




Conflict sensitive climate finance: lessons from the Green Climate Fund

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the state of integrated climate-security programming in the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and evaluates whether its operational activities and portfolio are conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive. Using a novel natural language processing method, the analysis draws on a comprehensive dataset of 1,704 documents published by the GCF from January 2012 to February 2023. The findings indicate that while the GCF adheres to conflict sensitivity principles, it falls short in implementing effective conflict governance practices. This oversight leads to the systematic underestimation of conflict risks, potentially exposing GCF projects to unforeseen operational challenges. On a positive note, the analysis also reveals signs of progress in integrated climate security programming in the GCF, primarily thanks to initiatives by the Board and Accredited Entities. Overall, this study offers novel insights into the work of the GCF that have potential practical implications for practitioners working in climate finance.

Key Policy Insights:

- The Green Climate Fund (GCF) portfolio appears to be moderately exposed to security and conflict risks with about USD 8.5 billion allocated toward countries that have experienced forms of organized violence between the 2015–2020 period.
- Despite its exposure to security risks, the GCF does not fully incorporate conflict sensitivity or peace responsiveness in its project cycle. Out of USD 11.4 billion of allocated funds, only USD 4.5 billion correspond to projects that have conflict management practices, and a mere USD 90 million correspond to projects that include conflict assessment measures.
- The absence of conflict sensitivity in climate finance can result in operational and reputational risks, impair the mobilization of funding in conflict-affected regions, and undermine potential peace-building co-benefits. For these reasons, the GCF should arguably place a stronger emphasis on mainstreaming conflict sensitivity into its operational activities and portfolio to proactively address climate security dynamics and minimize risks.

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1. Introduction

The Green Climate Fund (GCF) is a key mechanism in addressing climate change, providing funding for climate-related projects around the world. However, as its portfolio expands, so does the risk of implementing projects in conflict-affected or insecure areas. Among the 154 countries in the UNFCCC (Non-Annex I Parties) that are eligible to receive funds from the GCF, many face compounded climate security challenges. Research has shown that nearly 40 percent of the 1.3 billion people exposed to climate hazards globally live in conflict-affected or fragile contexts (Läderach et al., 2021). This striking statistic highlights the conflict dimension as an ever-present operational reality in climate finance, emphasizing the need for conflict-sensitive approaches.

Funding projects in conflict areas, as illustrated by the history of international aid, can be challenging due to security risks and the persistence of political economies of war. Moreover, climate policies do not occur in a

political vacuum and always have unintended consequences (Tänzler & Scherer, 2019, p. 8). When financial disbursements are not conflict-sensitive, they risk fostering grievances, creating dependencies, or altering political and security equilibria. Instances of conflicts related to climate finance have already been identified in the case study literature, primarily in relation to National Adaptation Programmes of Actions (NAPAs) and Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) projects (Tänzler, 2013; Sovacool, 2018; Ingalls et al., 2018; Alusiola et al., 2021).

The GCF has a set of measures and policies in place to safeguard its disbursements against abuses and prevent undesirable social and environmental consequences. These policies include dedicated gender and indigenous people policies, monitoring and accountability practices, and environmental and social safeguards standards (ESS). While several studies have looked at these policies from various angles (Bracking, 2015; Recio, 2019; Schalatek, 2020; Schalatek & Watson, 2020; Bertilsson & Thörn, 2021), no research has assessed their level of conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness. Likewise, no systematic attempts have been made to assess the extent and quality of integrated climate-security programming in the GCF project portfolio.

This paper aims to fill existing research gaps and provide an up-to-date analysis of conflict-sensitive practices in climate-specific funding mechanisms, using the GCF as a case study. To fulfill its objective, the study introduces a mixed method that employs an automated content analysis of 1,704 operational documents coupled with an in-depth qualitative assessment of key documents. The paper aims to answer three research questions. First, is the GCF, from an organizational point of view, conflict sensitive? Second, to what extent are the GCF portfolio and operations conflict sensitive? And third, how does the GCF operationalize conflict sensitivity in its projects?

The structure of the study takes the form of six sections. After the introduction, the methodology section outlines the research design and datasets used in the analysis. Section three sets the groundwork for the rest of the paper, contextualizing the GCF portfolio and its institutional arrangements from the point of view of conflict sensitivity. The fourth section presents the findings generated by the content analysis, outlining the extent and nature of integrated climate security programming in GCF operations. Finally, the remaining sections five and six discuss the findings and summarize the final remarks. Overall, the paper seeks to provide novel insights into the work of the GCF that have potential practical implications for practitioners working in multilateral climate funds.

2. Methodology

The analysis of the allocation of funds was made using project data retrieved by scraping the GCF online project repository and website (GCF, 2021g). The data, initially collected in July 2021, was updated in March 2023 during the peer review process. The aggregated financial data were analyzed in light of conflict geographies, which were calculated using the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project dataset (ACLED, 2019). Countries with casualties from battles, explosions/remote violence, and violence against civilians between 2015 and 2021 were grouped in quantiles based on conflict intensity. Countries in the top 90th percentile were classified as having high-intensity, those above the 80th percentile as mid-intensity, those below the 80th percentile as low-intensity, and those with less than 40 casualties as having no conflict.

The content analysis of institutional arrangements included 134 documents, published between January 2012 and March 2023, pertaining to investment procedures, administrative processes, and guidelines or strategies. The results were used primarily to identify relevant content for the context section that was qualitatively assessed to infer policy principles, objectives, and mean-to-goal mechanisms. The analysis of operations and projects included 1,570 documents published between January 2012 and August 2022, including all publicly available country programmes, board meeting reports, concept notes, approved readiness and project proposals, ESS reports, gender action plans and gender assessments. The data was used to infer quantitative trends as well as guide a qualitative reading of selected documents.

The analysis of institutional arrangements and projects was made using an automated content analysis calibrated on an assessment framework aimed at measuring the level of integrated climate-security programming. The content analysis was implemented with CtrlFindr, a natural language processing and content analysis toolkit written in Python (Scartozzi, 2023a). First, the operational and project-level documents were

downloaded as PDFs or text files and converted into a homogeneous digital format. Then, the text was pre-processed, cleaned, and labeled using metadata extracted from the documents. The documents were then tokenized in individual sentences and parsed into a unified data frame. Sentences discussing ‘conflict of interest’ were dropped to avoid false positives. Finally, relevant content was identified using CtrlFindr’s rule-based algorithms, which run on a pre-defined taxonomy and a list of search strings compiled by the researcher.

The taxonomy was compiled using a mixed inductive and deductive approach. Terms associated with the variables listed in the assessment framework were expanded using Word2Vec Model Explorer and then verified and complemented manually by a researcher (Scartozzi, 2023b). This approach was chosen to improve construct validity, as Word2Vec uses a neural network model that can be trained to learn word associations within the given dataset of documents, identifying synonymous based on semantic similarity (*Word2vec*, 2023). For this study, Word2Vec was trained on a corpus of 886 documents, including approved project proposals, ESS, and gender assessments.

The content analysis assessed each individual sentence from the 1,704 documents for six variables and 29 proxy variables, each with a unique search string. For example, sentences that addressed environmental topics (variable 1) were required to include one of the following five sub-topics: biosphere, hydrosphere, land, climate/weather, or climate/weather impacts (proxies 1.1 to 1.5). In turn, the presence of a proxy was evaluated by searching for specific constructs, namely the presence of particular words or co-occurring words (see Supplementary Materials). Through this approach, the content analysis generated a codebook indicating the extent to which documents engaged with six variables: (1) environment; (2) security; (3) security in relation to the environment; (4) security in relation to risk; (5) security in relation to marginalized groups; and (6) conflict governance practices. The results of the analysis are included in the Supplementary Materials together with the assessment framework containing the search strings and taxonomy. Given that both the data and the code (Scartozzi, 2023a, 2023b) used to run the analysis are open source, the method aims to be fully replicable.

3. Contextualizing conflict sensitivity in the green climate fund

3.1. Allocation of funds from a conflict-sensitive perspective

As of March 2023, the GCF Board has approved 209 projects, committing a total of USD 11.37 billion in financing (GCF, 2021n). These projects include 85 focused on adaptation, 66 on mitigation, and 58 on cross-cutting themes. Funds are mobilized via a wide array of financial instruments, which include loans (USD 4.8 billion), grants (USD 4.6 billion), equity (USD 1 billion), and guarantees (USD 348.2 million). In regards to thematic areas, the majority of funds are allotted to energy generation and access (USD 2.9 billion); buildings, cities, industries and appliances (USD 1.7 billion); forestry and land use (USD 1.5 billion); livelihoods of people and communities (USD 1.5 billion); health, food, and water security (USD 1.1 billion); infrastructure (USD 995 million); transport (USD 993 million); and ecosystems services (USD 802 million) (GCF, 2021k, 2021n).

The Fund is mandated to allocate funds across regions in a balanced way and invest 50 percent of its adaptation funds in ‘particularly vulnerable countries’ (GCF, 2021g). As of today, the Fund has approved 87 projects in the Asia-Pacific region (USD 3.9 billion), 85 in Africa (USD 3.9 billion), 56 in Latin America and the Caribbean (USD 3 billion), and 12 in Eastern Europe (USD 414 million) (Figure 1). According to the Fund, its project portfolio is expected to ‘abate a total of 2.0 billion tonnes of CO₂eq of greenhouse gases and reach 613 million (direct and indirect) beneficiaries’ (GCF, 2021n, p. 10).

From a conflict governance perspective, the GCF portfolio, see Figure 2, appears to be moderately exposed to security and political risks. About USD 8.5 billion, see Figures 3 and 4, are mobilized toward countries that have experienced violent conflicts during the 2015–2020 period. Among these funds, USD 2.4 billion, or 21 percent of the total, are allocated to countries that have tallied more than 5,000 casualties from battles, remote violence, or violence against civilians. Of the countries that have experienced high-intensity violence, there are 17 with approved projects and 23 with approved readiness activities. This group of states includes countries affected by terrorism (e.g. Nigeria and Iraq), organized violence (e.g. Mexico), and political violence (e.g. Philippines, Myanmar, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan).

Table 1. Key conflict sensitive policies.

Policies	1. Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism 2. Policies on Ethics and Conflict of Interest 3. Policy on the Protection of Whistleblowers and Witnesses 4. Policy on Prohibited Practices 5. Policy on the Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Sexual Abuse, and Sexual Harassment	<i>Policies related to misconduct and abuses</i>
	6. Environmental and Social Safeguards & Environmental and Social Management System 7. Risk Management Framework	<i>Issue-specific policies</i>
	8. Gender Policy 9. Indigenous Peoples Policy	<i>Issue-specific policies</i>

The group of policies that relates to misconduct and abuses ensures that the GCF and its counterparts meet basic fiduciary standards, due diligence, and legal requirements. Overall, they also help mitigate reputational, regulatory, legal, and financial risks. These policies are also essential to fulfill the Fund's mandate toward accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness (UNFCCC, 2012, p. 58). As a side outcome, policies against misconduct and abuses help prevent grievances that might arise from the entrenchment of vulnerable populations or the enclosure of public goods.

From a perspective of conflict governance, the most interesting policies are to be found in the overarching and issue-specific categories. For example, the 2018 Environmental and Social Safeguards (ESS) policy and 2021 Revised ESS Policy set the perimeter of conflict-sensitivity in the Fund, which is bounded on one side by the aim of doing 'no harm' and on the other side by the aim of maximizing socio-environmental co-benefits (GCF, 2021m, p. 5). To stay within this perimeter, the Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP) sets measures to avoid, minimize, mitigate, and compensate for adverse environmental and social impacts. Among these measures, the ESMP recommends pursuing a scaled risk-based and fit-for-purpose approach (GCF, 2021m, p. 7). The GCF is, as of writing, in the process of finalizing an updated ESS policy that is expected to have greater elements of conflict sensitivity and be aligned with IFC's Environmental and Social Performance Standards.

Overall, risk management policies are the main ways in which the GCF operationalizes conflict prevention (GCF, 2021j). Risk types, or categories, are listed by priority in the Risk Register section of the Risk Management Framework (RMF) (GCF, 2016a). Here, 'grievances' are noted as a reputational risk with high priority, while geopolitical events and man-made disasters are listed as operational risks with medium priority (GCF, 2021i, pp. 145–153). Unfortunately, 'country risks' such as 'war' and 'civil disturbance' are mentioned in the RMF but not listed in the Risk Register (GCF, 2021i, pp. 180–185). Moreover, the RMF does not systematically prescribe or recommend the use of conflict assessments. In sum, the RMF sets the ground for dealing with non-financial risks but, at the same time, overlooks the operational reality of the GCF by not providing sufficient guidelines on political risks.

It appears that the policies where the GCF has been the most proactive in establishing conflict governance frameworks are the issue-specific ones. The Gender Policy mainstreams gender issues in all phases of the project cycle with the four-pronged aim of supporting climate change interventions via a 'comprehensive gender approach,' promoting investments that enhance gender equality, minimize gender-related risks and reduce gender-specific vulnerabilities (GCF, 2019l, p. 2). From an environmental security perspective, the Gender Policy promotes sustainability and development, which are expected to contribute to peace and stability. The Policy also creates a framework to monitor gender-related structural violence and grievances, thus improving the overall conflict sensitivity of the GCF.

The Indigenous People Policy (IPP) aims to prevent harm and bring positive changes to vulnerable communities. From a conflict governance point of view, the policy appears to be particularly advanced about land tenure conflicts and redress. The IPP prescribes AEs to work with indigenous people to prepare project-specific plans that ensure the recognition of property rights in accordance with applicable laws and with 'customs, traditions and land tenure systems' (GCF, 2018d, p. 15). The GCF also recognizes that indigenous people might face barriers to accessing the Independent Redress Mechanism and Independent Integrity

Unit to file complaints (GCF, 2018d, p. 16). Hence, it recommends the establishment of *ad hoc* project-level redress mechanisms to be designed in consultation with the affected communities (GCF, 2018d, p. 17).

3.2.2. Conflict sensitivity in the GCF business model

The GCF works in partnership with National Designated Authorities (NDAs) and Accredited Entities (AEs) to offer a wide range of financial instruments for climate action in developing countries (GCF, 2020a). NDAs are government-nominated institutions that act as an interface between recipient countries and the Fund. In consultation with national stakeholders, NDAs nominate entities for accreditation by the Fund and invite entities to submit pilot proposals (GCF, 2015a). NDAs also work alongside the GCF during the project pipeline and apply the ‘no-objection procedure,’ making sure that GCF projects are aligned with national climate strategies and priorities (GCF, 2013).

Project proposals are drafted by AEs, following the guidelines set by the Initial Investment Framework (IIF) (GCF, 2020k). The Framework is composed of six investment criteria and 24 indicators (Table 2) that have to be addressed by AEs during the formulation of funding proposals (GCF, 2015b). Among the criteria, few present potential entry points and bottlenecks for conflict sensitivity. The ‘impact potential’ criterion requires AEs to assess the impact of their proposed intervention according to a series of indicators that are outlined in the Initial Results Management Framework (GCF, 2014). Some of these indicators, such as the expected reduction in vulnerability or the strengthening of adaptive capacity, create an interesting space for implementing conflict management practices in climate finance. After all, if, as argued by Brooks et al. (2005), conflict exacerbates vulnerabilities and reduces adaptive capacity, then conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness may also help promote adaptation and lead to socio-environmental co-benefits.

A similar entry point to integrated climate security programming can also be found in the ‘needs of the recipient country’ criterion, which requires AEs to quantify how their proposal meets the needs of the beneficiary population. In some cases, conflict and insecurity act as a barrier to climate finance by hindering effective governance, increasing vulnerability, limiting access to information, increasing costs and risks, and complicating the equitable distribution of resources. Against this backdrop, an argument can be made that conflict sensitivity can be used to better meet the needs of recipient populations by de-risking investments and improving readiness and capacity (Scartozzi, 2022).

The criterion of ‘sustainable development potential’ requires the measurement of the expected co-benefits of GCF interventions. During the submission of a funding proposal, AEs are required to find one positive co-benefit in at least two of four thematic areas: economy, society, environment, and gender empowerment (GCF, 2019c). Examples of socio-economic co-benefits, as listed by the IIF, include ‘health and safety’ and

Table 2. Outline of GCF initial investment framework.

Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	Indicators	
Need for strengthening institutions	Absence of alternative sources of financing	Economic and social development level	Vulnerable groups and gender aspects	Vulnerability of the country	Engagement with civil society & stakeholders	Capacity of accredited entities to deliver	Coherence with existing policies	Existence of a national climate strategy		Industry best practices	Programme/project financial viability	Amount of co-financing	Cost-effectiveness and efficiency
1. Impact potential					2. Paradigm shift potential					3. Sustainable development potential			
4. Needs of the recipient					5. Country ownership					6. Efficiency and effectiveness			
Mitigation impact	Adaptation impact				Potential for scaling up and replication	Potential for knowledge & learning	Creation of an enabling environment	Contribution to the regulatory framework	Contribution to climate-resilient development	Environmental co-benefits	Social co-benefits	Economic co-benefits	Gender-sensitive development impact

‘energy security’ (GCF, 2015b). AEs are also free to include peace co-benefits as a positive investment criterion, pending the formalization of an associated indicator and baseline and target values. In sum, peace or conflict resolution can be promoted, within the existing institutional design, as ancillary objectives of climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Finally, the criterion of ‘country ownership’ presents both opportunities and challenges to conflict sensitivity. Country ownership is an inclusionary process that aims to prioritize in-country stakeholders to avoid top-down, donor-led development processes (Wood et al., 2011). The principle assumes that domestic stakeholders have better contextual information than international donors and, therefore, are better suited to design and implement projects. Hence, it could be argued that country ownership helps prevent forms of maladaptation. Unfortunately, the principle of country ownership appears to have a problematic operationalization in the GCF as it grants NDAs discretionary power on the allocation of funds via agenda setting, recommendations, and vetoes (i.e. the no-objection procedure).

With the current configuration of the country ownership principle, NDAs act as gatekeepers that have the power to block access to climate finance for specific regions or segments of their population. Moreover, since NDAs are nominated by governments, their gatekeeping can be driven by political calculations. This is a potential problem as some countries where the GCF operates do not have democratic, accountable institutions. The solution here is not to forsake the country ownership principle (which is enshrined in the UNFCCC) and enforce top-down, technocratic decisions, but rather to expand country ownership beyond the purview of governments. For the principle to be truly conflict-sensitive, sub-national governments, civil society, and the private sector should be made stakeholders of country ownership and allowed to bid for climate investments based on merit alone, without being subjected to vetoes from *pro-tempore* national governments.

4. Findings on conflict sensitive programming in projects and operational activities

4.1. Country programmes

Country Programmes are drafted by governments in coordination with their respective NDA and serve as ‘project origination tools’ (GCF, 2020c, p. 6). Their purpose is to set a national investment plan for the GCF that outlines priorities as formulated in Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), and other domestic climate strategies (GCF, 2020c, p. 8). In the GCF project cycle, Country Programmes act as focal points for AEs to develop projects that meet national climate agendas and priorities.

The content analysis shows that, on average, countries have failed to engage in a meaningful way with conflict and security. Figure 5 shows the extent of engagement of Country Programmes with the variables outlined in the assessment framework, which represent topics related to climate security. Engagement was measured as the percentage of sentences within each document that featured a given variable. Overall, the engagement metric provides a quantitative measure of the attention that is paid by documents to specific topics.

A key finding for the analysis is that most countries frame the discussion on environment and security (variable 3) primarily from the perspective of human security and to a minor extent, conflict, and crime. Conversely, topics pertaining to the classical environmental security scholarship (e.g. resource competition) are discussed only in five programmes. Overall, security is usually cited in relation to energy, food, water, economy, or health and safety. For example, Palestine and Papua New Guinea see investments in renewables as a way to improve energy security (GCF, 2020g, 2020h), while Pakistan and Bangladesh see funds in sustainable agricultural activities as a pathway to increased food security (GCF, 2017c, 2018f). Laos, Marshall Islands, and Rwanda, among other 15 countries, see their Country Programmes as a tool to enhance water security among communities (GCF, 2018a, 2019f, 2021h). Finally, Vanuatu and Indonesia see the impact of development on health and livelihoods as a way to improve human security (GCF, 2018e, 2021b).

Violence is mentioned only in 11 Programmes, mostly in relation to violence against women. Conflict is mentioned in 21 Country Programmes. Palestine frames the conflict with Israel as a cause for its reduced adaptive capacity. Chad cites the impact of climate change as an influence on intra-communal conflicts (GCF, 2019h). Mali and Cambodia acknowledge the presence of conflict in their territories (GCF, 2018j). Congo (DR) mentions

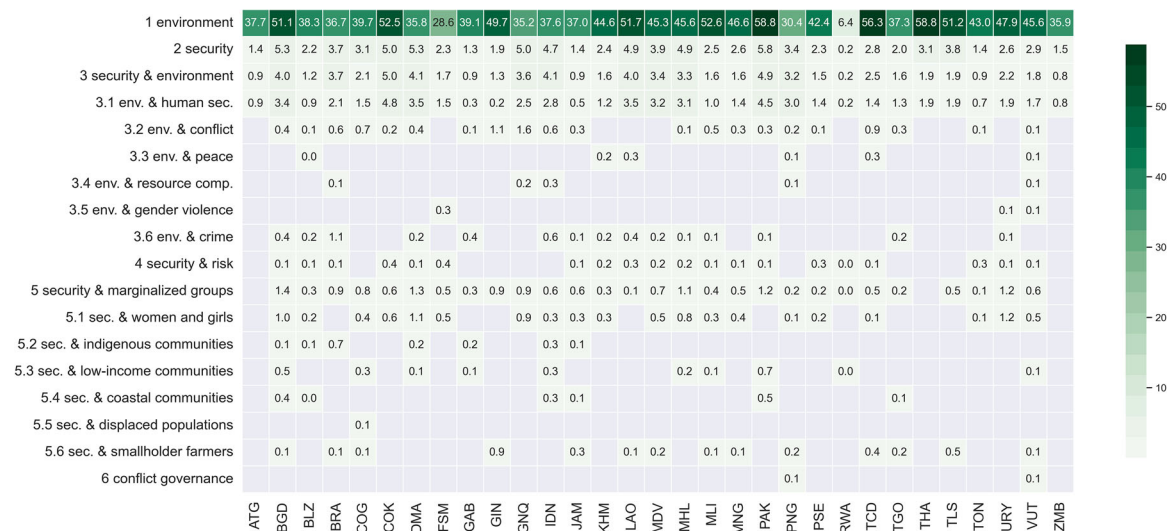


Figure 5. Extent of topic engagement in country programmes.

that development pathways are a solution to conflict (GCF, 2019e). Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and Brazil refer to the link between environmental policies and land tenure conflicts (GCF, 2018e, 2018k, 2020g). Moreover, it is important to note that while security is discussed in 20 countries in relation to non-financial risks (variable 4), only two countries discuss conflict governance measures (variable 6).

Finally, the word ‘peace’ is mentioned only 24 times across 10 Country Programmes. Vanuatu and Bangladesh speak of peace as a desirable outcome, while Laos and Antigua and Barbuda refer to peace in the context of development policies (GCF, 2017a, 2018f, 2019f, 2021b). One of the most cogent references to peace is made by Timor-Leste, which states that climate change poses a threat to the ongoing processes of peacebuilding in the country (GCF, 2019d). Overall, the findings indicate that while countries perceive insecurity as potential operational risks and are aware of a nexus between finance and peace, they do not usually seek GCF projects to intersect with conflict dynamics or engage in peace responsiveness.

4.2. Concept notes

The first step of the GCF project cycle requires the submission of a Concept Note to the GCF Secretariat. The submission of the Note is also mandatory for AEs using the Simplified Approval Process (SAP) pipeline for projects below USD 25 million (GCF, 2017d). Interestingly, the template for the SAP’s Concept Note provided by the GCF contains a checklist of non-financial risk factors that include questions on ‘Community Health, Safety, and Security.’ Among the questions, the applicants are asked to assess conflict and security risks affecting the project site, the staff, and the affected community (GCF, 2020b)

Out of 105 checklists attached to SAP concept notes, only one coherently indicates a traditional security risk. This note, submitted by the World Food Programme (WFP) in 2019, involves a project on resilience building in the Newly Merged Districts (NMD) of Pakistan (GCF, 2019i). The Government of Pakistan, under its Return and Rehabilitation Strategy, is working to bring back NMD’s families that have been displaced due to militancy and conflict. The WFP aims to add a climate dimension to the relocation programme by enhancing climate resilience among returning communities via ecosystem-based adaptation schemes. To minimize operational risks, the WFP proposes to hire project staff locally and collaborate with the Pakistani Army and Government. This project proposal represents one of the first attempts of integrating climate finance with peacebuilding objectives.

The reason why so many SAP concept notes refrain from reporting security risks is two-pronged. First, funds in conflict-affected countries appear to be allocated primarily in areas or communities less exposed to violence

(GCF, 2019m). Second, conflict risks are discounted because AEs assume, *ex-ante*, that their mechanism of conflict prevention and resolution will prove effective. For example, a Concept Note on climate-resilient lifestyles in Zimbabwe mentions that safety risks do not need to be factored in, as the project is premised on the principle of ‘do no harm’ (GCF, 2019p). In another example, which involves a project on adaptation in Lake Chad, the AE affirms that there are no safety risks because, even though ‘potential conflict might arise’ from activities related to resources management, the project will implement a community-based approach that will limit risks (GCF, 2019q).

4.3. Approved projects and readiness programmes

The analysis of approved projects and readiness programmes shows a mix of positive and negative results, which are summarized in Figure 6. The top half of the figure shows the percentage of documents that engage with the variables specified in the assessment framework, while the bottom half displays the extent of engagement for each variable, measured as the percentage of sentences in each document that feature that variable. The projects are further categorized into three investment sectors: adaptation, mitigation, and cross-cutting.

The findings suggest that almost all approved projects discuss environment in relation to security (variable 3). The extent of engagement, however, is significantly higher among adaptation and cross-cutting projects rather than in mitigation projects. Moreover, the engagement predominantly revolves around the topics of human security (variable 3.1), conflict (variable 3.2), crime (variable 3.6), and gender violence (variable 3.5). Discussions related to peace (variable 3.3) or natural resource competition (variable 3.4) are present in less than a third of documents and with a minor depth of engagement. When security is discussed in relation to marginalized groups, it is predominantly done so concerning women and girls (variable 5.1) and to a lesser extent about low-income communities (variable 5.3), smallholder farmers (variable 5.6), and indigenous people (variable 5.2).

Security is also framed with non-financial and operational risks (variable 4), particularly among adaptation projects. Security risks are often discussed as related to ‘security concerns’ and ‘challenges’ in recipient countries. In a few cases, these challenges are portrayed as a reason for investment. For example, a project in the Democratic Republic of Congo explains that security concerns have disincentivized private investments in solar-grid systems, thus creating a financing gap that could be filled by the GCF (GCF, 2018i). More often,

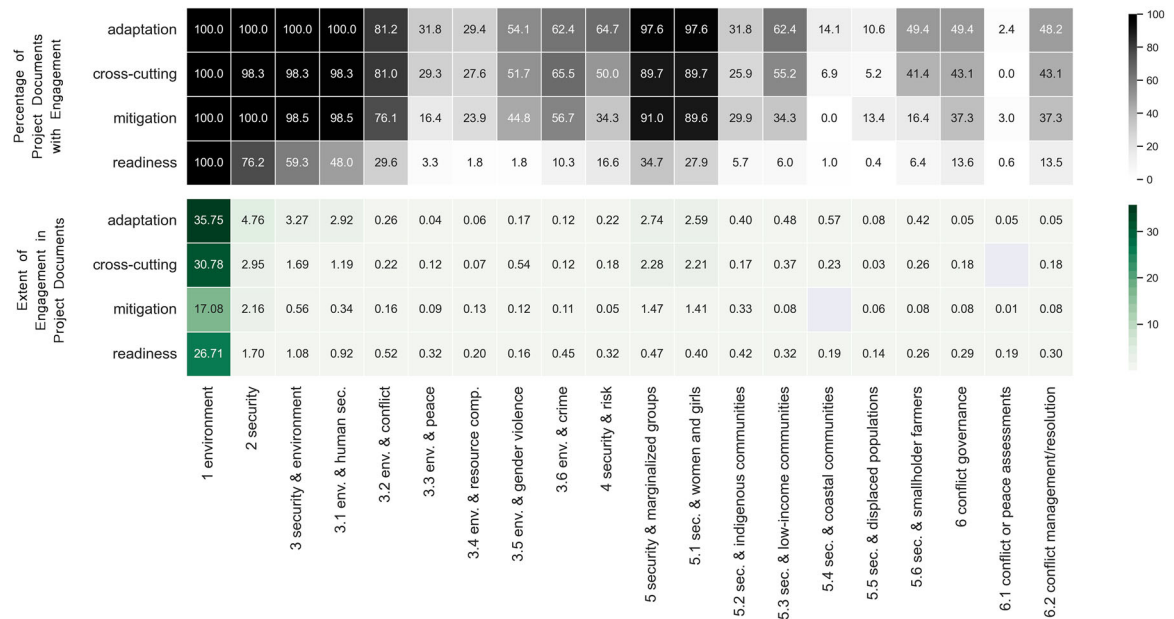


Figure 6. Analysis of topic engagement in project-level documents.

security concerns are expressed as potential obstacles to the implementation of projects. For example, Readiness Proposals for Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, Iraq, and Syria highlight that security could be a possible operational risk, albeit one that can be mitigated (GCF, 2019a, 2019n, 2019o, 2019s, 2019r, 2019t). Examples of mitigation strategies found in project proposals include building security hardware (e.g. fences) to protect the perimeters of the project sites (GCF, 2016c, 2018c, 2021e), hiring security personnel and contractors (GCF, 2021d), engaging with local communities (GCF, 2016c, 2018c, 2021e), and relying on the provision of security from local governments (GCF, 2019r).

Elements of conflict management and resolution (variable 6.2) are present in 48 percent of adaptation, 37 percent of mitigation, and 43 percent of cross-cutting projects. A few cogent mentions of conflict management practices can be found in a project on the restoration of agroforestry systems in Kordofan, Sudan, which aims at preventing farmers-pastoralists conflicts by creating new stock routes to prevent livestock overconcentration (GCF, 2020l). Additional examples of conflict management mechanisms include a community-based natural resource management system in a Timor-Leste project (GCF, 2021f); an online and *in situ* public consultation mechanism in a REDD + project in Argentina (GCF, 2020j); a system of inquiry on land rights in an adaptation project in Kenya (GCF, 2019j); and early warning systems in two African projects (GCF, 2018h, 2020f).

Several projects have also addressed conflict resolution through various means; a cross-cutting project in Botswana trains staff in conflict resolution practices and aims at using customary law when land-use grievances cannot be settled by project personnel (GCF, 2021c). Two projects in Ethiopia and in Afghanistan aim to develop conflict resolution via project-specific redress instruments (GCF, 2020e, 2020d). In Bangladesh, a project proposes a ‘human rights-based and conflict-sensitive approach’ to the allocation of resources (GCF, 2018b), while a natural resource management project in the Niger basin includes conflict prevention and peace as a co-benefit deliverable (GCF, 2018h).

Unfortunately, there are two major issues impairing conflict sensitivity in GCF projects. Firstly, the extent of engagement in conflict management measures within project-level documents is very limited (see Figure 6). This is because conflict management is usually framed, as part of a check-boxing exercise, as a form of safeguard rather than as contributing mechanism for climate action that can contribute to peace. Secondly, there is a severe lack of conflict assessment practices (variable 6.1), indicating that most projects are essentially conflict blind. Due to a lack of awareness of the operational context and peace-responsive objectives, it can be argued that GCF projects lack overall conflict sensitivity.

The correlation analysis shows that lack of conflict sensitivity is particularly problematic among large-size, ESS Category A, and private sector projects (Figure 7). Large-size projects (i.e. above USD 250 million) negatively

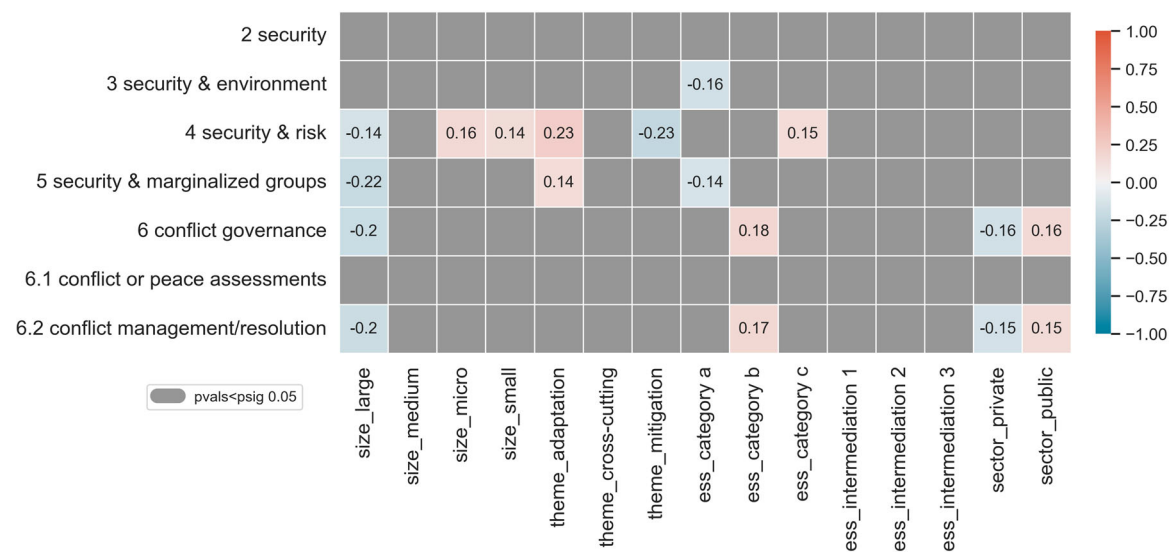


Figure 7. Relationships between project characteristics and topics.

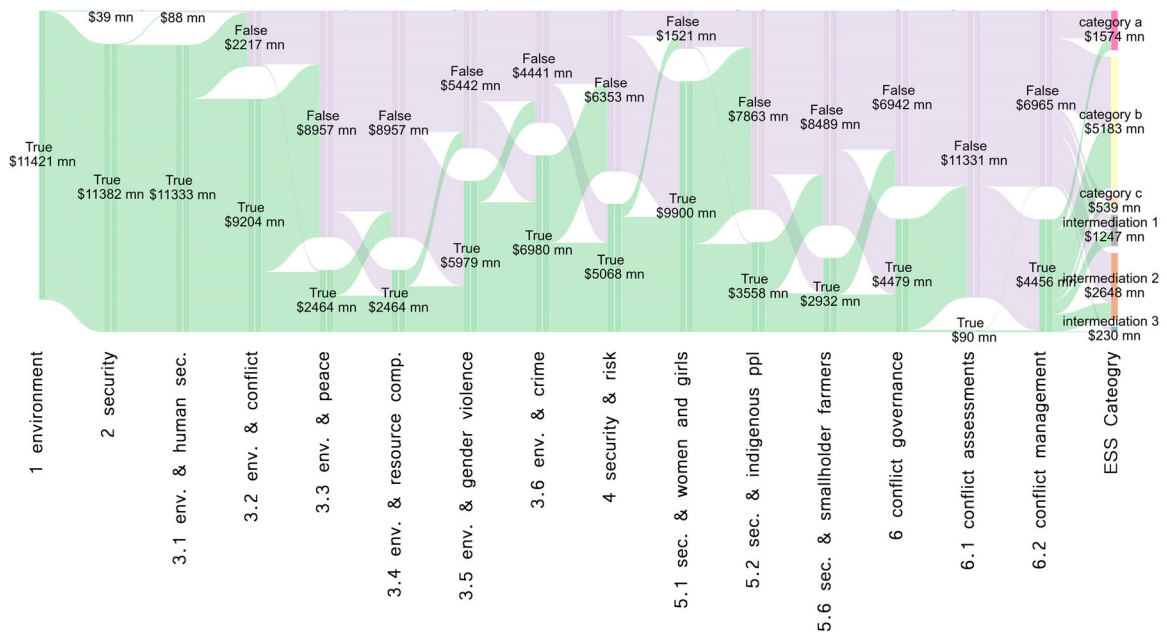


Figure 8. Monetary value of topic engagement in project-level documents (excluding readiness activities).

correlate with conflict management/resolution practices as well as with discussions on security risk and security in marginalized groups. ESS-A projects (i.e. projects that are classified as having the highest potential to have significant adverse environmental and social impacts) negatively correlate with discussions linking security with the environment or marginalized groups. Finally, projects in the private sector, conversely to those in the public one, are negatively correlated to conflict management measures.

In conclusion, by examining the findings in monetary terms as outlined in [Figure 8](#), there are three main takeaways that can be identified. First, projects worth USD 11.3 billion feature discussion on environment and security, yet documents mentioning security risks or conflict management practices account for, respectively, USD 5 billion and USD 4.5 billion. Hence, more than half of the allocated funds appear to be lacking the specific measures to address risks emerging from conflict or insecurity. Moreover, USD 8.9 billion worth of projects potentially lack awareness of risks emerging from resource competition, which can be particularly problematic in the context of adaptation investments. Finally, only projects worth USD 90 million include forms of conflict assessment, indicating that more than USD 11 billion in funding is potentially conflict blind.

4.4. Board meetings

The Board has shown increased interest in conflict sensitivity, particularly in relation to funding proposals. This interest was first demonstrated at the 11th meeting of the Board in 2015, where an AE was recommended to include conflict resolution mechanisms among its safeguard processes for indigenous people (GCF, 2016b). Two years later, at the 16th meeting, a Board member asked if conflict analyses were being carried out and argued for all GCF projects to promote conflict resolution and minimize political instability (GCF, 2017b). During the 18th meeting, another member argued that ‘all conflict analyzes should, as a mandatory requirement, take into account not only ongoing conflicts but also the potential for project consequences to aggravate lower-grade tensions or contribute to the outbreak of conflict’ (GCF, 2017e). The Board member also recommended project proposals to include actions on the mitigation of conflict risks (GCF, 2017e). A year later, given the renewed interest in conflict governance, the Fund’s Technical Advisory Panel was recommended to engage in capacity building and recruit experts in conflict sensitivity (GCF, 2018g).

The interest in conflict and security increased sharply after 2018. At the 21st meeting, it was pointed out that three projects under consideration ‘did not include a conflict-sensitivity analysis’ in their risk assessment, which was considered to be a necessary component to understand the project implications on security (GCF, 2019b). During the following meeting, it was noted that ‘conflict sensitive analyses’ were still missing and needed to be made mandatory (GCF, 2019g). At the 23rd meeting, in 2019, a Board member remarked that, despite raising the point ‘on several previous occasions,’ conflict analyses still needed to be provided in all funding proposals. During this meeting, it was also recommended that conflict assessments were to include plans to minimize the ‘project’s potential negative impact on ongoing conflicts’ and maximize ‘positive contribution to peacebuilding’ (GCF, 2019k). To this end, the GCF Secretariat replied that it had ‘listened to the guidance from Board members’ and was working to implement changes.

Since 2020, recommendations on conflict governance have become increasingly common. For example, during its 26th meeting, the Board requested an AE working on a project in Sudan provide to the Secretariat ‘a recent updated comprehensive conflict situation analysis’ that assesses ‘different interest groups, community-level resource control, decision-making, and traditional conflict management and resolution mechanisms’ (GCF, 2020i). In 2021, the Board recommended another AE submit a ‘Fragility Note’ detailing conflict risks and vulnerabilities (GCF, 2021i) and requested clarifications from another AE on why it had omitted conflict resolution from its capacity-building project (GCF, 2021a). Similar requests were also made in 2022. In particular, during the 34th meeting, a Board member ‘drew attention to the fact that many of the most vulnerable lived in conflict-affected areas’ and ‘it was therefore important that GCF applied conflict-sensitive approaches to ensure effective work and not to inadvertently contribute to conflict’ (GCF, 2023). In the same meeting, it was also mentioned the updated GCF Strategic Vision should incorporate conflict sensitive approaches.

In addition to comments from the secretariat and Board members, the meetings also include comments from Civil Society Organizations (CSO) and project stakeholders. While their comments on conflict are more sporadic, it is worth noting that the GCF’s counterparts are part of the dialogue on security. For example, in 2020, a CSO praised the establishment of early warning systems for conflict prevention and mitigation in a project on agroforestry in Sudan (GCF, 2020i). Another CSO, commenting on a REDD + project in Colombia, expressed concern that armed conflict was still occurring in the country and that it was not clear how the Accredited Entity was planning to guarantee the right of participation of indigenous people under these circumstances (GCF, 2020i). Finally, stakeholder groups in a REDD + project in Nicaragua argued that they held a different perspective on the ‘dangers of the project’ and recommended the prioritization of participatory engagement of local stakeholders via mediation and conflict resolution mechanisms.

5. Discussion

The first question in this study sought to determine whether the GCF was a conflict-sensitive organization. Findings suggest that the GCF, from an organizational point of view, is not fully conflict-sensitive. It abides by basic principles of conflict sensitivity but lacks the mandate and mean-to-goal mechanisms to engage with peace responsiveness and conflict prevention. It has policies that tangentially touch on conflict management but lack an overarching conflict governance framework. It operates in conflict-affected countries but does not systematically require projects to include conflict assessments. Despite all these problems, it should be noted that elements of integrated climate security programming subsist in GCF policies, and, thanks to the Board, they have been increasing over time.

The second question posed by the study asked whether the GCF was allocating funds and implementing projects in a conflict-sensitive manner. Findings indicate that in the vast majority of cases, neither the allocation nor the project implementation appears to be informed by a conflict-sensitive approach. First, aggregated financial data shows that allocations for countries with compounded levels of vulnerability and conflict are predominantly for cross-cutting and mitigation projects rather than for adaptation. Second, while most projects recognize a relationship between security and the environment, only a minority attempt to operationalize conflict governance practices, and very few comprehensively do this. This problem is even exacerbated among large-size and ESS Category A projects, which arguably are the ones with the most exposure to security

risks. Overall, it appears that out of USD 11.3 billion in allocated funds, just USD 4.5 billion worth of projects mention conflict management, while only USD 90 million discuss conflict assessment practices.

Finally, the third question asked what conflict-sensitive measures were being adopted in the GCF and for what use cases. The study showed that the GCF is primarily designed to deal with security consequences that may arise from abuses and misconduct in project management. The GCF has also strong policies and frameworks to monitor conflict and structural violence in relation to indigenous people and women. Independently from the GCF design, project proposals have shown an increased awareness of conflicts caused by grievances over resource management, land rights, and distribution of funds and co-benefits. In recent years, the Board has also remarked on several occasions on the need to better account for the unintended security consequences of its interventions.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to analyze integrated-climate security programming in the GCF. The evidence presented by the study has made it clear that conflict sensitivity at the GCF is still a work in progress. The GCF has established robust policies and frameworks to address the consequences of misconduct and abuse in project management, as well as to monitor conflict and structural violence concerning indigenous people and women. However, the GCF does not have specific conflict-sensitive or peace-responsive regulations, guidelines, or mechanisms. This lack of specificity and guidance makes it challenging for project proponents and implementing entities to operationalize conflict governance effectively.

The lack of conflict sensitivity in climate-specific funding mechanisms is a significant problem due to the risks it poses. Failure to deploy conflict management increases the likelihood of exacerbating or perpetuating conflicts, which in turn, jeopardizes the effectiveness and sustainability of GCF projects, potentially undermining the positive contributions that climate finance can have on peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Furthermore, a lack of conflict sensitivity means that the GCF does not have the necessary means-to-goal mechanisms to operate in conflict-affected countries, potentially impairing the allocation of funding toward conflict-affected and climate-vulnerable populations.

Fortunately, implementing entities (AEs) working with the GCF have demonstrated an increased engagement with conflict-sensitive practices despite the lack of an overarching conflict governance framework. This can be attributed to recommendations from the Board as well as to the operational realities of the projects. Some of the measures that have been proposed include early warning systems; data collection and surveillance; capacity building; engagement with local communities and governments; collaboration with security operators and military forces; use of passive protections; participatory mechanisms of co-governance; clarification of legal rights over land and natural resources; and use of customary conflict resolution mechanisms.

The heterogeneity of approaches to conflict management could be a strength for the organization. After all, each project is free to choose a fit-for-purpose strategy instead of implementing top-down solutions supplied by the Secretariat or the Board. Yet, a lack of standardization can also impair learning and evaluation processes at the organizational level. Moreover, since AEs have no duties to pursue conflict management practices, they are free to neglect the issue. Indeed, findings from this study suggest that conflict risks are systematically overlooked and discounted. Of the USD 11.4 billion in allocated funds, only USD 4.5 billion are associated with projects that discuss conflict management practices. Additionally, only USD 90 million are earmarked for projects that mention conflict assessments.

On a more positive note, the GCF has also proven to have the potential for peace responsiveness. Some AEs have been pushing the boundaries of what can be done to promote peace within climate finance. For example, a few projects have been including peace and security, in the form of co-benefits, as part of their project goals and deliverables. In other cases, there have been proposals to integrate climate finance with reconciliation and national peacebuilding processes. These trends could be further strengthened with the accreditation of new implementing partners that operate in the peacebuilding sector. Moreover, the GCF board seems to have advocates of conflict sensitivity, which may eventually lead to the mainstreaming of conflict management practices. While there is still much work to be done, these positive developments suggest that the GCF has the potential to be a force for good, capable of advancing the dual goals of addressing climate change and building a more peaceful world.

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