



## Environmental Dimensions of Resilient and Peaceful Societies

*At least 40 per cent of all violent conflicts in the last 60 years have been linked to natural resources. Climate change and increasing natural disasters are expected to increase the risk of such conflicts by degrading the available resource base. Sound stewardship of the resources, including access to information, inclusive decision-making, equitable benefit sharing, and rule of law are essential to mitigate these risks and help create resilient and peaceful societies.*

### DRIVERS

Environmental factors, while rarely the sole cause of violent conflict, can help spark violence and contribute to renewed unrest if not properly managed.<sup>1 2</sup> The global value of world exports in natural resources was in 2008 US\$ 3.7 trillion<sup>3</sup>, around one fifth of global merchandise trade is in natural resources.<sup>4</sup> Despite the promising revenues, low-income economies largely dependent on natural resources are ten times more likely than other developing countries to experience civil war<sup>5</sup> and significantly slower economic growth than similar countries without major natural resources.<sup>6</sup> Nearly half of the world's population is directly dependent on renewable natural resources for its livelihood<sup>7</sup> although the value of natural capital is not accurately reflected in various statistics.

Conflicts over natural resources are universal - there are always conflicts between competing user groups and economic interests - in fact, such conflicts are a normal part of society. When institutions cannot absorb or mitigate **environmental degradation, contamination, and other shocks and stresses**, this can contribute to increased competition for scarce resources, destabilization and even violence.<sup>8</sup> Increasing climate stresses and disaster risk may further compound local tensions and instability by eroding the resource base on which livelihoods depend or impacting its availability and distribution.

If environmental and natural resource conflicts are not dealt with practical, non-violent ways, they risk becoming intertwined with societal cleavages and vested economic incentives, forming more complex and explosive conflict drivers. Where environmental damage and degradation causes grievances to some while **benefits are reaped inequitably**, the stage is set for growing tensions. Women and girls face specific risks due to their roles in family welfare, food production and water collection, particularly in post-conflict settings, where up to 40% of households are headed by women.<sup>9 10</sup> Prolonged insecurity may also discourage the local and international private investment critical for job creation, poverty eradication and economic growth.<sup>11</sup>

As access to information is undergoing a revolution and awareness of community rights is spreading, bottom up pressure regarding environmental and natural resource decisions is increasing. If there are problems in channelling expectations into decision-making processes, this may manifest itself in a variety of forms from civil disobedience to different levels of violence. **An information vacuum or unreliable, confusing information** on the state of the environment, natural resource stock or revenue streams will cause harmful volatility. This can be a fertile ground for corruption, where revenues are misappropriated and benefit private interests instead of the larger population and future generations - often ignoring environmental standards and causing harm to ecosystems.

**Unclear regulatory framework or confusing overlap and competing claims for land and resources** can affect stability, and lead to disputes and grievances. This can also provide an incentive for profiteering and illicit activities and further boost corruption. As a result of illicit activities countries will fail to accrue the benefits of their natural resource wealth while private parties exploit this potential. For example, where basic services such as water and sanitation are inadequate, many turn to the informal sector for access, creating inequitable or unsustainable resource consumption.

All countries, no matter their stage of development or geographic location, are exposed to **natural hazards and disasters**, being impacted by extreme hazard events such as floods, heat waves, droughts, tropical cyclones, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes. The devastation and degradation caused by slow-onset disasters, such as sea-level rise and drought, and sudden-onset disasters, such as storms and floods create new risks. Nevertheless, the impact that these natural hazards have on people and economies depends on the vulnerability of such populations.

Where the **legacy of past conflict** has left unaddressed grievances over the environment and natural resources - such as access, use or ownership of land and water - tensions have persisted and associated vulnerabilities such as poverty and food insecurity have been exacerbated. A recent study, covering the last 60 years, indicates that post-conflict nations where violence was associated with natural resources are more likely to return to conflict within five years. Less than a quarter of peace agreements have addressed resource-management mechanisms.<sup>12</sup>



## INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS

Healthy ecosystems - such as coral reefs, wetlands and forests - help protect against natural hazards and provide for basic needs and livelihoods, increasing the resilience of natural and human systems to climate change impacts, disasters and conflicts. **Sound stewardship of natural assets**, sustainable ecosystems management, and improved environmental governance are critical to sustaining the key regulating and provisioning services essential to human development and building resilient, stable societies. Customary (traditional) and statutory (formal) mechanisms should be accessible to all, and the relationships between the two should be clear. Governments and businesses need to commit to sustainable and transparent practices, and accountability frameworks. This means, among other things, applying good practice such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance and Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forest, as well as the principle of free, prior informed consent. Land tenure is a field where clarity of arrangements is important, including conditions for large-scale land acquisitions.

### Disaster vulnerability linked to the environment and natural resources stems from three main drivers:

- i. the likelihood of being harmed (a degraded ecosystem and scarcity of resources can increase the susceptibility to natural hazards),
- ii. coping ability (policies, public and communal mechanisms to react to shocks after a hazard event) and
- iii. adaptation capacity (long term change and prevention measures to reduce the impacts of natural hazards).

**Preventing illegal and illicit exploitation** – including trafficking in wildlife, timber or minerals – reduces conflict drivers and improves the chances of sustainable development.<sup>13</sup> **Rule of law** enables the sustainable use of natural resources by enshrining land, environmental and resource rights in constitutions and legislation; enforcing regulations; bolstering environmental protection frameworks; and defining rules for natural resource exploitation, land governance and equitable benefit sharing at all levels.<sup>14</sup> International standards such as the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI)<sup>15</sup> can hold natural resource activities to account, as it requires the timely publishing of concession terms, impacts of extraction and distribution of benefits from natural resources, thus allowing citizens to monitor environmental compliance and fulfilment of social commitments.

Economic growth needs to be accompanied by environmental values and social justice, equality and respect for human rights and human dignity.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, **inclusive decision-making processes** should ensure fair representation and participation of those who are affected by natural resource over-exploitation. Inclusive decision-making on exploitation can prevent grievances accumulating. The voices of rural women, the poor, and landless should be heard in decision making as their access rights are important for securing productive activities, resilience and stability. Civil society that is capable of articulating community views are needed alongside the often louder voices of economic interests.

**Capable and effective public institutions** provide predictable ways to deal with shocks, stresses and tensions in a fair and transparent manner, thereby preventing escalation. The environment and natural resources can also be a good platform for building confidence and a tangible basis for cooperation between social groups, and between countries and regions. It can allow communities to understand the benefit of promoting ecosystem integrity, while at the same time promoting dialogue as a tool for conflict prevention.

**Restoration of basic services** such as water and sanitation, within and across boundaries, can help strengthen local authorities and set the foundation for more sustainable water use. Where transboundary resources have become degraded due to conflicts, states have a vested interest in joint rehabilitation and an opportunity to build trust and cooperation. In such cases, concrete action has been facilitated by enhancing public awareness of environmental degradation, developing joint management committees with national and regional representation, and leveraging local commitments to secure broader financial backing.

Without access to **reliable information**, decisions on natural resource management become arbitrary. Access to quality information is a building block for informing expectations and establishing a realistic and equitable national vision on the role of natural wealth in the society. Information availability is the basis of resilient societies as well. Information openness is essential for communities to understand which areas are more vulnerable to natural hazards, and also allows communities to react in a timely fashion to rapid onset disasters. At the same time, openness of information allows people and communities to be informed of their rights and responsibilities. Empowered people can build resilience and have the capacity to deal with shocks and stresses.

References can be found at: <http://www.unep.org/post2015>

Comments and questions can be sent to:  
[unep.post2015@unep.org](mailto:unep.post2015@unep.org)  
[www.unep.org](http://www.unep.org)