in Kenya.' Glenwood Publishers Limited, 2nd Edition., 2017

³² Bercovitch. J., 'Mediation Success or Failure: A Search for the Elusive Criteria.' *Cardozo Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 7, p 289

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Muigua. K., 'Resolving Conflicts through Mediation in Kenya.' Op Cit

³⁵ JAMS ADR., 'Mediation Defined: What is Mediation?' Available at <https://www.jamsadr.com/mediation-defined/> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

³⁶ United Nations., 'Guidance for Effective Mediation' Available at https://unrcca.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/dpa_msu_guidance_english_web.pdf (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

commitment to implement joint decisions³⁷. It has been observed that mediation ensures that environmental and natural resources conflicts are resolved sustainably and cooperatively for peace and development³⁸. Mediation provides several advantages including neutrality, flexibility, confidentiality and collaboration thus ensuring an effective approach towards managing environmental and natural-resource based conflicts, which are increasingly driven by resource scarcity and climate change³⁹.

In particular, it has been observed that environmental mediation offers a structured, flexible and effective approach to conflict resolution, focusing on collaborative problem-solving and consensus-building⁴⁰. Through this, environmental mediation not only addresses immediate disputes and conflicts but it also fosters long-term relationships and mutual understanding among parties thus ensuring sustainable resource governance⁴¹. UNEP notes that environmental mediation is a collaborative, 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 arbitration⁴². It has been correctly observed 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 boundaries⁴³. Mediation over natural resources is effective in helping parties identify ways to maximize and share benefits, and ultimately unlock entrenched or zero-sum positions, allowing parties to develop cooperative and constructive relationships that can be carried over to other areas⁴⁴.

Utilising mediation is therefore necessary towards effective management of conflicts over natural resources. In particular, in order to enhance the role of mediation in resolving conflict over natural resources, it is imperative to harness *Ubuntu*. At its core, *Ubuntu* is an African philosophy that

³⁷ Kaufman. S., 'Mediation in Environmental Disputes' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258727868_Mediation_in_Environmental_Disputes (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

³⁸ Kals. E., Strubel. I., & Hellbruck. J., 'Environmental Conflicts and Environmental Mediation' Available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-662-70739-5_11 (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

³⁹ 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 28/10/2026)

⁴⁰ Environmental Mediation: Resolving Conflicts for a Sustainable Future., Available at <https://medium.com/@jds3232/environmental-mediation-resolving-conflicts-for-a-sustainable-future-edc4fba81af1> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Natural Resources and Conflict: A Guide for Mediation Practitioners' Op Cit

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Ibid

emphasises harmony/togetherness over individual interests⁴⁵. The philosophy of *Ubuntu* is relevant in environmental governance⁴⁶. For example, *Ubuntu* emphasizes caring for the natural world and requires human beings to use natural resources responsibly and non-exploitatively for the greater good of humanity⁴⁷. In order to minimize environmental and natural-resource based conflicts, *Ubuntu* requires humans to take their fellow humans into account in the way they relate to the environment and use resources by emphasizing the values of sharing and caring⁴⁸. *Ubuntu* is vital in the pursuit of sound environmental governance and justice in Africa since it encourages peaceful coexistence between humanity and nature⁴⁹. In particular, by inculcating *Ubuntu* in mediation, it is possible to promote effective management of environmental conflicts towards peace, harmony and social cohesion while prioritising the needs of both humanity and nature due to their interconnectedness⁵⁰.

The role of mediation in resolving conflicts over natural resources can also be strengthened by promoting harmony. For example, by promoting collaboration and cooperation, mediation allows different stakeholders to work together towards effective resolution of natural resources-based conflicts through harmony and dialogue⁵¹. Embracing harmony in mediation encourages teams to work through disagreements by empathy and listening, towards mutually beneficial and sustainable solutions⁵². Effective mediation promotes harmony by enabling parties to focus on common ground rather than who is right or wrong in a conflict⁵³. It has been observed that by focusing on harmony in mediation, it is possible to address root causes of conflicts and disputes thus preserving and strengthening relationships and ensuring peaceful co-existence among

⁴⁵ Mugumbate. J., & Nyanguru. A., 'Exploring African Philosophy: The Value of Ubuntu in Social Work.' Available at <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4272&context=sspapers&httpsredir=1&referer#::~:txt=Ubuntu%20can%20best%20be%20described,ngumuntu%20ngabantu%20in%20Zulu%20language> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁴⁶ Etieyibo. E., 'Ubuntu and the Environment' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321157342_Ubuntu_and_the_Environment (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Kyei-Nuamah. D., & Peng. Z., 'Ubuntu philosophy for ecological education and environmental policy formulation' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Volume 58, Issue 4 (2024), pp 540-561

⁵⁰ Mliswa. A., 'Ubuntu: Africa's Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) Framework?' Available at <https://africasocialwork.net/ubuntu-africas-esg-framework/> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁵¹ Food and Agriculture Organization., 'An Introduction to Natural Resource Conflicts, Collaborative Management and Sustainable Livelihoods' Op Cit

⁵² Miroslavov. M., 'Mastering the Collaborating Conflict Style In 2024' Available at <https://www.officernd.com/blog/collaborating-conflictstyle/#::~:~:text=It's%20one%20of%20the%20strategies,their%20underlying%20needs%20and%20interests.> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

⁵³ Mediation Can Maintain Harmony at Various Stages of a Case., Available at <https://www.brickergraydon.com/insights/publications/Mediation-can-maintain-harmony-at-various-stages-of-a-case> (Accessed on 28/10/2026)

individuals and within communities⁵⁴. Consequently, in the context of conflicts over natural resources, it is imperative to focus on harmony in mediation in order to ensure peaceful, collaborative and sustainable outcomes.

There is also need to ensure justice while resolving conflict over natural resources through mediation. It has been observed that mediation plays an important role in promoting environmental justice since it ensures the inclusion and participation of vulnerable and marginalized segments of the society including women, the youth, local communities and indigenous peoples in environmental decision-making processes⁵⁵. With conflicts over natural resources being witnessed all over the world, utilising mediation can enable various stakeholders including communities, investors and governments to achieve quick, innovative and sustainable solutions to disagreements at the expense of lengthy and expensive court processes that can end up worsening environmental injustices⁵⁶. In addition, it has been observed that in the context of environmental and natural resource-based conflicts, mediation provides a platform for individuals and communities disproportionately impacted by environmental hazards to hold polluters accountable and access remedies towards achieving environmental justice⁵⁷. It is therefore necessary to inculcate justice in mediation including through ensuring the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups including women, the youth, local communities and indigenous peoples in environmental and natural resource decision-making processes for peace and prosperity.

4.0 Conclusion

With conflicts over natural resources being witnessed across the world, effective management of these conflicts is key towards spurring peace, prosperity and development. Mediation provides an appropriate, collaborative and consensus-based platform that can foster effective management of natural resource-based conflicts for Sustainable Development. However, in order to fully harness its potential in resolving conflicts over natural resources, it is imperative to inculcate *Ubuntu*, harmony and justice in mediation towards peace, prosperity and development.

⁵⁴ Muigua. K., 'Resolving Conflicts through Mediation in Kenya.' Op Cit

⁵⁵ 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 28/10/2026)

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Ibid

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