

*The Role of Land and Natural Resources in Negotiating Peace Agreements*<sup>1</sup>  
University of Delaware

**Overview:** Drawing on the growing genre of literature on “environmental peacebuilding,” this paper develops a qualitative model of how land and natural resources (including minerals, water, forests, and agricultural products) contribute to the framing of conflicts and how they might contribute to their resolution. It considers twelve cases of peace processes in which land and resources played a role and develops a causal link typology of the nexus between natural resources and conflict. Based on extensive archival research and interviews, it develops a series of causal variables and pathways that were synthesized into our qualitative model – The Peace and Natural Resource Nexus Model (PNRN). The analysis suggests that there are opportunities for making peace through a nexus with natural resources and for making peace agreements more robust with greater attention to natural resource linkages even if they might not be the dominant cause of conflict. Attention to the roles of natural resources in conflicts and the inclusion of environmental and natural resource factors in the negotiation of peace agreements is thus likely to be advantageous across a wide spectrum of conflicts.

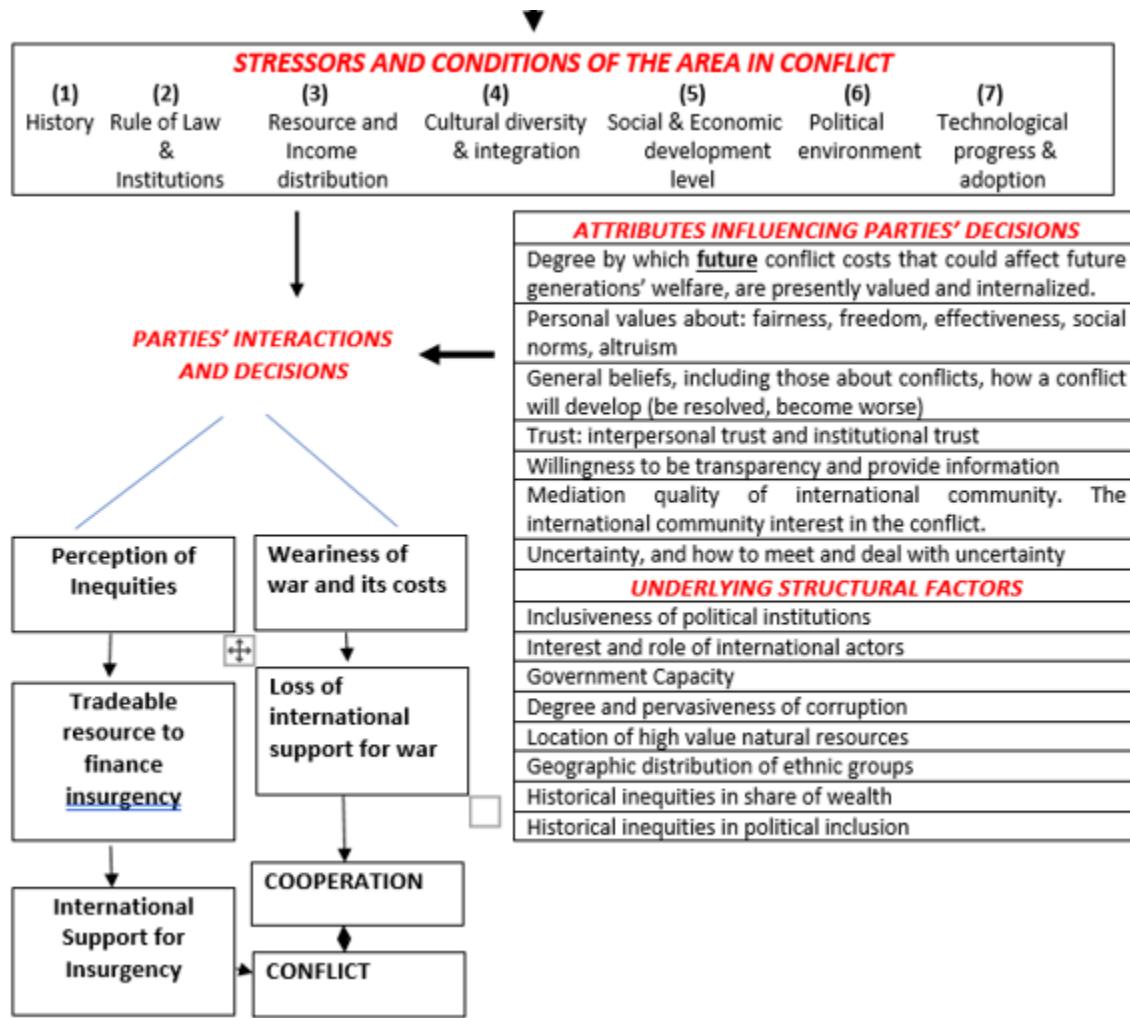
**Model:** Based on the evolution of the field and case analysis for this project, this study has developed the **Peace and Natural Resource Nexus (PNRN) model**. The model’s name is meant to be systems-oriented and emphasize the inherent linkages between terrestrial and aqueous environments. We have kept “peace” at the forefront of the model caption as that is the ultimate goal though conflict and cooperation dialectics will be part of the anatomy of the model itself. This study examines several variables, focusing on the role of land and natural resources in these contexts, and the choices local, national, and international parties make to work for peace or prolong conflict, observing that parties have agency and can choose to work for peace. While the model is holistic, the focus in this paper is on characteristics, histories, and qualities that are closely tied to land and resources issues. The model also recognizes that the evolution and resolution of a conflict related to land and resources requires the parties in conflict to be knowledgeable of and acknowledge the conditions and settings in the area in conflict. These conditions set the stage for conflict or cooperation pathways and influence the type of interaction between and decisions made by two or more parties.

The model suggests that incremental action through a purposeful sequencing of trust-building measures is most useful in these cases. Third parties may well be needed to facilitate and support the peace process, and for compliance assurance and monitoring where there is a trust deficit or where the conflict is in a remote area that requires technological tools to keep track of activities. The model explains how the initiation, development, endurance, expansion, peace negotiations, and final resolution of a conflict related to land and resources is unavoidably determined by the type of interaction and the decision-making of the parties involved in the conflict. The arrows pointing to “parties’ interactions and decisions” from the contextual variables in the model are intended to indicate the characteristics of the contextualization through which the choices between conflict or cooperation develop. The arrows between the boxes leading to conflict or cooperation indicate an additive feature, which does not imply sequencing or directionality. Such interactions and decisions will influence one another’s welfare. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Peter Jones – Executive Director, Ottawa Dialogue, University of Ottawa – for drafting, with permission, this summary report derived from “The Role of Land and Natural Resources in Negotiating Peace Agreements,” by Ali et al. The original research was conducted as part of the research project, “Why It Worked: Research-Driven Model for Conflict Resolution,” a project devised and funded by Bridging Insights, Inc. and designed and led by Harvard Kennedy School’s Negotiation and Conflict Resolution Collaboratory. Bridging Insights, Inc. is a registered nonprofit organization seeking to build a research-based model for conflict resolution to provide new ideas, paradigms, and methods of engagement applicable to practitioners in diverse conflicted areas. Between 2021 and 2023, Bridging Insights worked with five universities on a large-scale, multi-case comparative, interdisciplinary study of conflicts between 1946 and 2018 that are considered resolved. For further information please reach out to [research@bridginginsights.com](mailto:research@bridginginsights.com).

model also shows that the type of interaction and decision making is determined by human attributes: interests, attitudes, beliefs, values and goals of the parties in conflict. Some people, for example, may behave quite differently toward those with whom they expect to have a long-term relationship than toward those with whom they expect no future interaction. The model also recognizes that the evolution and resolution of a conflict related to land and resources requires the parties in conflict to be knowledgeable of and acknowledge the conditions and settings in the area in conflict. These conditions set the stage for conflict or cooperation pathways and influence the type of interaction between and decisions made by two or more parties.



**Case Studies:** The cases studied show that peace agreements are most beneficial when they create platforms and structures capable not only of addressing current causes of conflict yet also of evolving to resolve future conflicts. Rather than aiming to work out a definitive resolution of all current issues, peace processes benefit when they develop new ways of thinking that build relationships, recognize grievances, and create social spaces in which future conflicts can be resolved in non-violent ways. This is an alternative view of peace agreements from those views which focus on the resolution of specific current causes of conflict.

With respect to land and resource issues, research indicates that parties to successful accords negotiate multiple, alternative ways to resolve grievances, create platforms for future dialogue, and reach a signed,

lasting peace accord. Land redistribution issues are consigned to the political arena for future resolution, and platforms are created to address those issues in the political arena, with guaranteed representation of dissident groups. A mandate for economic development plans was put in some accords, and court systems were developed to resolve land disputes.

For example, the Evian Accords (France-Algeria) addressed economic security needs of the more powerful partner in the peace agreement and the development needs of the less powerful partner, and are an example of the willingness of a former colonial power to assist in the economic and financial aspects of transition. In South Sudan, crucial trading partners existed for its oil before and after the peace accord. However, corruption and secrecy remained its norm, resulting in continued armed conflict even after independence was achieved through a referendum agreed to in the peace accord. In addition, economic development opportunities incentivize adherence to peace accords. In the Angolan struggle for control of the government, the natural resources provided separate streams of funding for the contending parties. The international community worked to dry up diamonds as a source of funding for conflicts, and thereby depleted local capacity to wage effective warfare. Although Angola continues to remain deeply divided politically and the distribution of “rents” and equal opportunities for the formerly contending ethnic groups is contested, statistics show Angola experienced remarkable development and prosperity following the peace accord. These economic development opportunities are only possible when there is peace between former adversaries, which guarantees the stability and security so important to international business partners.

In other cases (Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Colombia), land was contested as a question of distributive justice and the need to overcome historic grievances, or to achieve self-governance for an ethnic group (South Sudan, Algeria, South Africa, Philippines).

**Conclusions:** In summary, the case comparisons provide us with a rich tapestry of material to consider the nexus between natural resources and conflict and consequently also provide a mechanism for their role in peace building. Furthermore, in some cases, natural resources can be brought forth as an important variable to consider a novel pathway for peace-building when they are not even a core issue in the conflict. Such a pathway highlights the salience of environmental factors as a “superordinate goal” for adversaries. This superordinate goal is the realization that natural resources are essential for survival for all parties locally and have international importance, which helps to orient stakeholders to the full context of a conflict, and consequently, it incentivizes parties to find new structures and ways of thinking to make peace currently and resolve conflicts peacefully in the future.