

THE PEACEBUILDING PROMISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

**LESSONS ON ENVIRONMENT,
CLIMATE CHANGE, SECURITY
AND PEACEBUILDING**

Practice paper



THE PEACEBUILDING PROMISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT: LESSONS ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE, SECURITY AND PEACEBUILDING

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Cover photo: Journalists and peace and environmental activists hiking to raise awareness of the impact of climate change and conflict in Pakistan-administered Kashmir. In this photo they are working with communities to show how water resources of alpine pastures can be preserved by rainwater harvesting structures in Seemari Valley. © MD Mughal.

INTRODUCTION

Increasing evidence highlights the links between the climate crisis, environmental degradation, and conflict and insecurity. However, there is the potential to not just mitigate this but effectively harness environmental management for both peacebuilding and environmental outcomes.

Emerging climate security analysis highlights how changes to the environment, compounded by climate change impacts, will amplify existing vulnerabilities, grievances and exclusions, potentially exacerbating conflict and impacting stability and security globally.¹ While conflicts have long been linked to the management of natural resources – 40% of civil wars since 1950 have been related to natural resources in some way² – today's global conflicts underscore this point dramatically. Threats to desalination plants in West Asia, the destruction of water infrastructure in Gaza, and strikes on the Kakhovka Dam in Ukraine highlight the environmental consequences of violent conflict, despite considerations of environmental consequences enshrined under international humanitarian law (IHL).

Research by Conciliation Resources shows that it is not just the physical effects of the global climate crisis, but the human responses to these which can exacerbate tensions, decrease resilience and increase violence.

Meanwhile, conflict itself can influence environmental degradation and damage natural resource management systems (whether deliberately targeted or as indirect consequences of armed violence). Conflict also weakens the resilience of communities to manage climate impacts.³

Meaningfully addressing conflict in the context of environmental and climate impacts requires understanding *how* managing environmental issues⁵ can lead to peace dividends. The growing fields of environmental peacebuilding and climate security highlight the interest in and relevance of these issues. Climate security approaches focus on the direct and indirect impacts of environment and climate change on national and global security; for example, the links between reduction in available resources, movements of people, and amplified grievances and conflict drivers. Environmental peacebuilding⁶ approaches emphasise that the sustainable and inclusive management of natural resources can prevent and mitigate conflicts exacerbated by environmental pressures, increase social cohesion and support peacebuilding processes.⁷ However, while environmental management has the potential to support conflict transformation, this does not occur automatically.

BOX 1: UNDERSTANDING THE CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT, CONFLICT AND PEACE INTERSECTION

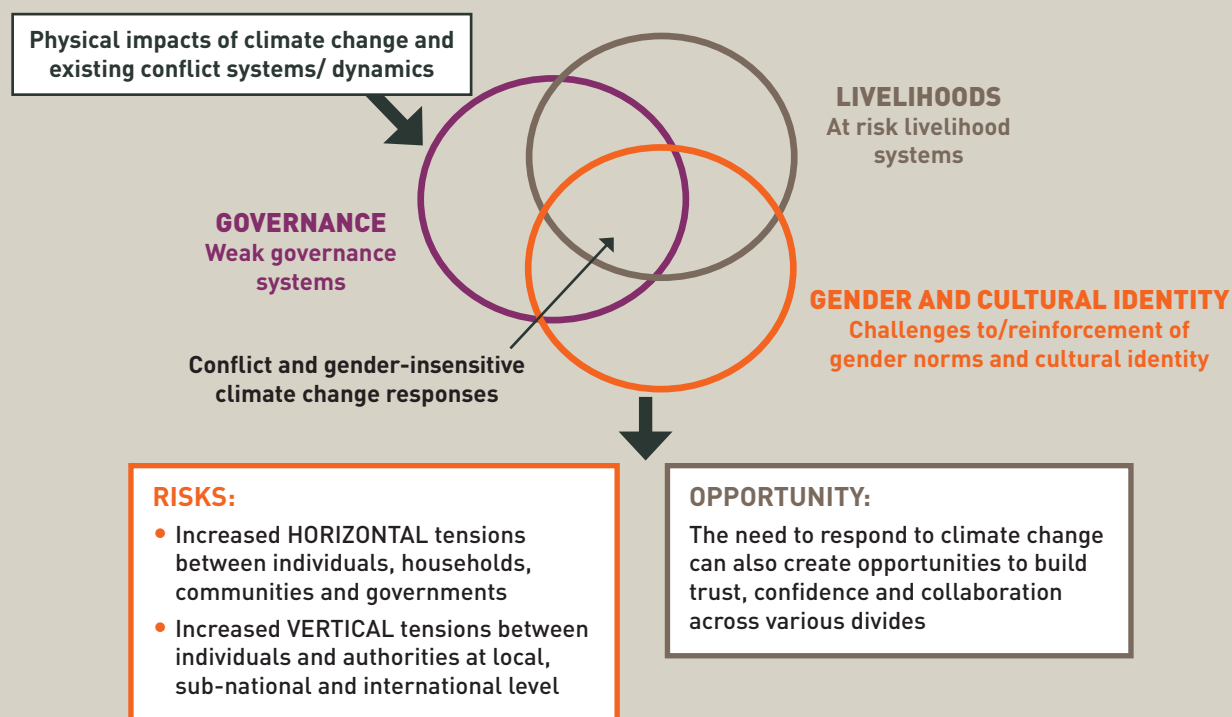
In previous practice papers, Conciliation Resources has shared our understanding of the interactions between climate change, conflict and peace, and how peacebuilding can tackle the unique challenges that arise. For instance, floods and droughts can devastate agricultural productivity and weaken the capacity of already fragile institutions in conflict vulnerable areas, exacerbating conflict over scarce resources and increasing vulnerability to violent extremism.⁴ Climate adaptations themselves, such as flood protection infrastructure, agricultural land conservation or managed relocation, may lead to increased social tensions.

Figure 1 on the next page highlights some of the ways in which environmental changes can exacerbate conflict risks. Through the lenses of governance, livelihoods, and gender and cultural identity, it is possible to examine the contextually specific nuances to these intersecting challenges and understand the role of human responses in shaping these risks.

Gender and cultural identity shape vulnerability and responses to the climate crisis, which can impact conflict dynamics. An understanding of this is fundamental to any successful response. In [Gender, cultural identity, conflict and climate change](#), we share our methodology for participatory gender, climate and conflict analysis as well as findings from piloting this in our programming contexts.

Specific contextual analysis on the links between climate change, conflict and peacebuilding published by Conciliation Resources include [Peace and security for pastoralist communities in African borderlands](#) and [Climate change and peacebuilding in Fiji](#).

Figure 1: Common issues at the intersection of climate change and conflict



Further detail can be found in Conciliation Resources' report, [A changing climate for peace](#).

BOX 2: THE PEACEBUILDING PROMISE OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Environmental peacebuilding approaches often suggest that environmental issues offer a neutral or low-stakes peacebuilding entry point, as environmental cooperation can happen at a technical level and may be less politically sensitive.⁸ As issues that sit across political and geographical borders, they are seen as 'universal challenges' which encourage longer-term thinking.

Environmental cooperation can be framed as a win-win solution where mutual benefits outweigh the zero-sum logic of conflict,⁹ and therefore can offer an incentive for engagement and build trust and confidence between communities and strategic leadership.¹⁰ This can strengthen institutions that support dialogue and conflict management, creating opportunities for dialogue that also reinforce environmental management, establishing a self-sustaining 'virtuous cycle'.¹¹

This practice paper seeks to further understand and demonstrate how spillover from environmental management and cooperation can support conflict transformation.¹² It highlights lessons to inform environmental peacebuilding practitioners and

researchers working at multiple levels, including formal and informal, outsider and insider mediators operating at national and community levels. It also makes the case for this work in a wider donor and policy environment, recognising how conflict transformation needs to be embedded within wider climate security framings.

Methodology

Drawing on Conciliation Resources' programming work, this practice paper builds upon our previous analysis and publications. Considering the questions of where and when the engagement of environmental issues may be productive (and counterproductive) to peacebuilding purposes, and what design elements can enable environmental and peacebuilding interventions to support conflict transformation, it highlights interventions implemented by Conciliation Resources in close collaboration with partners across Asia and the Pacific, South Asia, the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and East and Central Africa.

Individual and comparative learning workshops were held to reflect on analysis, theories of change and experiences of programming on the environment, climate change and peacebuilding. Context-specific analyses were brought together to help identify common lessons across contexts, and to refresh a cross-contextual framework of how Conciliation Resources works towards conflict transformation in its environment and peacebuilding initiatives.



SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Context matters when seeking to intervene on joint environmental and conflict challenges. Specific conditions are needed for these interventions to lead successfully to conflict transformation outcomes, and in some cases environment-focused initiatives may exacerbate conflict dynamics. Where there is space to support environmental and peacebuilding goals, interventions may differ significantly depending on whether they are seeking to reduce, prevent or resolve environmental conflict drivers, or to provide an entry point for wider peacebuilding objectives (or a combination of these).

It is essential to identify where and when environmental interventions may better support peacebuilding purposes and intentionally consider the approach to take. For environmental interventions to positively impact conflict, they need to address not only the symptoms of conflict but also grapple with underlying power relations central to the drivers of conflict. In some cases, interventions may help to directly resolve or address conflicts exacerbated or caused by environmental pressures. Environmental cooperation may also serve as an entry point to start or unblock a peace process. In other contexts, they may be counterproductive to peacebuilding goals.

BOX 3: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN ENABLING FUNDING AND POLICY ENVIRONMENT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

1. Fund and facilitate holistic analysis which considers environmental and conflict risks and opportunities.
2. Provide a mandate for internal and external coordination between environmental and peacebuilding teams, departments and agencies.
3. Embed a focus on conflict transformation into wider climate security framings and responses.
4. Fund and facilitate locally specific and locally led environment and peacebuilding solutions.
5. Respect and centre traditional and local knowledge and practice.
6. Incentivise and enable connections between different spaces of engagement on environmental and conflict issues.

Drawing on Conciliation Resources' programming work, this paper has identified a number of lessons relevant to practitioners and researchers working on the connections between climate, environment, conflict and peacebuilding.

1 Intentionally designed environmental management and cooperation practices can support peacebuilding approaches at local, national and international levels.

Interventions that address this intersection are highly varied and can include community-based work to strengthen cohesion and inclusion, interventions to improve governance and inclusion in decision-making processes, and development of confidence-building measures as part of dialogue processes. Intentional design is needed to ensure connections between environmental outcomes and the peacebuilding space. This includes utilising the most appropriate framing to achieve intended objectives. Specific lessons include:

- Environmental solutions can strengthen cohesion at a local level and address exclusion.
- Rooting technical environmental management solutions in customary, traditional and religious knowledge can strengthen community buy-in as well as impact.
- Environmental cooperation can support dialogue efforts when intentionally linked into longer-term peacebuilding efforts.
- Knowing when and how to use environmental management language and framing can impact peacebuilding outcomes.

2 To address conflict drivers, environmental and peacebuilding interventions need to engage with underlying power relations and powerholders rather than remain purely technical.

Environmental and peacebuilding interventions are inherently political and should therefore intentionally engage with underlying power relations and powerholders. Failing to do so can exacerbate underlying conflict dynamics instead of addressing them. However, in taking into account power dynamics, it is possible to address inclusion and take transformative approaches which shift the underlying exclusions. Specific lessons include:

- Environmental issues are intertwined with broader conflict drivers, including economic and religious factors.
- Environmental interventions can be an opportunity for more inclusive decision-making.
- Climate pressures can shift power dynamics, creating opportunities to strengthen inclusion while also fuelling tensions.
- Recognising that environmental resources themselves can be a source of material power and cultural authority can help to address underlying sources of tension.
- Engaging traditional powerholders can ensure buy-in for interventions and their outcomes.

3 Holistic programming across multiple levels and spaces is more likely to achieve long-lasting peacebuilding and environmental outcomes.

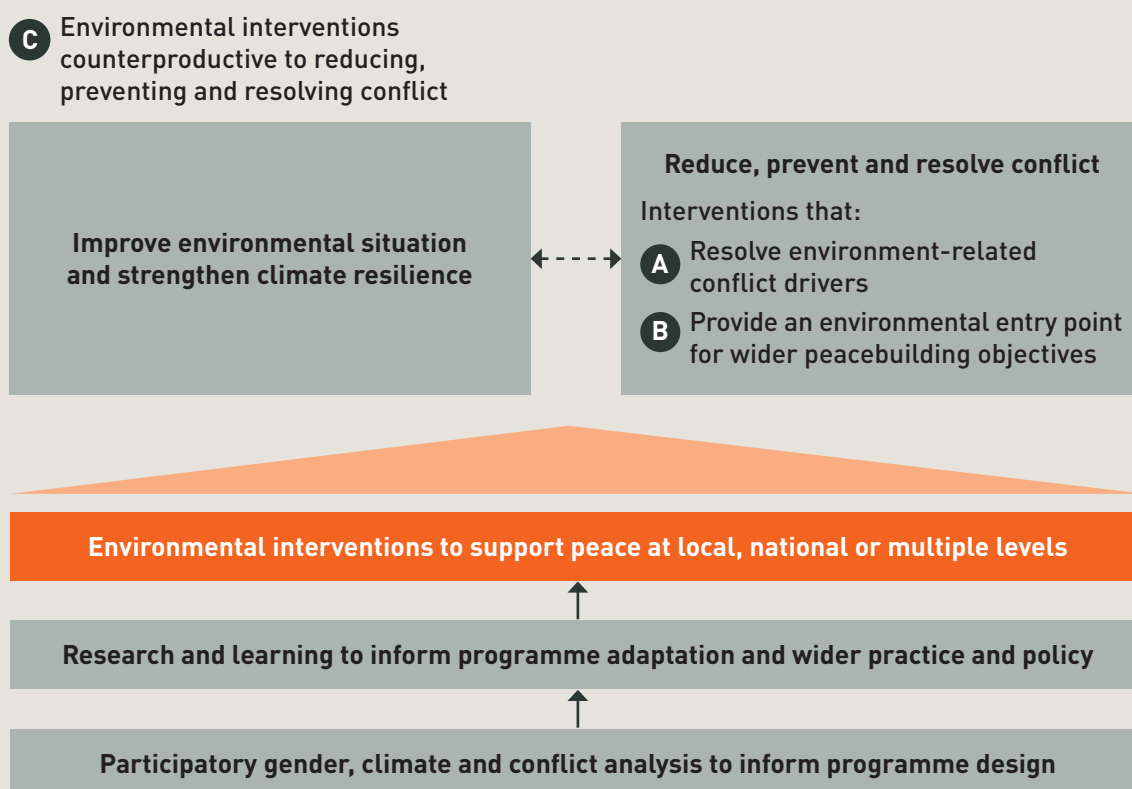
Peacebuilding practice shows that interventions that connect different spaces, and consider connections between different stakeholders, are effective. This is equally valid in considering how environmental management interventions can be used to support peacebuilding. Specific lessons include:

- Connecting stakeholders from the top-down and bottom-up can break down silos and be mutually reinforcing.
- Convening environmental management and strategic/policy stakeholders in peace processes can leverage the benefits of environmental solutions.

WHEN AND WHERE TO INTERVENE? UNDERSTANDING THE ENVIRONMENT- CONFLICT INTERACTION

Context matters when seeking to intervene on joint environmental and conflict challenges. Analysis on the ways in which environment and conflict interact should inform interventions that seek to have both environmental and peace outcomes (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mutually reinforcing environmental and peace outcomes



Specific conditions are needed for these interventions to lead to conflict transformation outcomes. Conciliation Resources utilises a participatory gender, climate and conflict analysis approach that recognises the complex interaction between climate factors, gender and cultural identity, and social inequality and conflict. This helps us understand how specific environmental issues impact different groups and contribute to conflict, whether they meet different conditions for supporting peacebuilding goals, and whether interventions can resolve conflict drivers, unblock a wider peace process, or be counterproductive. Continuously updating an understanding of underlying social, economic, cultural and political drivers of conflict is a necessary step in supporting spillover benefits.

If there is the opportunity for interventions to support peacebuilding goals, how they do so may differ in different scenarios. Different interventions may seek to reduce, prevent or resolve environmental conflict drivers (A in Figure 2), or provide an entry point for wider peacebuilding objectives (B in Figure 2). These categories are not always entirely distinct. For example, an intervention that creates a dialogue space for communities to tackle tensions over shared resources may also serve to model more cooperative ways of working that can be broadened to address other conflict drivers.

Environmental and peacebuilding interventions can support conflict transformation when they directly resolve environment-related conflict drivers (A in Figure 2). For example, community peace committees set up along the border of Somalia and Ethiopia's Somali Regional State have helped pastoralists and farmers to manage scarce resources jointly and more effectively. Droughts and floods have resulted in increased movement of pastoralists and livestock, resulting in clashes with traditional farming communities over dwindling land resources. Reduced river flow along the Shabelle River has also led to increased tension over flood-retreated fertile riverbanks. Community peace committees have supported governments and communities to develop joint action plans to respond to competition over resources and address the links between climate change and conflict. These committees also offer women, young people, and representatives from minority clans a rare platform to raise concerns with other power brokers. In doing so, the peace committees have helped to fill gaps in local peace infrastructure that had been weakened due to conflict, limited cross-border coordination, and reduced trust between communities.

Directly resolving conflict exacerbated by environmental pressures is more likely to be successful if stakeholders see some benefit in managing the conflict, and if there is a shared interest in addressing the negative impacts of the environmental issue. Managing the environmental issue should provide positive paths forward and have reciprocal risks and benefits. Crucially, however, there is sometimes still scope to address environment-related conflict drivers head on, even if they are the most contentious conflict issue and highly politicised, or if conflict actors benefit from environmental drivers of conflict – see lessons in the following section.

If conditions allow, environmental cooperation can create an entry point or act as a confidence-building measure (CBM) to unblock a wider peace process (B in Figure 2). In some situations, introducing environmental issues as a topic for discussion and potential collaboration may help to start or restart a formal dialogue or peace process between conflict parties. At some points in a peace process, engagement on an environmental issue might simply be keeping a space open for engagement between conflict parties even if other pathways may be closed. Engaging on environmental issues to start or unblock a peace process works best when there are issues that can provide 'quick wins', or that conflict parties can readily agree on.¹³ Environmental entry points are also more likely to succeed if the environmental issue fits a political 'Goldilocks' zone, where there is sufficient political interest from all sides to engage on the issue, but it is not so politicised that parties find it difficult to engage.¹⁴

Air pollution in South Asia, particularly the high levels experienced in cities like Lahore and New Delhi, provides an example of an environmental issue that could offer a pathway for diplomatic engagement as an environmental entry point. Despite historical instances where domestic narratives have blamed neighbouring countries, the issue has generally avoided becoming heavily politicised. Its cyclical nature allows for yearly peaks when the issue is most evident on the broader political agenda and therefore when opportunities may exist for greater cooperation. This is evidenced by so-called 'smog diplomacy', including the call for unity in addressing air pollution made by Pakistan's Chief Minister of Punjab, Maryam Nawaz Sharif in 2024. While regional and bilateral engagement on this matter remains limited, the worsening shared crisis presents a potential future space for dialogue, which has largely been sidelined to date.

Environmental cooperation is more likely to be a successful confidence-building measure if it can be framed as a win-win rather than zero-sum situation. For instance, in water management, focusing and reframing discussions on water *quality* can create win-win opportunities, moving away from a focus on water *quantity*, which may lead to a zero-sum mindset due to the fixed amount of water available to divide between competing interests.¹⁵ A win-win situation is also one that effectively engages and factors in underlying power and gender dynamics, such as the role of formal and informal powerholders.

However, environmental interventions can sometimes prove counterproductive to peacebuilding objectives, even if environmental factors are driving the conflict (C in Figure 2). In such instances, alternative peacebuilding strategies may be more appropriate, and any environmental intervention should seek only to improve the environmental situation through technical solutions, outside of the peacebuilding realm. Structural power imbalances may prevent essential stakeholders from engaging, or lead to them exploiting environmental issues in order to tighten their control or draw in additional stakeholders, making meaningful cooperation highly challenging. In some contexts, the role of natural resources and conflict minerals in conflict management can be highly sensitive, in part due to the involvement of vested interests both domestically and internationally, and a complicated landscape of stakeholders and geopolitical considerations.¹⁶ Directly working on issues surrounding the mining of critical minerals in some contexts may therefore reinforce exclusionary power dynamics, potentially fuelling further conflict. Environmental and climate issues may be perceived as too separate to conflict drivers within a specific context and therefore will lack resonance, which may lead to a 'climate-peace trade-off' where environmental issues are omitted from processes.¹⁷



Participants at a workshop in Naviavia, Fiji. © Transcend Oceania

The interaction between the environment, climate change and conflict is not static. Environmental issues that once presented as ‘low-hanging fruit’ for dialogue and provided pathways for consensus can become securitised or politicised. Responding to changed realities can include reframing, where politically contentious issues may be discussed in broad umbrella terms, or exploring entirely new entry points. In other situations, engagement on environmental issues may be beneficial for some time, but can then become a blocker for dialogue, at which point new avenues for dialogue should be explored.

The issue of water management between India and Pakistan demonstrates this non-linear trajectory. In the past, despite contextual challenges, water cooperation was seen as an area where potential consensus could be built. Following the Pahalgam terror attack in May 2025 and subsequent Indian unilateral abeyance of the Indus Water Treaty, the issue has become more highly politicised.¹⁸ As a result, the potential of water as an entry point to broader dialogue has been reduced, and discussions touching on the treaty have become politically untenable. This shift from an environmental issue that could once have been considered a potential entry point, to zero-sum attitudes and securitisation, is illustrative of where specific framings of environmental management could do more harm than good from a peacebuilding perspective.

Continuous monitoring is essential to analyse the actual pathways between environmental cooperation and peacebuilding outcomes, rather than just assuming them, and to inform adaptation to this changing context. The development of strong theories of change can help to focus this monitoring by surfacing any assumptions made about cooperation and identifying potential risks. At the same time, analysis and monitoring processes need to be flexible enough to respond to the changing context and identify unexpected side effects. This requires the creation of regular processes and shared spaces for critical perspectives to emerge and for collaborative learning that can support ongoing adaptation to changing dynamics. Failure to do this risks interventions inadvertently solidifying power asymmetries and exacerbating conflict dynamics.

HOW TO INTERVENE? DESIGNING ENVIRONMENTAL AND PEACEBUILDING INTERVENTIONS TOWARDS CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Where there is space for environmental work to support conflict transformation, environmental initiatives require intentional and holistic design. Lessons learned from Conciliation Resources' work on environment and peacebuilding are outlined below.

1. Intentionally designed environmental management and cooperation practices can support peacebuilding approaches at local, national and international levels

Environmental solutions can strengthen cohesion at a local level and address exclusion

By engaging in meaningful consultative processes between technical stakeholders and local communities, environmental solutions can support more inclusive engagement and strengthen community cohesion.

In Kashmir, despite clear vulnerabilities to the impacts of climate change, decision-making primarily exists at a national level and local decision-makers are often ill-equipped, with weak governance and a lack of funding resources. Community documentation highlights continued environmental concerns, especially regarding melting glaciers, and reflects persistent worries about the sustainability of their land and livelihoods. Conciliation Resources and partners work to create spaces for community engagement with the national and local authorities and support more inclusive consultations on climate issues with the aim of promoting greater understanding and more informed policy responses. In this context, climate action represents a fairly low-risk, gender- and conflict-sensitive entry point to less culturally and politically contentious issues, and provides an opportunity to increase the access and profile of vulnerable groups in leading community action.

Rooting technical environmental management solutions in customary, traditional and religious knowledge can strengthen community buy-in as well as impact

Customary and traditional knowledge about the environment can sometimes be overlooked in favour of scientific and technical knowledge, but involving custodians of traditional knowledge in developing solutions builds buy-in and strengthens the sustainability of agreements.

In the Central African Republic (CAR), Conciliation Resources initiated conversations between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders/cattle keepers to manage finite resources needed for both land and cattle pasture. The agreement between both parties rested on local and traditional knowledge of usage of the land; for instance, the borders of the herding corridors were based on recognised landmarks (such as specific trees or natural boundaries) and a traditional understanding of how to manage the land.

In Fiji, drawing on traditional knowledge in the relocation of communities can help minimise tensions that emerge from climate-induced relocation. Earlier relocation efforts created tension between communities being relocated, and communities who have traditional claims over seemingly vacant land allocated for relocation. Relocation sites selected by the government were not always conducive to livelihoods for the relocating community (for example, a traditionally coastal community moving inland and having to adapt to a new way of life). This resulted in community frustrations that spilt over into tension. Community advocate workshops were held to create a space for relocating communities to integrate traditional and customary knowledge into relocation decisions and to build trust.¹⁹ This included using traditional familiarity with the usual pathways of cyclones and land management claims to advise on more favourable relocation sites. Communities were able to raise culturally-relevant suggestions and design elements in proposed relocation sites to manage floods and heavy winds, and source food sustainably, which would help mitigate frustrations over relocation.

In Kashmir, the ongoing conflict undermines local communities' capacity and agency. Climate crises are often exploited to advance national political objectives, fitting within a dominant framework that emphasises 'foreign agendas'. To foster greater ownership of sustainable community resilience efforts, Conciliation Resources and its partners strategically framed these conversations using the Islamic principle of collective responsibility. By working with *Molana* (Islamic scholars) from multiple mosques to include lessons around environmental degradation in Friday prayers, the protection of natural resources, afforestation, eco-friendly tourism and sustainable living principles were emphasised. By anchoring environmental responsibility and sustainable practices within the local religious and cultural context, this work has successfully enhanced community knowledge and understanding, simultaneously supporting the elevation of environmental issues onto the local political agenda and making engagement on these issues more acceptable for local government.

However, in considering environmental interventions, it is important to recognise potential trade-offs between short-term and long-term impacts. Peacebuilding solutions can negatively contribute to climate and environmental stress, and agreed-upon traditional and customary environment strategies may not always be sustainable. In West Africa, as growing seasons have become less predictable due to climate change, the traditional understanding of hybrid land use, where the same land is used at different times of the year for farming and grazing, was lost. To manage growing tensions between pastoralists and herders over shared land use, communities agreed to demarcate a portion of land solely for year-round grazing and other land for year-round crop production. However, this requires irrigation farming, which can exacerbate water shortages in downstream locations as water is diverted for irrigation, and potentially contribute to a conflict situation elsewhere. In addition, year-round agricultural production relies heavily on chemical fertilisers and herbicides, which can leech into water sources and cause pollution. Taking an environmental and peacebuilding lens therefore needs to consider the indirect and/or long-term impacts of potential solutions, based on the local context.

Environmental cooperation can support dialogue efforts when intentionally linked with longer-term peacebuilding efforts

In several contexts, Conciliation Resources has supported dialogue processes that bring together strategic and technical expertise to explore tangible confidence-building measures (CBMs) utilising environmental entry points. Using these traditionally 'softer' environmental entry points can be an effective opportunity to build trust, particularly as they can be seen as less threatening to participants, including those with political profiles, and provide them with a welcome cover to also engage with one another around more contested issues.

Yet past experience has shown that CBMs can fail if they lack technical feasibility or do not effectively address what is politically acceptable in a context. On the one hand, solely political environmental discussions are often challenging and end without constructive solutions or practical pathways forward. On the other hand, exclusively technical environmental knowledge focuses the dialogue on practical solutions, but can lack nuance on political sensitivities. While it is commonly assumed that technical experts represent a neutral position, experience highlights that their expertise and approach to dialogue is often informed by a specific political position. Trust-building is therefore an important part of ensuring effective dialogue engagement. Bringing together technical and strategic interlocutors can help to develop politically tenable and technically sound proposals for CBMs that can effectively strengthen trust between parties.

Strong technical understanding is key to devising practical, incremental steps that serve as a neutral starting point for engagement and can facilitate gradual change. For example, while a long-term goal to tackle air pollution in South Asia could be a regional approach to minimum basic standards and operational transboundary cooperation under the Malé Declaration, initial steps could include specific research into transborder pollution or raising public awareness through campaigns to elevate the issue's prominence in political discourse. The quick wins achieved through these incremental technical steps can build trust and allow for necessary adjustments to adapt to shifting conflict dynamics and on-the-ground realities. Showcasing these constructive successes can then support further engagement and demonstrate the positive outcomes of participating in dialogue processes.

Knowing when and how to use environmental management language and framing can affect the relevance of the topics to stakeholders and communities

While technical solutions on the environment can create openings for peacebuilding, using the language of 'environment' and/or 'climate change' can support or conversely block peacebuilding outcomes. In Bougainville, climate change is not always recognised as a driver of conflict. Our partners used conflict analysis tools as a vehicle for dialogue, working alongside communities to conduct community-led conflict analysis. By framing environmental issues in the context of conflict, issues such as contested and unclear land ownership and water management emerged more readily, creating a space for directly addressing environment-related conflict drivers. In some cases, raising awareness of the role of climate change helped to ease tensions, by reframing climate impacts as a shared issue rather than deliberate harm caused by other communities. In some communities, climate impacts like prolonged drought, changing migration patterns of fishing stocks, and rivers



changing course, have sometimes been attributed to sorcery rather than climate change. This exacerbates tensions, as sorcery is blamed on specific individuals within communities and is sometimes deliberately instrumentalised by conflict actors around land disputes (known as sorcery accusation-related violence).

In contrast, in the tri-border region between Uganda, South Sudan and Kenya, dialogues facilitated by Conciliation Resources focused on language that avoided the specific environmental issue of land management. While unclear land ownership and border demarcations are a contributing factor to the conflict, land governance and management issues may activate broader nationalistic narratives. As such, the framing of resource sharing in cross-border community dialogues was kept strictly focused on access to water and pasture, and local peace committees were able to agree on shared usage solutions. This included engaging herders and sedentary farmers to anticipate potential cattle movements, thereby pre-empting potential conflict over pasture, negotiating access to shared water points, and developing mechanisms for the recovery of stolen cattle.

How to frame environmental management may also vary based on stakeholders within a context. In Conciliation Resources' work in the Central African Republic (CAR), the issue of natural resource exploitation was a good rallying call to encourage youth in communities to engage with natural resource management and conflict in community dialogues. However, as natural resource management is interlinked with other complex dynamics, using a similar framing in engagement with government and private sector officials may have received more pushback.

2. Environmental and peacebuilding interventions need to engage with underlying power relations and powerholders rather than remain purely technical

Environmental issues are intertwined with broader conflict drivers, including economic and religious factors

Transhumance conflict is closely interlinked with cultural/religious, governance and economic factors.²⁰ In CAR, some herder groups are armed and/or look to militias for protection due to previous disputes with farmers or cattle theft. Herders who migrate south from Muslim-majority Chad can trigger sensitivities around religion and nationalism, and in some cases disputes over resources are closely associated with broader ethnic and religious disputes, and armed groups tied to certain ethnicities, religious and nationalities, such as Séléka and anti-Balaka movements. Conciliation Resources' work on initiating conversations between local communities, agriculturalists and cattle keepers, to agree on herding corridors for cattle to graze and to manage cattle raiding and theft, is therefore situated within other dimensions of conflict around protection. In the Somali Regional State, the climate-conflict nexus is further complicated by the presence of transnational armed groups like Al-Shabaab. As transhumance routes shift due to droughts, herders are increasingly led into Al-Shabaab controlled areas and are at risk of recruitment through incentives such as land, money and the provision of relief.

Crucially, climate and environmental stressors must be analysed alongside deeper structural drivers. However, in some contexts powerholders have instrumentalised the climate-conflict narrative as a means to obscure other root causes which may highlight their complicity and failings. In Nigeria and Ghana, government actors and community leaders are increasingly framing herder-farmer clashes as an inevitable byproduct of climate change, and presenting themselves as powerless victims of an uncontrollable environmental phenomenon. This severely undermines the prospects for conflict resolution and serves as a political shield for powerholders against public criticism, providing cover for the systemic corruption and weak governance that often sit at the root of conflict. Powerholders are important stakeholders to work with, but they can both exacerbate as well as mitigate conflict drivers related to environmental issues.

Environmental interventions can be an opportunity for more inclusive decision-making

Gender inequalities – often also drivers of conflict – mean that women and historically excluded groups are often left out of both peace processes and environmental management decision-making processes. Yet women in particular tend to be disproportionately affected by natural disasters, in part due to unequal access to early warning information, emergency relief training, and relief and assistance.²¹ Climate change disproportionately impacts women and girls, manifesting in heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV). This vulnerability often stems from their traditional roles, such as the need to travel long distances to secure water or firewood. Furthermore, natural disasters frequently force women and girls to flee their homes, which increases their exposure to trafficking, early marriage and GBV. Beyond physical safety, environmental shifts also jeopardize their economic stability by reducing access to food and income derived from land.

Ensuring the meaningful participation of women in environmental and peacebuilding initiatives is an important step in addressing the interaction between climate change, gender and conflict. For example, when supporting community peace committees, bringing together different groups – such as security actors and local authorities with women and youth – helps to ensure effective decision-making that represents the needs and concerns of all communities. This requires supporting the meaningful participation of women and historically excluded groups, which may include providing additional training on environmental management and peacebuilding, helping them to frame their concerns strategically, and addressing logistical and financial barriers to the participation of women, youth and other groups, such as by holding consultations in safe spaces.

Environmental initiatives can sometimes be seen as less contentious or ‘softer’ issues, which can provide a useful entry point for gender-transformative approaches in peacebuilding. For example, bringing women and marginalised groups into environment-focused processes as technical experts (and primary custodians of traditional natural resource knowledge and management) can strengthen their broader credibility and ownership when it comes to decision-making. Our experience shows that convening women in spaces focused on technical environmental issues (as opposed to gender advocacy issues, which can be more divisive) can serve as an entry point into dialogues within highly patriarchal and hierarchical environments, ultimately paving the way for them to address wider topics.

Climate pressures can shift power dynamics, creating opportunities to strengthen inclusion while also fuelling tensions

Climate pressures can both disrupt and strengthen traditional cultural values, while creating losses and gains for certain members of communities, which can fuel tensions in households and wider communities. In Bougainville, climate impacts exacerbate food and water insecurity, in turn challenging the social fabric because sharing and gifting food is integral to community values and social cohesion. With lower fishing and agricultural yields, communities are forced to make choices between sustenance and contributing to cultural obligations; this weakens social ties, creates additional friction and can escalate violence.

Gender roles and expectations in particular experience shifts due to climate change.²² In some contexts, the changing roles and responsibilities of women have strengthened and facilitated their entry into peace processes. In Kashmir, climate-induced short-term migration has primarily affected men, who travel seeking work, leaving women to manage the household. This has created additional space for women to engage in decision-making, with a substantial increase in the number of women headed householders in the region.

Yet this disruption of traditional gender norms can also exacerbate tension. In Burkina Faso and Nigeria, the inability to provide for one’s family in the face of climate pressures increases young men’s vulnerability to violent extremism. Climate-related events, such as flash flooding, landslides and heatwaves impede men’s role as primary financial providers, making it harder for them to meet religious and moral expectations around defending communities and family honour during times of threat. This in turn can increase pressure on men to show strength and bravery and protect their communities.

Those unable to fulfil these expectations via traditional routes may turn towards violent extremism and exerting heightened forms of masculinity as a way of coping, which is reflected in how they engage with women and other marginalised groups. Armed groups actively exploited this inability to achieve gender norms by promising to find young men wives and/or paying dowries that otherwise cannot be afforded due to the decline in sustainable livelihoods. Similar dynamics in terms of high-risk masculine coping strategies and responses are noted in other contexts, including the Philippines, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Kashmir; Conciliation Resources and our partners are working with community leaders to develop non-violent approaches to deal with the pressures of climate change on these societies.

Recognising that environmental resources themselves can be a source of material power and cultural authority can help to address underlying sources of tension

Land and water hold deep symbolism and cultural and religious significance in different cultural contexts. If environmental solutions do not take into account the cultural authority and power inherent in land management, they could fuel or exacerbate tension. For the iTaukei community in Fiji, the concept of *vanua* represents the absolute anchor of cultural identity, encompassing both the spiritual and physical aspects of life, and referring not only to the land but also to the people.²³ Customary land is owned by the clan rather than by an individual, and clans are seen as guardians of the village and caretakers of the land. Community relocation that was done without the engagement of communities failed to take this into account. Conciliation Resources' community advocate workshops aimed to provide communities with a platform to ensure that community relocation policies and design considered these traditional systems of power.

In Nigeria and the wider West African region, ethnic identities are similarly deeply interwoven with traditional relationships to the land. For pastoralist communities like the Fulani, livestock rearing and dairy production are not merely livelihoods but are foundational pillars of ancestral knowledge, social boundaries and collective identity. However, state and international programming frequently operates on the assumption that climate-resilient livelihood options will automatically reduce resource competition and

economic frustrations, and lower the propensity for conflict. This, in practice, pushes pastoralists towards sedentary life, reducing their reliance on livestock and thus severing traditional cultural bonds between pastoralists, their livestock and the land. This policy shift occurs against a broader backdrop of perceived hostility and marginalisation toward pastoralists. Attempts to build resilience through forced livelihood adaptation are often experienced as a structural attack on identity rather than an economic solution. Even when alternative livelihoods are successfully established, the erosion of core cultural practices fosters profound grievances and a sense of abandonment. Ultimately, this perceived assault on collective dignity fuels deep social tensions, increasing the vulnerability of these communities to divisive, politicised narratives and recruitment into banditry or violence.

Engaging traditional powerholders can ensure buy-in for interventions and their outcomes

In some contexts, local leaders also hold power and authority because of their role in informal land management systems. In CAR, we involved local authorities and traditional chiefs in fostering community dialogue and developing local development plans, including those led by young people. This approach acknowledged the significance of informal land rules, which coexist with common law. These local leaders hold considerable, often informal, power and authority over land management and agricultural access, largely due to their role as custodians of customary law. A key focus of this work has been to raise awareness about the role of customary law and to mitigate conflict arising from grievances amongst stakeholders.

Similarly, engaging informal religious powerholders can also be critical in harnessing wider acceptance of environmental peacebuilding solutions in some communities. In the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia, community peace committees that were established for communities to find solutions to potential and ongoing conflicts are comprised of community members, security and local authorities, and religious and traditional leaders who hold sway within communities. The involvement of religious leaders is critical to disseminate messages agreed upon in the community peace committees. For instance, religious leaders used Friday prayers to highlight the incidence of drought and request communities to be respectful of people's land and welcoming of those who are facing drought.

3. Holistic programming across multiple levels and spaces is more likely to achieve long-lasting peacebuilding and environmental outcomes.

Connecting stakeholders from the top-down and bottom-up can break down silos and be mutually reinforcing

In many areas, local-level environment-related conflict drivers may be connected to national levels of conflict. Grounding initiatives in a nuanced understanding of both formal and traditional/informal processes, procedures and laws means recognising and engaging with powerholders at multiple levels. Efforts implemented from the top-down and bottom-up can be mutually reinforcing and in line with a holistic approach to peacebuilding. Conflict transformation includes work that seeks to constructively change relationships, attitudes, behaviour and interests to reduce, mitigate, prevent and resolve conflict. This includes building social cohesion, and resolving or diminishing the risk of conflict, and can encompass formal peace processes or structured dialogues at national and sub-national levels, alongside community dialogues and processes, and the interaction of both.

In the tri-border region between Uganda, South Sudan and Kenya, Conciliation Resources supported cross-border community dialogues which engaged security leaders, formal powerholders and local leaders to ensure that community agreements had backing from multiple levels. For instance, agreeing on water sharing between communities from both sides of the Kenyan-Ugandan border required negotiating informal access at local water points, as well as engaging with formal government structures, recognising different water access levels in both countries.

Similarly, in Karamoja, Uganda, Conciliation Resources facilitated community dialogues on environment and peacebuilding which respected the influence of elders in the community, while recognising the role of youth to implement the decisions of the elders. This also meant providing sufficient space for elders to engage, taking their lead and timing on approaching different topics, setting agendas, and reaching a resolution, before bringing in formal powerholders such as security leaders and local authorities. This approach created space for issues around access to resources to have the backing of informal leaders within the community.

Convening environmental management and strategic/policy stakeholders in peace processes can leverage the benefits of environmental solutions.

In the process of incorporating technical, traditional and local knowledge, it is important to not just bring different strands of information together, but to also convene and shape understandings between different sectors and spaces. This includes technical and scientific stakeholders (such as environmental departments and scientists), stakeholders who hold localised and traditional knowledge, and strategic decision-makers in the formal peace process. The process of convening is itself critical. It can help to ensure proposed peacebuilding solutions benefit from different expertise, and ensure that environmental solutions are grounded in and connected to underlying power dynamics, and linked to political and peace processes. Participatory analysis and dialogue processes can support this active intersection of different spaces and expertise.

In convening technical and strategic stakeholders, it is crucial to bridge differences and foster collaboration. This involves building a common understanding and language around environmental issues and climate change. In the tri-border region between Kenya, Uganda and South Sudan, a project on climate change and conflict sought to bring together environmental experts, peace process stakeholders, and community members who have managed environmental issues through traditional methods and with traditional knowledge. The project highlighted differences in understanding of definitions of 'environment' and 'climate change', and of approaches (for example, addressing issues from a governance versus conflict lens) from all sides. A key lesson learnt is the need to identify and call out where stakeholders hold different underlying assumptions and definitions, and to work to clarify and build consensus accordingly.

RECOMMENDATIONS: HOW CAN POLICYMAKERS AND DONORS SUPPORT AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL OUTCOMES AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION?

The following recommendations have been developed to ensure an enabling funding and policy environment for environmental outcomes and conflict transformation. They are informed by Conciliation Resources and partners' work across multiple contexts.

1. Fund and facilitate holistic analysis which considers environmental and conflict risks and opportunities.

This analysis should integrate gender considerations and draw on relevant expertise – including mediation and local peacebuilding expertise alongside environment and scientific expertise and security expertise. Analysis should be locally specific, consider differentiated needs and vulnerabilities, and be continuously refreshed. Policymakers and donors should embed requirements to integrate gender and conflict analysis into existing mechanisms for environmental analysis, and similarly embed requirements for environmental analysis as part of gender-sensitive conflict analysis. Participatory analysis can help create shared understandings amongst different stakeholders, providing benefits beyond the output of analysis.²⁴ Funds for holistic analysis are a small investment in more effective development and peacebuilding interventions.

2. Provide a mandate for internal and external coordination between environmental and peacebuilding teams, departments and agencies.

Strengthened coordination between environmental and peacebuilding donors and policymakers will strengthen the basis for holistic analysis and interventions that seek both environment and peacebuilding outcomes. For example, environmental solutions to conflict may be financed by donors' development or environment agencies; one department may lack comprehension of the political context and peacebuilding goals driven by the other. Information sharing between donor and policy counterparts can lead to a greater appreciation of their different objectives and operating environment, which can support smoother implementation and partnerships. Internal leadership on the environment and conflict nexus (for example, creating leadership positions that have a specific directive to work across departments or teams) can strengthen the mandate for internal and external coordination.

3. Embed a focus on conflict transformation into wider climate security framings and responses.

Climate security focuses on the impacts of climate change on (often national) security. This goes beyond the connections between environment, climate, conflict and peacebuilding discussed within this paper and for example includes focus on the impacts on the security sector. However, opportunities for conflict transformative approaches should be an integral part of climate security policy and programming. Interest in early warning mechanisms within climate security approaches demonstrate one area of overlap. Additionally, conflict transformation approaches are more likely to address underlying power dynamics and support the sustainability and efficacy of desired environmental outcomes, benefiting security more widely.

4. Fund and facilitate locally specific and locally led environment and peacebuilding solutions.

While funding may be more limited in today's global environment, locally led interventions that focus on conflict transformation and environmental change may require relatively smaller budgets but have a significant impact on peace and security efforts, in comparison to other climate security interventions. These approaches can be supported through standalone programming and/or through conflict transformation components as part of wider environmental and climate change programming. Interventions could include locally led climate adaptation practices in conjunction with local dialogue and inclusion work, and support to existing but under-pressure conflict resolution mechanisms to enable them to integrate environmental conflict drivers. Support should involve funding for local civil society partners, who are often at the frontline of such issues and already working across thematic silos to address community needs.



A quiet, paved road stretching into the distance under an overcast sky in Papua New Guinea

5. Respect and centre traditional and local knowledge and practice.

Support spaces where different expertise can come together, and recognise the time and resources required to build shared understandings. Donors could look to work with groups bringing together technical experts and experts in customary and traditional knowledge. This can be critical in identifying and refining interventions which have buy-in from local communities and are rooted in localised solutions, and therefore more likely to be sustainable. Environmental interventions and responses to climate change should include culturally sensitive community engagement to minimise conflict risks and ensure successful outcomes. Practically, this should include respecting cultural practices when initiating contact, forming longer-term relationships based on respect, avoiding short-term or exploitative interventions, and supporting communities to have agency in managing challenges. This may mean working in partnership and building longer lead times to ensure meaningful community engagement at a minimum and collaborative development of plans as an ideal.²⁵

6. Incentivise and enable connections between different spaces of engagement on environmental and conflict issues.

Donors should ensure funded dialogue processes include interaction between technical and political stakeholders to support the identification of opportunities that are both technically and politically feasible. This requires careful trust building and participant selection, recognising that how the interaction works in practice will be specific to the dialogue process and context. Similarly, donors can facilitate and fund holistic approaches which tackle drivers at both local and national level, or make connections between those working at local and national levels. This could involve supporting locally led initiatives alongside longer-term dialogue efforts. By supporting bottom-up and top-down efforts together it is easier to take advantage of openings or address challenges that may arise when the context shifts.

Endnotes

1. For example, a [2026 national security assessment](#) for the UK Government highlighted the links between biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, and national and global security; see also the [2023 Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council](#) on the climate and security nexus.
2. Based on [analysis by UNEP](#).
3. See resources published by the [Conflict and Environment Observatory](#) and [UNDRR](#) on the environmental impacts of armed conflict.
4. Krampe, 2019; Badurdeen et al., 2026.
5. Environmental issues could include disasters, environmental degradation, or the use and management of renewable and non-renewable resources (Mason et al., 2026). Many of these issues are exacerbated by climate change, but environmental issues should not be conflated with climate change. For instance, mining and conflict minerals present different challenges in the conflict space than flooding.
6. Environmental peacebuilding refers to the “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).
7. Ide et al., 2021; ECCP, 2025.
8. In some environmental peacebuilding practice and research, environmental issues are seen as ‘cross-border and low politics’ issues, supporting positive-sum cooperation (Ide, 2020). Waxman et al. (2015) highlight that even where environment issues escalate to ‘high politics’, they can still be seen as a ‘low-hanging fruit’, or a relatively easier problem to solve compared to more politically complex concerns.
9. Waxman et al., 2015.
10. A commonly cited example in environmental peacebuilding practice is joint fisheries management as a non-political entry point for cooperation among littoral states in the South China Sea (Mason et al., 2026).
11. Davis et al., 2022.
12. The ‘spillover’ effect is frequently referenced in environmental peacebuilding literature, where technical cooperation on the environment can catalyse broader change in social and political relationships (Ide & Detges, 2018; Sommer & Fassbender, 2024).
13. Huda, 2021.
14. Specific conditions for when environmental issues can be used as mediation entry points are covered in depth by Mason et al., 2026.
15. Susskind and Islam, 2012.
16. Literature on conflict minerals has highlighted the role of multinational corporations in human rights violations in fragile and conflict-affected areas, such as the role of Poligrow in Colombia, and ArcelorMittal in Liberia (Van Dorp, 2016). In 2025, the nonprofit European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights submitted a legal complaint against French energy multinational TotalEnergies for their role in violence committed against civilians in north Mozambique (Perry, 2025).
17. Eppele, 2025.
18. See April 2025 [media briefing](#) from the Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
19. The community advocate sessions, led by Transcend Oceania and Conciliation Resources, are discussed in more detail in [Peacebuilding Approaches to Climate Change in Fijian Communities](#).
20. Further analysis on cross-border conflict dynamics and the role of transhumance is explored in [Peace and security for pastoralist communities in African borderlands](#).
21. UN Women, 2025.
22. These connections are further explained in the Conciliation Resources report [Gender, cultural identity, conflict and climate change](#).
23. Charan et al., 2018.
24. Conciliation Resources’ [gender, climate and conflict analysis](#) methodology is one tool for combined participatory analysis.
25. For an example of what meaningful community engagement looks like in practice, Conciliation Resources and partners developed a [guide to community engagement in Fiji](#).

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Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

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