

Climate Adaptation in a Changing Peacebuilding Environment

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If the climate crisis is a conflict driver, then conflict-resolution cannot ignore it. This is the basic premise of including climate adaptation in environmental peacebuilding. Climate adaptation might serve to reduce the instability caused by the climate crisis in post-conflict settings and can foster cooperation between hostile actors.¹ However, the dynamics of peacebuilding are undergoing profound changes. As a result, local actors, such as local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and social movements, will play an increasingly important role in promoting climate adaptation as a peacebuilding measure. For international law, this may lead to an increasing importance of human rights in this space, at the expense of traditional climate law, in particular the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Regime. At the same time, for legal scholarship, there is a need to reflect on how human rights will be received in and can be adapted to local peacebuilding settings.

Traditionally, the main promoters of climate adaptation in peacebuilding have been European donor states, the United Nations, and international NGOs.² In terms of international law, these actors have primarily drawn on the climate regime of the UNFCCC, promoting measures such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation Programme.³ But all three groups have seen their influence in peacebuilding diminish in recent times. On the whole, international actors have lost influence in peacebuilding as a result of the ‘local turn’, with local governments and non-state actors

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¹ On the aims of environmental peacebuilding, see Daniëlla Dam-de Jong and Britta Sjöstedt, ‘The International Legal Dimensions of Environmental Peacebuilding’, in: Daniëlla Dam-de Jong and Britta Sjöstedt (eds), *Research Handbook on International Law and Environmental Peacebuilding* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2023), 3–4.

² See e.g. German Foreign Office, ‘Climate, Peace, Security: Three Pillars of German Foreign Policy’ (2024); Accordingly, most legal research has focused on them, see e.g. the contributions in Daniëlla Dam-de Jong and Britta Sjöstedt (eds) (n. 1).

³ ‘REDD+ as a Peacebuilding Strategy’, Alliance Bioversity International & CIAT, 1 September 2017, available at: <<https://alliancebioversityciat.org/stories/redd-peacebuilding-strategy-what-are-opportunities-sustainable-food-production>>, last access 30 June 2026.

taking the spotlight.⁴ Displacing the traditional heavyweights, new international actors such as Qatar, Oman, and China, have asserted themselves as mediators and participants of peace processes. More recently, both the United Nations and international NGOs have been severely hamstrung by funding cuts. At the same time, the need for climate adaptation is greater than ever, in the face of a rapidly accelerating climate crisis. What, then, are the consequences for how international law is applied in post-conflict settings?

With the UNFCCC's traditional promoters diminishing in relevance, the climate law regime will likely lose influence in post-conflict settings. The new international mediation actors bring with them different normative priorities, which do not appear to include climate adaptation.⁵ As a result, international legal scholarship should focus more on local actors, in particular local NGOs and social movements.⁶ This will likely entail a shift in the dominant discourse on international norms in peacebuilding, away from the UNFCCC and towards human rights. Social movements in climate activism, transitional justice, and beyond have long made use of human rights as a strategic tool.⁷ At the same time, climate movements have been critical of the UNFCCC process for its perceived lack of ambition, inclusiveness and urgency.⁸ This shift also aligns with developments in international, regional, and domestic fora, where the human rights dimension of the climate crisis has become increasingly important.⁹

⁴ Caroline Hughes, Joakim Öjendal and Isabell Schierenbeck, 'The Struggle versus the Song – the Local Turn in Peacebuilding: An Introduction', TWQ 36 (2015), 817–824 (817).

⁵ Teresa Whitfield, 'Diversified Mediators, Mandates and Ambitions', in: Teresa Whitfield (ed.), *Accord – an international review of peace initiatives: Issue 30*, (Conciliation Resources, February 2024), 32, available at: <https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Accord_30_Still_Time_to_Talk_-_Adaptation_and_innovation_in_peace_mediation_0.pdf>, last access 30 June 2026.

⁶ Similar for conflict studies, Jan Sändig, Natalia Dalmer, Tobias Ide and Inselm Vogler, 'From Climate Conflicts to Environmental Peacebuilding: Exploring Local Dimensions', *Environment and Security* 2 (2024), 3–20 (3).

⁷ David Backer, 'Civil Society and Transitional Justice: Possibilities, Patterns and Prospects', *Journal of Human Rights* 2 (2003), 297–313 (297); Neil Stammers, 'Human Rights and Social Movements: Theoretical Perspectives', *Revue interdisciplinaire d'études juridiques* 75 (2015), 67–89 (67); Cecilia Mabeldott, 'Civil Society Narratives of Climate Justice: Subjects, Causes, and Solutions', *Critical Policy Studies* 20 (2026), 1–30 (1).

⁸ Corrie Grosse and Brigid Mark, 'A Colonized COP: Indigenous Exclusion and Youth Climate Justice Activism at the United Nations Climate Change Negotiations' in: Benjamin J. Richardson (ed.), *From Student Strikes to the Extinction Rebellion: New Protest Movements Shaping our Future* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2020), 146–170.

⁹ See, ICJ, *Obligations of States in Respect of Climate Change*, Advisory Opinion of 23 July 2025, 369–404; ECtHR, *Verein Klimasenioren Schweiz and Others v. Switzerland*, judgment of 9 April 2024, 53600/20; German Federal Constitutional Court, *Neubauer et al. v. Germany*, Decision of 24 March 2021, 1 BvR 2656/18.

Nevertheless, there are important challenges that require attention. First, there is a disconnect between social movements in the climate and peacebuilding contexts, respectively. Second, social movements may not always be inclined to draw on human rights for their activism. We must keep in mind that social movements are not necessarily or inherently benign actors, and may also be exclusionary or oppressive in themselves.¹⁰ Furthermore, radical local actors may be suspicious of human rights due to their connection to mainstream international law and thus global capitalism.¹¹ Finally, local actors may simply not have the capacity to implement climate adaptation measures.¹² Thus, human rights are by no means a panacea for climate-adaptive peacebuilding.

But this does not mean that international legal scholarship should turn its back on the issue. Rather, what is required is a new approach to the post-conflict role of international climate law in general and climate-related human rights in particular. Human rights cannot be imposed externally on peace processes. Instead they can be a tool for local actors to wield, if they so desire. In the process, they will be contested, adapted to local needs, and shaped by local norms.¹³ What is needed from international legal scholarship are ways to make sense of this phenomenon, and of its repercussions on the international stage.

¹⁰ Sändig, Dalmer, Ide and Vogler (n. 6), 13.

¹¹ Paul Gready and Simon Robins, 'Rethinking Civil Society and Transitional Justice: Lessons from Social Movements and "New" Civil Society', *The International Journal of Human Rights* 21 (2017), 956-975 (964).

¹² Sändig, Dalmer, Ide and Vogler (n. 6), 13.

¹³ Stammers (n. 7), 78.

