

SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

# GROUND FOR PEACE

Land Restoration for International  
Peace and Security



**United Nations**  
Convention to Combat  
Desertification

## Acknowledgments

Ground for Peace: Land Restoration for International Peace and Security is a collaborative effort led by the Secretariat of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) with adelphi, and numerous partners and experts. UNCCD would like to thank the authors, contributors and reviewers for their contributions to this publication.

We acknowledge the interactive discussions and valuable inputs from the Writeshop of the publication held on 21 May 2024 in Berlin, and online consultations on 27 March 2024 and 23 July 2024.

This publication was made possible by the generous financial support provided by the Government of the Republic of Korea (Korea Forest Service).



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### Layout and design:

Pitch Black Graphic Design, The Hague/Berlin

### Cover photo:

© Faizal Abdul Aziz – CIFOR

### Imprint:

Published in 2024 by UNCCD, Bonn, Germany.

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ISBN 978-92-95128-10-1 (e-copy)  
ISBN 978-92-95128-11-8 (hard copy)

Recommended citation: United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). 2024. Ground for Peace: Land Restoration for International Peace and Security. Bonn, Germany.

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## SUMMARY FOR POLICYMAKERS

# GROUND FOR PEACE

## Land Restoration for International Peace and Security

**Land is crucial to people's livelihoods, health and wellbeing, and culture and identity, but it is increasingly under threat.** For more than three billion people, land is core to their survival, wellbeing and dignity. However, with between 20% and 40% of global land area, as well as 60% of all ecosystem services already degraded or degrading, many are seeing this vital resource disappear before their eyes.

**As land resources are degraded and become scarcer, competition and disputes over access and usage intensify, becoming a prominent feature in many conflicts.** Over the last 60 years, at least 40% of all intrastate conflicts have been linked to natural resources, including land. At the same time, conflict and fragility drive vulnerability to environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change. Conflicts sharply increase the fragility of the institutions, essential services, infrastructure and governance that are critical for strengthening people's resilience to a changing climate and environment.

**These worrying trends have made land and forest degradation in conflict areas an emerging concern for the global community.** Growing awareness of the links between climate change, conflict prevention and sustaining peace among researchers and in policy circles, including in the UN Security Council, has increased attention on natural resources and the environment more broadly. Currently, there is momentum around land and ecosystem restoration globally, with the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration serving as a flagship initiative, seeking to mainstream restoration activities to prevent, halt and reverse degradation across different types of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems between 2021 and 2030. In 2019, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification launched the Peace Forest Initiative, a flagship programme designed to promote peace through transboundary cooperation on sustainable land management (SLM) in fragile and conflict-affected settings (FCAS), and post-conflict settings. The initiative offers a practical platform to facilitate collaboration on the restoration of degraded lands and forests.

**Despite growing global awareness of the importance of land and ecosystem restoration in addressing the climate crisis, less attention has been paid to its promising – yet largely untapped – potential to foster international peace and cooperation.**

This report aims to fill this gap by setting the political case for land and ecosystem restoration as a powerful route towards international peace and security, addressing the following questions:

- What are the linkages between land degradation, conflict and insecurity that matter most between countries and societies in transboundary geographies?
- What are the key enablers for land restoration and forest conservation initiatives to promote cooperation across borders and achieve peace-positive outcomes, especially in FCAS?
- What is the current financial landscape for cross-border land and ecosystem restoration initiatives, and what significant gaps remain in enhancing peace and security priorities?
- What are the critical next steps to advance the land-peace-security nexus agenda and bring it to the forefront of the global security arena?

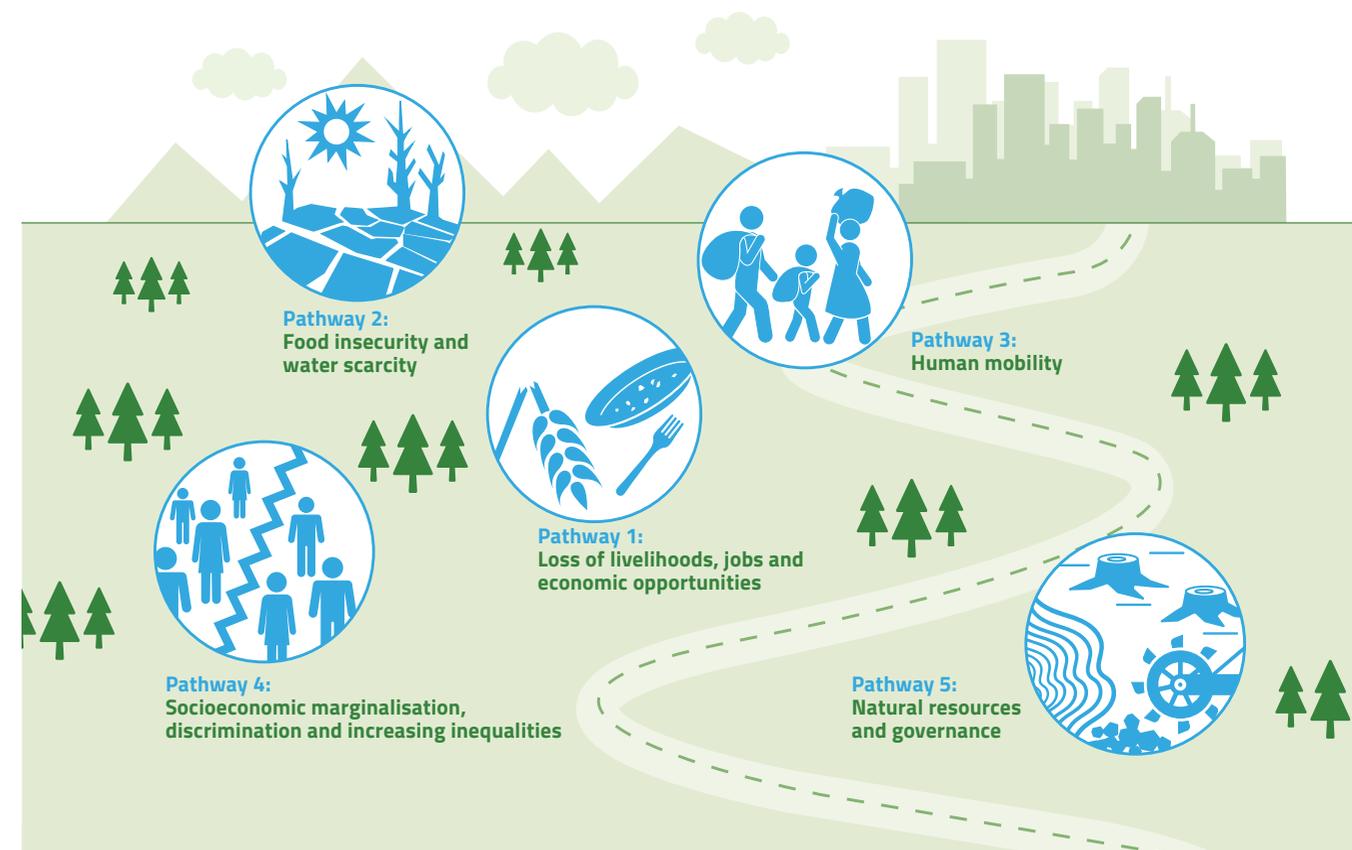
## Links between land, ecosystem degradation, and international peace and security

**Land can be a victim, as well as a source and driver, of conflict.** Conflict can directly impact land and land-based resources through physical damage caused by fighting, landmines or fires, or indirectly by accelerating land, ecosystem and resource degradation through the destruction of crops, pastures and watering systems. Conflict can strain land-based natural resources by increasing demand for or directly targeting them, as well as trigger the widespread displacement of people, which can have severe consequences on land and land-based resources. Conflict can push people to choose maladaptive coping practices at the expense of land and ecosystem health, particularly in FCAS with low resilience. Finally, conflicts severely weaken land and natural resource-related governance systems.

**This report identifies five key ways through which land and ecosystem degradation exacerbate fragility and trigger cascading impacts along the lines of socially constructed vulnerabilities, thus driving conflict.**

**Relevant strides have been made in integrating land restoration efforts with conflict sensitivity and cooperation in international conventions and multilateral efforts at the global policy level.** For example, parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity regularly share knowledge and best practices in transboundary cooperation through the Peace and Biodiversity Dialogue Initiative, which promotes collaboration in protected areas globally. The UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration and the International Land Coalition emphasise inclusivity as a path towards peace, especially through the integration of Indigenous Peoples' local knowledge and land rights, recognising them as champions in land restoration. At the regional level, organizations such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and Association of Southeast Asian Nations have highlighted the importance of integrating land restoration and conflict prevention into their work.

Key pathways linking land, land-based resource and ecosystem degradation to conflict and insecurity



### Pathways

- 1. Loss of livelihoods, jobs and economic opportunities.** Land and ecosystem degradation expose resource-dependent communities to loss of livelihoods, jobs and economic opportunities, and can drive an increase in criminal activity.
- 2. Food insecurity and water scarcity.** Land and ecosystem degradation drive loss of productive land and heighten the risk of crop failures, raising food prices, and exacerbating food insecurity and water scarcity.
- 3. Human mobility.** Land and ecosystem degradation can increase migration and displacement, leading to tensions and conflicts among communities.
- 4. Socioeconomic marginalisation, discrimination and increasing inequalities.** Land and ecosystem degradation in fragile contexts can increase socioeconomic disparities, and the marginalisation and discrimination of minority and vulnerable groups.
- 5. Natural resources and governance.** Weakened land and natural resource-related governance structures can escalate conflict, including across borders.

## Leveraging land and ecosystem restoration for international peace

There is considerable evidence that cooperation over the management of shared natural resources can pave the way for broader political agreements and even prevent conflict. Embedding environmental considerations within traditional peace processes, for example, has proven useful to achieve more sustainable outcomes and promote stability. Similarly, environmental peacebuilding can bolster post-conflict recovery by encouraging sustainable resource management. Since natural resources are crucial for economic recovery following war, environmental issues should be handled effectively to ensure sustainable peace.

To date, existing literature exploring the linkages between land, peace and security has largely focused on shared natural resource management, along with the agriculture and land tenure dimensions of land-related interventions, rather than on restoration aspects. Moreover, the literature has tended to emphasise how these interventions can be conflict-sensitive, rather than explicitly on how they can achieve peace outcomes. In addition, cross-border dimensions have received limited attention, with land issues being largely understood and addressed within state boundaries, and especially with a focus on local and community-level dynamics.

The extent to which land and ecosystem restoration interventions are able to deliver on cooperation and peace outcomes varies significantly depending on the context. Prevailing social, economic and political conditions, alongside other influential factors, are key determinants. Especially in FCAS and post-conflict settings, the stage of the conflict cycle significantly affects the types of activity that are feasible and effective. In the early stages of the conflict cycle, land and ecosystem interventions largely focus on prevention, addressing the land and environmental drivers of tensions and potential conflict. During ongoing conflicts, land and ecosystem restoration activities can provide entry points for dialogue and mediation. Meanwhile, in post-conflict reconstruction settings, land and ecosystem restoration interventions may focus more on fostering economic and social development.

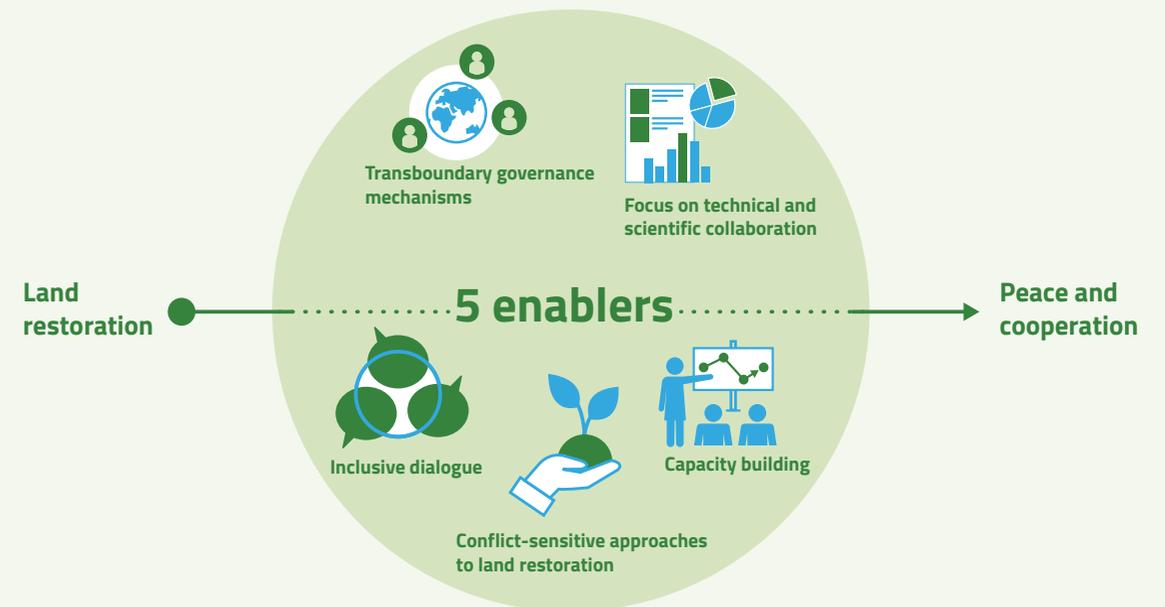
Examples of components under a sustainable land management approach.



A broad portfolio of land-based restoration interventions can be employed to address conflict drivers such as land rights, water access and management, marginalisation, and exclusion from decision-making. Under the umbrella of a SLM landscape approach, interventions directed at livelihood security, ecosystem and land restoration, protected areas, and climate security can support peace and cooperation outcomes, as well as key synergies with climate and biodiversity goals. As a crosscutting element, investment in land can contribute to the achievement of multiple SDGs, including targets around climate action, biodiversity, water and food.

This report identifies five key enablers for land and ecosystem restoration initiatives to promote cooperation and peace in FCAS and post-conflict settings.

Enablers for land and ecosystem restoration to promote cooperation and peace.



- 1. Focus on technical and scientific collaboration.** In cross-border areas, technical and scientific collaboration to address land and ecosystem degradation challenges can create a neutral ground to pursue shared goals.
- 2. Inclusive dialogue.** Community-led, inclusive dialogue must be prioritised in transboundary ecosystem restoration and SLM efforts. Conducting robust stakeholder analysis and mapping at the outset is essential to this end.
- 3. Transboundary governance mechanisms.** Joint approaches to land and ecosystem restoration can serve as confidence-building mechanisms, bringing stakeholders together over common goals.
- 4. Conflict-sensitive approaches to land restoration.** Applying conflict sensitivity to land and ecosystem restoration interventions helps identify proactive ways to build trust and cooperation. A foresight approach is essential to ensure that land and ecosystem interventions do not have unintended, negative impacts.
- 5. Capacity building.** Capacity building is needed to leverage land and ecosystem restoration interventions for cooperation and peace, and can itself be a tool for promoting peace by building a common understanding and improving dialogue between parties.

## Financing land and ecosystem restoration

**To fully harness the potential of land restoration for cooperation and peace outcomes, adequate finance must be made available and accessible.** A variety of funding streams are relevant for peace-positive land restoration initiatives. Vertical climate funds, bilateral and multilateral donors, market mechanisms, and peace-building funds all have a role to play.

### Funding streams

**Vertical climate funds** are a major source of financing for land restoration projects. Collectively, approximately 10% of projects funded between 2015-2024 were related to land and forests. The primary recipients of this funding are designated state institutions, government ministries and international organizations, while still very little finance goes directly to local civil society and community-based organizations. Transboundary initiatives represent only a small portion of funded projects.

**Bilateral and multilateral donor organizations** have also played a major role in financing land and ecosystem restoration interventions, primarily using climate action as an entry point. Among bilateral donor-funded nature-based solutions (NbS), agricultural projects receive the largest share of funding, followed by biodiversity, water, disaster risk reduction and forestry projects.

**Carbon market mechanisms** have also financed land and ecosystem restoration, but their full potential remains untapped. The Voluntary Carbon Market issued USD 264 million in credits between 2015 and 2024, with roughly 11% originating from NbS projects. The main project types include avoided conversion, afforestation and reforestation, avoided deforestation, improved forest management, and reduced emissions in agriculture.

**The UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF)** has supported 1,057 projects since its inception, including 60 specifically related to land and peacebuilding since 2015. Through its climate-security portfolio, the PBF has been one of the few funding mechanisms to make explicit efforts to expand cross-border programming. However, thus far, most cross-border projects have involved parallel activities, steps or processes executed on either side of a border, rather than reflecting a truly transboundary approach.

**Overall, the level of financing for land and ecosystem restoration remains inadequate, especially in FCAS.** In addition to the volume of funding, significant gaps in the financing landscape include the lack of well-integrated social and peacebuilding considerations within climate change vertical funds. While funds may include environmental and social safeguards that indirectly benefit peace and security or mitigate risks, conflict prevention and peacebuilding are generally not mainstreamed as co-benefits or decision criteria.



Niamey, Niger, photo by Michel Isamuna on Unsplash

**Designated resources for transboundary land restoration projects are limited** and differing regulations across jurisdictions increase the complexity of transboundary projects compared to national ones.

**There is a notable gap in financing reaching the local level where it is most needed for contextualised, locally appropriate solutions.** Many funding agencies require states or large implementing partners to absorb funds to meet donor expectations, including monitoring, evaluation and learning requirements. However, in some cases, there is a disconnect between national and local realities, particularly in settings with high government turnover. This can mean that funds absorbed at the national level may fail to reach those who need them most, for example, in remote rural areas.

**Another challenge is the need for long-term funding for programming balanced with short-term funding cycles and demand for quick results.** Many funders experience pressure to lower transaction costs and demonstrate positive results quickly. This leads to a preference for short-term interventions, often favouring large-scale, standardised investment in low-risk settings. In contrast, long-term strategic investment is necessary to ensure peace and security goals, with responsive, risk-tolerant programme design in fragile contexts.

**Finally, there have been very few attempts to meaningfully engage the private sector in these efforts.** Encouraging greater private sector involvement could facilitate a shift from short-term relief to income generation and economic development, while fostering innovative solutions to long-standing issues that the public sector alone may struggle to address. The private sector can play a key role in opening avenues for transboundary cooperation, as central governments typically have strong interests in attracting private companies and investment. In FCAS, however, de-risking mechanisms – for example, guarantees, blended finance and political risk insurance – are needed to ensure adequate stability and predictability for investment.

## Recommendations

This report identifies three key areas of action for donors, implementing agencies, governments, civil society and researchers working at the intersection of land and ecosystem restoration, environmental protection, climate action, peace and security, and development.

### ► Delivering to scale: land, peace and security for all

1. **Pursue land and ecosystem restoration through multi-sectoral and inclusive activities**, including livelihood security, education, health and trade.
2. **Recognise the value of “technical diplomacy”** in land-peace-security work, noting that engagement on technical issues may be the necessary first step towards broader cooperation and peace goals.
3. **Build the capacity of institutions and people to create an enabling environment for land-related peace and sustainability.**
4. **Promote talent and innovation**, and ensure that interventions purposefully incorporate individuals and groups that have in the past been excluded from access to and decision-making over land and land-based resources.
5. **Harness technology**, such as satellite imagery, and digital citizen reporting and storytelling tools to enhance peace and land restoration outcomes.
6. **Think regionally, while acting locally**, prioritising contexts with clear entry points for regional collaboration.

### ► Catalysing action on land, peace and security

1. **Elevate the land, peace and security agenda**, and embed it more deeply within key security and peace organizations.
2. **Operationalise action on land, peace and security**, working towards a coherent and coordinated portfolio of activities that simultaneously support land and ecosystem restoration, as well as peace and cooperation objectives, with a focus on the transboundary level.
3. **Recognise the importance of international agreements for sustainable development and the protection of the environment** for conflict prevention, management and resolution, as well as long-term peacebuilding.
4. **Use the momentum around the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration and the World Decade of Afforestation and Reforestation** to ensure peace and cooperation outcomes are achieved.
5. **Build on ongoing initiatives and programmes at different levels**, including those carried out by regional organizations.
6. **Leverage the land-peace narrative to garner public and political support for land and ecosystem restoration**, emphasising how restoring landscapes can improve cross-border relations, peacebuilding and regional stability.

### ► Seizing opportunities for more and better financing

1. **Ensure long-term financial sustainability and flexibility** in land restoration initiatives by diversifying funding sources and incorporating mechanisms that allow for adaptive management.
2. **Improve coordination** with other financial instruments to identify synergies, avoid duplication of efforts and scale up successful initiatives.
3. **Direct more funding to the local level** by reducing the complexity of applying for small grants and investing in capacity building of local groups.
4. **Consider establishing an innovation fund** that provides grants to encourage organizations to engage in transboundary and regional peace and land restoration efforts.
5. **Encourage private finance** by supporting de-risking mechanisms in FCAS, and demonstrating the investment returns that protecting and restoring land and ecosystems can offer.
6. **Include follow-up mechanisms** and adequate funding and capacities to understand the effectiveness and long-term impacts of transboundary projects.

Kajiado, Kenya, photo by Lazarus Marson on Unsplash



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