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Environmental Peacebuilding in Latin America and the Caribbean: Bridging Gaps and Harnessing Opportunities

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KEY MESSAGES

- ▶ Despite the region's pressing environmental, climate, violence and conflict challenges, existing studies of environmental peacebuilding in LAC tend to focus narrowly on Colombia following the 2016 Peace Agreement, with only a few exceptions in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica.
- ▶ The region faces a range of critical issues that characterize environmental peacebuilding specificities in LAC, including socioeconomic inequalities, political exclusion, institutional mistrust, transnational criminal organizations, land grabbing, violence against environmental activists and unequal access to land and insecure tenure rights.
- ▶ Strengthening locally based evidence is crucial for closing knowledge gaps in the connections between environmental management and peacebuilding in LAC.
- ▶ The urgency to prioritize community participation by integrating indigenous knowledge, local perspectives, and participatory methods into the design, implementation and evaluation of environmental peacebuilding projects, ensure they reflect the needs of affected communities throughout projects lifecycle.
- ▶ The need to strengthen the capacity building offers on the environment, climate, peace, and security nexus to enable public institutions and civil society to expand their knowledge and awareness to promote more integrated strategies and interventions that support environmental peacebuilding efforts in LAC.
- ▶ Promoting thorough peace and conflict sensitivity assessments before implementing environmental projects, programs, and policies can help identify potential drivers of conflict and cooperation, avoid doing harm, and tailor interventions to local political, social, and environmental contexts.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES ACROSS THE THREE COPS: UNFCCC COP29, UNCBD COP16 AND UNCCD COP16

- **UNFCCC** (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) objectives and actions to support climate adaptation, climate mitigation and disaster risk reduction can, if developed in a conflict-sensitive way, avoid maladaptation and address key drivers of conflict and insecurity to yield peace co-benefits.
- **UNCDB** (United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework integrate objectives and efforts for biodiversity conservation that can synergistically be leveraged along with climate action strategies to produce peace co-benefits while enhancing biodiversity and climate resilience.
- **UNCCD** (United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification) objectives and targets to address desertification and land degradation through sustainable land use management offer great opportunities for environmental peacebuilding efforts in LAC as shown by the Peace Forest Initiative.

The goal of this brief is to reflect on the gaps, challenges and opportunities of environmental peacebuilding efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). Specifically, it aims to demonstrate the importance of producing more comprehensive and robust evidence to bridge the gaps in understanding the interrelations between environmental management and peacebuilding opportunities in a LAC context. Additionally, it explores the opportunities and challenges of introducing environmental peacebuilding scientific evidence and approaches into policymaking, programming and investment in the region, with the goal of ensuring multisectoral engagement and ending siloed approaches among institutions working on climate action, environmental management, security, peacebuilding, and the triple nexus between humanitarian, development and peace (HDP).

A brief introduction to environmental peacebuilding

Over the past few decades, there has been a shift in the understanding of conflict threats and insecurity in the international system, with a growing emphasis on intrastate violence and the relationship between environmental factors and conflict. During the mid-1990s, there was an increased attention on how environmental scarcity and the abundance of high-value natural resources could trigger violent conflict, as scholars, practitioners, and policymakers explored the links between resource shortages, commercialization, and rising tensions (Homer-Dixon, 1999; Dalby, 2002). Consequently, a framework of ecological security, which complemented traditional understandings of national security with human security as experienced by local populations, mainstreamed across different national and international organizations active in global efforts for peace and sustainability (Conca, 2024).

Building on this foundation, and initial work, growing concerns over climate change in recent decades have further deepened the study of how environmental factors influence conflict dynamics. Peace and conflict studies moved into examining how climate change and variability interact with, and potentially aggravate, the risk of armed conflict (Gemenne et al., 2014). Specifically, emerging research on climate security has developed a more complex understanding of the intersection between climate and security, moving beyond simply looking at how climate may exacerbate armed conflict - looking at other types of insecurities-, and putting emphasis on the socioeconomic, institutional and political drivers that mediate this non-linear relationship through different indirect mechanisms and pathways (Von Uexkull & Buhaug, 2021). For instance, considerable advances have been developed around conflict and security risk assessments in the context of climate vulnerability, whether to understand the security implications of climate-induced environmental degradation or to evaluate the potential conflicts produced or exacerbated by the implementation of climate action strategies (Sarzana et al. 2023; Pacillo et al. 2024; Rüttinger et al. 2023; see Šedová et al. 2024 for a review of further climate security risk assessment tools).

The intersection of climate and environmental security have traditionally focused on violence, armed conflict, and instability. However, a growing number of grassroots practitioners, activists, and scholars are recently advocating for a paradigm shift. They emphasize the need to focus on peacebuilding processes and opportunities arising from environmental challenges and the role of societal responses in addressing them. For instance, Conca and Dabelko (2002) and UNEP (2003; 2009) set ground for environmental peacebuilding studies by addressing the transformative potential of environmental cooperation in post-conflict contexts. These emerging perspectives precisely challenge the notion that violent conflict is an inevitable byproduct of environmental change (Conca, 2024). Since then, environmental peacebuilding as a discipline has been developed to examine the social, economic and political conditions for peace and how environmental management can be leveraged for this purpose (Krampe et al.,

2021). In other words, it has shifted towards analyzing the “multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution and recovery” (Ide et al., 2021, 2).

Shifting the Paradigm Across the UN: Recognizing the Interlinkages Between Climate Change, Peace and Security

Acknowledging the need for a more systematic and cross-sectoral approach to climate related security risks, the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Department of Peace Operations (DPO), joined forces to form the Climate Security Mechanism (CSM) in 2018. The CSM aims to strengthen the capacity of the United Nations to more systematically analyze and address the linkages between climate change, peace and security.

The CSM works directly with United Nations field missions and country teams, and with regional and sub-regional organizations, to build capacity, exchange knowledge, and achieve results that support States and communities most affected by climate-related security risks. Through the United Nations Community of Practice on Climate Security, comprising more than 20 departments, agencies, funds, and programmes from across the three pillars, and close relationships with research institutions, the CSM is also building a global community able to connect the latest science to policy and practice.

In addition to the emerging body of research on environmental peacebuilding, recent guidance from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) highlights how climate change acts as a conflict multiplier in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Guidance Note on Climate, Peace, and Security emphasizes that while climate change does not directly cause conflicts, its effects—such as rising sea levels, droughts, and extreme weather events—worsen existing vulnerabilities and inequalities, particularly in fragile areas. This creates heightened risks for displacement, organized crime involvement in environmental crimes like deforestation and illegal mining and deepens socio-environmental conflicts over natural resources like water and land. Addressing these interconnected risks requires integrating climate, peace, and security considerations into regional and national policies to foster resilience, protect environmental defenders, and promote sustainable natural resource management (UNDP, 2023).

Several case studies from conflict and post-conflict affected contexts around the world demonstrate the potential peacebuilding outcomes of environmental cooperation (Unruh & Williams, 2013; Weinthal et al., 2014). Scholars and practitioners have presented different conceptualizations of peace with ongoing debates on mechanisms and measuring methods for

peacebuilding in contexts of environmental action. Galtung's (1969) work has been especially influential, distinguishing between negative peace, or the absence of direct violence, and positive peace, referring to "the attitudes, institutions and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies".

More recently, the literature has considered four interrelated and overlapping dimensions of peace (Ide, 2019; Johnson et al., 2021): (i) the absence of violent conflict; (ii) trust-building processes based on cooperation, interdependence and shared identities; (iii) substantial integration produced by the establishment of joint and inclusive institutions, which focuses on State-society relations; and (iv) strengthening capabilities, understood as individual freedoms and opportunities for people under threats of conflict to shape their livelihoods and life-styles.

Within this broader understanding of peace and its different forms, the environmental peacebuilding literature recognizes diverse mechanisms or pathways through which environmental cooperation can contribute to peacebuilding. Although there is not a unified understanding of these mechanisms, most authors on the environmental peacebuilding field agree on considering the ones listed below (Ide, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020):

- **Minimizing grievances and raising conflicts opportunity costs:** A fair and inclusive management of the environment and natural resources, such as land, water and forest resources, can guarantee a steady source of livelihoods, generate additional revenues for local communities, and improve governmental capacities for delivering basic services. These outcomes can contribute to peacebuilding by strengthening local capabilities, reducing the risk of violent conflicts produced by lack of basic needs, as well as enhancing state legitimacy and strengthening institutional capacities.
- **Building trust and cooperation:** Environmental challenges can be an entry point for dialogue and a way to stimulate cooperation between social groups and states. Proactive dialogue and cooperation around environmental challenges can, in turn, build trust and increase solidarity among divided groups. Shared and inclusive management of resources can also lead to frequent interactions, establish mutually recognized rights, promote collective understanding, values, expectations and activities, and even foster the creation of shared identities.
- **Increase interdependence and guarantee sustainability:** When environmental cooperation has been established and interdependence between groups has increased, conflicts escalation is less likely to occur as both sides can be negatively affected and loose positive-sum conditions. Over time, this interdependence can contribute to resource sustainability, resulting in positive ramifications such as strengthened livelihoods, prevention of environmental degradation, ecosystems restoration and limited overexploitation of resources.

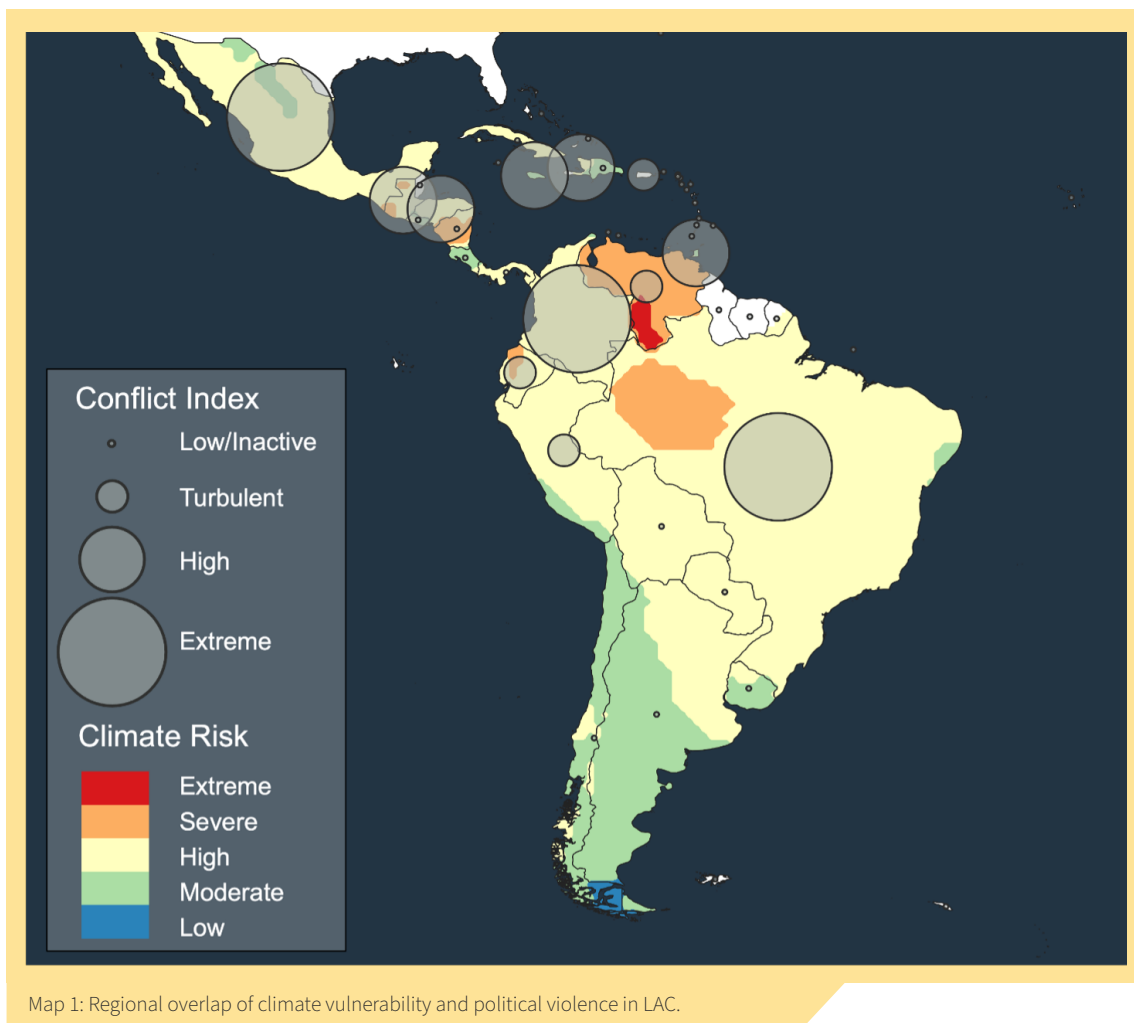
- **Establishing and strengthening institutions:** Establishing formal or informal joint institutions can be a way to guarantee fair and effective natural resource governance. Once established, these institutions may contribute to peacebuilding efforts in several ways. For instance, they can serve as channels for communication, including conflict resolution means; ensure inclusive governance and equitable distribution of resources; enhance recognition and participation of marginalized groups in the decision-making; establish laws and actions promoting collective action and collaborative resource management; enhance rule of law; and promote state-society integration.
- **Shared knowledge and social inclusion:** Successful cooperation strategies and institutions concerning environmental issues often incorporate plural understandings on the use and conservation of natural resources. Including indigenous and other diverse knowledge to these strategies is a mean to enrich collective plans and programs while guaranteeing social inclusion of marginalized populations, promote equal access to resources and their benefits, and foster capabilities of communities depending on traditional livelihoods.

Environmental cooperation holds significant potential for peacebuilding and research continues to explore the specific conditions and mechanisms that can enhance the effectiveness of environmental peacebuilding approaches. However, the evidence on the success of environmental peacebuilding mechanisms remains inconclusive. A review of intrastate environmental peacebuilding initiatives revealed that only 25% had an overall positive impact on peacebuilding objectives. In contrast, 16% had either no impact or a negative impact, with some initiatives even renewing or exacerbating conflict. Additionally, 44% of cases showed mixed effects, where environmental initiatives contributed positively to certain aspects of peace but negatively to others, complicating the assessment of their overall impact on the peacebuilding process (Johnson et al., 2021).

What are some of the gaps in the field of environmental peacebuilding in Latin America and the Caribbean?

- LAC shows underexplored interconnections between environmental management and peacebuilding efforts, as most research and programs in the region tend to focus on conflict and resource competition.
- Environmental peacebuilding in LAC is under-researched, with most studies focused on post-conflict Colombia, leaving other forms of violence, such as gender-based violence or organized crime, lacking data to inform policy.
- There is a disconnect between practitioners, policymakers, and academics around environmental peacebuilding discussions, which hampers the integration of practical experience and research into effective decision-making.

Many countries in LAC face similar challenges, including environmental degradation, climate vulnerability, social fragility, socioeconomic inequalities, political instability and socio-environmental conflicts, high crime rates and a pervasive sense of insecurity. The ACLED Conflict Severity Index (2023) lists several countries in the region among those experiencing conflict severity rates ranging from Moderate to Extreme, including Colombia, Mexico, Haiti, Venezuela, Brazil, Honduras and Guatemala. In some countries, high crime and homicides rates persists even in post-war or post-peace agreement contexts, such as El Salvador, Colombia, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru. Additionally, 13¹ of the 50 countries identified as most affected by the climate emergency are in the LAC region (OECD et al., 2022). According



Map 1 combines the ACLED Conflict Index, which evaluates conflict levels based on indicators such as deadliness, danger to civilians, geographic diffusion, and armed group fragmentation, with the Climate Risk Index. The latter integrates climate hazards—droughts, heat, and floods—alongside governance effectiveness. Together, these indices highlight regions experiencing intersecting risks of political violence and climate-related challenges.

¹ Those countries are: Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, Argentina, Paraguay, Haiti, Honduras, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

to the Climate Risk Index presented in Map 1, many countries in the region are highly exposed and vulnerable to climate hazards, particularly Venezuela, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

Despite these regional challenges and compounding risks, the interconnections between environmental management and peacebuilding efforts remain underexplored and sparsely integrated into policy and practice across the region. This presents a critical gap for scholars, policymakers and practitioners. The environmental peacebuilding field of research in a LAC context has received limited academic attention, leaving gaps in data and knowledge that could support decision-makers in addressing the intersections of environmental, climate, security, and peacebuilding issues. Ide (2023) notes that the environmental peacebuilding framework has been scarcely applied by scholars in LAC, despite the region's pressing environmental, violence and conflict challenges. Existing studies tend to focus narrowly on Colombia following the 2016 Peace Agreement, with only a few exceptions in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica (see Ide, 2023 for a systematic review of peer review literature). Notably, research in Mexico and Central America primarily examined transboundary water resource management, overlooking the broader internal security issues that also warrant attention.

The lack of academic focus on environmental peacebuilding in the region contrasts with the strong engagement of on-the-ground practitioners working in environmental conservation, resource management, and conflict prevention. For instance, in post-conflict Central American countries, the Central American Commission for Environment and Development (CCAD) has worked on environmental governance linked to peacebuilding (King et al., 2016). Similarly, in post-agreement Colombia environmental and resource management strategies are at the core of peacebuilding efforts (Valenzuela & Caicedo, 2018). However, the disconnect between these efforts and academic literature highlights a significant gap that needs to be addressed to integrate research and scientific evidence into policymaking to advance the field and foster integrated solutions in LAC.

Empowering communities to protect nature and enhance environmental governance

UNDP and the Bolivian National Ombudsman have developed a series of tools and mechanisms to support and strengthen the work of human rights and environmental activists. Specifically, capacity-building initiatives and the use of a smartphone app by local communities in the Amazon and lithium extraction areas have been implemented to monitor water contamination and gather information on socio-environmental safeguards. This data has also been integrated into the Ombudsman's Intelligent Conflict Prevention and Analysis System. This initiative has further led to the creation of a network of environmental activists at the local level, promoting the protection of Mother Earth, human rights, and indigenous peoples' rights to land and participation in decision-making.

The limited literature and knowledge gaps as well as the disconnect between practitioners, policymakers and academics in the field of environmental peacebuilding in the region can be attributed to several factors. First, there is often a divide and lack of communication between research and policies that look at environment and conflict, and those that focus on environmental management and peacebuilding. Secondly, many studies and programs tend to reflect assumptions of social relations as inherently conflictive and with an undue focus on violence, leading to a bias toward addressing resource competition and conflicts rather than emphasizing opportunities for cooperation and peacebuilding. Third, often policymakers and practitioners overlook the importance of peacebuilding in stable or low-conflict areas, viewing it as relevant only in cases of severe conflict escalation. This neglects the broader benefits of fostering cooperation and social cohesion in less overtly conflictive but vulnerable settings, overlooking the great conflict prevention potential that environmental peacebuilding has by addressing the root causes of tensions before they escalate.

The field of environmental peacebuilding has yet to fully address several pressing security and violence concerns prevalent across LAC. For instance, while much of the field emphasizes the role of environmental management in resolving inter-group conflicts, this focus does not necessarily extend to addressing the drivers of organized crime, petty violence, and social disparities at community level. Additionally, significant knowledge gaps remain regarding how environmental management policies and institutions can effectively combat corruption, enhance political representation, and strengthen legitimacy. Addressing these issues is crucial for developing more comprehensive, effective and context-specific approaches to environmental peacebuilding in the region.

What are some of the opportunities that can be harnessed through the adoption of an environmental peacebuilding approach in Latin America and the Caribbean?

- Local and indigenous knowledge and conceptions offer significant potential for integrating environmental management and peacebuilding in local contexts, enabling grass-root solutions to advise environmental peacebuilding in other regions.
- Incorporating local, bottom-up perspectives into policymaking can ensure conflict-sensitive, peace-responsive policies, helping to address local and regional challenges and problems.
- Environmental peacebuilding can provide a collaborative platform for stakeholders across sectors to address environmental challenges and promote peacebuilding efforts, especially in resource-conflict settings.

Despite existing knowledge gaps and the weak coordination between scholars, practitioners, and policymakers, the LAC region presents significant opportunities to advance environmental peacebuilding efforts. Greatest opportunities emerge from studying and analyzing local examples to identify commonalities and differences across various contexts. For instance, opportunities can be identified when analyzing how local collective action for environmental management fosters peacebuilding (Ide et al., 2023; Sändig et al., 2024). In addition, local solutions and indigenous knowledge offer untapped potential for better integration into research and policymaking processes, as well as project design, implementation and evaluation.

Understanding local conceptions of nature, environment, resources, politics, land and territory, cooperation and peace, and decision-making and participation, among many other constructs, can help researchers avoid ethnocentric interpretations of solutions while appreciating the relevance of homegrown strategies. For instance, studies such as Amador-Jimenez et al. (2024), Medina et al. (2024) and Siddiqi (2022) demonstrate the importance of enriching research in the field by proposing local solutions, participatory methods as well as highlighting local viewpoint of conflict and peace. This approach encourages researchers to move beyond traditional securitization and competition-based frameworks, introducing perspectives such as feminist, decolonial, or social learning theories to reshape the understanding of environmental peacebuilding.

Agroecological peasant schools in Colombia

Agroecological Peasant Schools (Escuelas Campesinas Agroecológicas or ECAs) in Colombia are grassroots initiatives that promote agroecological education and foster community solidarity among farmers. In the context of Colombia's ongoing post-conflict challenges, these schools have emerged as critical mechanisms for addressing socio-political, economic, and environmental crises in rural areas. ECAs enhance social cohesion by strengthening the associative capacities of farmers, improving agroecological practices, and contributing to the socio-economic recovery of conflict-affected regions. By fostering shared identities and collective action, ECAs play a vital role in building community resilience and advancing positive peace from the ground up.

(Chavez-Miguel et al. 2022)

Further research into local peacebuilding efforts through environmental management can also provide valuable insights for scholars and practitioners for building a more comprehensive theoretical framework, demonstrating the effectiveness of environmental peacebuilding and its application on a broader regional or global scale. Examining local contexts in LAC can validate the environmental peacebuilding pathways outlined in current literature while

also enhancing and refining the theoretical approach, increasing its applicability across diverse contexts. As such, peacebuilding efforts in LAC must address specific local challenges that cannot be directly compared to those in other regions. These include distinct forms of insecurity that go beyond traditional armed conflict. For instance, the expansion of organized crime, the lack of representation of local, Indigenous and Afro-Latin Americans communities in natural resource management, the inequality in land possession, the widespread mistrust in institutions due to government corruption and the strong presence of socioenvironmental conflicts. Taking into consideration these regional specificities is crucial for advancing both the theory and practice of environmental peacebuilding in LAC.

Incorporating local and bottom-up perspectives into environmental peacebuilding should also strengthen policy development in the region. By integrating academic research and practitioners' knowledge and experiences, policymakers can better design, implement, and evaluate policies, national plans, strategies and programs in a conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive manner to achieve their goals while ensuring positive spillover effects. A growing body of literature in some LAC countries underscores the value of evidence-based policymaking. Graser et al. (2020), Johnson et al. (2024), and Morales-Muñoz et al. (2021) demonstrate how efforts for strengthening environmental resource and risk management can be instrumental in shaping and evaluating policies across various sectors. For example, holistic programs such as the Buena Milpa project (Hellin, 2018) in Guatemala have demonstrated the capacity of leveraging cooperative environmental management to address various issues ranging from poverty, malnutrition, and climate vulnerability while contributing to tackle local violence and conflicts between local communities, extractive industries and governments. This illustrates how, in LAC contexts characterized by conflicts over natural resources, environmental action can be leveraged as a key contributor to peace and security. Local initiatives show that by addressing environmental challenges, it is possible to reduce tensions, strengthen state-society relations and enhance stability.

Consequently, an environmental peacebuilding approach also provides a platform for diverse, multi-level stakeholders to participate in policymaking processes. In comparison to the magnitude of insecurity challenges faced by the LAC region, public budgets and available funds dedicated to addressing environmental issues are relatively limited. In this context, how can environmental action be leveraged to contribute to security within broader government efforts that traditionally prioritize securitization and militarization? By exploring the nexus between environmental management and peacebuilding, stakeholders from different sectors—such as climate action, environmental management, biodiversity conservation, security, human mobility, humanitarian action and development—can collaborate more effectively. Additionally, focusing on local contexts can help bridge the gap between local actors and policymakers by promoting cooperation and prioritizing bottom-up processes that ensure local participation and empower communities.

Focusing on local contexts will also allow us to identify and learn from the existing governance mechanisms and spaces, which are often crucial for local governance. This is particularly evident in many Indigenous territories, where traditional institutions and authorities serve as the primary mechanisms for local governance. Recognizing and strengthening these traditional institutions is essential to ensuring environmental protection and social cohesion. For example, in Guatemala, with the signing of the 1996 Peace Agreement that ended the long-standing internal armed conflict, a process of rebuilding traditional indigenous representation and organizational structures took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These traditional Indigenous institutions have become the primary mechanisms for internal community participation, as well as for managing justice and protecting the environment.

What are some of the challenges of environmental peacebuilding in Latin America and the Caribbean?

- To avoid perpetuating existing grievances and conflicts, environmental peacebuilding efforts in LAC must address regional deep-rooted conflict drivers such as socioeconomic inequality, insecure land tenure, corruption, organized crime and high violence rates.
- Overcoming socioeconomic inequalities, political exclusion, and violence against environmental activists requires moving away from top-down approaches that risk reigniting social tensions and marginalizing vulnerable communities. Conducting conflict sensitivity assessments of environmental initiatives is a promising starting point for this goal.
- Environmental peacebuilding must consider its limitations in addressing deep regional structural issues, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches that account for broader socio-economic and political challenges.

Fostering environmental peacebuilding in LAC presents substantial opportunities, yet it is essential to overcome key challenges to unlock its full potential. Understanding specific local and regional complexities is essential to avoid what Ide (2020) calls the “Dark Side of Environmental Peacebuilding”. That is, the unintended reinforcement of the political and economic drivers of insecurity through environmental action. In LAC, it is essential to analyze these regional drivers as they manifest in local contexts to prevent environmental efforts from causing unintended consequences linked to structural violence and deeply rooted conflict drivers. The region faces a range of critical issues, including strong socioeconomic inequalities, political exclusion and polarization, the influence of transnational criminal organizations, land grabbing, high rates of violence against environmental activists, significant inequality in land access and insecure tenure rights, widespread corruption, institutional mistrust and a high rate of environmental crimes. Addressing these factors is crucial when developing environmental

peacebuilding initiatives that avoid perpetuating or exacerbating existing problems and, ideally, contribute to their mitigation.

At the regional level, historic Escazú Agreement was adopted in 2018 as a key tool to address some of these regional drivers and to catalyze climate governance and action from a human rights-based approach. The Treaty specifically aims to guarantee the full and effective implementation of the three rights: to access environmental information, for public participation in the environmental decision-making process, and to access justice in environmental matters. However, its ratification and implementation remain major concern. Out of 33 countries in Latin America, only 15 have ratified the Agreement, and even in those countries, its implementation has been inconsistent. For example, a mining concession granted last year in Panama, one of the first signatories of the agreement and which ratified it in March 2020, allegedly ignored the public consultation guidelines established in its terms, failing to inform citizens before the project's approval.

Failing to account for conflict drivers when evaluating the expected outcomes of environmental projects not only undermines the effectiveness of cooperative strategies but also risks perpetuating existing inequalities and conflict-prone conditions. In LAC, social dynamics such as militarization, forced displacement and the marginalization of minority groups are among the underlying factors that can interfere with environmental peacebuilding efforts. For instance, initiatives such as planned relocation strategies for environmental conservation, or top-down approaches that fail to engage historically marginalized communities, may overlook and rekindle existing social tensions and conflicts. Regional issues, such as the high rate of attacks and killings of environmental activists - particularly alarming in countries like Colombia, Mexico, Brazil and Honduras- highlight deeper structural problems. In brief, the socioeconomic and political drivers of environmental-related violence, such as corruption, economic inequalities, nepotism and the pervasive influence of organized crime must be acknowledged and consciously tackled through environmental action for peacebuilding outcomes to emerge.

Access to land is another historical long-standing and unresolved challenge in the region, with the highest land inequality rate in the world. According to Oxfam (2026), the largest 1% of farms hold more than half of the agricultural land. In other words, 1 per cent of farms control more land than the remaining 99 per cent. This has been at the heart of protracted armed conflicts like those experienced in Colombia or Peru, to local socioenvironmental conflicts over land access or natural resource exploitation. In some countries, these conflicts are nowadays the most significant in terms of both number and impact. For example, in Guatemala, the Agrarian Affairs Secretariat estimated that there were over 1,400 unresolved agrarian conflicts as of 2020, while in Peru, according to the Peruvian National Ombudsman in December 2023, more than 70% of all involved land access, natural resources, and territorial boundaries issues (Ombudsman's Office of Peru, Social Conflicts Report n° 238, December 2023). The limited capacity of states to address these land conflicts has led to the displacement of communities,

as well as persecution and murder of rural and indigenous leaders, illegal land grabbing, massive deforestation, and contamination of water sources.

On the other hand, there are examples where the recognition of Indigenous territories by public institutions as well as the protection of territories by communities have allowed for more sustainable management of the environment and natural resources, which, in turn, has contributed to greater governance and peace in these territories. One example of this can be found in the Guna Yala Comarca in Panama, where the collective ownership of their territory was legally recognized in 1930. Since then, the Guna Yala indigenous people have successfully managed and protected their natural resources and environment, where 80 per cent of their land remains forested (Martinez Mauri, 2011).

For this reason, it is crucial to emphasize the importance of conducting thorough conflict sensitivity assessments for environmental policies and projects. The concept of conflict sensitivity assessment begins with the recognition that humanitarian, development, and environmental activities are inherently linked to the peace and conflict dynamics of the contexts in which they are implemented (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2022). Conflict sensitivity assessment involves developing an understanding of the context in which policies and interventions are delivered, analyzing the relationship between the interventions and the context and thus preventing unintended consequences, as fostering peace through environmental cooperation is most effective when addressing deep-rooted conflict drivers (UN Climate Security Mechanism, 2020). Conflict assessments play a pivotal role in identifying these underlying issues. However, applying these assessments effectively in the unique context of LAC remains an area with significant room for further exploration and development.

Another significant challenge in the region is the capacity gaps of governmental institutions in implementing environmental peacebuilding efforts. Strengthening institutions through environmental action can indeed be a key mechanism for fostering peace. However, in the LAC context, where corruption is often perceived as widespread, this approach can backfire. For example, environmental initiatives perceived as exclusive and unsuccessful can erode trust and further diminish the legitimacy of the state. Moreover, when environmental peacebuilding strategies focus on empowering the state, they may inadvertently create opportunities for extractive industries to benefit from these same strengthened institutions. This can lead to grievances and social unrest among local populations, who may feel that their interests and environmental concerns are being ignored in favor of extractive purposes. Ensuring a balance between strengthening the state, fostering representation and accountability, and safeguarding local communities' rights and resources is crucial to the success of environmental peacebuilding in the region.

Finally, among other challenges that should be considered are the limitations of environmental management to resolve structural problems of the region, which exceed the potential of cooperative strategies of this kind. For instance, structural economic inequalities acting as conflict drivers in most LAC countries cannot always be addressed by solving problems of

equal access and fair management of natural resources. This is especially difficult in urban and industrialized contexts in which resource- and agricultural-based livelihoods are less prevalent than in rural areas. Similarly, security problems related to transnational criminal organizations and limited institutional capacities to confront illicit enterprises are generalized problems in the region that surpass the potential benefits of cooperative resource and environmental management. Likewise, other structural and concerning problems in the region with limited potential for environmental peacebuilding may include corruption in governmental institutions, restricted budget for enhancing public services or the high rates of unemployment and labor informality. These limitations underscore the need for environmental peacebuilding research to adopt a more integrated approach, considering the broader socio-economic and political contexts that influence both conflict dynamics and environmental management.

SireneJud: Combating deforestation and environmental crime in Brazil

UNDP and the Brazilian Judiciary have developed an electronic tool, SireneJud, to help tackle illegal and illicit drivers of deforestation. The tool overlays and cross-references data to show where environmental harm is taking place, what judicial processes are underway and generate alerts on environmental crimes. The intention is to strengthen the response of judicial and executive branch actors and inform evidence-based public policies and justice-sector interventions for environmental protection. As an open tool, Sirenejud assists civil society monitor deforestation contribute to the monitoring of Brazil's international commitments to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss.

Action Points for Environmental Peacebuilding in LAC: Strategic Priorities for UNFCCC COP29, UNCBD COP16, and UNCCD COP16

Reflections for UNFCCC COP29: Climate action strategies as an opportunity for environmental peacebuilding in Latin America and the Caribbean

In LAC, there is a notable disconnect between climate action plans and environmental peacebuilding, revealing gaps in scientific evidence and policymaking. National and regional climate adaptation strategies often overlook the potential peacebuilding outcomes that can arise from climate action programs. By ignoring the interconnection between environmental sustainability and social stability, current climate action efforts miss opportunities to enhance peace through initiatives aiming to prepare for climate change risks. This disconnection underscores the need to integrate environmental peacebuilding into climate adaptation

frameworks to better address the region's double burden of climate vulnerability and insecurity. A way forward is to promote conflict-sensitivity as a guiding principle in adaptation efforts by governments, international organizations and civil society associations.

Sarzana et al. (2022) or Scartozzi et al. (2023) have illustrated the importance and potential of enhancing the conflict-sensitivity and peace-responsiveness of climate finance and programs. They have developed programming tools such as the Climate Security Sensitiveness Tool (CSST) and the Climate Security Programming Dashboard for Climate Finance (CSPDxCF) to support these efforts. Likewise, Morales-Muñoz et al. (2022) highlights the potential for climate action and peacebuilding sectors to work together in developing conflict-sensitive approaches in land and water management, ecosystem restoration, and climate-smart agriculture. Such collaborations can yield co-benefits like stronger social cohesion and improved livelihoods, making the case for more coordinated efforts between these sectors. Together, these studies emphasize the importance of pursuing a “double dividend” or “co-benefit” where climate action strategies can also promote peace and stability in the region.

Additionally, UNDP (2023) also highlights how findings from the field demonstrate that adaptation processes can contribute to peacebuilding by (i) incentivizing communities suffering conflict to engage in dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution; (ii) fostering cooperation rather than conflict in cases of increased competition over natural resources and promote social cohesion. (iii) designing adaptation strategies to seize any plausible opportunity to deliver peacebuilding co-benefits, whenever feasible.

Reflections for UNCBD COP16: Biodiversity conservation as an opportunity for environmental peacebuilding efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean

Conflict and biodiversity loss are deeply intertwined, often creating a feedback loop that intensifies both issues. Conflicts harm biodiversity through habitat destruction, overexploitation of natural resources and increased pollution, heavily undermining the wellbeing and livelihoods of communities. This loss of biodiversity can, in turn, lead to food insecurity, loss of income-generating activities, health problems, and increased competition over natural resources, potentially fueling further conflict. Nevertheless, the potential for peacebuilding through biodiversity conservation remains less explored in the literature, particularly with limited case studies from LAC. Specifically, there is an opportunity to explore how ongoing processes of social mobilization for environmental justice and population demands for wider representation in environmental management can be leveraged towards peace and social cohesion.

Drawing from pioneering studies as Matthew et al. (2002) and new studies as Rist et al. (2024), some key insights can inform research opportunities that explore the under-studied relationship between biodiversity conservation and peacebuilding in LAC. Biodiversity conservation and peacebuilding should be addressed simultaneously, as the sustainable management of biological resources can contribute to both environmental and social stability.

Cooperative and regulated access to these resources can help ensure equitable sharing of benefits, thus preventing or addressing potential grievances.

In settings affected by violence, planned biodiversity conservation efforts can have positive effects, as protecting biodiversity fosters cooperation, trust, and resilience among communities. Additionally, promoting shared environmental goals, such as biodiversity conservation, can serve as a foundation for peace and strengthen relations among communities, extractive industries, governments and neighboring states. Greater scientific evidence and local case studies demonstrating how biodiversity conservation strategies perceived as environmentally just may foster peacebuilding are required to inform policymakers in designing effective strategies for conflict prevention and resource management.

Reflections for UNCCD COP16: Addressing desertification and land degradation as an opportunity for environmental peacebuilding efforts in Latin America and the Caribbean

In different parts of LAC, such as the Central American Dry Corridor or the Gran Chaco, strongly affected by desertification, the connections between land degradation, peace and conflict are often overlooked, leading to missed opportunities for environmental peacebuilding strategies. The pressures of resource scarcity –heavily aggravated by an unequal distribution–, soil degradation, and desertification can exacerbate tensions and fuel instability, particularly in communities that depend on agriculture and natural resources. Yet, many land restoration and sustainable land management programs fail to consider the potential peacebuilding benefits of addressing desertification challenges. By neglecting the connection between land degradation, peace and conflict, these programs often miss the opportunity to reduce instability and foster social cohesion in the region. To fully address the impacts of desertification, it is crucial to integrate conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive approaches into sustainable land use management efforts, ensuring that peacebuilding is a core component of environmental sustainability strategies.

The UNCCD has recognized the links between land use management, desertification and land degradation, and how efforts to jointly address these issues can be leveraged for environmental peacebuilding. Through the flagship program Peace Forest Initiative (PFI) launched in 2019, UNCCD has supported efforts to address ecosystem restoration in fragile and conflict-affected regions. The PFI focuses on restoring land, soil, water, and forests while promoting transboundary cooperation, fostering trust and peace among communities that share natural resources. For this purpose, the PFI promotes collaboration among stakeholders to co-manage shared resources such as land, soil, water, and forests, aiming to build peace and resilience. The initiative engages local actors to design activities that boost community resilience and sustainable development, with the goal of developing long-term restoration projects. The UNCCD provides technical support and seed funding, and the Global Mechanism has already identified 17 potential sites across 44 countries for implementation.

Recommendations

Despite the growing evidence on the complex nexus between environmental, climate, security, and peacebuilding issues as well as the increasing acknowledgment on the interconnected environmental and peacebuilding opportunities in LAC, communities and institutions working in the environment, climate change, development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding fields are still grappling with how to effectively address and navigate these issues. This policy brief outlines a set of recommendations designed to help overcome these obstacles and enhance environmental peacebuilding efforts in LAC:

1. Produce stronger locally based evidence to close the gaps in understanding the connections between environmental management and peacebuilding opportunities in LAC contexts.
2. Prioritize community participation by integrating indigenous knowledge, local perspectives, and participatory methods into the design, implementation and evaluation of environmental peacebuilding projects, ensuring they reflect the needs of affected communities throughout the project lifecycle.
3. Integrate environmental peacebuilding principles into funding criteria and allocation processes of international climate finance mechanisms, prioritizing funding for projects that address the drivers of conflicts and security risks, incentivizing cross-sectoral collaboration and dialogue between governments, civil society, international organizations, and private sector, and incorporating conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding criteria in climate financing.
4. Encourage stronger collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and on-the-ground practitioners to integrate research findings into policy frameworks, ensuring that academic research is well aligned to support policymakers and drives evidence-based action.
5. Facilitate collaboration between diverse stakeholders, including governments, civil society, international organizations, and local communities, to ensure that actors from various sectors like climate action, conflict prevention, and development consider environmental peacebuilding strategies as a possible roadmap to implement.
6. Strengthening the capacity building offer on the environment, climate, peace, and security nexus, enabling public institutions and civil society to expand their knowledge and awareness to promote more integrated strategies and interventions that support environmental peacebuilding efforts in LAC.

7. Conduct systematic analyses of existing environmental policies and programs across LAC through the lens of environmental peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity, with the goal of generating lessons and recommendations for environmental action to contribute to peace.
8. Explore evidence-based approaches to recognize and address underlying political and structural drivers of insecurity, such as corruption, marginalization, and the influence of transnational criminal organizations, through environmental action as a core strategy for environmental peacebuilding.
9. Promote thorough peace and conflict sensitivity assessments before implementing environmental projects, programs and policies, to identify potential drivers of conflict and/or cooperation, avoiding doing harm, and tailoring interventions to local political, social, and environmental contexts.

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CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

The Alliance of Bioversity-CIAT and the CGIAR FOCUS Climate Security

The Alliance of Bioversity and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) has worked for decades in addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, and malnutrition to deliver research-based solutions that harness agricultural biodiversity and sustainably transform food systems to improve people's lives. The solid experience and expertise of the Alliance of Bioversity & CIAT on climate, land, water, and food systems science as well as its well-established multidisciplinary approaches makes it a strategic partner for delivering research-based integrated solutions that contribute to building systemic resilience by addressing climate, humanitarian, and security crises.

The growing evidence on the interlinkages between climate change, food security, human mobility, conflict, and security led the creation of the CGIAR FOCUS Climate Security, which aims to address gaps in knowledge about climate change and food security for peace and security policies and operations through a unique multidisciplinary approach. Our main objective is to align evidence from the realms of climate, land, and food systems science with peacebuilding efforts already underway that address socio-political security, stability, and peace through evidence-based environmental, political, and socio-economic solutions.



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The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Founded in 1965, UNDP is a United Nations agency tasked with helping countries eliminate poverty and achieve sustainable economic growth and human development. With expertise in climate change, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, governance, gender equality, and finance, UNDP's work on climate security ensures the climate-proofing of conflict prevention and peacebuilding efforts. It brings together people and resources to foster resilient communities and advance sustainable development. UNDP contributes with a Climate and Security Risk Global Team, Climate Security Regional Advisors across the globe, and Nature and Environment and Governance Regional Teams, as well as more than 170 Country Offices to support states and societies in addressing the climate, peace, and security challenges.



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