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Published in 2024 by UNCCD, Bonn, Germany.

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Preface



With conflict on the rise worldwide, the notion of lasting peace can seem unattainable. As the natural environment is also a "casualty of war"¹, the impacts of conflict persist long after it ends. Conflict causes significant economic and social damage and environmental degradation, leading to resource scarcity, food insecurity and livelihood loss and, in turn, diminishing

the capacity of households and communities to cope with future shocks and increasing their vulnerability.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), one in six people live in an area of active conflict. Of the 234 countries and territories covered by ACLED, the majority – 168 – experienced at least one conflict event in 2023, resulting in at least 167,800 deaths.² Global military spending is also at an all-time high, having risen steadily since the late 1990s, and reached a record USD 2.2 trillion in 2023 amid a global context of deteriorating security. ³ Moreover, researchers estimate that the global military carbon footprint accounts for 5.5 per cent of all greenhouse gas emissions. If the world's militaries were a country, they would have the fourth largest national carbon footprint in the world.⁴

Reconciliation with nature is an unattainable goal without peace. Ending war and achieving lasting peace remains a fundamental condition for human progress, global stability, and sustainability.

The Peace Forest Initiative (PFI) represents a beacon of hope in these unprecedented times of growing instability. By merging ecological restoration, education and dialogue with peacebuilding and conflict-sensitive approaches, the PFI seeks to create sustainable communities and foster cooperative coexistence. In bringing together diverse stakeholders, including governments, international organisations, and local communities, moreover, it offers a model for global cooperation and peace, nurturing both people and nature for a more sustainable future. The PFI is also timely, in its alignment with increasing efforts to integrate peacebuilding efforts into climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.⁵

This brochure provides insight into the PFI, presenting an overview of its purpose, key milestones, and success stories in the area of environmental peacebuilding.

Louise Baker

Managing Director of the Global

A Ball



Introduction

Coinciding global food, environmental, health, and climate crises have impacted every nation, with the most vulnerable households and communities most affected. At the same time, land degradation and resource scarcity, coupled with climate change, and their related impacts are also increasing. As the world's population continues to grow, moreover, global demand for resources is also increasing, intensifying the effects of climate change and competition for natural resources and placing the most vulnerable at risk of being left behind.

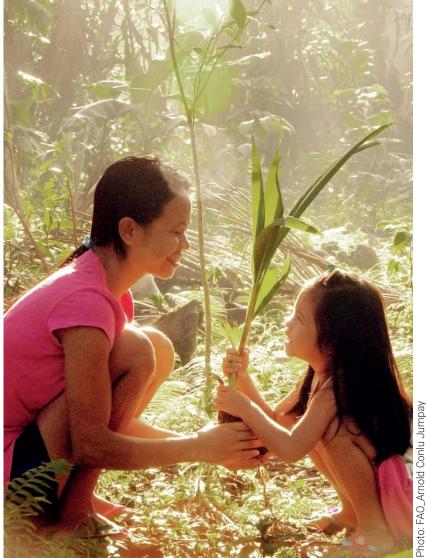
Environmental degradation increases the risk of conflict and influences its dynamics. An analysis of armed conflicts over the past 30 years shows that countries are more prone to conflict when natural resources, especially agricultural land, are less available or less productive, when countries are more dependent on natural resources, or when they suffer from drought.⁶ However, environmental degradation and resource scarcity do not inevitably lead to conflict; rather, they interact with a range of other political, social, and economic factors which, together, heighten the risk of conflict.⁷

At the same time, conflict is a significant root cause of degradation of natural resources and the ecosystem services they provide. Conflict has both direct and indirect impacts on land. It can directly destroy land and forest through physical damage, such as soil erosion, land degradation and contamination. In most conflict areas, there are little or no governance, institutions or policies to help effectively avoid, reduce and reverse land degradation. This increases the risk of land and environmental degradation in conflict and post-conflict areas.

The Peace Forest Initiative (PFI) provides a model for applying cooperative solutions to shared ecological challenges, with the aim to build peace. It envisions building connections between communities, governments, and other stakeholders to empower them to take responsibility for their environment and utilise their position to promote peace and prosperity.



- Conflict occurs when two or more parties (individuals or groups), have - or perceive themselves as having - incompatible goals.9
- Violent conflict occurs when individuals or groups seek to achieve their goals in a way that causes damage or harm to people, property, or activities.10
- Negative peace refers to a situation that is without violent conflict but that nonetheless may be characterised by injustice, exploitation, structural or cultural violence, and/or repression.11
- Positive peace is the presence of attitudes and institutions that help move a society away from violence and towards justice and sustainable peace in the long term.12
- Environmental peacebuilding encompasses the many approaches and pathways through which the management of environmental issues is integrated into, and can support, conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery.13



BOX 2: THE DEPENDENCE OF RURAL LIVELIHOODS ON HEALTHY LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES

The environment plays a critical role in securing and sustaining health and livelihoods. Many communities, particularly Indigenous peoples and local communities, have an inextricable relationship to the environment, as well as rights to land and natural resources. Poor communities throughout the world, four fifths of whom live in rural areas, also depend on natural resources for their livelihoods and well-being. The renewable natural resources on which poor people depend are increasingly being degraded, posing significant risks to resource-dependent communities. Most assessments show that 20–40 percent of the world's land area is degraded or degrading to varying degrees, and one fifth of all forest cover is severely degraded.

Climate change exacerbates the vulnerability risks associated with natural resource degradation. Natural resource degradation increases susceptibility and exposure to climate shocks, further straining the adaptive capacity of resource-dependent communities.

It is important to note that, while the world's poorest are most at risk, due to their direct dependence on the environment, the rest of the world is also affected. According to the World Economic Forum, half of the world's GDP is "moderately or highly dependent on nature", with the construction, agriculture, and food and beverages sectors most dependent and, thus, affected by environmental degradation.¹⁷ It is, thus, vital to recognise the interdependence between people and planet and to take immediate action in favour of all, with an emphasis on those most vulnerable due to their direct dependence and heightened risk of being left behind.



Photo: Aris Sanjaya_CIFOR



Milestone 1: The underlying concept of the Peace Forest Initiative

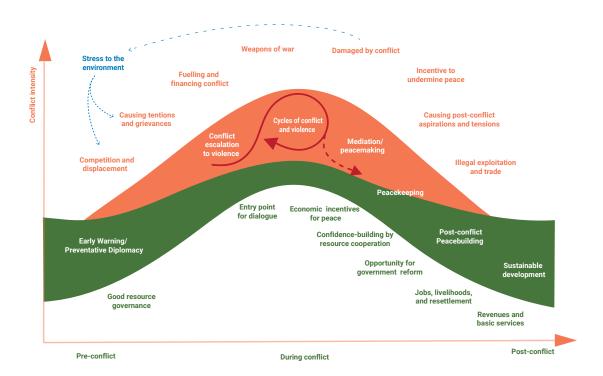
The central premise of the PFI is that environmental integrity, peace, and human well-being are inherently linked. Awareness of this relationship dates to the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, where countries acknowledged the vital connection between ecological integrity and human development. The 1992 Agenda for Peace, another milestone United Nations document on peacemaking and peacekeeping, established the link between the environment, sustainable development, and peace. In 2015, governments adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and committed to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), affirming the interdependence of sustainable development and peace and promising to secure the rights and well-being of everyone on a healthy, thriving planet. In 2021, the UN Human Rights Council formally recognised a healthy environment as a fundamental human right.

In recent decades, experts and practitioners have explored opportunities with respect to environmental peacebuilding²⁴ and have developed knowledge and models on the environmental aspects of peace and conflict. These include the environmental causes of conflict, effective environmental management as a means of preventing conflict, deliberate environmental harm during armed conflict, environmental motivations for ending conflict, and the environmental aspects of post-conflict reconstruction.²⁵

In its broadest sense, environmental peacebuilding encompasses the many approaches and pathways through which the management of environmental issues is integrated into, and can support, conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery, ²⁶ emphasising the potential for environmental governance – especially cooperative governance among conflict actors – to support peace and stability. ²⁷



FIGURE 1: ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THE CONFLICT LIFE CYCLE²⁸



Operating at different scales, from local to national to international, and in various conflict contexts, from social disputes and structural violence to armed conflict and war, environmental peacebuilding is based on the hypothesis that cooperation can lead to mutual benefits that outweigh self-interest and contribute to the pacification of human-natural systems in a durable and multifaceted way.²⁹

Environmental peacebuilding aims to overcome institutional, temporal, sectoral, and disciplinary barriers that often hinder other peacebuilding efforts. It addresses economic, identity, power, and social aspects of the linkages between environment, conflict, and peace.³⁰ As such, inclusive participation, adaptive governance, justice, and equity considerations represent key features of effective environmental peacebuilding efforts.^{31 32}

Yet, cooperatively managing competing interests over scarce resources within and outside territorial borders is not a new experience. There is a long tradition of cooperative water management that reconciles various competing interests by employing constructive responses that integrate water and related resources.³³ For example, of almost 2,000 water management challenges that occurred between 1990 and 2008 in over 280 transboundary river basins shared by two or more countries, twice as many were resolved cooperatively than were mired in conflict.³⁴

TRANSBOUNDARY MANAGEMENT OF WATER RESOURCES AND COOPERATION FOR PEACE

International cooperation on water has a long and successful history; some of the world's most vocal adversaries have negotiated water agreements. The institutions they have created are resilient, even when relations are strained. For example, the Mekong Committee, established in 1957 by Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Viet Nam, shared data and information about the river basin throughout the Viet Nam War.35 Similarly, the Indus River Commission survived two major wars between India and Pakistan.36 The transboundary water dispute between South Africa and Namibia offers another example. Following Namibia's independence in 1990, several water-related disputes arose between the Orange River riparian states of South Africa and Namibia, revolving around the demarcation of a common border, water allocation and pricing, and the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP). The Orange River Basin shows a high level of institutionalised water cooperation, with the basin states devising two regional water protocols, six bilateral agreements, and one basin-wide treaty. The latter provided for the establishment in 2000 of ORASECOM, a river basin organisation that provides technical advice to relevant parties on matters relating to the development, use and conservation of water resources, in alignment with the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Shared Watercourses. In addition to the multilateral framework, bilateral treaties concluded between Namibia and South Africa in 1992 established the Permanent Water Commission and a Joint Irrigation Authority, which can undertake studies and make recommendations on water allocation. Multilateral and bilateral cooperation mechanisms have not yet resulted in a formal treaty but have provided a forum for joint studies and information exchange on issues, such as demand projections, new infrastructure, cost-sharing and climate change. This has prevented water-related disputes between South Africa and Namibia from escalating into diplomatic or militarised crises. Although there is a dispute over the exact location of the South African-Namibian border, this has not negatively affected water cooperation between the two countries.37

Building on these and similar success stories, the PFI aims to help international and national stakeholders find ways to make natural resources and the environment a source of cooperation and confidence-building rather than conflict. To this end, the PFI encourages governments to adopt forward-looking and innovative policies and safeguards to protect and manage their resource endowments, including mechanisms to resolve conflicts, promote transparency and accountability, engage the public in decision-making, and ensure the equitable distribution of benefits.



Milestone 2: Establishing the objectives of the Peace Forest Initiative

Inspired by early success stories in environmental peacebuilding, as presented at the first Global Forum on Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN), held 2–4 July 2018, Parties to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) engaged in consultations to further shape the rationale and objectives of the PFI.

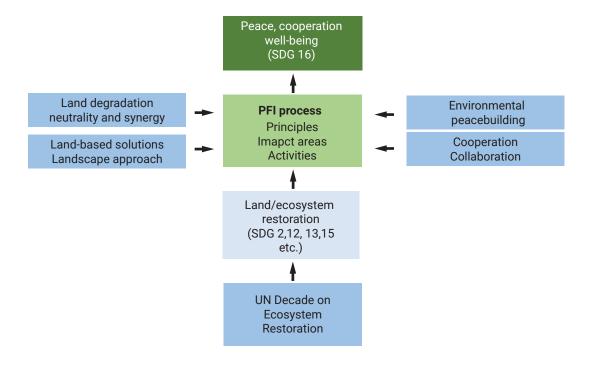
The goal was to launch the PFI at the Fourteenth Session of the Conference of the Parties (COP14) as an evolving and promising initiative to advance UNCCD implementation and achieve Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)³⁸ and, more importantly, for the co-management of nature to serve dual purposes, fostering international collaboration and supporting sustainable land management, forestry and land rehabilitation.

During the launch of the PFI at COP14, held 10 September 2019, Parties to the UNCCD set out to strengthen cooperation among them in favour of the SDGs, with emphasis on SDGs 15³⁹ and 16⁴⁰, and to promote peace and confidence-building through cooperation and collaboration on the rehabilitation and restoration of degraded lands and forests in conflict situations.

To achieve its goals, the PFI will embrace globally agreed initiatives and efforts, including the SDGs, United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and, as a key anchor point, LDN. It also incorporates best practices related to environmental peacebuilding and land restoration/conservation, such as a landscape approach and conflict-sensitive resource management.



FIGURE 2: THE CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNING OF THE PEACE FOREST INITIATIVE



BOX 3: KEY PRINCIPLES OF THE PFI

- Ensure equitable access to, and shared benefits from, restored natural resources and the improved delivery of ecosystem services.
- Strengthen the enabling environment, including governance and institutional systems, in favour of the implementation of LDN targets.
- Encourage cooperation among government officials, local communities, CSOs and the private sector to manage land and forests in sustainable ways.
- Include women, youth, and other marginal groups as an integral part of the implementation of these activities.
- Advocate and mainstream actions to promote confidence, peacebuilding, and reconciliation.

BOX 4: SDG TARGET 15.3 LAND DEGRADATION NEUTRALITY: THE ANCHOR POINT FOR THE PFI

LDN represents a paradigm shift in land management policies and practices. The LDN concept was developed to protect and enhance land-based natural capital and ecosystem services. LDN helps countries analyse and quantify the extent of land degradation and protect local communities from adverse impacts on the environment, local resources, and livelihoods. As a flexible concept, LDN can be applied to a variety of land types and land uses, such as production lands and protected areas, as well as different types of land degradation. LDN directly supports the achievement of SDG 15, in particular target 15.3.

The term "neutrality" refers to counterbalancing between expected losses and gains in the level of land-based natural capital to achieve "no net loss", assessed against a baseline and monitored through relevant indicators. ⁴¹ In summary, the objectives for LDN include:

- · Maintain or improve the sustainable delivery of ecosystem services.
- Maintain or improve productivity to enhance food security.
- Increase resilience of the land and populations dependent on the land.
- Seeksynergies with other social, economic, and environmental objectives
- Contribute to reinforce responsible and inclusive governance of land tenure.⁴²

THE CORDILLERA DEL CONDOR PEACE PARK

A successful example of the use of environmental protection efforts to mediate hostilities between nations is the Cordillera del Condor Peace Park (Ecuador-Peru). In 1999, Ecuador created the El Condor Park, and Peru created an Ecological Protection Zone and the Santiago-Comaina Reserved Zone. These peace parks were created as mechanisms for bilateral cooperation and have been used to promote the social, cultural, and economic development of local communities in both countries. In addition to contributing to the resolution of a long-standing territorial dispute between the two countries, the resultant transboundary agreement initiated an important phase of bilateral diplomacy, cooperation, and post-conflict economic relations.⁴³



Milestone 3: Shaping peace – The Peace Forest Initiative framework/ operational guidelines

Developing a compelling yet practical implementation framework for the PFI was the next step. To ensure that the promises of the PFI are translated into tangible action on the ground, and to avoid adverse impacts of environmental peacebuilding, a concise theory of change, core principles and concrete building blocks for implementation, and defined impact areas are important prerequisites.

Although environmental peacebuilding can be beneficial, there is also a downside to it if interventions are not designed and managed appropriately in a conflict-sensitive manner. Specifically, environmental peacebuilding practices can negatively impact development, weaken environmental protection, and undermine peace.⁴⁴ To ensure the success of PFI projects, a thorough understanding of context-specific tensions between groups, gender, and other potential divisive issues is necessary.

As specified in the operational guidelines, the PFI adopts a comprehensive approach, combining conflict-sensitivity with a rights-based approach that analyses and seeks to address inequalities at the core of people's grievances.

This includes the creation of a multi-stakeholder platform involving all relevant stakeholders, and a locally led conflict analysis as a precondition for each PFI project.

BOX 5: THE IMPORTANCE OF BOTTOM-UP PEACEBUILDING

Placing local grassroots actors at the centre of peacebuilding processes is a promising and complementary approach to top-down governance and can support institutional peacemaking because it fosters coexistence based on cooperative interactions and is not motivated by short-term political considerations and underlying agendas.⁴⁵ For example, in northern Sierra Leone, bottom-up approaches and their hybrid interactions with formal state institutions have enabled local people to defend their claims to mineral rights and manage related conflicts, demonstrating that informal and hybrid institutions can contribute significantly to peacebuilding and need not always be replaced by formal arrangements.⁴⁶

If local needs and dynamics are not adequately considered and addressed, tensions can be exacerbated. The success of a conservation, water or land restoration project is often limited if local communities and civil society groups cannot have their voices heard or hold decision makers accountable. As a result, certain groups may perceive rules and practices as illegitimate, unclear, or contradictory. It can also mean that generally vulnerable groups, such as women, small-scale farmers, and Indigenous peoples are excluded from decision-making and access to resources, leaving them highly vulnerable. Conversely, empowering vulnerable groups can facilitate collaborative relationships that enable individuals, communities, and institutions to ensure the successful implementation of PFI activities.

The PFI emphasises collaboration and positive change in the relationship between people, land and resources. This can include strengthening natural resource governance through inclusive decision-making, stabilising land tenure and resource rights, and promoting coordination between and within states.

Restoring or conserving land, forests and ecosystems and improving natural resource management are also typical areas of cross-border cooperation. This could include the establishment and management of protected areas, sustainable land and water management, and compliance with environmental and social standards and safeguards.

Ideally, the PFI should be implemented at a landscape scale. This will help maximise impact and ensure coverage of connected ecosystems in participating countries.



Photo: UN Women_Pedro Pio

UNLOCKING WOMEN'S PEACEBUILDING POTENTIAL⁴⁷

The province of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea was at the centre of one of the bloodiest conflicts in the South Pacific since the end of World War II. Disputes over the distribution of the costs and benefits of a large-scale mining project were central to the outbreak of violence in the region. The conflict between the government and a guerrilla force comprised of local clans lasted nearly a decade, with both sides accused of egregious human rights abuses. Bougainvillean women have been particularly affected by the widespread displacement caused by mining and the violence of the ongoing conflict, and they also have been at the forefront of local and national peace talks since the early stages of the crisis, providing support on the sidelines of official meetings and lobbying discreetly. Following the final peace agreement negotiations in 2001, several women's organisations held a summit aimed at consolidating and building on existing women's networks and informing all women of the outcomes of the agreement in order to ensure meaningful participation in the reconstruction process. Today, although women's representation in the political sphere remains low, women continue to seek space to raise concerns about the potential impacts on their land and communities in the renewed discussions about the resumption of mining operations.

The conflict in Sudan has lasted almost 50 years, and the establishment of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011 officially marked the final stage of a six-year peace agreement. Pastoral systems in South Kordofan rely on seasonal transhumance along livestock corridors, and the erosion of traditional leaders' authority over land allocation and conflict management, as well as declining natural resource availability and recurrent droughts, led to tensions between pastoralists and farmers. In response to these growing tensions, SOS Sahel implemented a resource-based conflict reduction programme in South Kordofan engaging youth and women in natural resource management and conflict resolution processes. Through a series of training workshops and meetings, SOS Sahel educated women on conflict reduction and peacebuilding in order to promote a common understanding of processes and knowledge of available tools. These interventions have led to the development of steering groups with women representatives and the registration of community structures as legal entities under Sudanese law. This legal status enables the committees to carry out voluntary work on behalf of their communities, including the demarcation of corridors, which is a critical component of peacebuilding and conflict reduction.



Milestone 4: Sowing collaboration and harvesting together

The PFI is currently in the process of rolling out its activities. The UNCCD Global Mechanism has recently completed an initial mapping of potential PFI sites and has tentatively identified 17 sites involving 44 countries for PFI activities. The Global Mechanism will continue to work with partners and Parties to the UNCCD to sow the seeds of peace and trust and facilitate implementation of the PFI in various locations by supporting stakeholder exchanges and dialogues, trainings, meetings and workshops, feasibility analyses for the development of bankable restoration projects, and programmes that address the interrelated challenges of environment, development, and social and community sustainability.

To this end, the UNCCD Secretariat will support PFI countries in co-designing and developing transboundary cooperation projects and programmes on land and forest restoration, and in mobilising resources for their implementation.

HAITI AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC ASSESS POTENTIAL FOR CROSS-BORDER ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

In 2012–2013, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) worked with the governments of Haiti and the Dominican Republic to examine the challenges and opportunities for cooperation on natural resources in the border region, where environmental degradation and increasing natural resource depletion have fueled tensions between the two countries. The final evaluation report, "Haiti-Dominican Republic: Environmental Challenges in the Border Zone", highlighted several challenges, such as widespread environmental degradation due to deforestation in Haiti, which creates significant vulnerability to natural disasters for both countries. The report's recommendations were endorsed by both governments and became an important technical basis for a new binational peace and development programme developed by the United Nations country teams in both countries.⁴⁸

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