

Institutionalizing Environment and Security: Lessons learned and the way forward

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Presented at the IUCN/IISD Futures Dialogue on
**“Addressing the environmental roots of tensions and conflict: A new security
agenda”**

Johannesburg, IUCN Environment Centre, Nedcor Building, September 3, 2002

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The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa offered an invaluable opportunity to help bridge the gap between Northern and Southern perspectives on environment, development, population, poverty, conflict, and peace linkages. In the past two decades several international organizations, researchers, policy analysts and advisors, as well as governments attempted to create an institutional context to analyse the complex relationship and pathways between scarcity of renewable resources, environmental degradation, social marginalization and conflict. However, in recent years the focus has shifted towards the promotion of institutions, programmes and projects to foster environmental cooperation as a tool for confidence building and stability.

In this context, I want to elaborate on the following questions: What are the shortcomings and lessons learned of the existing institutional design put forward by “Northern” institutions” to prevent environmental conflicts and promote peace through sustainable development and environmental cooperation? Which aspects deserve considerable attention to improve institutional arrangements at the global, regional, national and local level for conflict prevention and peace promotion?

I identify five main shortcomings emerging from research and policy initiatives on environment and security.

- **The current dominance of Northern perspectives on this debate.** To date, Northern perspectives have dominated both research on the environment and security nexus as well as institutional approaches to prevent or mitigate these conflicts by various organizations. The kind of environmental conflicts we are looking at are predominantly conflicts in the South – be it water scarcity in sub-Saharan Africa, mining conflicts in the Pacific islands, or unsustainable forest management in South-East Asia. Tensions could arise around the renewable resources of land, forests, water, and soil mostly taking place at a sub-national level. However, Southern perceptions of the linkages between environment and security have either been marginalized or completely ignored in much of the scholarly and policy dialogue in the past decades.
- **The distinction between donor assistance at the project level and the coherent integration of conflict assessments at the broader programme or policy level.** Conflict prevention, poverty eradication and gender mainstreaming are central elements in Western donor’s portfolios. Where progress is made at the project level, the linkage between environment and security is not yet reflected at the programme level, which sets priorities for donor assistance. Earlier attempts to significantly integrate the question of environmental causes of conflicts or environmental cooperation to promote peace and stability into the OECD Donor Assistance Guidelines have yet been unsuccessful.
- **Misconception and miscommunication of environment and security linkages.** In particular, and – this is most important the misconception and miscommunication of its broader policy implications. It was the initial hope of Western governments to raise attention to scarcity of renewable resources and environmental degradation by pinpointing to the potential risks or threats to

security, mainly perceived as national security. However, this turned out to be counterproductive since affected parties (be it states or societal groups) that are already involved in transboundary disputes or prone to conflicts, resist to securitize environmental issues. Nonetheless, there are several good examples for environmental cooperation (on technical matters) in the shadow of political tension or even acute conflict.

This “securitization” of water, for example, limits a state’s economic growth and sustainable development potential. The classification of water-related data leads to perceptions of insecurity which feeds growing hostilities. In order to break out of this vicious circle, water politics must be “desecuritized” through the collection, sharing, and negotiated agreement of water data throughout river basins.

The European Union (promoted by the Finnish Government) put environmental security on the initial agenda for this World Summit without further elaborating what they intend to achieve with this proposal. There was not even a serious debate among EU Member States on this issue.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Task Force on environment and Human Settlement in 1998 suggested extending UNEP’s mandate to cover early warning, crisis intervention and conflict mitigation. The G77 clearly rejected this proposal, basically since national sovereignty was at risk and the operational implications of potential interventions remained unclear.

- **The preference for uniform – and global - recipes to deal with environmental conflicts.** Western attempts mostly focussed on global institutions that allow for conflict prevention and foster environmental cooperation as a tool for confidence building. This includes several attempts to create a World Organization for Environment and Security or include the issue of environmental conflicts into the UN Security Council’s mandate.

The strong belief in a one-model-fits-all-approach is reflected in a recent New York Times editorial referring to the “need for globally accepted formula on how to divide up the water from streams shared by many countries”. Obviously, there is no single model to deal with the complexity of very unique disputes or tensions.

The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in its Economic Forum aims at promoting transboundary river basin management institutions for conflict prevention and peace promotion. The European Union’s “Water for Life” takes a similar approach to transfer river basin management concepts and institutions to conflict prone areas in the South. Any attempt to easily transfer an institutional setting that proved to be effective in the North to the South (or East) will fail. Efforts need to reflect that existing water scarcity has been created through the development of water resources in the past, the selective entitlements of water rights and incidental and structural resource capture by the better off. The political dimension of river basin management has not yet received sufficient attention.

- **The strong belief in global assessments** (identifying regions at risk). Global assessments mainly failed to address the very unique dynamics of both the emergence of conflict and structural components for achieving peace. Several initiatives, including the US State Failure's Task Force on Environment, conducting research on identifying future regions at risk or identifying environmental and security relevant hot spots neglect to consider the potential policy implications for decision makers. The Turkish government, for example, rejected any effort taken within the OSCE that determines water resource issues as security relevant.

From these shortcomings we can draw seven conclusions. In addition to these findings, I will also draw my conclusions on the discussion and results of the Roundtable on Environment, Development and Sustainable Peace, that took place on August 27 here at the Summit. The Roundtable was part of the Environment, Development and Sustainable Peace Initiative (EDSP) (www.sustainable-peace.org), initiated by Adelphi Research (Berlin), the Environmental Change and Security Project of the Woodrow Wilson Centre (Washington DC) and the Foundation of Foreign Service for Peace and Democracy FUNPADEM (San Jose). This initiative aims to explore ongoing Southern efforts in this area. Its primary goal is to facilitate a constructive dialogue among Northern and Southern policy-makers, practitioners, journalists, and scholars on mitigating environmental contributions to conflict and developing a constructive environment, development and sustainable peace agenda.

- The environment and security debate focuses mainly on the environmental causes of conflict and needs to **shift towards mechanisms to promote peace**. Further attention needs to be given to environmental cooperation as a tool for confidence building, looking at the specific mechanisms and means to promote peace.
- **Policy initiatives** on conflict prevention and mitigation addressing environmental conflicts in the South **require a sustained integration of Southern perspectives**.
- **Institutions play a crucial role** in preventing or mitigating conflicts over natural resources. In the water sector, river basin commissions or water authorities have proved to be effective in integrated water resource management and thus contributing to confidence building among parties. However, successful examples of transboundary water cooperation in the North cannot be transferred to river basins in the South without taking account of the given local context. In many cases, social dimensions such as poverty, inequality, and culture create specific challenges for any external model.
- Institutions gain **legitimacy through ownership** by affected communities. A sustained Southern perspective is required for institutional design and implementation. Any institutional mechanism for conflict resolution or prevention needs to be based on broad participation of relevant stakeholders.

- As a basis for any negotiation over shared waters, availability and **sharing of hydrological data** plays a crucial role. Generating and exchanging data may significantly contribute to reducing perceived threats and fostering confidence building.
- **Women and children** are most affected by environmental degradation in the South. At the same time, women play important roles in crisis management and conflict resolution that could increase peaceful outcomes to disputes.
- The **private sector** has been neglected in the analysis of both its contribution to conflict as well as conflict prevention and resolution. Further research is required on the role of the private sector, looking specifically at the impacts of private sector engagement in conflict prevention and resolution and sustainable resource management in the South and North.

To advance the debate on preventing environmental conflicts and to foster stability and peace through environmental cooperation and sustainable resource management two immediate steps seem to be necessary:

1. The inclusion of the Southern perspectives into this debate through a sustained dialogue among researchers, civil society groups and policy makers.
2. To bring the existing knowledge about the very specific nature of environmental conflicts and strategies to build or promote peace through environmental cooperation and sustainable resource management to decision makers in national governments, regional and international organizations in a consistent way.

The IUCN/IISD futures dialogue on environment and security offers an excellent opportunity to integrate the Southern perspective into this debate and raise attention to civil society groups, researchers and policy makers on ideas and approaches to incorporate these issues into their conceptual thinking and practical implementation.

This Roundtable discussion on environment and security corresponds to the Environment, Development, and Sustainable Peace Initiative (EDSP). An alliance among these and other efforts should be further explored.