

# Environmental Peacebuilding as a Pathway of Sustainable Development in Northern Province, Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

The post-war Northern Province of Sri Lanka continues to experience complex tensions arising from contested land governance and environmental degradation. Focusing on Northern Province of Sri Lanka, this study examines how land disputes and ecological degradation function as interconnected drivers of post-conflict tension. Drawing on Political Ecology and Resource Conflict Theory, the research analyzes how power relations and competition over natural resources shape environmental and social conflict in post-war contexts. Using qualitative and quantitative data collected through interviews and surveys with 30 villagers and activists, the study finds that military and police occupation of civilian land for camp construction has intensified local grievances and restricted access to traditional landholdings. Respondents further identified extensive deforestation, unauthorized construction, and unregulated tube-well development as significant contributors to environmental degradation and groundwater depletion. In addition, the designation of local lands as protected areas without adequate community consultation has limited livelihood opportunities and deepened perceptions of marginalization. The findings demonstrate that environmental degradation and land disputes are mutually reinforcing processes that exacerbate post-conflict tensions in Northern Province. The study argues that sustainable peacebuilding requires demilitarization of occupied lands, stronger environmental regulation, inclusive land governance, and community-centered environmental peacebuilding initiatives to promote reconciliation and long-term resilience in post-conflict regions

**Keywords:** Environmental Peacebuilding; Land Governance; Post-Conflict Recovery; Northern Province; Sri Lanka; Sustainable Development

## Introduction

The Northern Province of Sri Lanka has undergone profound socio-political and environmental transformations as a result of more than three decades of civil conflict. Although the cessation of armed hostilities in 2009 marked a formal end to the conflict, post-war recovery in the region remains fragile and contested. Persistent land disputes, environmental degradation, institutional fragmentation, and unresolved ethnic and religious tensions continue to undermine sustainable development and long-term peace. Among these challenges, land governance has emerged as one of the most sensitive and politically charged issues, directly affecting livelihoods, ecological integrity, and social cohesion. Prior to the conflict, land and natural resource gov-

ernance in the Northern Province relied significantly on customary practices and community-based management systems. These systems promoted shared access, informal conflict resolution, and local stewardship of land, forests, and water resources. Prolonged conflict, however, disrupted these mechanisms through displacement, militarization, and the centralization of authority. Emergency regulations and security-driven governance weakened civilian institutions and reduced community participation in land-related decision-making. In the post-conflict period, many of these distortions persist, contributing to continued grievances and governance deficits. In response to these interconnected challenges, environmental peacebuilding offers an integrated framework that links environmental management, conflict transformation, and gov-



ernance reform. Rather than addressing environmental degradation and peacebuilding as separate policy domains, environmental peacebuilding emphasizes their mutual dependence, particularly in fragile and post-conflict settings. This study applies the environmental peacebuilding framework to examine land governance dynamics, environmental impacts, and inter-community relations in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, highlighting both structural challenges and emerging opportunities.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in approximately one year of fieldwork, complemented by the researcher's professional experience within the public administration system. This dual positionality enabled in-depth observation of land disputes, environmental governance practices, and institutional interactions across multiple administrative levels. Data were collected through:

- Continuous field observation of land use patterns, environmental conditions, and development interventions
- Review and analysis of land-related complaints received by administrative offices
- Engagement with affected communities representing diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds
- Observation of administrative, mediation, and dispute-resolution processes
- Review of secondary sources, including government reports, gazette notifications, land records, and environmental policy documents

The integration of field-based evidence with administrative insight provided a comprehensive understanding of how formal governance structures operate in practice, where they fail, and how communities respond to these failures.

## Empirical Findings: Land Governance and Conflict Dynamics

### Prevalence and Nature of Land Disputes

A central finding of the study is the high volume of land-related complaints received by administrative authorities. These disputes commonly involve conflicts between local communities and state institutions such as the Forest Department, Wildlife Department, and Archaeology Department. In numerous cases, land that has been used for cultivation, housing, public playgrounds, or even schools for extended periods has been subsequently declared state land through gazette notifications. Such declarations are often issued without adequate ground verification or community consultation. Once land is claimed by these departments, administrative redress becomes extremely difficult. Affected communities experience prolonged uncertainty, loss of livelihoods, and restricted access to essential communal spaces. These processes erode trust in state institutions and intensify perceptions of injustice.

### Ethnic and Religious Dimensions of Land Control

The study further reveals that ethnic and religious contestation is a fundamental underlying factor in many land disputes. Several state institutions are perceived to operate along ethnic lines, particularly in areas where land has cultural, historical, or religious significance. As a result, land governance is frequently interpreted by communities not as neutral administration but as an extension of post-war power relations. Land acquisition and enforcement actions are disproportionately associated with armed forces and majority-dominated institutional structures, rather than minority groups. Minority communities often lack the political influence or institutional access necessary to challenge such actions effectively. This asymmetry reinforces post-conflict hierarchies and perpetuates grievances rooted in both identity and access to resources.

## Environmental Impacts of Weak and Politicized Governance

The governance failures identified in the study have direct and indirect environmental consequences. Key environmental impacts observed during fieldwork include:

- Deforestation resulting from both unauthorized clearing and poorly regulated development
- Loss of agricultural land and declining productivity due to land reclassification
- Increased soil erosion and localized flooding risks
- Disruption of traditional livelihoods dependent on land and natural resources

In several instances, land acquisitions justified under environmental protection mandates have paradoxically contributed to environmental degradation due to weak enforcement, lack of local stewardship, and absence of adaptive management practices.

## Governance Constraints and Administrative Limitations

From an administrative perspective, political interference emerges as the most significant constraint affecting land and environmental governance. Enforcement of environmental regulations is often intentionally weak where politically or militarily powerful actors are involved. Overlapping institutional mandates create administrative paralysis, while local authorities remain largely powerless in comparison to centralized departments and security institutions. Community participation in land-related decision-making is minimal, further undermining institutional legitimacy. Even where injustices are clearly identified, mechanisms for timely and effective redress are limited, contributing to frustration and disengagement among affected populations.

## Emerging Environmental Peacebuilding Practices

Despite these challenges, the study identifies several positive practices consistent with environ-

mental peacebuilding principles:

- Community-led reforestation and environmental initiatives, supported by Divisional Secretariats and rural development societies
- Mediation boards and administrative mediation mechanisms that help resolve certain land disputes and reduce tensions
- Joint environmental and social initiatives involving communities, NGOs, administrative authorities, police, and armed forces, including environmental clean-up programs, medical camps, and disaster-response activities

When implemented inclusively, these initiatives contribute to trust-building, social cohesion, and incremental institutional legitimacy.

## Policy Implications and Sustainable Development Alignment

The findings underscore the need to integrate environmental peacebuilding into post-conflict development and governance frameworks. Key policy priorities include strengthening participatory land governance, clarifying institutional mandates, depoliticizing environmental enforcement, and supporting community-based environmental management. These measures align closely with SDG 11, SDG 15, and SDG 16, offering a practical pathway for sustainable and peaceful development.

## Conclusion

The Northern Province of Sri Lanka exemplifies the complex interconnections between environmental degradation, contested land governance, and unresolved post-conflict tensions. This study demonstrates that environmental peacebuilding provides a holistic framework capable of addressing these challenges simultaneously. By linking equitable land management, ecological restoration, and inclusive governance, environmental peacebuilding can support a development trajectory that is environmentally sustainable, socially cohesive, and institutionally resilient.