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Armed Actors and Environmental Peacebuilding LESSONS FROM EASTERN DRC

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report argues that integrating armed actors into the study and practice of environmental peacebuilding is crucial for placing the field on a firmer conceptual footing and for improving environmental peacebuilding programs and projects. It draws on the authors' fieldwork in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly in and around Virunga National Park and the Itombwe and Okapi National Reserves. This report is based on a research project funded by a grant from the United States Institute of Peace.

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Cover photo: Congolese soldiers and park rangers at an outpost in Virunga National Park on October 9, 2014. (Photo by Uriel Sinai/New York Times)

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Summary



Environmental peacebuilding is a rapidly evolving field of research and practice, but it has thus far paid limited attention to the multifaceted roles of armed actors in conflict and cooperation over natural resources. This oversight exists even though both state security forces and nonstate armed groups can shape the governance of natural resources and influence resource-related conflicts in important ways.

This report argues that greater attention to the role of armed actors in environmental peacebuilding is needed. It outlines three dimensions of environmental peacebuilding where armed groups and state security forces have significant influence: first, economic development projects that involve changes to natural resource governance; second, initiatives to foster trust by promoting collaboration over environmental or resource issues; and third, efforts to build strong and legitimate governance institutions.

To accurately assess how armed actors shape environmental peacebuilding, it is important to acknowledge their variable and multifaceted role in resource governance and resource-related conflict and their diverse motives for resource extraction. It should also be recognized that aside from engaging in environmentally destructive behavior, armed actors can also engage in efforts to protect the environment and biodiversity. Finally, armed actors not only shape the economic aspects of resource-related conflicts; through their rhetoric and links to civilians, they also influence the social and identity-related dimensions of these conflicts.

Focusing on armed actors can make environmental peacebuilding interventions more effective in several ways. First, it can strengthen environmental peacebuilding's theoretical underpinnings and its evidence base. This result, in turn, will help fine-tune the theories of change that inform program design. Finally, a focus on armed actors will contribute to more conflict- and gender-sensitive environmental peacebuilding interventions.

The report draws on field research in and around protected areas in the war-affected eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Its findings and recommendations are also relevant to other conflict and post-conflict contexts where armed actors shape resource governance and resource-related conflicts.



A Congolese soldier is silhouetted by the glow from a lava lake in Virunga National Park on August 30, 2010. The Congolese army and park rangers conduct joint operations to secure large swathes of the park from militia groups that use the park for hiding. (Photo by Finbarr O'Reilly/Reuters)

Introduction

Environmental peacebuilding is a rapidly evolving field of research and practice that examines how environmental and resource issues affect conflict dynamics. The field has a broad focus: it looks at the prevention and transformation of conflict as well as post-conflict recovery, and it covers conflict both within and between states as well as situations where conflict is not violent, where violent conflict is ongoing, and where it has happened in the past.¹

Despite the rapid development and diversification of environmental peacebuilding in recent years, there remain notable gaps in its study and practice.² One such gap is the role of armed actors, including state security forces and nonstate armed groups. Few studies and programs comprehensively address how armed actors influence processes of environmental peacebuilding—even

though state security forces and nonstate armed groups can significantly affect key dimensions of peacebuilding interventions.³ They may shape, for instance, the governance of natural resources, resource-dependent livelihoods, state-society relations, and conflicts between and within communities. Their influence is notable not only in situations of ongoing violent conflict but also in latent and post-conflict situations.⁴

This report demonstrates why it is important to integrate armed actors in the study and practice of environmental peacebuilding. Thus far, most attention to armed groups and forces within environmental peacebuilding has related to preventing or reducing their involvement in natural resource exploitation to finance conflict.⁵ While this is a pertinent focus, armed actors shape resource governance and resource-related



Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock. Boundaries of Itombwe and Okapi reserves are approximated from maps in Marine Gauthier, “3-D Mapping: A Planning and Management Tool for the Itombwe Reserve,” Rainforest Foundation Norway, 2016; and Wildlife Conservation Society, “Mitigating Conflict and Protecting Rightful Access to Natural Resources: Demarcating the Western Boundary of the Okapi Wildlife Reserve,” December 2020.

conflict in many other ways as well. For instance, the presence of armed groups linked to specific identity groups may exacerbate intergroup conflict over natural resources. Armed groups can also shape people’s perceptions of natural resources by using grievanc- es around these resources as a tool of mobilization. In turn, the involvement of state security forces in resource exploitation has important implications for state-society relations, since it often creates resent- ment and distrust of the state. Overlooking these aspects creates several risks, including design of

environmental peacebuilding interventions that are not sustainable or that may be counterproductive.

To mitigate these risks, environmental peacebuilding research and programs should focus more systemati- cally on armed actors. Doing so offers several benefits. To start, it will allow environmental peacebuilding to be placed on a firmer conceptual footing and strength- en its evidence base. This, in turn, will help fine-tune the theories of change that inform program design. In addition, owing to the importance of armed actors in

The Congolese state is well-known for extracting resources from Congolese citizens in an arbitrary and unofficial manner, often involving significant coercion. As one interviewee put it, “The population is the field of the state, and all they do is harvest.”

defining gendered identities and relations in conflict and post-conflict societies, research that focuses on such actors will more fully account for the gendered nature of environmental peacebuilding. Finally, paying explicit attention to armed actors, including in stakeholder analysis and monitoring and evaluation, can render environmental peacebuilding projects more conflict sensitive and enhance their effectiveness.

The report draws on field research in and around protected areas in the war-affected eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).⁶ These areas include the Itombwe Nature Reserve in South Kivu Province, the Okapi Wildlife Reserve in Ituri and Haut Uélé Provinces, and Virunga National Park in North Kivu Province. The report focuses on both state armed actors, in particular the Congolese armed forces (Forces armées de la république démocratique du Congo, or FARDC) and nonstate armed groups.⁷ Both the military and armed groups strongly influence Congolese society in the east. Of the FARDC’s 165,000 (claimed) members, well over half are deployed to the eastern provinces of North Kivu, South Kivu, and Ituri.⁸ These provinces are also home to over 120 armed groups of different shapes and sizes. While some are larger-scale politico-military movements, others are small-scale armed groups (under 500 fighters) that mobilize around community self-defense and have a limited geographical sphere of influence.⁹

There are some similarities in the ways that the FARDC and nonstate armed groups shape environmental peacebuilding. Both sets of actors are heavily involved in the exploitation of and trade in natural resources such as charcoal, timber, bushmeat, cannabis, minerals, and fish.¹⁰ A part of these activities takes place in protected areas, where most forms of resource exploitation are prohibited or strictly regulated. Armed

actors “protect” these illegal activities, implying they authorize and facilitate them, including by preventing interference from law enforcement and other officials. In exchange, they demand protection fees, which generally take the form of “taxes” in cash or in kind.¹¹

But the broader effects of this engagement in resource exploitation are somewhat different for the FARDC than for nonstate armed groups. First, the FARDC is part of the state apparatus, and its involvement in illegal resource sectors shapes its relations with other parts of the state apparatus, including environmental agencies. While this involvement often leads to significant tensions, there are also many instances in which members of the civilian administration collaborate with the armed forces in breaking the law.¹² The Congolese state is well-known for extracting resources from Congolese citizens in an arbitrary and unofficial manner, often involving significant coercion. As one interviewee put it, “The population is the field of the state, and all they do is harvest.”¹³ This imperative for revenue generation creates complex patterns of conflict and cooperation between and within different arms of the state.

A second point of difference is that the FARDC’s involvement in resource exploitation has important implications for perceptions of state authority and state-society relations. The fact that representatives of the state violate the laws they are supposed to uphold bestows a veneer of legality on illegal activities. In the long term, this undermines the authority of the state and its capacity to enforce laws. Where the unofficial taxation that it imposes is perceived not to involve any return service, such as enhanced security, the FARDC’s involvement in resource exploitation can also create resentment of the state. Moreover, civilian businesspeople often perceive the FARDC to have an unfair advantage in the resource sector, since it imposes conditions by force.¹⁴



A park ranger gets ready to begin her shift in Virunga National Park on October 10, 2013. The recruitment of women into the ranger service has steadily increased since 2015. (Photo by LM Spencer/Shutterstock)

By contrast, resource exploitation by nonstate armed groups generally has more local impacts on conflict. Most of these groups emanate from and are seen to defend specific ethnic communities—particularly so-called Mai-Mai groups, community-based militias that mobilize for self-defense against putative “foreigners” and “invaders.” Where these groups engage in illegal resource exploitation, this may be seen as justified to finance the defense of the ethnic community. However, it is in many cases also considered predatory behavior even by members of the communities that these groups claim to defend.¹⁵ Because of their direct links to ethnic communities, these nonstate groups have strong impacts on intercommunity relations, including tensions around natural resources.

In sum, both nonstate armed groups and state security forces shape resource governance and conflicts in important ways, though with some differences. These differences should be taken into account in environmental peacebuilding research and practice.

The report begins by documenting the absence of armed actors in research on environmental peacebuilding. It then looks at armed actors’ roles in environmental peacebuilding in some detail, reviews the risks of overlooking armed actors in environmental peacebuilding, and outlines the advantages that arise when armed actors become a focus. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for centering armed actors in further environmental peacebuilding research and practice.

Where Are Armed Actors in Environmental Peacebuilding?

Existing literature on environmental peacebuilding rarely puts armed actors center stage. To start with, much of the literature does not specifically mention armed actors but instead subsumes these actors under labels such as “conflict parties” or “communities.” Second, armed actors do not appear within environmental peacebuilding’s theoretical underpinnings. In recent years, scholars have tried to identify the different causal mechanisms through which cooperation over natural resource management and other environmental issues can contribute to peacebuilding.¹⁶ Yet the current literature does not explicitly discuss the role of armed actors in any of these mechanisms. Both these omissions are problematic in contexts where armed actors strongly affect resource governance and resource-related conflicts.

ARMED ACTORS’ INVISIBILITY IN ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING RESEARCH

The first generation of environmental peacebuilding research, which examined interstate conflict, focused mostly on governments. In the second generation, which looks at intrastate conflict, there is an additional focus on local (civilian) authorities and communities.¹⁷ Both generations work with the often implicit assumption that “communities” or “governments” are the key conflict parties and that these are unitary actors. However, different branches of government may hold different interests and can even work at cross-purposes. Communities are not unitary actors, either: there are long-standing concerns within the development and peacebuilding fields about treating communities in an undifferentiated manner, as this hides power differentials along gender, class, generational, and other lines.¹⁸

While armed groups and forces are part of or linked to governments and communities, they generally have a distinct way of operating, being trained and organized to wield violence. In addition, they tend to have distinct organizational interests. For instance, in numerous conflict and post-conflict contexts, such as Uganda, Pakistan, and Guatemala, the higher echelons of the military have significant business interests that include resource exploitation, while civilian control over the armed forces is weak.¹⁹ In such environments, the armed forces should be analyzed separately from civilian branches of government.

There is also a need to differentiate nonstate armed groups from the communities they are linked to. The fact that armed groups such as the Mai-Mai claim to defend certain communities does not imply that they represent or can be equated with these communities. While some armed groups that engage in community defense are placed under the authority of or listen to local leaders, other groups operate largely autonomously.²⁰ Civilians therefore have a limited say in their operations and may disagree with certain decisions, for instance, regarding the use of violence.

Acknowledging the agency and distinct interests of armed organizations justifies approaching them as conflict actors in their own right within environmental peacebuilding, instead of subsuming them within the categories of “government” or “communities.” This approach is also necessary given that armed actors’ influence on environmental peacebuilding processes can differ considerably from that of civilian communities and authorities.



People carry bags of charcoal on their bicycles in Mweso, a village near Virunga National Park, on January 27, 2015. In some villages near the park, an estimated two-thirds of people depend on illegal charcoal production to earn a living. (Photo by Melanie Gouby/AP)

ARMED ACTORS' ABSENCE FROM THEORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

Environmental peacebuilding research pays growing attention to the causal mechanisms through which cooperation over natural resource management and other environmental issues contributes to peacebuilding.²¹ These mechanisms include contributing to economic development, building trust and cooperation, and building strong institutions of governance.²² Current analyses of these mechanisms do not specify the role of armed actors. Yet the presence of such actors can importantly shape the different processes that each mechanism entails, as explained below.

Promoting Economic Development

In numerous conflict and post-conflict areas, many residents depend on natural resources for their livelihoods. Improved natural resource management could help

address the basic needs of these residents and spur economic development, reducing incentives to join rebel groups.²³ Yet where armed actors engage in and protect unsustainable resource exploitation, they will resist reform efforts, sometimes violently. Moreover, in some contexts, the same illegal resource exploitation that allows elites and armed actors to enrich themselves enables the poorest parts of the population to survive.²⁴ For instance, in some villages located at the edge of Virunga National Park in eastern DRC, around two-thirds of the inhabitants depend on illegal charcoal production for making a living.²⁵ As a result, efforts to end or better regulate the illegal and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources—efforts that in the long term can lead to economic growth—may end up impoverishing a part of the population in the short term.²⁶ A sudden loss of livelihood can drive people to join armed groups or to intensify relations with armed

actors who protect illegal resource exploitation and therefore their means of earning a living.

These complexities are a reminder that in zones of ongoing or past conflict, the formal economy, the international aid economy, the informal economy, and the illegal components of the informal economy tend to be interwoven in complex ways.²⁷ While some of the environmental peacebuilding literature acknowledges how all these different economies are interwoven, few systematically consider the role of armed actors in each of these strands, thereby missing out on a full analytical picture.

Fostering Trust and Cooperation

A second causal mechanism of environmental peacebuilding involves building trust and cooperation through the development of joint projects around natural resources. Fostering shared dependence on natural resources can increase conflict parties' recognition that they have mutual interests. One example is collective natural resource management; the goal here is for groups in conflict to interact frequently and develop the habit of cooperation over environmental issues—which is then expected to “spill over” to other, more contentious areas, in this way reinforcing trust.²⁸

Armed actors can strongly influence these different pathways of trust building and cooperation in both positive and negative ways. Where armed groups are linked to and claim to defend different communities in conflict, their presence can undermine trust building in the course of collective natural resource management. This is especially the case where civilian leaders have limited control over armed groups and these groups engage in violence. Conversely, where armed actors directly participate in environmental cooperation issues, the chances for positive spillover effects may increase. Precisely because these groups often play on intercommunity distrust, their display of collaborative behavior can have strong demonstration effects and entice civilians to start collaborating, too. In sum,

because of their capacity to wield violence and their links to civilian conflict parties, armed actors can cause trust-building mechanisms to work in ways, or to degrees, that are different from what is currently conceptualized in the literature.

Building Strong Institutions

Strengthening state institutions and state governance capacity, including in the field of natural resources, is considered an important pathway of environmental peacebuilding. Strong state institutions are assumed to strengthen the rule of law, help secure property rights, and provide public services, such as security. In addition, strong and legitimate state institutions can be crucial for resolving conflicts and preventing outbreaks of violence.²⁹

An important body of work on statebuilding in fragile contexts, however, points to the dangers of focusing uniquely on the state and on the pitfalls of externally induced statebuilding efforts.³⁰ Armed actors are a key factor in these drawbacks. In some conflict zones (for example, in parts of Myanmar, the Philippines, and Mali), armed organizations have more legitimacy and provide more public services than the state, including by regulating conflicts around natural resources.³¹ Some of these organizations also invoke dissatisfaction with the performance of the state as an important reason for taking up arms.³² Attempts to reinforce state authority in such areas might undermine service delivery while enhancing the popularity of nonstate armed groups. Efforts to reinforce state authority that hinge on state security forces can be particularly challenging, since these forces often have a reputation for committing abuses against the population and engaging in ruthless revenue generation. In such contexts, the increased deployment of state security forces can lead to increased state predation and violence, thereby undermining, rather than reinforcing, security provision and state legitimacy.³³ Despite the obvious effects of armed actors on efforts to strengthen governance institutions, the current environmental peacebuilding literature has not systematically considered these effects.

Understanding Armed Actors' Role in Resource Governance and Conflict

The invisibility of armed actors in environmental peacebuilding research hampers a good understanding of the different ways in which these actors shape resource-related conflict and resource governance. Understanding the role of armed actors in environmental peacebuilding is further undermined by one-dimensional interpretations of these actors and their relations to natural resources. To accurately grasp how armed actors shape environmental peacebuilding processes, it is necessary to acknowledge their multifaceted and diverse involvement in resource governance and conflict. The discussion below considers three aspects of this involvement: armed actors' variable role in resource exploitation, their involvement in the protection of nature and the environment, and their impact on resource-related conflict dynamics.

ARMED ACTORS' VARIABLE ROLE IN RESOURCE EXPLOITATION

Where the environmental peacebuilding literature addresses armed actors, it has focused mostly on their implication in illegal resource exploitation as a means of financing conflict.³⁴ This is indeed a crucial way in which armed actors shape conflict dynamics and resource governance. But involvement in resource extraction not only helps finance armed mobilization; it also affects who has access to and control over natural resources, how these resources are exploited, and how the benefits accruing from their exploitation are distributed.³⁵ At the same time, there is significant

variation in the degree and nature of armed actors' implication in illegal resource exploitation. The drivers of this involvement are also varied and extend beyond simplistic notions of "greed."³⁶

How and to what extent armed actors are involved in resource exploitation should be seen as a spectrum. One side of the spectrum is minimal involvement, such as when armed actors merely "tax" the exploitation and trade of natural resources without regulating other dimensions. In the DRC, for example, the FARDC and armed groups put up roadblocks on access roads to artisanal mining areas and demand a fee from all who use the roads. In this way, they indirectly "tax" the minerals sector, but without deeper involvement. In the middle of the spectrum there is wider-ranging involvement of armed actors, who may set and enforce rules and thus exert some influence on who exploits natural resources and under what conditions. For instance, in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, FARDC units have aggressively dislodged artisanal miners from gold deposits to make way for semi-industrial gold mining operations by Chinese companies. On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are armed actors who not only regulate but directly organize the exploitation and trade of natural resources. In certain areas of Fizi territory in South Kivu Province, for instance, the production of illegal charcoal is entirely in the hands of the Congolese armed forces; soldiers log the trees and burn the charcoal while overseeing transport and sale via civilian intermediaries.³⁷

Armed actors have different motivations for their involvement in resource exploitation. For some nonstate armed groups, exploiting natural resources is mostly a means to an end, such as defending their community or overthrowing the government; but for others it has become an end in itself.

By using civilian intermediaries, armed actors can influence resource exploitation and trade even without being physically present. For instance, the customary chief of the artisanal gold mining site in Misisi (part of Fizi territory) used to transfer a part of the tax revenues he collected to a Mai-Mai group.³⁸ In this way, the Mai-Mai exerted influence even though the area was nominally under control of the Congolese armed forces. The FARDC has also used civilian intermediaries, including high-level government officials, to exert control over resource exploitation. One such intermediary is the company Maniema Union 2, which obtained vast logging concessions in the course of 2018 and 2019 despite a moratorium on logging concessions that has been in place since 2002. While ostensibly run by civilians, Maniema Union 2 is in fact linked to FARDC general Gabriel Amisi, who is currently under European Union and United States sanctions for his involvement in human rights violations. It appears that Amisi used his influence over officials in the Ministry of the Environment to obtain the logging concessions, which were then quickly sold to a Chinese company.³⁹ This case argues against the widespread belief that natural resource exploitation by armed actors occurs at gunpoint; it shows instead that the involvement of armed actors can be subtle and take place indirectly, without physical presence, such as through influence peddling among political and economic elites.

It is important to recognize that armed actors have different motivations for their involvement in resource exploitation. For some nonstate armed groups, exploiting natural resources is mostly a means to an end, such as defending their community or overthrowing the government; but for others it has become an end in itself. Likewise, there are important differences in the extent to which armed group commanders use resource

exploitation to enrich themselves or to strengthen their movement. In relation to the armed forces, involvement in resource exploitation is driven by complex inter-sections of organizational and personal motives. The hierarchy of the FARDC generally allows its personnel to engage in resource exploitation and other economic activities. Not only does this provide army personnel with a welcome supplement to their meager wages, it also allows the military hierarchy to enrich itself by appropriating a part of the revenues. Indeed, power plays in the armed forces are intricately bound up with the politics of resource exploitation, as different power factions contest coveted deployments to resource-rich areas. Officers in the highest echelons of the army vie to have protégé brigade commanders deployed to artisanal mining areas; in this way they ensure themselves a cut of the revenues generated by the various kinds of “taxation” the commanders impose, and they guarantee a favorable climate for their private businesses.⁴⁰

Armed actors’ various motives for and means of involving themselves in resource exploitation are consequential for environmental peacebuilding. For instance, if armed actors fully control a particular resource commodity chain, are predominantly motivated by self-enrichment, and have connections among powerful political and economic elites, it may be difficult to reform natural resource governance. If, in contrast, they exert limited control, use the revenues primarily to sustain their organization, and lack political connections, reform may be easier to achieve. Indeed, armed actors’ broader position in society and links to civilians are also important determinants of their role in environmental peacebuilding. These social and political dimensions are often overlooked by a narrow focus on economics, leading to inaccurate or incomplete analyses.



Virunga National Park rangers follow a bloodhound during a search and rescue exercise on August 12, 2012. In Virunga and other protected areas, the Congolese army and park rangers have conducted joint operations to stop the illegal exploitation of resources, including poaching. (Photo by Jerome Delay/AP)

ARMED ACTORS' PROTECTION OF NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

While much of the literature emphasizes the involvement of armed groups and forces in predatory and destructive natural resource exploitation, armed actors can also promote the sustainable management of resources and engage in the protection of biodiversity and the environment. Take the case of Mai-Mai groups operating in isolated areas of the vast Itombwe Nature Reserve in South Kivu, where administrative and state security services are absent. The people living inside Itombwe Sector (an administrative entity that includes parts of the reserve) have long upheld hunting restrictions on certain species, such as gorillas, to ensure their protection. Many members of Mai-Mai groups operating in this area, who are mostly recruited from among the local population, continue to uphold these norms. For instance,

in Kipombo village, in the Basimunyaka area of the reserve, the Mai-Mai Yaleese (Mai-Mai groups are commonly named after their commanders) chased a young boy caught with a severed gorilla hand out of the village. Some Mai-Mai groups in the Itombwe Nature Reserve also try to shape the population's attitudes toward natural resources and biodiversity protection. At the start of 2021, for example, a poacher killed 40 monkeys close to the village of Kitopo. A Mai-Mai commander in the Mwana Valley zone apprehended this person, sentenced him to 100 lashes, and told the community that hunting does not mean exterminating a species.⁴¹

While the FARDC is often involved in illegal resource exploitation, it sometimes contributes to upholding environmental laws. For instance, in the same nature reserves and national parks where it protects charcoal

production, mining, timber felling, and fishing, the FARDC conducts joint patrols and operations with the Congolese wildlife authority, the Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature (ICCN); the goal is to stamp out illegal settlements and end other forms of illegal resource exploitation, such as unauthorized cultivation and poaching. These law enforcement operations are controversial, not least because they often involve brutal human rights violations.⁴² Yet in some contexts, the military's collaboration with the ICCN has contributed—at least temporarily—to a reduction in illegal resource exploitation. In certain areas of Virunga National Park, for instance, charcoal production diminished after joint ICCN and FARDC efforts to curb this destructive form of resource exploitation, even though the FARDC has continued to be involved in the charcoal sector elsewhere in the park.⁴³

The world offers many other examples of armed forces and movements that are involved in environmental governance. Armed forces in many countries are deployed in biodiversity protection, even though this sometimes intensifies conflict, violence, and illegal resource extraction.⁴⁴ For instance, the deployment of the Guatemalan army's Green Battalion to the Maya Biosphere Reserve led to the violent eviction of peasants, thereby sparking tensions.⁴⁵ Some politico-military movements, such as the National Liberation Army of Colombia and the Kurdistan Workers' Party, have actually enshrined provisions for protecting the environment in their codes of conduct.⁴⁶ Others engage in environmental protection—for strategic and public relations reasons, among others—as part of their everyday governance activities. Examples include the large-scale reforestation programs of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the olive-planting and street-cleaning campaigns of Hamas in the Gaza Strip.⁴⁷ These examples highlight the importance of examining armed actors' varying influence on environmental governance.

ARMED ACTORS' IMPACT ON RESOURCE-RELATED CONFLICTS

Armed actors also matter for environmental peacebuilding because of their influence on conflicts specifically focused on natural resources. This influence is not limited to conflicts over the resources that they themselves exploit, nor is it always primarily related to economic interests. It may also relate to a natural resource's symbolic and social value, which is a function of the resource's link to particular identities or perceived connection to people's ancestral patrimony.

In parts of the Itombwe area, there have long been conflicts between crop growers and cattle keepers. Farmers depending mostly on agriculture for their livelihoods accuse cattle keepers of allowing cattle to trample their fields, while cattle keepers accuse farmers of encroaching on grazing areas. Until 2018, when large-scale violence engulfed the area, there were regular efforts to resolve these conflicts. These efforts were undermined, however, by the presence of armed groups linked to and claiming to defend the rights of each side. This situation reinforced distrust between the two parties, who accused one another of inciting violence. Moreover, some armed groups claiming to defend farmers' rights regularly looted cattle, which stalled any progress sought through talks and reconciliation. Indeed, frequent outbreaks of armed group violence raised the stakes of this conflict, which increasingly came to be seen as a conflict centering on different communities' very identities. The involvement of the FARDC further complicated the conflict. When officers from particular ethnic backgrounds were accused of using their position to protect cattle, confidence in the army's impartiality was undermined. The resulting climate of distrust and tension caused individual incidents—such as trampling of fields by cattle—to quickly turn violent. This illustrates how the presence of armed actors can raise the stakes of resource conflicts, quicken the pace of violence, and impede conflict resolution.⁴⁸

Armed actors also influence resource conflicts by voicing and reinforcing the grievances that inform these conflicts. They often do this in part to attract recruits and mobilize popular and political support. As a result, these resource-related grievances become more visible and salient, thereby aggravating conflict. One example is the (now defunct) Mai-Mai Morgan group in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve. The Bombo community in Mambasa territory, from which their leader hailed, saw the Mai-Mai's insurgency as a defense of their rights and thus justifiable. Specifically, the group gave voice to the community's discontent with the park administration, which they accused of encroaching on "their" forest—located on their ancestral grounds—and of imposing restrictions that undermined their livelihoods. The latter included bans on hunting with firearms, consuming bushmeat, and collecting timber for the construction of housing. In June 2012, the Mai-Mai Morgan attacked the main ranger station in Epulu, murdering six people and killing 14 endangered okapi. The attack was an attempt to destroy the reserve, whose rangers had been confiscating poached ivory and closing down gold mines the rebels

profited from. While provoking national and international condemnation, the attack also uncovered local grievances with the reserve that the armed group had capitalized on. In addition, the attack drew attention to the fact that Morgan seemed to have operated with the complicity of a high-ranking FARDC commander, which undermined the credibility of the national armed forces' commitment to providing security in the area.⁴⁹

These examples illustrate the need to look beyond economic stakes when considering how armed actors shape resource-related conflicts. Armed actors' ideologies also matter, as do their rhetoric and their position in the society—specifically, whom they are seen to represent and how they are linked to civilian populations. Nonstate armed groups may affect resource-related conflicts through their status as defenders of particular identity groups and through reinforcement of claims to particular natural resources. State armed forces, in turn, can affect these conflicts by appearing to take sides and by informally supporting armed groups, which can aggravate tensions and undermine trust in the state.

The Risks of Ignoring Armed Actors

Given the influence of armed actors on resource governance and resource-related conflicts, ignoring these actors in environmental peacebuilding bears high risks. Armed actors can prevent environmental peacebuilding interventions from having positive effects or undermine these effects where they do happen, thereby jeopardizing interventions' sustainability. Moreover, armed actors' behavior can trigger or exacerbate the unintended negative consequences of environmental peacebuilding efforts, such as increasing conflict and delegitimizing the state.⁵⁰ The discussion below looks at how armed actors can undermine environmental peacebuilding, specifically their influence on the three mechanisms contributing to peacebuilding highlighted above: fostering economic development, promoting trust and cooperation, and building strong institutions.

UNDERMINING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Armed actors can hamper environmental peacebuilding by undermining economic development initiatives related to natural resources. They can, for instance, prevent developmental activities from having positive effects by creating insecurity or directly sabotaging these activities. The case of hydroelectric development in Virunga National Park is illustrative. To promote development and peace in the park and surrounding area, a public-private initiative named the Virunga Alliance is constructing hydroelectric plants in the area. In 2017 and 2018, armed groups conducted a spate of attacks on one of these plants near Luviro in Lubero territory, which severely undermined progress on its construction.⁵¹ Even where the plants have been constructed without disruption (for instance, the Matebe

plant in Rutshuru), ongoing insecurity related to armed group activity has undermined the initiative's contribution to economic development.⁵²

HAMPERING TRUST BUILDING AND COOPERATION

Armed violence or intensified armed mobilization can generate so much distrust and animosity that any gains made through environmental peacebuilding interventions are canceled out. Furthermore, where armed groups use the symbolic value of land or other natural resources to recruit and mobilize support—for instance, by claiming to defend a particular ethnic group's ancestral lands—the willingness of conflict parties to share those resources with their adversaries may diminish.

How armed actors can undermine trust building is well illustrated by the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration, a conservation initiative between Uganda, the DRC, and Rwanda that aims to strengthen interstate cooperation in the conservation domain. One of the hoped-for outcomes of the initiative, given the historically strained relations between the countries, was to foster greater trust among them. However, ongoing military incursions and proxy warfare by government-supported rebel groups targeting their adversaries have kept relations between the three countries tense. In October 2019, an attack in Musanze district in Rwanda targeted a facility used by tourists visiting Volcanoes National Park, which is a popular destination for viewing mountain gorillas. The attackers came from the eastern part of the DRC, but according to sources, Rwandan officials believed they had operated with Ugandan assistance.⁵³



A park ranger sits inside her truck in Virunga National Park on March 9, 2018. The park is patrolled by nearly 800 park rangers. (Photo by Denys Kutsevalov/Shutterstock)

The incident therefore contributed to deteriorating relations between the two countries, undermining some of the gains that had been made through transboundary cooperation in the conservation sector.

In addition to annulling the positive effects of environmental peacebuilding initiatives, armed actors can cause such initiatives to backfire and intensify conflict. This can happen where armed groups actively resist peacebuilding interventions or where these interventions become subject to elite capture involving military officers. An example of the latter occurred in 2013, when the management of Virunga National Park decided to stop law enforcement in the Rutshuru Hunting Domain, a disputed part of the park that numerous smallholder farmers had started to cultivate. Subsequently, army officers and other elites linked to a former rebel group that previously controlled the

area obtained a large part of the land and pushed out most small-scale farmers, employing them as cheap day laborers on the elites' new concessions. The result was not only increased conflict between large concession holders and small-scale farmers, but also—given that the former were mainly Hutu and the latter mainly Nande—a sharp increase in intercommunity tensions.⁵⁴

WEAKENING INSTITUTIONS

Environmental peacebuilding theory generally identifies the legitimacy of the state and strong state institutions as necessary for effective resource governance. State security forces can significantly undermine the legitimacy of the state and deteriorate resource governance. In the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, both the Congolese army and ICCN rangers act to protect illegal resource exploitation, giving these activities an aura of legality and thus encouraging people to

Operations to close down illegal settlements and resource exploitation activities in protected areas often entail burning down dwellings and agricultural fields, confiscating and destroying personal belongings, and in some cases extrajudicial killings and rape.

participate. At the same time, the very fact that those supposed to uphold the law violate it undermines the credibility of state authority and undercuts the legitimacy of nature conservation efforts. State authority is further undermined by the armed forces' and park rangers' regular use of violence, including when regulating resource use. Operations to close down illegal settlements and resource exploitation activities in protected areas often entail burning down dwellings and agricultural fields; confiscating and destroying personal belongings; and in some cases, extrajudicial killings and rape. People who are apprehended for violating conservation laws have also been subjected to abuse and humiliating treatment, including beatings and being forcibly stripped naked.⁵⁵ This abusive behavior has further negative effects on peacebuilding, as it can push those falling victim to it to join armed groups.⁵⁶

Where environmental peacebuilding efforts directly or indirectly involve armed actors, these efforts can end up delegitimizing the state, specifically when they involve unpopular measures. In 2010, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) set up a project to mitigate park-people conflict and reduce illegal fishing

on Lake Edward in Virunga National Park. To that end, WCS sponsored the creation and operation of monitoring committees, which encompassed ICCN rangers, representatives of fisher organizations, and members of the Congolese navy and army, to patrol the lake. In addition, WCS lobbied political and military leaders to arrange for joint operations by the Congolese army and ICCN rangers to clear settlements around the lake hosting illegal fisherfolk.⁵⁷ These operations involved significant use of force: dwellings were burned down, personal belongings were confiscated, and over 100 fisherfolk were arrested, including some who were beaten. The operations therefore fed growing resentment toward the army and the ICCN. Having lost their livelihoods, many fisherfolk simply relocated to other illegal fishing villages around Lake Edward to resume their activities. The operations also intensified tensions between the navy, the army, and the ICCN that eventually sparked clashes between these forces, resulting in deaths and further undermining people's trust in Congolese state services.⁵⁸ Partly as a result of these events, Mai-Mai groups were able to extend their control over illegal fishing in several areas around Lake Edward in the following years.

The Benefits of Integrating Armed Actors



Given armed actors' pronounced role in resource governance and resource-related conflict, taking these actors more fully into account in environmental peacebuilding research and practice can offer several benefits. Specifically, it can reinforce environmental peacebuilding's theoretical underpinnings, help focus attention on gender-related issues, and lead to better environmental peacebuilding outcomes by improving programming, projects' conflict sensitivity, and monitoring and evaluation processes.

PLACING ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING ON A FIRMER THEORETICAL FOOTING

In response to criticisms of weak theoretical underpinnings and a limited evidence base, scholars have recently made great strides in strengthening the conceptual foundations of environmental peacebuilding. They are working to identify the causal mechanisms of environmental peacebuilding and to gather systematic evidence to substantiate these mechanisms. As shown above, the role of armed actors in these causal mechanisms remains unspecified, even though these mechanisms work differently where armed actors are significantly involved. This limitation reduces the applicability of interventions to areas where armed actors are influential and impedes the formulation of adequate theories of change to inform environmental peacebuilding programming in these areas.⁵⁹

One important point that theories of change should address in relation to armed actors is anticipating possible displacement effects, whereby armed actors barred from gaining revenue from certain types of resource exploitation will seek alternative sources of income, for instance,

from violent crime. In certain areas of Virunga National Park, efforts to crack down on illegal charcoal production and other forms of illegal resource exploitation have coincided with a sharp increase in ransom kidnappings.⁶⁰ While this development is the result of numerous factors, the need for alternative sources of revenue by armed actors has likely played a part. Theories of change should also pay more attention to how the social and identity-related dimensions of natural resources affect armed actors' role in environmental peacebuilding. For instance, in 2010, to resolve long-standing conflicts around the boundaries of Virunga National Park, wildlife and UN agencies initiated a participatory demarcation process. But many people doubted that the process was truly participatory, believing instead that the park ultimately just imposed the boundaries it thought were accurate. For some inhabitants, this apparent failure to take the population's views into consideration evoked memories of the colonial era, when people's land was expropriated for the creation of the park by force or through nontransparent agreements. Armed groups and politicians further capitalized on these sentiments by voicing grievances over the park's boundaries and by encouraging people to violate them—and protecting those who did.⁶¹

Taking armed actors into account can also help address environmental peacebuilding's depoliticizing tendencies. That is, in seeking to foster collaboration over environmental issues in a nonconfrontational manner, environmental peacebuilding programs often aim to address these issues in a technical and neutral manner. But this approach tends to disregard or work around power relations and unequal socioeconomic structures,



Women fleeing fighting between the M23 rebel group and the Congolese army take refuge in a church in Kibumba, a village near the eastern edge of Virunga National Park, on January 28, 2022. (Photo by Moses Sawasawa/AP)

which effective peacebuilding solutions must address.⁶² The fact that armed actors are often ignored in environmental peacebuilding testifies to these depoliticizing tendencies. If these actors are instead brought into the picture and integrated explicitly into theories of change, environmental peacebuilding can be re-politicized and power relations more accurately apprehended.

FOCUSING ON THE GENDERED NATURE OF ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING

It has been well-established that both human-environment interactions and conflict processes are gendered.⁶³ The use of and access to natural resources often follow gendered patterns; for example, women are often responsible for fetching water. Consequently, conflict processes involving natural resources, such as struggles over water sources and the related insecurity, affect men and women differently.⁶⁴ However, the gendered nature

of conflict dynamics pertaining to natural resources has not been sufficiently acknowledged within environmental peacebuilding research and practice.⁶⁵ This gap is significant because it undermines accurate conflict analysis and related peacebuilding interventions.⁶⁶ A focus on armed actors can help bridge this gap. Armed actors are important vectors of gendered dynamics in peace and conflict processes.⁶⁷ Moreover, the gendered social identities of combatants and their relatives importantly shape how they engage with natural resources, both during and after armed service. For instance, demobilized female combatants can face important obstacles accessing land, a situation that circumscribes their livelihood opportunities and thus affects their reintegration into society.⁶⁸

The case of eastern DRC shows how a focus on armed actors and their position in society can foster a better understanding of the gendered nature of illegal natural

resource exploitation. The wives of FARDC officers are known to play an important role in the sale of illegal resources obtained by the military, such as cannabis. In making these illegal sales, these women may invoke either military or civilian identities, both of which have gendered aspects. In some situations, women selling cannabis display a masculinized image of toughness and emphasize their association with the armed forces; in other contexts, such as when they are threatened with arrest, they may emphasize feminine civilian identities, in particular that of being mothers.⁶⁹ Awareness of such nuances provides greater insight into the commodity chains of illegal natural resources—insight that can be harnessed to stem illegal resource exploitation. In this case, it helps clarify not only who benefits from, and therefore stands to lose from stopping, illegal natural resource exploitation, but also how such exploitation is enabled by the social position and identities of those involved.

IMPROVING ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING OUTCOMES

Finally, taking armed actors into account can help improve programming and increase the effectiveness of environmental peacebuilding interventions, partly by enhancing their conflict sensitivity. Conflict-sensitive approaches emphasize the importance of conducting thorough conflict and stakeholder analyses in order to anticipate the impact of specific interventions on conflict dynamics.⁷⁰ Analyses that pay detailed attention to armed actors, including the relation of armed actors to their civilian environment, will be more accurate. They will therefore enhance the chances that environmental peacebuilding interventions have a positive impact. A focus on armed actors is also important for monitoring and evaluation of environmental peacebuilding programs, as it can help better establish the extent to which these programs contribute to conflict transformation.

In some cases, it may be possible to engage with armed actors or their civilian representatives within

environmental peacebuilding interventions either directly or via intermediaries. Such engagement can take different forms, such as establishing lines of contact, asking armed organizations about their grievances and views on environmental matters, or including armed actors in workshops, consultations, trainings, talks, and other activities. Still, the potential drawbacks of involving armed actors in environmental peacebuilding processes cannot be overlooked: it could inadvertently bestow legitimacy on such groups and generate power imbalances with civilian actors, who might engage in self-censorship out of fear of being held to account by armed actors.⁷¹ Some donors are therefore reluctant to support activities that directly or indirectly include armed actors. On the other hand, engagement with armed actors can clarify these actors' views on and position within environmental peacebuilding processes. Where this knowledge can feed into programming, better environmental peacebuilding outcomes may result.

During the creation of the Itombwe Nature Reserve between 2006 and 2016, various Mai-Mai groups in Itombwe Sector participated in meetings and workshops in which the boundaries of the reserve were agreed upon. For example, the Mai-Mai leaders Lwesula and Zela Mbuma met with the representatives of an international conservation organization in the village of Miki to discuss the establishment of the reserve in their area of operation. Representatives of another group, the Mai-Mai Aoci, participated in a micro-zoning project in the Mwana Valley—part of the Itombwe Nature Reserve—to establish different land use areas for human habitation, livelihood activities, and conservation.⁷² In neither of these cases have the involved groups thus far actively contested the outcomes of the zoning or the reserve itself. While Mai-Mai groups' willingness to abide by zoning outcomes can be explained by a range of factors, including the limited enforcement of conservation rules and restrictions, it is plausible that their engagement in the zoning process has also played a role.⁷³

Conclusion and Recommendations



Drawing on examples from the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, this report has demonstrated the importance of state armed forces and nonstate armed groups in crucial dimensions of environmental peacebuilding processes. The salience of armed actors in eastern DRC may be higher than elsewhere, since it is a context of ongoing violent conflict with many armed groups and significant army deployment. Yet there are numerous other conflict and post-conflict contexts where armed actors are important in shaping resource governance and conflicts, including Myanmar, Mali, Nigeria, Colombia, and Afghanistan. Analysis of experiences with armed actors in these contexts is currently limited to individual case studies and program evaluations. There is a need to gather this scattered evidence in order to analyze the role of armed actors in environmental peacebuilding in a more systematic and comparative manner and to identify a set of best practices. The following steps can help develop this agenda for environmental peacebuilding research and practice.

Integrate armed actors in theories of change. Given the importance of armed actors in environmental peacebuilding pathways, any theories of change informing environmental peacebuilding interventions should explicitly consider their presence and influence. To what extent are armed actors involved in governing the natural resources that are the object of interventions, either directly or through civilian intermediaries? How do armed actors affect conflicts between or within communities? How do state security services behave, and how does this behavior shape state-society relations? Considering these questions will be crucial for designing effective interventions and for reducing the chances of inadvertent negative effects. It will also help ensure that environmental peacebuilding interventions do not become too

technical and therefore fail to take the inherently political nature of environmental peacebuilding into account.

Center armed actors to increase conflict and gender sensitivity. To make interventions thoroughly conflict sensitive, it is necessary to undertake a detailed assessment of the presence, relations, and practices of armed actors within the areas where environmental peacebuilding projects will be implemented. The conflict and stakeholder analyses that are a key part of conflict-sensitive programming should pay particular attention to the multifaceted role of armed actors. Moreover, such analyses should address armed actors as conflict actors in their own right and not as an undifferentiated part of conflict parties in general. Increased attention to armed actors should go hand in hand with examining how these actors shape the gendered nature of human-environment interactions through their relations with natural resources and with civilian communities, thereby making environmental peacebuilding interventions simultaneously more conflict- and gender-sensitive.

Consider armed actors in monitoring and evaluation. Peacebuilding and stabilization interventions increasingly measure and evaluate contributions against theories of change. This means that instead of focusing on the effects of individual projects, the emphasis is on the impacts on wider dynamics of conflict and violence; this provides an opportunity to examine more systematically the role of armed actors in producing particular environmental peacebuilding outcomes. This broader approach to monitoring and evaluation can, for instance, help analyze to what extent environmental peacebuilding interventions diminish the overall influence of armed actors on the governance of contested natural resources. Detecting such change may be

difficult when looking at a single project. Nevertheless, gauging the changing role of armed actors in resource governance and conflict is crucial for assessing the cumulative impact of environmental peacebuilding programs. It is therefore also a prerequisite for fine-tuning these programs. Where armed actors have proven to be obstacles to the success of certain interventions (or, by contrast, have contributed to their success), programs can be adjusted to prevent or capitalize upon these effects, as appropriate.

Engage with armed actors in environmental peacebuilding. While not all organizations involved in environmental peacebuilding would feel comfortable engaging with armed actors or would support such engagement, in some contexts reaching out to armed actors could be beneficial. It could help prevent interventions from having negative effects or proving unsustainable, and in some contexts it could enhance their positive outcomes.

Concerning state security forces, some scholars have suggested that trust building in international conflicts can be reinforced by including members of national armed forces in transboundary conservation activities or as part of military-to-military cooperation in the environmental domain.⁷⁴ Concerning nonstate armed groups, direct engagement might be more difficult. Yet interventions could focus, for instance, on supporting civilian leaders who interact with armed groups; one goal might be for these leaders to urge armed actors to change their practices of resource exploitation where these have environmentally destructive effects.⁷⁵

Given the centrality of armed groups in key dimensions of environmental peacebuilding, a case can be made for deeper reflection on how and in what circumstances armed actors could be engaged within environmental peacebuilding interventions—even if such engagement would require new or unconventional solutions.

Notes



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Environmental peacebuilding is a rapidly evolving field of research and practice, but it has thus far paid limited attention to the multifaceted roles of armed actors in conflict and cooperation over natural resources. This oversight exists even though both state security forces and nonstate armed groups can shape the governance of natural resources and influence resource-related conflicts in important ways. This report argues that greater attention to the role of armed actors in environmental peacebuilding is needed. It outlines three dimensions of environmental peacebuilding where armed groups and state security forces have significant influence: first, economic development projects that involve changes to natural resource governance; second, initiatives to foster trust by promoting collaboration over environmental or resource issues; and third, efforts to build strong and legitimate governance institutions.

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