

Environmental Conservation as Source of Building Peace – Myth or Reality

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ABSTRACT

Peace-building is both the theory and practice of identifying the conditions that can lead to a sustainable peace. It is must for human development and effective environmental management, both of which are critical to achieving national and regional goals. Applying peace building to environmental crises would include developing an understanding of eco-justice and promoting its advancement. Both peace and environmental educators have a common goal-of stopping violence. Both negative and positive peace implies a commitment to nonviolence in inter human relations and human relationships with nature. Environmental educators have seen the emergence of education for ecological responsibility as a response to human violence against the Earth. Massive deforestation, desertification, global warming, acid rain, the depletion of fishing stock, the extermination of an average of one hundred species a day, shortages in clean water, population growth, soil erosion, and wide spread pollution – all these interactive and compounding environmental problems have social and economic impacts that in turn lead to conflicts and civil strife that may grow into low intensity warfare or even international strife. Peace and environmental educators alike need to recognize this interconnectedness between the degradation of Earth processes and destructive human activities. Peace will require environmental sustainability and environmental sustainability will require peace. In this context, the present paper highlights the various issues that assist us to understand whether protecting environment leads to peace in the nation and also suggests possible solutions to overcome this problem.

KEYWORDS: Environment, Peace, Sustainability

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INTRODUCTION

As a peacemaking tool, the environment provides unique and useful qualities that contribute towards building peace and transforming conflict. While there is a general understanding that environmental issues such as environmental degradation and inequitable access to resources can result in conflicts, it has been proven that finding a way to resolve these issues require cooperation from different stakeholders. Since the beginning of this decade, the warnings of high ranking government officials and representatives of international organizations about future water wars and environmental refugees have been slowing giving way to the growing hope that environmental cooperation and environmental conservation will promote stability and peace between conflicting parties. Thus, transboundary cooperation for environmental conservation (Peace Parks), international river basin management, regional marine agreements and joint environmental monitoring programmes can enhance cooperation between communities or countries. The more such initiatives exist and the more momentum they gain, the more they will help communities resolve conflicts in a constructive and consequently non-

violent manner. Surprisingly, there is still relatively scant information on what form trans-boundary initiatives for environmental cooperation could take, and the conditions under which these could best contribute to conflict prevention, conflict transformation and peace-building. Little is known about the constraints they would be subject to, and under what conditions environmental cooperation and conservation can develop into broader forms of political cooperation and generate a social and political dialogue going beyond environmental issues. There is insufficient empirical evidence so far to substantiate either the theory of environmental wars or environmental peace-building.

There are nevertheless a number of initiatives by governmental and international institutions focusing on the linkages between resource degradation, ecological distribution conflicts and conflict and cooperation. While a growing number of studies are devoted to the relationship degradation and violent conflicts, the equally important issue of how environmental conservation can contribute to peace building has hitherto rarely been subjected to systematic analysis. Indeed, at the political level there has been no

significant interest in studies or initiatives on this issue. This is primarily due to political reservations about questioning ongoing environmental cooperation projects in crisis or conflict regions.

In Jammu Kashmir state crisis also entered onto the wider international stage when India brought it to the UN Security Council in 1948, but despite UN efforts and various bilateral attempts to discuss the issue, no tangible progress has been made since then. Rather, the Kashmir situation has given rise to violent or near-war crises in 1948, 1965, 1987, 1990, 1999, and 2001-2002. Jammu and Kashmir's existence has been turbulent since partition but the violence and active insurgency that erupted in 1989, particularly on the Indian side, has continued with an intensity matched by few other conflicts in the world. Over the last fifteen years between 30,000 and 50,000 people have been killed and countless more injured and or displaced. The ongoing conflict and inability to resolve the issues has perpetuated and intensified the overall mistrust between India and Pakistan, not to mention played a crucial role in the under-socioeconomic development of the state. No matter whether measured by per capita income, aggregate growth rates, or GSDP,

Jammu and Kashmir ranks among the bottom one-third economically of the Indian states, and has been one of the slowest growing regional economies in South Asia. In 2002, more than one third of the population lived on less than one dollar a day. The lack of development is one of the most crucial barriers to the peace process.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To identify the conditions under which environmental cooperation can facilitate conflict transformation and peace building.
- To examine which specific forms of negotiation or stakeholder constellations have so far proved particularly successful.
- The study is primarily an attempt to systematize the role of environmental cooperation with regard to conflict prevention and peace building and to define its scope more clearly.

APPROACHES TO PEACEBUILDING BY ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

The majority of environmental peace initiatives can be classified in one of three partly overlapping categories. (1) Initiatives to prevent conflicts that are directly related

to the environment; (2) attempts to initiate and sustain a dialogue on transboundary environmental cooperation between parties to a conflict; and (3) initiatives that are directed at achieving lasting peace by promoting conditions for sustainable development

(1) Causes of environmental conflict

If the minimum requirement for peace is defined as the "absence of violent conflict", then environmental cooperation as well as environmental conservation can potentially play a role in preventing the kind of violence that erupts due to the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of ecosystems or the devastation of livelihoods based on natural resources. Most of the research, which establishes a link between environmental degradation and violent conflict, highlights two key aspects. Firstly, the pressure on resources on which people are economically dependent must be reduced. Secondly, the institutional capacities to respond to environmental challenges must be strengthened. In other words, the most direct means of ecological

peacemaking are measures to prevent ecologically induced conflicts.

In certain situations, environmental conservation can also moderate the anger of groups who perceive themselves to be victims of ecological injustice and consider this to reinforce their socially and economically disadvantaged status. Latent environmental problems may thus combine into an explosive combination of material insecurity coupled with the perception of being marginalized. In situations where ethnic identity determines access to political and economic opportunities, environmental impacts tend to affect different ethnic groups unequally.

(2) Environmental conservation as a platform for discussion

A second approach to environmental peace building is directed at conflicts that have no specific ecological cause. The objective is to create peace through cooperative solutions to common environmental challenges. Initiatives that address common ecological problems can be used to bring about an initial dialogue between the parties to the conflict when other political and diplomatic approaches have failed. In many instances, countries whose relations are otherwise

characterized by distrust and hostility, if not open violence, have found that environmental issues are one of the few areas in which they can sustain an ongoing dialogue.

An attempt has been made in Kashmir, a region over which India and Pakistan have been fighting bitterly since the end of British colonial rule post World War II. International environmentalists are of the view that the establishment of a Peace Park in the Karakoram Mountains lying between India and Pakistan in the western Himalayas and the joint management of this unique glacial region, in which numerous soldiers have fallen victim to the adverse forces of nature rather than political adversaries, could help defuse this bloody border conflict. The concept of joint management is also rooted in the realization that environmental degradation poses the greatest danger to this unique ecosystem. Of course, it should not be expected that a joint environmental programme in a remote, barely inhabited region, where even maintaining a permanent military presence is practically impossible due to the prohibitive costs, will fundamentally alter the structural dynamics of the Indo-Pak conflict. Nevertheless, given the current

treaty and the recent thawing in relations between the two countries, there are grounds for hope that cross border activities of this kind will play an important role in conflict transformation. Common environmental challenges, however, do not only pave the way for a societal dialogue. By overcoming barriers to cooperation and replacing distrust, suspicion and divergent interests with a shared knowledge base and common goals, they have the potential to transform relationships traditionally marked by conflict. Technically complex issues, in which conflicting parties almost invariably rely on disparate, fragmented information, can intensify mutual distrust. The causes of conflict are concerned, not unlike the space cooperation between the super powers during the Cold War. This objection, however, fails to take into account the high political and economic commitment required for environmental cooperation in the affected regions. Since problems relating to shared river basins, regional biodiversity, forest eco-systems or land and water use are frequently very controversial and associated with a high resource investment, they are dealt with at the highest level in the countries concerned.

(3) Sustainable development as a prerequisite for durable peace

A third approach to conflict prevention and peace building through environmental cooperation and conservation is based on the premise that long-term and comprehensive sustainability are a prerequisite for durable peace. Consequently, the question as to whether water scarcity is the 'cause' of the conflict between India and Pakistan fails to address the root of the problem. A solution to the shared water problem is a necessary but insufficient precondition for lasting peace. Even if the water disputes between India and Pakistan were not the actual cause of the conflict, the joint management of shared water resources represents more than just a significant opportunity to keep alive the dialogue between both parties, regardless of the overriding conflict. They are also the key to negotiating a resolution. Concepts of sustainable development aim at achieving a balance of ecological, social and economic interests so that the natural resource base is preserved for future generations. Sustainability is thus an attempt to achieve an ideal society, which is free of distribution conflicts, poverty, marginalization, corruption and violence.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION AS A MECHANISM FOR CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION AND PEACE-BUILDING

One of the chief functions of environmental conservation as a mechanism for conflict transformation and developing peace is evidenced in the utilization of the potential inherent in ecosystems and eco-regions. Households, agriculture, industry, electricity generation and ecosystems all require this resource in timely and adequate quantities and quality. As a mechanism for peace, the environment has some useful, perhaps even unique qualities that are well suited for peace building and conflict resolution. Environmental problems ignore political borders. They require a long-term perspective; encourage participation by local and non-governmental organizations, help build administrative, economic and social capacities for action and facilitate the creation of commonalities that transcend the polarization caused by economic relations. It is also true, of course, that isolated factors such as the complexity of the problem or the need for sustained political commitment can often act as barriers to transboundary environmental cooperation.

So far, the attempts to translate the insights from the environment and conflict debate into a viable policy framework for environmental cooperation and sustainable peace show some signs of real promise. However, up to now there has neither been any broader political and social debate on these approaches, nor have they been implemented. More research in this area is needed to better understand how water - an internationally shared and indispensable resource, which triggers highly emotive responses - can serve as a cornerstone for confidence building and as potential bedrock of peace. If a better understanding of the conditions under which water can lead to conflicts or promote cooperation is achieved, then mutually beneficial cooperation over water resources can be employed in a more focused manner to prevent conflict and promote sustainable peace between states and social groups.

However, when viewed from the perspective of peace-building and conflict transformation, environmental cooperation plays another, more important role. As environmental cooperation develops and societal and political stakeholders are systematically integrated in negotiation processes to protect natural goods, a simultaneous thrust is given to building

trust, initiating cooperative action and encouraging the creation of a common regional identity emerging from sharing resources.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION TO FACILITATE PEACEBUILDING

Environmental conservation is a serious option for building up cross-border collaboration at a level removed from the narrow and frequently divisive sphere of economic relations. Many citizens' initiatives and grassroots organizations in Mexico and the USA, which emerged from the protest movements against the North American Free Trade Zone (NAFTA), for instance, are working on joint environmental projects along and on both sides of the border. Transboundary environmental cooperation could, in the long term, lead to a broader understanding of geographical spaces and communities, thereby replacing the traditional concept of a mutually exclusive, politically defined identity with one of an ecological community.

One of the obvious shortcomings of environmental peacemaking has been its inability to transform environmental

cooperation into broader forms of political cooperation and initiate a social and political dialogue going beyond environmental aspects. Here there are fundamental differences between transboundary water and nature conservation projects. The conflict element or peace building impact is to some extent explicitly articulated in transboundary water protection as well as in the relevant research and implementation of concrete projects, while transboundary cooperation in nature conservation tends to focus far more on preserving biodiversity and natural landscapes. Nevertheless, cooperation in nature conservation is at times specifically employed as a mechanism for peace-building or for creating political stability in conflict or crisis regions.

The establishment of "Peace Parks" creates ecological buffer zones between conflicting parties, which transcend political borders. In 2001 there were 169 nature conservation areas in close proximity to border regions in 113 countries worldwide. The protection and preservation of cultural diversity is equally promoted. Over and above nature conservation, they facilitate step by-step reconciliation between conflicting parties on a range of issues that are generally less politicized and therefore less contentious. In political practice however, cooperation in

nature conservation hits a ceiling when environmental policy is confronted with foreign and security policy considerations that it cannot address. The scope for cooperation in nature conservation to serve as a mechanism for peace building is clearly still limited at this point.

Cooperation in nature conservation has a key role to play in the context of a comprehensive regional strategy for building and consolidating peace that also includes the promotion of cultural, economic and social development. The existing nature conservation conventions have so far not included any conflict prevention norms. Mechanisms and procedures for dispute settlement and obligations of reporting, consultation and providing information are only isolated efforts in this direction. In practice moreover, nature conservation projects are by no means free of conflict. The opposing interests of different user groups can also impede political reconciliation.

Environmental conservation projects in general and Peace Parks in particular may not be able to end existing (border) conflicts. However, they do promote communication and cooperation between conflicting parties - the first stage in a peace process - by providing an institutionalized platform for

communication and mechanisms for collecting and processing data. This results in a phased rapprochement between formerly hostile states or social groups. In the long term, such projects help improve the living conditions of local communities and promote social, economic and political development as a corollary of efforts towards environmental conservation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

✓ The first step should be a systematic analysis of previous case studies and actual cooperation projects in environmental conservation based on a standard analysis grid. The absence of a comparative research project, analogous to existing studies on environmental conflicts (which were not concerned with environmental peace building). A research project should be initiated so as to fill this obvious research gap and to make the findings available to stakeholders at the policy level.

✓ This would necessitate doing away with the prevalent compartmentalization into divisions and disciplines (environmental policy, foreign policy, development policy, trade policy etc.), both in political decision-making and in research. As of now, there are no

interdisciplinary studies in this area. Yet issues of environmental peace building cannot be meaningfully tackled by either environmentalists or peace and conflict scholars in isolation.

✓ Similarly at the policy level, political decision makers must overcome a department-centric focus and move towards integration.

✓ An action-oriented research results not only in an objective acquisition of knowledge about social contexts, but at the same time facilitates an improvement in social conditions by linking project implementation with parallel research.

✓ By developing integrated methods of assessing conflict relevance and peace building impacts in development programmes and projects. Experts and research institutes can participate in operationalising and testing the still to be defined criteria for concrete project and programme evaluation.

✓ By implementing organizations, and represents an untapped potential for conflict prevention and peace building. Some significant initiatives in this regard are joint

seminars for senior management from the implementing organizations, the participation of experts in the fields of peace and conflict research in the development of country and regional strategies for conflict regions, and the involvement of environmental experts in the formulation of relevant sector strategies in the areas of conflict prevention and peace building.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has outlined the scope and constraints of the theory that environmental cooperation generally makes a contribution towards conflict prevention and peace building. We all share the same resources within our environment; therefore environmental challenges ignore political boundaries. These challenges therefore require long-term planning and encourage participation not only from governments, but all sectors of society. Cooperating on environmental issues helps to enhance trust

and create shared regional identities. Cooperation also encourages dialogue at the local level and also among governments on common environmental problems within and across countries. In so doing, confidence is built between governments and local people and also between countries to achieve peace through environmental conservation. A number of initiatives that can bring about through the environment include peace parks, shared river basin management plans, regional seas agreements, and joint environmental monitoring programs. These strategies all bring together ecology and politics with the aim of fostering peace. By managing environmental resources using cooperative efforts, insecurities are dealt with and more peaceful relations become a reality worldwide. Instead of allowing environmental issues to cause differences, they can be used to bring about peace worldwide, providing a better world for us to live in.

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