

Environmental Peacebuilding with Formerly Armed Actors

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Peacebuilding refers to the field of actions intended to shift formerly antagonistic relationships into sustainable, harmonious, and non-violent forms of coexistence. [Environmental peacebuilding](#) (EPB) transforms shared environmental challenges in armed conflict areas into opportunities for fostering cooperation, trust, and common goals to reduce resource conflicts, which are often worsened by [war-related ecological degradation](#). This Research Brief introduces **the opportunities and challenges related to EPB, focusing on the role of formerly armed actors (FAAs) as key stakeholders**. It argues that, under certain conditions, FAAs can serve as leaders in restorative, sustainable actions for an enduring end to violence.

Resource conflicts are just one of many factors contributing to ongoing violence. However, [integrating environmental security and resilience](#) into peacebuilding projects can bolster sustainable community livelihoods and crucial factors like mutual trust, recognition and collective action, which may also counter detrimental dynamics such as [armed group recruitment and violent extremism](#). Furthermore, by focusing on resource preservation and management in post-conflict recovery and reconciliation as a shared and universal necessity, EPB can sidestep the reproduction of divisive group identities for recognition and benefits, [a problem endemic to dichotomous “victims” and “ex-combatants” programs](#). While appearing as an attractive pathway towards sustainable futures, EPB's success [is contingent upon a litany of often difficult-to-obtain conditions](#). Key among these is the institutionalisation of cooperation through formal structures, ensuring the inclusive participation of various stakeholders such as local communities, governments, and NGOs. Environmental efforts should also be integrated with broader economic and political processes, developing common goals to bridge existing divides, and allocating sufficient resources for comprehensive environmental management plans. Embedding this in a conflict-sensitive approach that accounts for regional dynamics is critical, as is the establishment of legal frameworks for conflict resolution and cooperative management. Addressing the underlying root causes of prolonged violence, including social, economic, and political factors, is also fundamental for long-term peace and stability.

Incomplete EPB approaches may perpetuate or even create novel [deleterious effects](#) on the land and the communities that inhabit it. Related infrastructure developments, for instance, can displace populations or cause inadvertent environmental degradation. This tends to disproportionately impact women and marginalised groups, compounding vulnerabilities that fuel further conflict and undermine state legitimacy. The likelihood of these adverse effects is influenced by various factors, including pre-existing structural inequalities, the nature of governance systems, as well as specific project-level risks such as space and resource-intensive designs and vested economic and political interests. Nevertheless, these negative aspects can be mitigated through measures like impact assessments, external monitoring, inclusive consultation protocols, and gender and conflict-sensitive processes.

Trust After Betrayal argues that **formerly armed actors (FAAs) are the leading contextualised experts in security-building**, as they are the only actors with the dual embodied knowledge of producing insecurity and building pathways out of it. Therefore, the proposed approach EPB builds on that precedent and responds to the United Nations Environmental Programme's call for EPB initiatives to [include a specific focus on FAAs](#), women, and other marginalised groups. Though academic research on such an approach is scarce, there is some work that signals its promise. For example, a study on a sustainable land use initiative in post-Accord Caquetá, Colombia, found that managing

natural resources and land use among conflict-affected populations supported [economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability](#). Additionally, [natural resource justice](#) initiatives in the Niger Delta supported reintegration by foregrounding equitable distribution and sustainable resource management in a region where issues around resource control have been central to conflict dynamics. As a cautionary counter-example, especially relevant for those settings in which resource extraction looms large as a conflict driver, FAAs from Liberia's civil war contributed to ongoing instability by [illegally occupying rubber plantations](#) and profiting off of slave labor conditions among the workers. In all settings, multi-stakeholder, community-driven approaches that address collective well-being will be best served by scoping and feasibility studies that integrate local perspectives with an eye for balancing socio-economic, environmental, but also political considerations for sustainable success.

Namely, depoliticising environmental sustainability through technical cooperation can hinder environmental peacebuilding by oversimplifying complex issues, neglecting power dynamics, excluding key stakeholders, and undermining long-term sustainability and local participation. Care must also be exercised so that solutions in one community do not come at the cost of another – e.g., [water infrastructure construction resulting in unplanned population displacement](#). A nuanced understanding of the roots of identity- and resource-based conflicts is necessary to ensure that proposed alternatives do not exacerbate discriminatory practices and environmental degradation. Finally, to reduce the risk of delegitimising the state and sliding into conflict, it is crucial to ensure effective governance and capacity building at the state level, evidenced at the very least by [fulfilling promises to the population](#), and to establish inclusive accountability and oversight mechanisms at the community level.

The diagram on the next page presents some critical concerns for an FAA-inclusive EPB approach. For instance, the fundamental step of **increasing contact among previously antagonistic groups of actors** resulting from coordinated EPB action can potentially [aggravate tensions, reinforcing divisions and mistrust](#) when the root causes of conflict remain unaddressed (e.g., power imbalances and historic marginalisation). Persistent **resentment and mistrust can also obstruct open dialogue and collaborative negotiation** processes essential for sustainable peacebuilding and reconciliation. Furthermore, [perceived preferential treatment](#) of FAAs in EPB programming can alienate non-combatant communities who suffered in the conflict, which may reignite animosities, hinder reconciliation, and [undermine integration and inclusive engagement](#). Relatedly, if collective action under EPB **disproportionately empower FAAs at the expense of other community members**, it can perpetuate existing uneven power dynamics, marginalise non-combatant voices, and disrupt efforts toward equitable and inclusive peacebuilding.

In sum, ensuring the inclusion of FAAs as co-protagonists in EPB program and policy design and implementation requires a comprehensive strategy that addresses a wide range of complexities. First, a multi-level, multi-stakeholder understanding of environmental challenges, power dynamics, and diverse stakeholder interests is required. Despite the time, budget, and security constraints often present in conflict-affected settings, it is nevertheless necessary to avoid oversimplifications and exclusions, particularly of local communities and FAAs. Conflict-sensitive and trauma-informed practices are vital, recognising and addressing the roots of violence, and ensuring that solutions do not inadvertently cause discrimination, environmental harm, or negative impacts such as displacement. Additionally, robust governance and community engagement at both state and community levels are crucial, aimed at fulfilling state commitments, ensuring inclusive accountability, and preventing any preferential treatment of FAAs that might alienate non-combatants or disrupt equitable peacebuilding. Thus, while FAAs have a unique and essential role to play in EPB, they – and the communities who receive them – must be understood within the broader constellation of social, political, and economic relations and actors.

Assessment Framework Trajectories and Risks of Environmental Peacebuilding (EPB) with Formerly Armed Actors (FAAs)

The following diagram features an adaptation and blending of Dresse and colleagues' "[Environmental peacebuilding trajectories framework](#)" and Ide's model from "[The dark side of environmental peacebuilding](#)". The former outlines when, how, and why environmental cooperation can function as a peacebuilding tool. It conceptualises the EPB process as a **three-step sequential trajectory process** (technical, restorative and sustainable EPB), each embedded in underlying assessment conditions. Adapted from Ide's model are the potential **risk factors and adverse effects** of these efforts, emphasising the need for a deep understanding of conflict dynamics and evidence-based EPB approaches, complemented by **special considerations for incorporating FAAs into them**.

