

NGO Recommendations to the First Intergovernmental Consultations on Nature-based Solutions

A Conflict-Sensitive Lens: Nature-based Solutions for Peace and Security

INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENT, PEACE AND SECURITY

The world is witnessing how there is a wide array of environmental issues linked with conflict that have profound impacts on individuals, communities and nature.

Climate change has already been recognised as one of the myriad drivers of armed conflicts as well as a factor [exacerbating](#) the suffering during conflict. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 14 of the 25 countries [most vulnerable to climate change](#) are experiencing violent conflict. Additionally, according to the Institute of Economics and Peace, 90 percent of the 20 least peaceful countries face at least one [catastrophic ecological threat](#). Yet, the immediate insecurity of conflict-affected settings often hampers a focus on and funding for adaptation. Additionally, conflict-sensitive approaches do not feature prominently in environmental restoration and conservation projects and the effectiveness of climate adaptation remains understudied in armed conflict contexts.

The last decade has brought to light the broad and more granular details of **environmental damage** through improved [identification](#) and monitoring of environmental dimensions of armed conflicts. In particular the war in Ukraine has underscored the severe impacts of conflict on the environment and ecosystems that people depend on. This has been well-documented in research carried out by [civil society groups](#) and international organisations. The ICRC emphasized the responsibility of states to prevent environmental damage through its updated military [guidelines](#) for protection of the natural environment in armed conflict.

States and UN agencies are increasingly acknowledging the detrimental impacts of violent conflicts on the environment and vice-versa. The IUCN researched linkages with [nature conservation](#); more and more multilateral policy [discussions](#) happen on the issue at the UN Environmental Assembly (UNEA), Arria formula meetings, and the UN Security Council (UNSC), often through a strong focus on the [Protection of Civilians](#). However, there is **little formal language** in resolutions and international agreements addressing the linkages between environmental degradation and armed conflicts.

Though the best remedy is to prevent damage from occurring, the harsh reality is that armed conflict and climate-linked natural resource degradation will continue to exist. Therefore, there is a need to anticipate and alleviate these negative impacts by preparing to deal with them. This growing understanding should **spur more action** to prevent and minimize the compounding impacts of armed conflict and environmental degradation and build better and effective solutions through remediation and restoration efforts.

NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

In 2022, The UN Environment Assembly voted to recognise [Nature-based Solutions \(NbS\)](#) as “*actions to protect, conserve, restore, sustainably use and manage natural or modified terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems which address social, economic and environmental challenges effectively and adaptively, while simultaneously providing human well-being, ecosystem services, resilience and biodiversity benefits*”. The NbS approach has seen uptake from governments, communities and organisations around the world as a holistic approach to reducing the impact of climate change, disasters, and environmental degradation.

The international community is increasingly identifying the **potential of NbS to contribute to peace and security** throughout the conflict cycle. Effective, sustainable management of natural resources is key to the peacebuilding process, helping to build resilience in infrastructure, livelihoods and food security in situations of environmental and climate stress. These actions can also reduce the drivers of conflicts over access to natural resources and foster cooperative efforts that help to sustain peace in post-conflict situations. NbS which work to remove environmental degradation as an underlying risk factor for disasters can help to minimise exposure and vulnerability to a range of hazards. Those which address environmental damage caused by conflict can mitigate against potential resource crises and health impacts in post-conflict environments.

An [initial overview](#) of the potential of nature-based solutions for peace & security was summarized based on the Nature-based Solutions dialogues hosted by the Geneva Environment Network. Further, ecosystem-based adaptation is often referred to in climate security assessments, the [environmental peacebuilding movement continues to grow](#), and actions for nature are taken within the broader peacebuilding space, such as [green humanitarian response](#). Though there is existing [research](#) on how Nature-based Solutions and ecosystem-based adaptation mechanisms have an important role in conflict-prevention and peacebuilding through natural resource management, this NGO submission collected examples and suggestions from already ongoing initiatives with a particular focus on the conflict-impact side. They represent actions where nature is central to those efforts that should inspire and provoke thinking to tackle conflict-linked environmental damage, peacebuilding through shared natural resource management and nature-based focus in post-conflict programming. The environmental dimensions of conflicts have been divided along the lines of **response, remediation and restoration**.

Response

The first phase of conflict focuses largely on humanitarian response operations and the acute need to deal with environmental damage. A known tragic example is Cox Bazar refugee camp in Bangladesh [leading](#) to massive tree cutting and landslides, having direct environmental impacts while its population is heeding serious climate security [challenges](#). Other clear environmental concerns can be linked with solid waste management as environmental governance collapses, posing additional public health and pollution risks to ecosystems and unsustainable energy use in both displacement camps and informal settlements.

A working group of various humanitarian organisations prepared key [messages](#) around NbS leading up to the UNFCCC COP26 to underscore the importance of the environment in humanitarian contexts. Similar messages

were also brought by the World Food Program and UN University in a new flagship [report](#) and the International Federation of the Red Crosses and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) [work](#) on NbS and humanitarian response. The response phase can already leave an environmental footprint that can worsen local environmental conditions for people and nature, which should be minimized and mitigated through careful planning, while there are a range of opportunities to include NbS in humanitarian work to build resilience and counter the negative impacts of crisis on the environment, including armed conflicts.

Remediation

The destruction from military activities and collapse of environmental governance in war-time can bring acute and long-term environmental health risks through exposure to toxic and hazardous substances. From bombed oil refineries and industrial zones to large scale urban destruction that creates millions of tons of rubble, rapid expansion of informal solid waste disposal sites, the examples are numerous. Yet expert organisations and academics are already exploring how actions for nature and NbS can be used to clean-up and remediate affected areas. In Iraq, bioremediation of the soil affected by massive oil leaks after ISIS set fire to 20 oil wells in 2016 [proves](#) to be an effective method. Naturally occurring microbes are 'eating' the oil remnants, providing a clean alternative to chemical remediation efforts, while other researcher in South-Sudan are using plants for phytoremediation of oil [contaminated](#) land in the Sudd Wetland.

Other actions for nature efforts focus on more environmentally friendly debris and rubble removal efforts, with a larger focus on recycling and reusing materials that can be both cost-saving and lower the environmental footprint of debris management operations, as is demonstrated by various ongoing programs in [Syria](#) and [Mosul](#). Actions for Nature, including NbS, can be crucial to address conflict-pollution and wider hazards linked with solid waste management and circular economies in the post-conflict [phase](#).

Restoration, Recovery and Rehabilitation

In the aftermath of armed conflict, environmental considerations are often lacking priority in the reconstruction phase, instead placing a large focus on socio-economic development. Yet the negative environmental impacts can have direct and long-term implications on lives, livelihoods, biodiversity, wildlife and climate resilience. In wartime, environmental protection measures are often neglected, which can result in an increase of hunting of endangered species, exploitation of natural resources in protected areas and can have detrimental impacts on nature reserves.

A significant part of humanitarian demining operations also start in the post-conflict phase, where actions for nature can be included to limit the environmental footprint of dealing with explosive and unexploded remnants of war in [clearance operations](#), including environmentally friendly disposal mechanisms and [land release](#).

Actions for nature in the post-conflict phase can have meaningful impacts on protection and restoration of deforested areas, by community-led and larger-scale programs of reforestation. Conflict-linked [deforestation](#) can be a major long-term climate issue due to the absence of natural carbon sinks, increased risk of erosion or decreased water tables. For example, western Syria has lost over 25% of its forest during the conflict,

while facing increasing heat and drought events, where large-scale reforestation projects are needed to rehabilitate these areas to mitigate climate impacts. Forest landscape restoration can also play an important role in peacebuilding through Nature-based Solutions, as proposed by [researchers](#) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) through their Peace Forest Initiative, focussing on land [restoration](#) from conflict-linked degradation.

With a focus on reconstruction of damaged towns, cities and energy infrastructure, there is also an opportunity to build back better and greener. In the design of the rebuilding phase, grey and green infrastructure considerations are key to both support climate-resilience and [disaster risk-reduction](#). Nature-based Solutions should be part of the urban planning phase to strengthen urban [resilience](#) linked with expected climate-crises linked impacts, as currently is already developed and can be [applied](#) in rebuilding in the aftermath of conflict. The post-conflict phase also offers opportunities to redevelop old energy infrastructure, often damaged or destroyed in the conflict, and move towards more [sustainable energy production](#) including solar and wind energy, while also taking into account conflict-sensitivities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FIRST GLOBAL REVIEW

Given:

- 1) the need to spur action in these times of increased violent conflicts and triple planetary crisis (dixit UNEP: climate, pollution, and nature loss crisis);
- 2) the lack of formal written acknowledgement of the linkages between environmental degradation and armed conflict;
- 3) the commitment of the international community to [leave no one behind](#) and protect and support the most vulnerable communities worldwide, i.e. conflict-affected communities;
- 4) the increasing awareness and body of evidence on the potential of NbS for peace and security, as summarized in the pages above;

we applaud the efforts of [Intergovernmental Consultations on Nature-based Solutions](#) to further support the implementation of nature-based solutions and we provide the following recommendations to do so, organized according to the request of UNEA to the Intergovernmental Consultations (a,b, and c):

- a) *Compile examples of best practice in nature-based solutions, based on the best available science;*
 - the Intergovernmental Consultations should recognize the importance to address the environmental dimensions of armed conflicts;
 - in the Intergovernmental Consultations, Member States should seek to explore the different opportunities to use Nature-based Solutions to address conflict-linked environmental degradation and sustainable resource management throughout the conflict cycle, i.e. for conflict-prevention, response, peacemaking (mediation and negotiations), peacekeeping, remediation, restoration and peacebuilding.
 - the Intergovernmental Consultations should support the systematic compilation of examples and best practices in nature-based solutions **in conflict-affected areas contributing to peace**



and security, based on the best available science and with a specific focus for conflict-sensitive approaches;

- b) Assess existing and discuss potential new proposals, criteria, standards and guidelines to address divergences, with a view to achieving a common understanding among Member States for the implementation of nature-based solutions, including to support Member States in designing, implementing and evaluating nature-based solutions, building on existing work, initiatives and platforms, as appropriate, and without prejudice to existing efforts and initiatives of and new proposals from individual Member States;
- the Intergovernmental Consultations should support the development of international standards and guidelines for the conflict-sensitive implementation of Nature-based Solutions in conflict-affected regions towards the protection of civilians and peace and security for the world's most vulnerable communities;
 - the Intergovernmental Consultations should support thorough research and evaluation of the long-term impacts of NbS in conflict-affected areas on both the environment as well as on peace and security and distill lessons learned;
- c) Identify options for supporting sustainable investment in nature-based solutions and share information on bilateral and multilateral sources of finance to enable developing countries to develop and deploy nature-based solutions.
- the Intergovernmental Consultations should recognize the importance and need to provide structural support and funding for the environmental dimensions of armed conflicts and the design, implementation and evaluation of nature-based solutions towards peace and security in conflict- affected areas;