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The Role of the International Environmental Cooperation in Achieving Sustainable Peacebuilding in International Relations: A Comprehensive and Critical Analysis

Mohamad Albakjaji¹, Soumaya Alkhammasi², Yusra Alshanqityi³

Abstract

Despite scientific and technological advancements, the international community faces a dual challenge: maintaining global peace while addressing accelerating environmental degradation. Environmental issues such as climate change, desertification, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity have increasingly become catalysts for conflict, particularly in regions characterized by socio-economic vulnerability, political instability, and weak institutional frameworks. In response, "global environmental peacebuilding" has emerged as a framework that not only seeks to protect the environment but also aims to mitigate conflict through cooperative natural resource management. This research investigates the evolution of international environmental peace and its significance within international relations. It critically examines theoretical foundations of environmental cooperation, analyzes multilateral legal frameworks, assesses empirical case studies, and explores challenges and limitations of this emerging paradigm. The central argument is that environmental governance—when embedded within robust international institutions and complemented by comprehensive domestic policy frameworks—can serve as a powerful mechanism for sustaining peace and preventing conflict, especially when initiatives address power asymmetries, engage local communities, and establish effective monitoring mechanisms.

Keywords: Environmental Governance, Peacebuilding, Conflict Prevention, Sustainable Development, Multilateral Cooperation, Resource Management, Climate Security.

Introduction

The 21st century presents humanity with unprecedented dual challenges: maintaining global peace amid geopolitical tensions while simultaneously addressing accelerating environmental degradation. (El Baroudy & Albakjaji, 2024). Despite scientific and technological advancements, the international community struggles to develop integrated approaches that address both challenges simultaneously. (Albakjaji, 2025). Environmental degradation—manifested through climate change, desertification, biodiversity loss, and water scarcity—has increasingly become a catalyst for conflict, particularly in regions characterized by socio-economic vulnerability, political instability, and weak institutional frameworks. These environmental pressures exacerbate existing tensions over resource access and distribution, creating complex security challenges that traditional conflict resolution approaches are ill-equipped to address (Albakjaji, El Baroudy 2024).

While a growing body of research examines specific environmental agreements or regional case studies, less attention has been paid to systematically analyzing how different theoretical

¹ College of Law, Prince Sultan University. Email: mabkjaji@psu.edu.sa.

² College of Law, Prince Sultan University. Email: skhammassi@psu.edu.sa

³ College of Law, Prince Sultan University. Email: yshanqityi@psu.edu.sa.



approaches to environmental cooperation translate into practical peacebuilding outcomes across diverse geopolitical contexts (Albakjaji, 2023). Additionally, existing literature often overlooks the structural challenges that limit the effectiveness of environmental peacebuilding initiatives, particularly power asymmetries and institutional weaknesses that undermine implementation (Konca and Dabelko, 2002).

This research seeks to address these gaps by exploring the evolution of international environmental peacebuilding and its significance within international relations. Specifically, this paper investigates the following question: What is the role of environmental cooperation in achieving sustainable peacebuilding in international relations, and what are the key mechanisms and limitations of this approach? Through critical examination of theoretical foundations, multilateral legal frameworks, and empirical case studies, we develop a more nuanced understanding of when and how environmental cooperation contributes to conflict prevention and resolution.

The main argument advanced is that environmental governance—when embedded within robust international institutions and complemented by comprehensive domestic policy frameworks—can serve as a powerful mechanism for sustaining long-term peace and preventing conflict recurrence. However, this potential can only be realized when environmental peacebuilding initiatives explicitly address underlying power asymmetries, engage local communities, and establish effective monitoring mechanisms that enhance accountability.

The research seeks to answer the following question:

What is the role of environmental cooperation in achieving sustainable peacebuilding in international relations? What are the key mechanisms and limitations of this approach?

To develop this argument, the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 examines the theoretical underpinnings of environmental peacebuilding, drawing from liberal institutionalism, constructivism, ecological security theory, and political ecology. Section 3 analyzes the primary mechanisms through which environmental cooperation contributes to peacebuilding, while Section 4 explores the legal and institutional requirements for effective environmental governance. Section 5 presents case studies from different regions that illustrate both successful and challenged environmental peacebuilding initiatives. Section 6 critically assesses limitations and implementation challenges. The paper concludes in Section 7 with recommendations for strengthening the nexus between environmental cooperation and sustainable peace.

Regarding the methodology, this paper will use an analytical and critical approach. To support the ideas discussed in this research, researchers will rely on reliable resources such as academic books, journals, and official reports from international institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The framework of major international relations theories typically analyzes the relationship between international relations and environmental peace. Each of these theories offers a concept and perspective on the extent to which environmental cooperation can promote peace or, conversely, can be a factor in increasing tensions and conflicts.

Liberal Institutionalism and Environmental Regimes

This theory is based on the idea that international institutions and the treaties and international standards they produce will certainly contribute to strengthening frameworks for international

cooperation between countries. Through these institutions, global peace can be built, as multilateral international environmental treaties, such as the Kyoto and Paris Agreements, will secure common ground for consensus and joint action. According to Keohane (1984), these institutions will contribute to reducing transaction costs, building trust, and facilitating reciprocity, even in an anarchic international system. For example, through international environmental programs such as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF), institutional design can encourage countries to achieve the foundations of peaceful cooperation regarding the management of shared natural resources, especially when these programs and international institutions include provisions for monitoring, transparency, and conflict resolution (Mitchell, 2003).

Constructivism and the Role of Norms

Constructivist scholars highlight the role of social norms, identities, and discourses in shaping state behavior. From this viewpoint, environmental peacebuilding is as much about changing narratives and expectations as it is about resource distribution. As Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) suggest, norms such as sustainable development and environmental stewardship can become internalized through international advocacy networks and civil society mobilization.

Constructivist theory also explains how environmental identities—such as being a “green state” or an “eco-leader”—can influence a state’s foreign policy. The Nordic countries, for example, have often aligned their environmental diplomacy with broader peacebuilding goals, projecting a “green peace” identity (Schreurs, 2008).

Ecological Security Theory

According to this theory, environmental degradation is linked to traditional concepts and elements of security. According to Homer-Dixon (1999), social tensions are exacerbated by the scarcity of renewable natural resources such as forests, arable land, and water, and competition over these resources can lead to frightening and violent conflicts. According to (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), natural disasters will be a source of conflict rather than development.

Hence, this theory emphasizes that environmental peacebuilding will contribute to transforming these conflicts and environmental challenges into opportunities for peace, prosperity, and cooperation, not only between states but also between local institutions capable of ensuring equitable access to resources, and mediating environmental grievances.

Political Environment

Proponents of this theory offer a critical approach to the concept of environmental peace by discussing the dimensions of who benefits from environmental governance and who is marginalized by it. According to this theory, there are deep-rooted causes behind environmental conflicts: historical inequalities, power asymmetries, and contested land rights (Robbins, 2012). Thus, it is not only the scarcity of human resources that causes environmental conflicts.

They are shaped by historical inequalities, power asymmetries, and contested land rights (Robbins, 2012).

For example, environmental governance projects aimed at environmental conservation, such as protecting natural parks, unintentionally have harmful consequences for indigenous communities, leading to new types of conflict. Therefore, this theory calls for the adoption of

comprehensive approaches and foundations based on rights, justice, and local knowledge systems to build global environmental peace (Forsyth, 2003).

Mechanisms and Foundations of Environmental Peacebuilding

Global environmental peace is built through diverse mechanisms and foundations that link environmental governance, conflict resolution, and diplomatic engagement. These mechanisms are implemented at multiple local, regional, and global levels, with the involvement of governments and civil society organizations.

Management of the Shared Global Natural Resource

Given that environmental components are typically transcontinental, such as rivers, seas, and groundwater, governance requires joint management to avoid conflict. Here, it can be argued that joint and cooperative management of shared natural resources is one of the most important foundations of environmental governance that promotes environmental peace. Therefore, when shared natural resources exist, cooperation between countries becomes a strategic requirement, not an option.

Here, we can find numerous initiatives adopted by countries sharing natural resources to manage such resources. These initiatives have contributed to peace and development in these regions.

For example, the Mekong River Commission established and adopted a framework for water management among Southeast Asian countries despite geopolitical tensions and conflicts in the region (Sneddon and Fox, 2006). This framework has been credited with calming these tensions for long periods.

The Senegal River Basin Development Authority, established to develop the Senegal River Basin, has played a similar role in achieving peace and development in West Africa by undertaking regional development projects and concluding water-sharing cooperation agreements (Krampe & Swain, 2018).

The Role of Soft Power and the Environmental Diplomacy

Environmental issues offer relatively low-risk entry points for diplomatic engagement between rival states. This is because environmental problems are often seen as “apolitical,” allowing dialogue in situations where formal political negotiations might be too contentious. Environmental diplomacy thus functions as a form of *soft power*, building trust and opening channels of communication.

Here, it can be noted that China's engagement and participation in global environmental forums has played a significant role in mitigating tensions with neighboring countries, particularly in the areas of air and water pollution (Lo, 2015).

Similarly, scientific research and oil spill prevention activities between the United States and Russia have helped ensure continued cooperation between the two countries, even during periods of political tension (Exner-Pirot, 2012).

Regional Peace Parks

Transboundary environmental projects are a source of joint cooperation to conserve the environment, enhance diplomatic dialogue, and end conflicts. These large-scale projects are often established in shared areas after devastating conflicts with the aim of promoting reconciliation and international cooperation, as well as protecting shared resources and

biodiversity. For example, the establishment of the Limpopo Transboundary Park, which spans Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, had a significant impact in fostering joint cooperation between formerly conflicting countries and was a source of revitalization for their tourism-based economies (Ramutsindela, 2007). Despite the importance of these large-scale projects, they have been criticized due to concerns about the displacement of local communities. This has highlighted the need to implement comprehensive, shared governance principles.

Restoring the Environment in Post-Conflict

It is said that war destroys both people and trees (Albakjaji, 2023). Therefore, post-conflict environmental peacebuilding can play a role in building trust between countries and establishing the foundations for coexistence, especially in rural communities that rely primarily on agriculture. An example of this is the efforts of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to support environmental activities that support post-conflict environmental restoration in many countries, such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

For example, the program supported Liberia in assessing environmental damage caused by the conflict there, supporting the government in restoring green spaces, protecting coastal areas, and creating job opportunities for former combatants in these areas, contributing to conflict de-escalation and peacebuilding (UNEP, 2010).

Also, in regions suffering from drought, floods, and storms, which can be factors that increase conflict (CNA, 2007), regional environmental initiatives can reduce conflicts fueled by resource scarcity. These initiatives, which aim to restore degraded lands and promote drought- and climate-resilient agriculture, will contribute to the stability of communities that have served as recruiting grounds for insurgents and a breeding ground for violent extremism. This demonstrates the role of environmental peace in achieving peace and security in these regions (Tesfaye, 2022).

Legal and Institutional Requirement

Legal and institutional frameworks play a significant role in supporting environmental peacebuilding efforts. These frameworks include international treaties, regional organizations, environmental regulations, and national constitutional provisions.

Multilateral and International Environmental Agreements

International environmental agreements have been and remain the cornerstone of international environmental governance (Albakjaji, 2024). These agreements are the written source of international environmental law, setting out the obligations of state parties, defining the mechanisms necessary to monitor implementation by states, and establishing a framework for settling disputes that may arise due to non-implementation of obligations. Most of these agreements, such as the Paris Agreement (2015) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), are not limited to environmental protection issues alone, but also encourage states to cooperate peacefully in the management of shared natural resources.

For example, the Paris Agreement includes provisions to encourage states to be transparent, and other provisions include mechanisms for commitment and review through the adoption of peer pressure mechanisms (Bodansky, 2016; Albakjaji, 2024: ecohumanism). The provisions that encourage transparency and establish peer pressure mechanisms for commitment and review are Articles 4, Article 9, Article 13, Article 14, Article 15. The Paris Agreement also includes provisions recognizing the principle of differentiated responsibilities between developed and

developing countries with the aim of building the foundations of global governance. This principle of differentiated responsibilities is highlighted in the following articles: the preamble, Article 2, Article 4.1, 4.4, Article 9, Article 10, Article 11, Article 13. This principle is considered one of the pillars of global governance to prevent conflicts over emissions, finance, and technology transfer.

The Initiatives of the United Nations in Environmental Peacebuilding

The United Nations consistently implements environmental support programs as peacebuilding programs and catalysts in conflict zones.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) collaborates with the Department of Peace Operations to integrate environmental risk assessments into mission planning. For example, in conflict zones such as Darfur and Haiti, the UN has conducted training for peacekeeping personnel on environmental support programs, such as training on mitigating and addressing environmental damage, training on afforestation initiatives, and water conservation management (UNEP, 2009). Similarly, in Sierra Leone, The UN Peacebuilding Commission) adopted strategies for protecting natural resources, such as those on land rights and the governance of mining activities, with the aim of achieving stability and laying the foundations for post-conflict reconciliation.

Regional Environmental Cooperation and Institutions

At the level of regional institutions, many have recognized the importance of supporting environmental peacebuilding as a foundation for continental stability. Therefore, these institutions are adopting regional frameworks and strategies for managing transboundary environmental threats and challenges. For example, the European Union Water Framework Directive (2000) adopted binding provisions for member states to adopt water management systems through the establishment of cooperative administrations for the management of transboundary river basins (Kaika, 2003).

Also in Africa, the African Union Peace and Security Council recognized the importance of integrating environmental peacebuilding programs with climate security programs as a foundation for stability on the African continent.

Integrating Environmental Rules into Constitutional Framework

Based on the importance of environmental protection, a trend known as environmental constitutionalism has recently emerged, with many countries adopting environmental principles in their constitutions (Omerović, et al, 2024). This demonstrates countries' recognition of the importance of environmental issues and their consideration of them as issues of fundamental value. Therefore, countries are attempting to adapt their domestic legal systems to comply with international obligations (Boyd, 2012).

Currently, more than 150 countries have incorporated constitutional provisions on environmental rights and duties (Hayward, 2021). For example, the Constitutional Court of Colombia relied on the constitutional principle of the rights of nature derived from international treaties to halt deforestation in the Amazon (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2014).

Environmental Peacebuilding: Case Studies from Different Regions

Case studies provide vital empirical grounding for understanding how environmental governance can either mitigate or exacerbate conflict. The following examples illustrate the

diverse outcomes of environmental peace initiatives in varying geopolitical and ecological contexts.

The Indus Waters Treaty between India and Pakistan

This treaty between India and Pakistan (1960) is considered one of the most important agreements reflecting the success of global environmental peacebuilding.

The Indus Waters Treaty (1960) between India and Pakistan is one of the most well-known examples of successful environmental peacebuilding. The Indus River Basin is divided into six rivers, and to prevent conflict between the two countries over shared water resources, these tributaries were divided between them. This agreement played a significant role in establishing mechanisms for maintaining environmental peace and resolving disputes.

Despite the ongoing wars and conflicts between the two countries, this treaty helped bring their views closer and ensured continued cooperation on managing these shared resources for more than six decades (Wolf, 1999). This demonstrates that shared environmental interests can transcend political conflict. Unfortunately, these agreements are sometimes fragile when the political will of the countries weakens. This was the case after the 2019 Pulwama attack, when India threatened to suspend its obligations (Glick, 2020). Therefore, a trend of thought has emerged that advocates for the adoption and implementation of comprehensive environmental governance principles that ensure cooperation and joint management of resources, even during times of conflict and political tension.

Initiative of Nile Basin

Launched in 1999, this initiative is considered one of the most important efforts to establish the foundations of shared governance and cooperation for water management among 11 riparian countries. This initiative has ensured a fair distribution of resources and the application of best practices for water management (Swain, 2011). Despite ongoing disputes between Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, these initiatives have helped enhance technical cooperation, build bridges of trust, and facilitate the exchange of data and information between these countries. Furthermore, this initiative has contributed to de-escalating military tensions and has encouraged diplomatic dialogue between these countries, thanks to its institutional framework (Paisley & Henshaw, 2013).

The Arctic Council

Given the Arctic's geopolitical importance and its proximity to several countries, the Arctic Council was established in 1996 among Arctic states (including the United States, Russia, Canada, and indigenous communities). The Council aims to address environmental protection issues peacefully and focus on joint scientific cooperation on climate and biodiversity issues.

This Council has remained a model of dialogue even during the years of geopolitical rivalry between NATO and Russia. This is due to this cooperative framework, which explicitly stipulates the exclusion of military solutions and the adoption of dialogue initiatives to resolve environmental problems in a competitive security environment (Young, 2009).

The Case of Jordan River Basin

Given the importance of the Jordan River Basin, which borders Jordan, Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Israel, the 1994 peace treaty between Jordan and Israel included provisions for

water sharing and the adoption of cooperation strategies. The treaty has helped avoid conflicts over the sharing of water resources.

Furthermore, several initiatives have been adopted, such as the "Good Water Neighbors" initiative, a grassroots cooperation between municipalities and cities, to promote mutual understanding, cooperation, and sustainable practices despite the political divisions among these municipalities (Feitelson & Haddad, 2000).

Challenges, Limitations of implementation

While environmental peacebuilding offers a promising framework, it faces several critical challenges that limit its effectiveness and sustainability.

Power Imbalances, Asymmetries and Environmental Inequity

The problem that often confronts the implementation of comprehensive and effective governance is that such governance reflects geopolitical and economic inequalities. For example, wealthy countries tend to impose their vision in climate negotiations and reduce carbon emissions, while upstream countries also seek to impose their vision and approaches during negotiations by controlling water flows. These structural imbalances can undermine trust and exacerbate conflict dynamics (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006).

For example, wealthy industrialized countries are often the primary contributors to carbon emissions, while poor countries contribute much less than those of wealthy countries, yet unfortunately bear the lion's share of the disastrous consequences of these emissions. Despite facing the brunt of the effects caused by these emissions, their negotiating power in international forums is very weak compared to that of polluting industrialized countries. This calls for the creation of a more equitable environmental system (Roberts and Parkes, 2007). Without adopting a more just international environmental system, efforts to build global environmental peace will be viewed by poor countries as ready-made recipes imposed from abroad and by force. This undermines countries' will to build a comprehensive governance system based on cooperation among all countries and civil actors.

Climate-Induced and the and the Risk of Statelessness

One of the most dangerous consequences of climate change and pollution is the creation of massive waves of refugees (climate refugees), particularly in coastal and arid regions (Alsamara & Ghazi, 2024). The legal vacuum exacerbates the situation, as international law provides no protection for climate refugees. This creates uncertainty about the distribution of responsibilities and rights between host and source countries. Climate change is expected to displace up to 1.2 billion people by 2050 (European Migration Network Inform, 2023).

Indeed, many residents of coastal areas threatened by rising sea levels, particularly those in the Pacific Islands, have begun to consider and plan to leave their lands and seek refuge in safer countries. The problem is that international law has not yet regulated the issue of dignified migration or climate refugees, creating extremely complex issues related to identity, sovereignty, and statelessness due to climate change (McAdam, 2012).

Institutional Ineffectiveness and Governance Failures

As previously noted, geopolitical and economic disparities have significantly weakened poor countries' ability to respond to international agreements' requirements. Weak environmental institutions, widespread corruption, and the limited capacities in these nations have made it

challenging to enforce international environmental agreements. State parties may sign agreements, but they are never implemented due to capacity constraints in poor countries. This undermines the credibility of international peacebuilding efforts and may exacerbate existing grievances.

A practical example of this is the worsening of environmental degradation due to ineffective governance policies and the adoption of short-term post-conflict reconstruction programs in Iraq and Afghanistan. Political instability and weak law enforcement institutions have greatly exacerbated this degradation (United Nations Environment Programme, 2009).

Short-term policies, such as tree-planting campaigns undertaken by politicians during election campaigns to bolster their positions or divert attention from political problems and conflicts, have also failed to address the root causes of environmental degradation. By prioritizing quick gains over structural reforms, these reforms undermine long-term efforts to achieve environmental peacebuilding. Therefore, it is essential to adopt radical solutions that align environmental policies and strategies with democratic and economic reforms (Barnett & Adger, 2007).

General Conclusion and Recommendations:

The concept of international environmental peace lies at the intersection of two of our time's most pressing global imperatives: environmental sustainability and conflict prevention.

Based on theoretical and philosophical approaches such as institutional theory, environmental security, and political ecology, this research focuses on the idea that joint environmental cooperation is the cornerstone of global environmental peace. Through practical case studies, this paper demonstrates that environmental issues and challenges can foster cooperation, even among adversaries. This, in turn, creates a climate for dialogue and diplomacy to find solutions to problems, challenges, and conflicts.

This paper also demonstrates that building global environmental peace faces numerous challenges. Economic disparities, divergent interests among states, weak institutions, the politicization of green agendas, and waves of displacement caused by climate change pose significant challenges and obstacles to building sustainable global environmental peace based on joint cooperation. Therefore, to achieve global environmental peace, the researchers recommend that future efforts focus on comprehensive governance and incorporate environmental rights into constitutional frameworks as one of the most important human rights. They also recommend involving local communities in global peacebuilding efforts and shaping the environment's future by building peace based on security considerations. In this regard, the researchers recommend developing international relations theory and practice to adopt a more holistic and ecological approach to peace. By investing in cooperative environmental governance today, the global community can lay the foundations for a more just, peaceful, and sustainable future.

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