Master Thesis:

Using conflict sensitivity in locally led initiatives to contribute to environmental peacebuilding

Practitioners' experiences from the Tropenbos International network

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Preface

Starting my Master's program in September 2024, I just finished reading the book *Climategeneral* by General Tom Middendorp (ret.). This book on the need to intertwine debates about security and climate made me think about the this climate-conflict interaction. This has pushed me to include questions about climate and nature conservation in my conflict oriented Master's program. By including courses from the Master Anthropology I have been able to include other perspectives on this question of climate-conflict relations. When looking for a thesis topic I also needed to find an organisation that would host my research. As I wanted to address the climate-conflict debate from the environmental side, I needed to find an organisation that would be interested to include the conflict and peace perspective within their environmental projects. Luckily, this was exactly what Tropenbos International was planning to do in 2024.

I am grateful for the opportunity I have had at Tropenbos International to work on the development of the themes conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding within the organisation. With their focus on climate resilience landscapes and sustainable livelihoods, including a conflict studies perspective into the organisation was something new. Working with the different local partners has been a pleasure, to hear their experiences in the various contexts in which they are active. I am also grateful for the conversations with the practitioners from the five other organisations, who have been friendly enough to explain to me their experiences from their organisations. Most of them I have also met later in the process, at the Third International Conference on Environmental Peacebuilding this June 2024. It has been an honour to represent Tropenbos International at the conference within the environmental peacebuilding field and meet many of the academics, from who I have used their works for this thesis. This conference, in the last week before finishing my thesis, I have also attended the panel discussion with General Tom Middendorp (ret.), who has been the inspiration for me from the beginning of the process to work in this field.

Content

1. Introduction

In a tropical forest in the Upper Suriname River Basin, there are traditional leaders of communities that are persuaded by outside actors to approve illegal logging activities in their communal forests. In the communal centres of Tigray in Ethiopia, the elderly men are challenged in their decision making power by women and youth that are included in the meetings on the instruction of outside organisations. In the villages surrounding the Indonesian forests on West Kalimantan, local communities are forced to choose sides between two different organisations that claim to support the local people in their agroforestry practices. These are just three examples of sensitive issues in the operating landscapes of partners within the Tropenbos International network (Interview 1, Tropenbos Suriname, 01-03-2024; Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024; Interview 11, Tropenbos Indonesia 03-04-2024). Although these examples are from very different contexts in three different continents, they are all related to the influences of power dynamics and traditional knowledge systems. Also, the examples all frame a sensitive situation, where tensions rise and potential conflicts may be around the corner. This research aims at analysing such potential conflict situations related to climate resilience work by Tropenbos International, to see how power dynamics and traditional knowledge play a role in addressing these situations in a sensitive manner.

1.1 Societal relevance

In the last years research has shown the link between climate and conflict, mostly through indirect links with food security, mobilisation tactics and bad policies (Daoudy, 2021; Barnett & Adger, 2007; Mavrakou et al., 2022; Gregory, Ingram & Brklacich, 2005). Daoudy (2021) explains the link between environmental degradation and conflict through bad governance, mostly economic, as this pushes food and water insecurity. The link between environmental change and conflict has not only been addressed in the academic field, but is also something that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other institutions are working on.

The Global Partnership for Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), for example, has been working on how climate, peace and conflict should be addressed together on a local level (Alston-Voyticky & Kumskova, 2023). With their analysis they argue for a climate security risk assessment. This would be the first step to build “local resiliency to climate change and conflict” (Alston-Voyticky & Kumskova, 2023, p. 9). The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) has also been focusing on the interlinkages between climate and conflict, stating that there is a two-way approach: either with “climate-resilient peacebuilding interventions” or with “conflict-sensitive climate change responses” (Crawford et al., 2015, p. 1). The former focuses on including climate related work into peacebuilding projects to influence factors of conflict, while the latter aims at creating climate related projects that take the conflict context into account. This research links to this notion of conflict-sensitive climate change responses, in order to work from this conflict sensitive

basis towards potential for environmental peacebuilding. In order to reach this collaboration between peacebuilding and environmental management, organisations have to find common ground and build bridges between the disciplines. Recently this was one of the objectives of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) in Nairobi at the beginning of 2024 (UNEP, 2024). At this assembly, organisations called for more action on this link between climate change and conflict, for example by focusing on nature-based solutions for peace and security, as presented by Pax for Peace (Wolters & Schellens, 2024). More synergies are expected to be formed on this link in the future (Qi & Terton, 2024). Some organisations are already trying to identify possible pathways to work together on these issues, such as Cordaid from the development perspective and Tropenbos International from the environmental perspective (Abdulrahman, Schaap & Van Sluijs, 2023; Kusters & De Graaf, 2019). By combining these initiatives of the different organisations in the field, a better understanding of how to use climate resilience to prevent conflict can be created. Analysing the potential of organisations working on this link between climate resilience and conflict prevention could help in this process, to contribute to the future development of the climate-conflict nexus in practice.

Along with links between environmental degradation and conflict, Daoudy (2021) also argues that power relations play a major role in addressing the impacts of climate on conflict and peace. When working in conflict affected communities, power dynamics can determine who gets the most benefit from certain initiatives and how resources are distributed. When NGOs are operating in these regions, they are also interacting with these power dynamics, sometimes resulting in partnerships with the local powers and neglecting the local communities that really need the help (Domínguez & Luoma, 2020; Escobar, 2006). Such strategies that are created by international or western organisations and implemented in the global south can have more negative impacts than positive ones, because they are planned without good knowledge of the local situation. Therefore, these power relations should be unpacked as well as addressed, and local communities should be included in the work on climate resilience and conflict prevention, to understand the local context and create more inclusive interventions (Matose, 2009; Lewis, 1998; Sorj, 2005). For NGOs it is important to understand how their interventions might impact the context and how they can adapt their strategies accordingly, for which academic research on conflict sensitive programming is helpful.

So far, conservation efforts have often not been beneficial for local communities and their livelihoods due to post-colonial conservation efforts of western organisations (Dunlap & Fairhead, 2014; Domínguez & Luoma, 2020). The continuation of a colonial perspective on managing the environment leads to bad governance of the natural landscapes and still results in exploitation of both the environment as well as the indigenous people living there (Fuentes-George, 2023). Also on a local scale, the relationships between western organisations, local communities and nature need to be understood in order to properly deal with climate change impacts on the vulnerable local livelihoods (Nagoda & Eriksen, 2017). Therefore, while analysing the potential of environmental peacebuilding, a

sensitive approach is crucial. This does also include sensitivity in terms of dealing with local people and the unbalance of power relations that still exist.

Finally, Lee (2020) reveals how practitioners working on local peacebuilding initiatives often perceive a gap between them and the academic world. There is a lack of academic work that explains the practical implementation of conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding. Especially on the opportunities of environmental peacebuilding on a local level, there is a gap in the research that can help practitioners understand how to contribute to it (Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). Even though the need for localisation has been discussed in the academic world, practitioners often don't know how to implement it (Harris & Tuladhar, 2019; Barakat & Milton, 2020). The same goes for the topic of environmental conflicts, as Fisher and Sablan (2018) argue that there has been an "increasing distance between 'theorists' and 'practitioners'" (p. 10), creating a gap between practices on the ground and the academic debates. Future research that focuses on the implementation of local strategies on the climate-conflict nexus could contribute to bridging this gap. Hardt and Sheffran (2019) explain how current research around the topic of climate and the environment in conflict studies is moving towards a more implementing view, but still has many gaps. Especially on the practical implementation of conflict sensitivity in climate resilience work, there is a lack of academic body to fully understand the most important themes that practitioners should take out of the theoretical work (Baranyi & Desrosiers, 2012; Froese & Schilling, 2019). To contribute to this, scholarly work alongside perspectives of practitioners need to be brought together analytically in order to highlight the potential of organisations working in the field. With a focus on including conflict sensitivity in climate resilience work, this path of implementation laid out by Hardt and Sheffran (2019) can be pursued.

1.2 Foundational knowledge

As a building block of political ecology, climate resilience emphasizes the relationships between social and environmental aspects, including both local and global power dynamics into the socio-ecological system (Turner, 2013; Gallopín, 2006; Folke, 2006). To understand climate resilience, the concepts stability, adaptability and vulnerability are key. Over the years, scholars like Holling (1973), Gallopín (1991) and Schellnhuber (1998) have developed the concepts within climate resilience. This has led to a definition of the capacity of a socio-ecological system to absorb disturbances and reorganize while undergoing change (Walker et al., 2004). This adaptability is crucial for resilience, allowing systems to persist and transform rather than merely returning to a previous equilibrium (Ludwig, Walker & Holling, 1997; Scheffer et al., 2001). Vulnerability, on the other hand, is characterized by a system's exposure to stresses and its inability to adapt, often exacerbated by external factors like conflicts and power imbalances (Smit & Wandel, 2006; Adger, 2006). Addressing this vulnerability involves strengthening the system's adaptive capacity and understanding the socio-political contexts that create and perpetuate vulnerabilities, such as historical colonial structures and ongoing power inequalities

(Rivera, 2020; Sou, 2022). Sustainable livelihoods are integral to climate resilience, as they depend on the resilience of the surrounding socio-ecological system. Effective governance, equity, and social justice are essential for sustainable livelihood strategies, for which the inclusion of local knowledge is crucial to create effective strategies (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Nataraja et al., 2022). The inclusion of traditional knowledge systems can enhance climate resilience and adaptation efforts, although this requires a critical examination of power relations and the often-dominant influence of Western science (Matose, 2009; Petzold et al., 2020). As these practices are sensitive to rising tensions and possible conflicts over the need of resources for local livelihoods, the resilience of a socio-ecological system is linked to the possibility of conflict or peace (Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014). Applying the political ecology lens to conflict and peace will help in considering both ecological and social dimensions and the broader context of global dynamics (Folke et al., 2004; Garcia et al., 2022). This links climate resilience and related concepts to the political ecology approach to conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding.

The intersection of climate and security has become increasingly prominent, linking climate impacts to regional conflicts and livelihoods (Barnett & Adger, 2007). Within political ecology, this intersection is analysed by examining local livelihoods, vulnerabilities, and power dynamics (Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014). Two main relations between the political ecology field and conflicts will be discussed, addressing conservation conflicts and natural resource conflicts. Historically, there has been many criticism on conservation efforts that exclude local communities, forcing migration and leading to conflicts over access to land (Peluso, 1993; Duffy, 2016). Although participatory conservation approaches have been proposed to mitigate these conflicts, power imbalances often undermine their effectiveness (Redpath et al., 2013; Sigamany, 2017). Scholars advocate for integrating political ecology with conflict studies to address socio-environmental changes comprehensively, considering cultural, ecological, and economic dimensions (Le Billon & Duffy, 2018; Escobar, 2006). This integrated approach is foundational for the emerging field of environmental peacebuilding. Related to conflicts over access to land, are conflicts over access to natural resources. These rise from unequal access and distribution, influenced by colonial legacies and unbalanced power dynamics (Martinez-Alier, 1995). Political ecology emphasizes the importance of local knowledge in sustainable resource management, advocating for hybrid knowledge systems that blend local and scientific insights (Escobar, 1998; Watts, 2017). Proper inclusion of local perspectives is critical to prevent conflicts and build trust (Bryant, 1998). NGOs can facilitate the integration of local and scientific knowledge to foster inclusive governance (Fernando, 2003). By addressing these themes, political ecology provides a framework to analyse and mitigate conflicts related to environmental change, emphasizing the need for inclusive, context-sensitive approaches to natural resource management and conservation (Escobar, 2006).

Environmental issues like land access and natural resource management can fuel conflicts but also offer opportunities for peacebuilding by enhancing climate resilience and socio-ecological stability (Dresse et al., 2018; Billon & Duffy, 2018; Krampe, Hegazi & VanDeveer, 2021). Environmental peacebuilding addresses both the root causes of conflict and works towards sustainable peace, integrating climate resilience into peace efforts (Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014; Ide et al., 2021; Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). This field emphasizes conflict sensitivity and the inclusion of local perspectives and power dynamics, aiming to create positive peace through interventions that are focused on the environment. Conflict sensitivity is essential in environmental peacebuilding, emerging from the 'do no harm' principle in humanitarian aid. It involves understanding the conflict context, linking interventions to this context, and acting upon this understanding to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive outcomes (Anderson, 1999; Norman & Michael, 2023; Gullette & Rosenberg, 2015). While it has primarily been applied in humanitarian and development fields, its relevance is growing in climate change adaptation and resilience work (Babcicky, 2013; Refisch & Jenson, 2016; Fisher et al., 2020; Nadiruzzaman et al., 2022). A political ecology perspective enhances conflict sensitivity by emphasizing the importance of power relations and local identities. This lens captures the various tensions and power dynamics in environmental conflicts, often rooted in colonial histories and global power imbalances (Peluso & Watts, 2003; Østby et al., 2011; Gonzáles-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2019). Implementing conflict sensitivity in environmental projects involves understanding the broader socio-political context and integrating local perspectives to ensure sustainable peace (Ware & Laoutides, 2021; Ide et al., 2021). From the implementation of conflict sensitivity in environmental interventions, the next step towards environmental peacebuilding can be taken if the intervention directly aims for conflict resolution and peace. Approaches of environmental peacebuilding are focused on environmental collaboration, cooperative management of natural resources and equitable resource sharing (Kampe, Hegazi & VanDeveer, 2021; Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). Academic debates have traditionally focused on the international level, but there's a growing emphasis on the local and community level, emphasizing the resilience of communities to environmental stressors and the importance of securing local livelihoods (Bruch, Muffett & Nichols, 2016; Barnett, 2018; Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014; Ide et al., 2021). Supporting local livelihoods to reach sustainable peace is a critical area for further development in the academic field, as a lack of secured livelihoods has been linked to rising conflicts. Including local perspectives in environmental peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity should be a priority for research and practice, for which the political ecology lens provides a strong base (Ide et al., 2021).

1.3 Scientific relevance

With a political ecology lens, as described above, this research aims to emphasize the role of local knowledge and power dynamics in conflict sensitive climate resilience interventions. Current research has been focusing on conflict sensitivity to be implemented in the humanitarian and development

field, with the aim to also have an impact on conflict and peace (Weiss, 1999; Uvin, 2002). Less attention has been given to conflict sensitivity in other fields. Nadiruzzaman et al. (2022) have described the current academic developments on conflict sensitivity in climate change adaptation, as the main pathway within environmentalist interventions where conflict sensitivity has been included. With a few contributions to conflict sensitivity in the field of climate resilience, the topic has been developing slowly (Babcicky, 2013; Refisch & Jenson, 2016; Fisher et al., 2020; Cappelli et al., 2022). This research will contribute to this development, by further analysing how conflict sensitivity is being implemented in climate resilience work. The focus on local knowledge and power dynamics present a new perspective on the implementation of conflict sensitivity that can be useful in the field of climate resilience, as these topics already play a big role within the environmentalism field. As contextual understanding is argued to be crucial, the political ecology lens of this research can provide an understanding of what topics are important to take into account for a better contextual understanding (Gullette & Rosenberg, 2015). Inclusion of local communities and traditional knowledge systems will be a focus point, as this has been argued to be an important factor for climate resilience interventions from the political ecology lens, thus posting the question what the role should be when looking at conflict sensitivity of these interventions (Shockley, 2023).

Norman and Mikhael (2023) argue that resilience can be achieved on the local level when organisations enhance their conflict sensitivity. In their perspective, conflict resilience means the prevention of violent conflict, which goes hand in hand with sustainable livelihoods and peaceful natural resource management, as this would create synergies between development, peacebuilding and climate resilience organisations. These actions of sustainable livelihoods and natural resource management cannot be seen independently from current developments in climate change adaptation, thus related to climate resilience as well. The fragility and vulnerability of a region is very much subject to its climate change impacts, thus making room for the climate-fragility-conflict and climate-resilience-peace nexus presented by Vivekananda, Schilling and Smith (2014). These linkages from conflict and peace to climate resilience, vulnerability and fragility show the possibilities to contribute to peacebuilding through climate related work. The links between climate resilience and conflict prevention should therefore be further researched. Van Sluijs and Masoliver (2022) already argued for inclusion of climate resilience in the Humanitarian-Development-Peace nexus (HDP-nexus), hoping for more cooperation between such organisations. Joireman and Haddad (2023) also aim at including climate related work in the HDP-nexus to be ready for the impacts of climate change in fragile areas. In order to involve climate related work that will be beneficial for both development and peacebuilding, more research is needed to understand conflict sensitive approaches to climate resilience work.

Lastly, the environmental peacebuilding field has been developing mainly on the international level. With only some contributions to the link between environmentalism and peacebuilding on the

local level, there is a lot to do to better understand the dynamics between environmental management and conflict management within and between communities (Ide et al., 2021; Sommer & Fassbender, 2024; Barnett, 2018). Taking environmental peacebuilding to the local level means dealing with local power dynamics, local knowledge and traditional mechanisms. Therefore these topics will be a focus point for this research, to better understand how environmental peacebuilding approaches can be enhanced by organisations working on local climate resilience initiatives. This research will contribute to developing the field of environmental peacebuilding, by combining the political ecology lens with conflict sensitive approaches.

1.4 Objectives & questions

Main research question:

"How do organisations working on climate resilience integrate conflict sensitivity to contribute to environmental peacebuilding?"

Sub-questions:

- In what way could a conflict sensitive approach in climate resilience work contribute to environmental peacebuilding?
- How do organisations working on climate resilience aim to contribute to conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding?
- How is a contextual understanding used as part of conflict sensitivity for interventions on climate resilience?
- What is the role of local knowledge and traditional mechanisms in conflict sensitivity for interventions on climate resilience?
- What is the role of power dynamics in conflict sensitivity for interventions on climate resilience?
- How can theory benefit practice on the link between climate resilience, conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding?

Objectives:

- Understand the link between climate resilience, conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding.
- Understand in what way climate resilience could benefit conflict prevention and peacebuilding through conflict sensitivity.
- Demonstrate how organisations working on climate resilience implement conflict sensitivity.
- Contribute to the development of environmental peacebuilding field, by understanding the contribution of local level climate resilience interventions to environmental peacebuilding.
- Understand the role of local knowledge, traditional mechanisms and power dynamics in a conflict sensitive approach to climate resilience work.
- Contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice on the use of conflict sensitivity in climate resilience work to benefit local environmental peacebuilding.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter will provide the theoretical basis for the research, built upon the theories and concepts that were touched upon in the introduction. From a political ecology lens, the main concepts linking to climate resilience, conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding will be discussed, in combination with the development of related academic debates. The structure of this chapter is threefold, working from a discussion of (1) climate resilience and related concepts within political ecology and linking (2) the political ecology lens to conflicts in socio-ecological systems, towards (3) the inclusion of theories from conflict and peace studies into the political ecology approach to peacebuilding, including the key concept of conflict sensitivity. A specific focus will be given to how the topics of local knowledge and power dynamics find their position in the theoretical debates on climate resilience, conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding. Based on this theoretical basis, the research will analyse how these theories are understood and implemented by practitioners working on climate resilience initiatives in various contexts.

2.1 Political ecology lens on climate resilience

Resilience has been a concept in development, featuring various implementations from ecological to economic resilience. Within the political ecology field, climate resilience has been argued to replace sustainable development as the main focus for policies and planning (Davoudi et al., 2012). The key of resilience with a political ecology lens is based on the relationship between society and the environment (Turner, 2014). With the ongoing globalising developments, the local climate resilience cannot be seen apart from global dynamics. Global shocks causes local disruptions and some localities have higher vulnerabilities compared to others, which again is a product of the global socio-ecological system and ongoing power dynamics resulting out of the colonial past (Semmler et al., 2023). The stability and adaptability of a socio-ecological system is what determines the resilience of the system, while this is at the same time influenced by outside and internal power dynamics (Gallopín, 2006; Folke, 2006). Such complex systems and dynamics are the context in which organisations operate that want to contribute to better natural resource management, sustainable livelihoods or conflict resolution. For this research, these socio-ecological systems are the basis in which the conflict sensitive approaches are analysed. Therefore, this first part will explain the most important concepts of climate resilience and the socio-ecological system from a political ecology lens, to better understand how this can contribute to the later discussed approaches of conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding.

2.1.1 Stability and adaptability of climate resilience

Resilience is a broad term that has been used over decades to explain the capability of environments or communities to react and adapt to change. The concept of resilience is tightly related to other concepts

like vulnerability, stability and adaptability, within the socio-ecological context (Gallopín, 2006). In this section, these concepts will be explained to come to a theoretical concept of climate resilience that will be used for this research.

Resilience has first been mentioned in context of the behaviour of ecological systems, thus solely focusing on nature and the environment (Holling, 1973). Humanity was only linked to this explanation of resilience in ecological systems in terms of management of resources, meaning that the impact on humanity was still left out. Schellnhuber (1998) later brings it together in his analysis of 'Earth Systems', relating the dynamics of ecosystems to the dynamics of humanity. The 'Earth System' can be seen as dynamic, as "human beings, animals, ecosystems and societies can respond, react, learn, change, adapt and influence each other" (Rotmans, 1998, p. 446). This means that human societies should be included in the analysis of this dynamic system. This idea by Schellnhuber (1998) of a dynamic set of processes, both ecological as well as social, has been picked up by many scholars and organisations. In the academic field, such a dynamic system, with mutual interaction between ecological and social dynamics, has been termed as the socio-ecological system (Gallopín, 1991). Such a complex system of interaction across the globe is central for the resilience framework, as changes or processes in the system can create impact somewhere else, either fast or slow paced (Folke, 2006). This global idea also means that single ecological or social components are never isolated, as they are always in interplay with other components (Gallopín, 2006). The interaction between the local and global within such socio-ecological systems also highlight the importance of including the local into global challenges, thus also relying on local knowledge in research about the resilience of socio-ecological systems (Berkes & Folke, 1998). Within this local and global socio-ecological system, there are strong impacts of changes of the environment on local livelihoods, thus asking for a focus on resilience in relation to local livelihood development (Folke et al., 2004). Climate resilience should also be seen within this socio-ecological system, as local cases of climate resilience will always be linked to the regional and global contexts of climate change, policies and power dynamics.

This view of resilience within a broader socio-ecological system relies on the definition of resilience by Holling (1973) based on the dynamics of resilience compared to the passivity of stability within the equilibrium. While stability is viewed as staying in the equilibrium, resilience has an adaptive sense to it. The capacity to return to the stable state could also be named resilience, given the specific term 'engineering resilience' by Holling (1996). On the other hand, ecological resilience shows the adaptive capacity, being able to persist the perturbation to the system without the necessity to return to the earlier equilibrium (Ludwig, Walker & Holling, 1997). Others also follow this trend of different definitions of resilience against stability, terming resilience as the more dynamic and fluctuating concept within socio-ecological systems (Scheffer et al., 2001; Gallopín, 2006; Folke, 2006). Changes in the environment would mean the system goes outside of its former stable state, transitioning to the new equilibrium. That creates the idea of multi equilibrium or bi-stability

(Gunderson, 2000; Scheffer et al., 1993). Such a multi stability landscape describes the system with resilience as the dynamic factor that creates an adaptive capacity (Scheffer et al., 1993). This adaptability as part of ecological resilience is also the concept that will be used within this research, where resilience shows the possibility to fluctuate from the main equilibrium while being persistent as a socio-ecological system.

The adaptive capacity of a socio-ecological system needs to be big to talk about a resilient system. Walker et al. (2004) even categorise resilience as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change" (p. 5). The capacity to absorb is related to the adaptability of a system and to the changing environment. For this adaptive capacity there is no need to predict the future, but there is a need for "a qualitative capacity to devise systems that can absorb and accommodate future events in whatever unexpected form they may take" (Holling, 1973, p. 21). This again puts resilience in a dynamic position, being able to fluctuate with the challenges it faces within a complex adaptive system (Folke, 2006). Resilience also asks to look at a bigger scale, meaning that local context plays together with regional and international dynamics, thus related to the global socio-ecological system. This promotes the interplay between sustaining and developing the socio-ecological system in combination with the internal or external changes (Folke, 2006). By managing the socio-ecological system, people could work towards a more resilient landscape through enlarging the adaptive capacity of the system. This ability to learn and use the existing knowledge to adapt is key to resilience work (Folke et al., 2010). Exactly this learning and adapting capacity makes resilience such a dynamic process. Risk management and resource management could be part of this development of the system, giving actors the possibility to act upon and influence the resilience of their local socio-ecological system (Walker et al., 2004). These practices are always related to social, political and economic processes as well as governance and power relations within the system (Smit & Wandel, 2006). With the political ecology lens, especially these processes and power relations are addressed in relation to the resilience of the socio-ecological system.

2.1.2 Whose vulnerability?

Contrary to the adaptive capacity of a system is the vulnerability of a system. Meaning that when there is less possibility for adaptability in the system, the socio-ecological system will be more vulnerable to changes (Smit & Wandel, 2006). Vulnerability thus means bigger exposure to stressors and perturbations and makes it harder for a socio-ecological system to adapt (Adger, 2006). Building elements of resilience, like ability to absorb shocks or adjust to changes, means strengthening the socio-ecological system and influencing the vulnerability. As stated above, management efforts could enforce the adaptive capacity, making the system less vulnerable to stressors and the harm they might do (Gallopín, 2006; Turner et al., 2003).

The understanding of the vulnerability of the system in which one might act is crucial to resilience work. The contextual knowledge needs to be in place to understand how to tackle the risks and possible stressors in the system in combination with addressing the underlying social relations (Erikson et al., 2021). The vulnerability of the socio-ecological system is also subject to external factors like raging conflicts and political tensions. Such external factors therefore again ask for more climate resilience work, including knowledge of the broader context to place the climate resilience work positively in a sensitive environment (Henly-Shepard et al., 2018). To combat this vulnerability, the idea is that sustainable livelihoods would create stronger climate resilience, leading to less vulnerability. The role of sustainable livelihoods within climate resilience will be further discussed in the next section. Resilience is not merely the opposite of vulnerability, but rather a broader approach to how to combat vulnerability through the community, based on the socio-ecological context (Manyena, 2006). Understanding what concepts are influencing the vulnerability, stability and resilience of the system is important to better understand how to tackle the issues (Van Meerbeek, Jucker & Svenning, 2021). A sensitive approach towards the dynamics of the system is therefore important, including both the ecological and the social aspects. At the same time power relations have a great influence on the vulnerability of the system and the vulnerability of specific livelihoods in that system.

The vulnerability of communities to climate change impacts is exacerbated by power relations. Colonial structures, both in the past and currently enduring, created greater vulnerability of certain groups and geographic locations. Current climate coloniality, for example linking to climate policies, climate change adaptation or disaster planning, leads to ongoing inequalities of vulnerability to climate stressors (Sultana, 2022). This kind of inequal distribution of risks has been termed ‘disaster colonialism’ by Rivera (2020), arguing that “ongoing colonialism is operating through disasters” (p. 133). The procedural vulnerabilities of communities are a result of governmental choices of the ones in power, meaning that communities won’t be able to be truly resilient as long as there are unbalanced power dynamics that create unequal vulnerabilities (Sou, 2022). Often, the local communities lack the power to counter the existing power structures, due to the long lasting power dynamics from colonial history. The question on how such vulnerability has been created remains important when looking at ways to address it, as the causes of these vulnerabilities are often cleverly neglected by western policies and institutions. Looking at who benefits from climate resilience initiatives is thus important to see if this is not still in line with existing power dynamics, keeping the vulnerable still vulnerable while benefiting those in power (McDonnel, 2020). In current resilience narratives, often the responsibility is put on the local communities, while their vulnerability has been created due to power dynamics, unequal governance structures and external influences from colonial times. This moves responsibility away from the main actors, such as the major polluters from the Global North and imperial western powers, which results in the question who is responsible for solving the vulnerability in these fragile regions (McDonnel, 2020).

2.1.3 Power dynamics of livelihoods and knowledge

Livelihoods of the local people are part of the socio-ecological system, as the local communities are dependent on the environment. Everything linked to being able to live within the system relates to livelihoods, or as Chambers and Conway (1992) put it: "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (stores, resources, claims and access) and activities required for a means of living" (p. 6). Such capabilities, assets and activities can be taken out of the socio-ecological system, especially in terms of natural resources. Therefore, the system is crucial for the livelihoods, as the system's functions create benefits for the people living in it. A dependency between the ecological and social side of the system is created, because both the sustainability of livelihoods and ecosystems are linked to each other (Kalaba, 2014).

Climate resilience relates to such sustainable livelihoods, as the sustainability of one's livelihood is dependent on the level of resilience of the surrounding socio-ecological system. If one can make decisions about possible future losses, one can minimise the losses of its livelihoods by the changes in the system, thus creating sustainable livelihoods (Manyena, 2006). The sustainability of livelihoods can thus be seen linked to the resilience of a socio-ecological system. It is based on the long-term possibility of access to the resources and assets of the system (Chambers and Conway, 1992). In that sense, the sustainability also refers to adaptive capacity and the way they bounce back from disturbances. As with climate resilience, livelihoods are most sustainable when they can bounce back better compared to the status quo before the disturbance in the system (Mallick, 2019). Thus, it is about flexibility of the livelihoods rather than the stability. This can be created through rightful ecosystem management, leading to ownership of land and its resources. Good governance is crucial for sustainable livelihoods, although as part of this good governance, the inclusion, equity, and social justice should not be forgotten (Nataraja et al., 2022). Inclusive approaches are important for sustainable livelihood governance in order to stay away from tensions and possible conflicts. By understanding the power relations through a political ecology lens, a sensitive approach could be applied to address sustainable livelihoods in the socio-ecological system. The aim of addressing these power dynamics would be to create local ownership of the landscape, without external powers influencing the practices, as that creates tensions in the socio-ecological system. Nataraja et al. (2022) argue that this focus on power dynamics is still often neglected by academics or organisations looking at the livelihoods approach.

Matose (2009) showed the importance of using traditional knowledge to be able to create sustainable livelihoods for rural communities. Due to the undermining activities ever since the colonial past, the traditional livelihoods have not got the space to use traditional systems in natural resource management. These conflicting power dynamics of the traditional mechanisms and colonial power ask for negotiation practices. These can be dynamic negotiations where the power of the multiple different levels of actors can change over time (Michelutti, 2022). In the current global system, where often

western science holds power over the more traditional ways of knowing, local communities find themselves in a difficult position. Staddon (2022) explains that also development practitioners will have difficulty navigating these power dynamics, as they work with rural communities of different classes and ethnicities, while they have not actively experienced this themselves. Still those practitioners aim to make policies based on what they think are the needs of those local communities, often based on western science. This creates a challenge in understanding the context due to the positionality of external actors, while such understanding is proven to be important for addressing issues in a sensitive way, as will become clear in later parts of this chapter.

Local knowledge systems could provide a useful opportunity for initiatives related to climate resilience and climate change adaptation. Although so far this has often been neglected in the western academical field, some studies have proven the benefit of a focus on these traditional mechanisms (Petzold et al., 2020). This also asks for a more critical view on the power dynamics and western knowledge often negatively influencing the local socio-ecological system (Matose, 2009; Knutsson, 2006). More studies on the inclusion of local knowledge in addressing environmental change issues would be useful, as this will also help in creating more sensitive approaches to practical implementations (Naess, 2013). These dynamic relations between power and the use of knowledge are crucial when acting in these landscapes where local livelihoods are dependent on the environment (McCusker & Carr, 2006). This is all part of working towards a better understanding of all the dynamics that are part of the socio-ecological system, in order to be able to approach it in a sensitive way and try to transform the dynamics of the system (Garcia et al., 2022). In the next section, issues around conflict and peace will be discussed as they have been part of the political ecology field.

2.2 Conflicts in political ecology

Since the rising discussions on the impacts of climate change, the link between climate and security has been made more often. This mainly relates to the impacts of climate change on certain regions or livelihoods of people (Barnett & Adger, 2007). There are multiple aspects in which climate is related to conflict, addressing topics like food security, natural resource management and conservation displacement (Martin-Shields & Stojetz, 2018; Daoudy, 2021; Kabra, 2018). The rise of the climate-conflict debate in academia has multiple roots in conflict studies, environmentalism and political ecology. Taking it from a political ecology lens means addressing the issues of local livelihoods, differences in vulnerabilities between groups and the influences of power dynamics on the environmental conflicts. The interconnectedness between climate resilience and conflict becomes apparent when such topics are included (Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014). In this part of the theoretical framework, climate conflicts will be discussed based on these topics, to understand how climate resilience work, focusing on sustainable livelihoods and natural resource management, is

linked to conflicts. From there the step towards addressing these conflicts will be taken, to see what academic debates have discussed related to an environmental approach to conflict and peace.

2.2.1 Conservation and conflicts

For many years environmental conflict has been part of political ecology, by looking at the power relations in play, the politics within ecology and the resource conflicts that arise (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). Especially conflicts over resources and land use have been actively addressed through the political ecology lens (Turner, 2004; Walker & Peters, 2010; Schroeder, 1999). Part of these conflicts over land use comes from nature conservation efforts that put the natural landscape above the people. This means that a certain area would be designated for biodiversity conservation, blocking the access to the land for the local people. This effort of forceful conservation, in a way that only protects the nature without taking into account the local communities, has been termed 'fortress conservation' (Peluso, 1993; Duffy, 2016). With these practices, the livelihoods of local communities are neglected, together with their relationships with the natural landscape and their traditional knowledge systems (Siurua, 2006).

Over time, fortress conservation has made room for more participatory approaches to conservation, also focusing on managing nature and natural resources without conflict (Redpath et al., 2013; Duffy, 2006; Le Billon, 2001). Such efforts seem nice on paper, but often these efforts are still overruled by the power imbalances between the local communities and the governments or private sector (Sigamany, 2017). In the academic domain, the attention to inclusive and participatory approaches has grown, but the implementation and operationalisation of such theories still seem to be lacking (Turner, 2001; Dowie, 2009). Local communities lack the power to contest these violations, while the neoliberal structure provides opportunities for governments and private sector to use their power to access the lands of those local communities (Humphreys, 2009). This still creates tensions and could possible exacerbate conflicts, mainly due to those unequal power relations.

The idea to combat conflict through conservation efforts has been build up over the years. Le Billon and Duffy (2018) are advocacies for the combination of political ecology with conflict studies. They argue for a combined approach to the dynamics between socio-environmental changes and conflicts. This means both cultural, ecological and economic aspects should be addressed to achieve equal approaches to conservation and access to the land (Escobar, 2006). Security already has been embedded within conservation efforts, but this often perpetuates conflict instead of preventing it (Siurua, 2006; Mahalwal & Kabra, 2023). To work towards an approach that does work, more theoretical background is needed on the link between nature and conflict (Duffy, 2016). As both conflict studies and political ecology have to face conflict management in their field, a combination of approaches would be helpful. Addressing it from a political ecology lens could help in taking into account the interests and needs of local communities, through their livelihoods and local knowledge

systems (Le Billon & Duffy, 2018). Linking such environmental approaches of political ecology to conflict and peace studies results in the field of environmental peacebuilding, which will be discussed later in this theoretical framework.

2.2.2 Natural resources and conflicts

Besides conservation efforts leading to conflicts over land access, there has also been a lot of research on natural resources and conflicts. Resource conflicts are constituted around the ecological distribution, which can be seen from two sides: Access to natural resources or the burdens of pollution (Martinez-Alier, 1995). The second finds its main research field within environmentalism, while the focus on access to natural resources also finds links to conservation and conflict studies. Within political ecology, the local perspectives have grown as a key part of natural resource management and related conflicts (Mahalwal & Kabra, 2023). Due to the current world order, based on ongoing power relations from the colonial past, local communities have been unequally disadvantaged in the distribution of natural resources. Inclusion of local knowledge in the protection of natural resources is key to create sustainable management (Escobar, 1998). For such approaches, local knowledge has been a big part of the development of the political ecology field. Often, forms of local knowledge have been combined with scientific knowledge, creating a form of hybrid knowledge to address these issues (Watts, 2017). The usage of traditional knowledge systems is still limited, while the benefits have been analysed and presented in multiple different contexts (McPherson et al., 2016; Mwamidi, Mwasi & Nunow, 2012; Roth, 2004; Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018).

Local knowledge systems are crucial for sustainable livelihoods of local communities and inclusive governance of natural resources. If this is not done properly, conflicts over natural resources can rise, as local communities would not trust the outside perspectives (Bryant, 1998). Linking the use of local knowledge, influences of power relations and inclusive governance is central to political ecology perspectives on natural resource conflicts. NGOs can play a collaborative role in combining knowledge and practice, including a form of hybrid knowledge to work towards inclusive practices (Fernando, 2003). To work towards this, environmental programs need to be inclusive and address the broader social context, including the local perspectives (Escobar, 2006). This relates to a conflict sensitive approach, which will be discussed as part of environmental peacebuilding in the next part of this theoretical framework.

2.3 Environmental peacebuilding

As discussed above, environmental issues, related to land access and natural resource management, can fuel tensions and lead to conflicts. At the same time, some academics have argued that these topics can also be opportunities to address peace or prevent conflict (Dresse et al., 2018; Billon & Duffy, 2018; Krampe, Hegazi & VanDeveer, 2021). By working on climate resilience, through for example

natural resource management or sustainable livelihoods, the stability and adaptability of a socio-ecological system can be increased. This process helps in preventing conflict and achieving peace through environmentally focussed interventions. Climate resilience benefits conflict resilience, thus benefiting peace, while vulnerability to climate stressors can create fragility and proneness to potential conflicts (see figure 1; Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014). Environmental peacebuilding does not only account for direct peacebuilding efforts to address violent conflict, but also relates to addressing root causes of conflict and working towards a more sustainable world (Ide et al., 2021: Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). In this way, environmental peacebuilding can encompass approaches towards sustainable livelihoods and natural resource management, which not directly contributes to solving violent conflicts, but rather contributes to forms of positive peace (Galtung, 1996; Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). Ide et al. (2021) define environmental peacebuilding as follows: "*Environmental peacebuilding comprises the multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution and recovery*" (p. 2 & 3). This definition will be followed for this research, with specific focus on conflict sensitivity as element of environmental peacebuilding. In this part, the steps through conflict sensitive approaches to climate resilience work, towards directly working on environmental peacebuilding will be discussed.

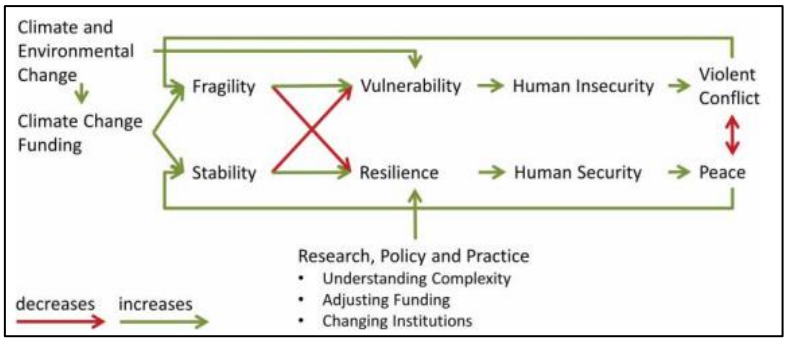

Figure 1: Integrated framework of the climate change – conflict/peace nexus (Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014)

2.3.1 Conflict sensitivity

Creating positive outcomes from environmental peacebuilding will be difficult if broader socio-political aspects are not taken into account (Ide, 2020). Adequate attention is needed to possible conflict situations where environmental projects are implemented. Therefore a conflict sensitive approach is important as an element of environmental peacebuilding. Conflict sensitivity has risen out of the 'do no harm' approach for humanitarian aid and development work. The first notion of the concept comes from Anderson (1999) on how aid work influences conflict, not only by helping people in need, but also by supporting certain features of the conflict itself. This could be through supporting the war economy or freeing budgets by supporting civilian needs (Anderson, 1999). From there the argument started that programs acting in conflict affected contexts should include conflict sensitivity as a safeguard to reduce negative impacts and maximise positive impacts, especially in areas where the local communities have a higher vulnerability due to the specific context (Norman & Michael, 2023). Especially on the local level, where some local communities have a higher vulnerability for external

impacts of outside political influences or climate change impacts, sensitivity in programming proves to be important (Baranyi & Desrosiers, 2012; De Coning, 2020). This new focus on understanding the context to improve the effectiveness of the programs has proven useful for many development organisations, especially as it is aimed at finetuning the programs rather than completely changing the approaches (Uvin, 2002).

Conflict sensitivity has been further developed in the combination of academic and organisational literature. The Conflict Sensitivity Community Hub (CSC Hub) developed out of this 'do no harm' principle, as a global network working on guidelines for conflict sensitive approaches to peacebuilding, humanitarian aid and development programs (CSC Hub, 2012). A group of peacebuilding organisations have defined three major steps for organisations to implement conflict sensitivity (Africa Peace Forum et al., 2004). These steps focus on (1) creating a contextual understanding, (2) understanding the link between this contextual understanding and the interventions, and (3) acting upon the understanding of this link between the context and the interventions. This means it is important to understand the broader context, including the socio-economic and political environment. According to Gullette and Rosenberg (2015), this three step approach would help to minimise the negative impacts and maximise the positive impacts of humanitarian and development interventions.

From the humanitarian and development field, the idea of conflict sensitivity has slowly moved towards other fields. Only a few peer-reviewed articles have been published on the implementation of conflict sensitivity in climate change adaptation or climate resilience work (Babcicky, 2013; Refisch & Jenson, 2016; Fisher et al., 2020; Nadiruzzaman et al., 2022). More work has been done in the gray area, where reports, working papers and institutional policies have addressed the need for conflict sensitive project planning (Tänzler, Carius & Maas, 2013; Yanda & Bronckhorst, 2011; Tänzler et al., 2022; Hamill et al., 2009). With the developing prove on the relationships within the climate-conflict nexus, conflict sensitive approaches within climate resilience related work rise in importance. The idea of doing good without doing harm is something that most NGOs will not be against, for which conflict sensitivity is crucial, especially in work related to natural resource management and land access (Refisch & Jenson, 2016; Fisher et al., 2020). As an element of environmental peacebuilding, conflict sensitivity is approached with the political ecology lens. This means topics like local identities and power relations, as they have been discussed as key elements of climate resilience, are included in conflict sensitive thinking.

2.3.2 Political ecology lens to conflict sensitivity

The development of conflict sensitivity within the environmental field has been pushed by the critical arguments on fortress conservation (Le Billon & Duffy, 2018; Hammill et al., 2016). Including a contextual understanding has been presented as the most important step into these conservation efforts

to make it conflict sensitive. From there, the next steps of understanding the interaction with the interventions and acting upon this interaction is crucial to not only act as if an organisation is working on it, but truly make the implementation conflict sensitive, according to Gullette & Rosenberg (2015). Looking at this from a combined approach from political ecology and conflict studies, such contextual understanding forms the core of conflict sensitive approaches. With the crucial point that this takes the broader socio-political context into account.

Le Billon and Duffy (2018) argue that the political ecology lens helps in better capturing these various tensions that play a role in environmental conflicts. These do not only include the tensions that create a potential for violence, but also address the power relations that play a huge role in natural resource governance. From the colonial past, the global power relations still have a big influence on the local socio-economic contexts and thus are part of the contextual understanding that is necessary for a conflict sensitive approach to environmental management (Peluso & Watts, 2003). Such unequal power relations have been the source of environmental conflict throughout history (Østby et al. 2011; Gonzáles-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2019; Ide et al., 2023). The development of conflict sensitivity in the humanitarian and development field, as discussed in the previous subchapter, has not included this focus on power relations into the contextual understanding. For the development of addressing environmental topics in (potential) conflict areas, such a broader approach to the context is important. With the influences of power relations on the local level, more focus is needed on the implementation of conflict sensitivity on local level environmental projects (Paudel, Subedi & Winterford, 2023; Barnett, 2018). Ware and Laoutides (2021) also argue for the implementation of local perspectives into conflict sensitivity, to make it a more participatory approach. Without this political ecology perspective, the conflict sensitivity steps would not be enough to move towards contributions to sustainable peace, as would be the goal for conflict sensitivity as an element of environmental peacebuilding (Ide et al., 2021).

2.3.3 Approaches to environmental peacebuilding

Taking the power relations into account for conflict sensitivity, as is proposed from the political ecology lens, means understanding the differences of various contexts and analysing the relationships between the stakeholders that are relevant to that specific context (Ide et al., 2021; Joireman & Haddad, 2023). Where conflict sensitivity is about projects that are implemented in conflict situations, environmental peacebuilding aims at projects that are implemented on conflict situations. The difference is the aim to either be active in the conflict situation or actively influence the situation. To do the latter, understanding how to do the former is crucial. With the understanding of the broader contexts and stakeholders in the context, there are multiple options of how to address the conflict and contribute to environmental peacebuilding.

Kampe, Hegazi and VanDeveer (2021) have identified three main pathways within environmental peacebuilding, relating to (1) cooperative management of natural resources that helps in building trust and social cohesion between stakeholders, (2) diffusing transnational norms like those around gender in environmental projects to address broader social issues and (3) to focus on equitable resource sharing which could strengthen the legitimacy of governments or local authorities. These approaches ask for a strong contextual understanding before implementation is possible. Especially when looking at environmental collaboration, the relations between stakeholders are the leading factor for success or failure of environmental peacebuilding efforts (Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). Environmental peacebuilding efforts are often focused on the root causes of conflicts, thus rather focusing on positive peace instead of solving violence. Combining this with the importance of climate resilience factors in the stability and peace of a region, Sommer and Fassbender (2024) argue for including climate resilient peace as an extra concept of peace, next to the well-known negative and positive peace of Galtung (1996). This also emphasises the resilience of states and communities to environmental stressors as an important factor in sustaining peace in the region, linking it to the climate-conflict nexus (Barnett, 2018; Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014).

The academic debates on environmental peacebuilding have mainly focused on the international level, while the local and community level has been neglected (Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). Looking at climate resilient peace as a possible outcome of environmental collaboration puts more focus on this communal level, as it includes the resilience of communities on environmental stressors (Sommer & Fassbender, 2024; Barnett, 2018). Supporting local livelihoods to reach sustainable peace is something that should be further developed in the academic field, as a lack of secured livelihoods has already been linked to rising conflicts (Bruch, Muffett & Nichols, 2016). Especially as local communities often have their own ways of natural resource management, the inclusion of local perspectives in environmental peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity should be a field for further research (Ide et al., 2021). There is a lack of understanding the benefits of local knowledge and traditional mechanisms for environmental peacebuilding. This can only be helped if first the attention grows to include local knowledge and traditional mechanisms in conflict resolution and environmental management. When looking at future possibilities for the development of environmental peacebuilding, the inclusion of bottom-up approaches is often mentioned, but without acknowledging the role of global and local power dynamics that undermine these bottom-up approaches and local voices (Ide et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2023). Contemporary power dynamics put western science over local knowledge systems, neglecting the crucial input that traditional mechanisms can have on conflict sensitive and environmental peacebuilding approaches. Most of current academic work on environmental peacebuilding do not engage with power dynamics or local knowledge (Davis et al., 2023). The current field is also dominated by western academics, leading to many discussions on creating inclusive approaches and strengthening local voices, while action to

truly make the field more inclusive is lacking. The future of environmental peacebuilding would benefit from more decolonial approaches and more engagement with on the ground practices, while including questions on local knowledge and power dynamics (Ide et al, 2023). The political lens on conflict sensitivity in this research will help in giving more attention to these power dynamics and local knowledge as a crucial part of both conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding.

3. Methodology

This research is focused on the perception of NGO practitioners on the inclusion of conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding in programs related to climate resilience, sustainable livelihoods and climate smart landscapes. To achieve this, this research is qualitative, and is based on a case study approach and semi-structured interviews with practitioners within the Tropenbos International network and a few other organisations working on related topics, which I will further discuss below.

3.1 Research approach

This research is based on a case study of Tropenbos International (TBI), to understand the perspectives of the practitioners. TBI is a network organisation, consisting of ten local network partners in South America (Colombia, Bolivia and Suriname), Africa (Uganda, Ghana, Ethiopia and DRC) and South East Asia (Viet Nam, Indonesia and Philippines), and the international secretary in The Netherlands. The TBI network has a global strategy focused on ‘Making knowledge work for people and forests’ (Tropenbos International, 2023a). Through the local network partners, they aim to support indigenous peoples and local communities in locally owned solutions for climate resilient landscapes and sustainable land use in tropical forest areas. Key topics within this work are the local focus, an inclusive approach and the sustainable livelihoods of the local communities. In the implementation of the projects by the various local network partners, they often come across various types of conflicts. Therefore TBI is aiming at developing their conflict sensitive approaches and understanding the possibility to contribute to environmental peacebuilding with their projects. TBI therefore forms a good case study for understanding the link between practice and theory on conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding, as they are active on the ground with local communities and are open for developing their capacity on conflict sensitive programming and environmental peacebuilding.

In order to create reliable research, the choice has been made to focus on practitioners within the TBI network. This case study focuses on experiences in the different contexts that TBI partners operate in. The perspectives of practitioners from TBI partners is combined with input from TBI documents. This selection facilitates a comprehensive qualitative analysis, aligning with the study's aim to address nuanced interpretations of various concepts (Bennett, 2004). This gives room for analysing the experiences and perspectives of the practitioners involved in this research, so to

understand their approaches in the different contexts. As the operations of TBI are spread out over ten different countries in three different continents, there are various different contexts in which the programs take place. This asks for a broad analysis of the different contexts and an open mind to the different implementation strategies and different cultures and situations in those contexts.

To further strengthen the validity of the research and to broaden its scope with other perspectives, other organisations are included (Gerring, 2004). The five other organisations are as follows:

- Peace Nexus Foundation (Switzerland): A Swiss private foundation that supports NGOs on the nexus between climate and conflict. They have been working with TBI on the development of conflict sensitivity in the TBI network since September 2023.
- Conservation International (USA): An NGO working on conservation across the globe. They have been working on conflict sensitivity within conservation together with Peace Nexus Foundation for over ten years.
- RECOFTC (Thailand): An NGO working on sustainable land use through landscape-based and inclusive approaches. They have worked together with TBI in the past and have been in contact with TBI on the development of conflict sensitivity for the TBI network.
- FAO (Thailand): The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is an international organisation of the UN that specializes in agriculture practices. They have been working in many fragile regions and have developed their own conflict sensitive approaches to their programs.
- Pax for Peace (The Netherlands): A peacebuilding organisation that has also been focusing on the link between the environment and conflict. Recently they have been developing a catalogue of Nature Based Solutions for Peace and Security (Wolters & Schellens, 2024).

The inclusion of these five other organisations provides the study with multiple perspectives from other disciplines and other contexts, while the focus remains on the specific work of TBI and its network partners. As the main focus is still on the practices of the TBI network, the conclusions of this research cannot be broadly generalised. The other organisations do provide the possibility to check the conclusions with their experiences in different contexts, but this does not provide enough to talk about further generalisation over global practices. This study aims to test the theories in the field of conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding with the practices of TBI network partners. The aim is not on further generalisation within the broader field of climate and conflict organisations, but the study does contribute to knowledge accumulation in the field (Flyvbjerg, 2006). These choices for including multiple organisations with different focus points in their strategies increases the representativeness of the research, while also decreasing the comparability (Gerring, 2004). Comparing the organisations is therefore left out of this study, as such comparing would not lead to stronger conclusions. Rather the

comparison of the results within the TBI network provides this study with the material needed. The outside organisations are used for verification of the results in other contexts.

A challenge for this research has been to combine individual cases and perspectives at the same time as creating a broader overview of best approaches across multiple contexts. As Corell and Betsill (2008) also argue, "this necessarily requires trade-offs" (p. 25). As in-dept case studies provide the possibility to get a good understanding of a specific case, this would mean that the broader overview would be lost (Underdal, Young & Mitchell, 2002). At the same time, solely focusing on generalising the approaches would mean neglecting the contextual differences and specific examples from the cases discussed. To counter this challenge, the choice was made to leave room in the interview for explanations of specific examples where possible, while still including some overarching themes in every interview to provide the necessary focus and structure in the research (George & Bennett, 2005). This combination of focus and structure has been done through semi-structured interviews, as will be discussed in the next section.

3.2 Data collection

Having a qualitative research design, the research aims to generate qualitative data on practitioners' perceptions, experiences, interactions, and collective processes. To collect this data, the main method has been through conducting fifteen semi-structured interviews, both within the TBI network as well as with practitioners from other organisations working on related topics. Besides these interviews, documents from the TBI network are used as reference material to verify the outcomes of the interviews. The documents used for this are the annual reports of TBI, the global strategy, the evaluation reports of 2023, both for the global programs as well as the local network partners, and the workplans for 2024, also for the global programs and the local network partners. A combination of such data provides the best approach towards conclusions on the link between practical experiences and the theoretical background (Yin, 2014). In this way the step from theory to practice is made within this research.

The choice for semi-structured interviews has been made because this gives the opportunity to get an insight into the way practitioners from different organisations are thinking. The semi-structured approach provides room for follow-up questions on the topics that the interviewee deems important and leaves the outcomes of the interview open for what the interviewee stresses the most (Brinkmann, 2014). In order to comprehend the complexity of themes that can be discussed in these interviews, the content of the interviews has been built on sensitizing concepts derived from the literature that was used in the theoretical framework. These sensitizing concepts are background ideas that are used in the interviews and analysis of documents. They serve as analytical tools for the exploration of practitioners' perspectives on the approach to conflict within their work and the programs. These sensitizing concepts have therefore also been chosen as the guidance in the semi-structured interviews,

to be able to link the results of the interviews to the theoretical background. Besides the sensitizing concepts there are also some themes discussed that were specific to the interviewee or the context that they are working in. These themes differ per interviewee or organisation. The following themes have been discussed in the interviews and form the backbone of the analysis:

- Type of conflict in their contexts
- Conflict sensitive approaches
- Context analysis (including tools)
- Power relations and dynamics
- The use of local knowledge
- Environmental peacebuilding (link between climate resilience and conflict sensitivity, and the impact of the projects on this link)

The selection of participants has been based on two different groups of participants. Firstly, the TBI network has been approached, to plan an interview with all the TBI network partners. Through the directors of the TBI network partners, interviews have been planned either with the directors themselves or with practitioners in the organisation that have been focusing on conflict transformation or related topics. The only TBI network partners that have not participated in the research are Ghana and Uganda, as they could not find the time to participate. From both Ethiopia and Suriname there has been a second interview with an expert on the topic, who also are advisors for those network partners. This selection of participants has resulted in ten interviews within the TBI network, all in different contexts and with different inputs. This gives a good overview of the different perspectives within the network and relations of the topic to the different contexts. Besides the TBI network, there have been five interviews with practitioners from the other organisations that have experience on the link between climate resilience work and conflict transformation or peacebuilding. These participants have been selected with the idea to create a varied group of participants, so both from a peacebuilding perspective as well as from a conservation perspective. Also a variety of geographical locations has been sought, including organisations from USA, Europe and Asia. Lastly, there has been a variety in type of organisation, including a UN organisation, a conservation focused NGO, an advisory foundation, an implementing organisation and a peacebuilding organisation. The full list of participants from both groups can be found in appendix A.

Besides the interviews, there have been a couple of focus groups that have given extra insight into the perceptions of the practitioners within the TBI network. In the beginning of the research period, an online session has been organized to get a first feeling of the practitioners' perceptions within the TBI network. This session was used to introduce the research to the TBI network partners as well as collect some first data for the research. The data collected includes the perceptions of the practitioners present on their contribution to environmental peacebuilding through their work, used in

chapter 4.1.2, and their level of understanding of the context, used in chapter 4.2. This first session included practitioners from seven of the network partners: Colombia, Ghana, Uganda, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Suriname and Bolivia. Besides this session, conflict analysis workshops have been given to the TBI network. In these two rounds of workshop, each consisting of 4 sessions with half of the TBI network partners, most of the time was spend on capacity building on conflict sensitivity for the network partners. Prior to the learning process, the current state of affairs on conflict sensitivity was tested, as has been used in 4.1.1 of the discussion. This helped in getting a feeling of what the network partners' understanding was of their position on conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding. These sessions included the whole TBI network, with the first round including Bolivia, Colombia, Philippines, Ethiopia and Suriname, and the second round including Uganda, Ghana, DRC, Viet Nam and Indonesia. During the workshops, conflict cases have been discussed and analysed, in order to better understand the specific situations and the approaches of the network partners in those situations. The insights from these discussions and analyses have been used both as background for the research as well as primary data for some parts of the discussion where specific cases are discussed.

3.3 Data analysis

The data collected with the interviews has been transcribed and coded. Coding was done through the program Atlas.ti, as this provides a practical space for structural coding of data (Vila-Henninger, 2019). The data was analysed with a first round of initial coding, in which codes were created based on the data. This data-driven coding, also called open coding, created the possibility to construct the code set based on the data, thus taking as much out of the data as possible (Gibbs, 2012). The first round of open coding is to some extent influenced by the initial analysis of the researcher, due to initial preparations of the research and the engagement with the relevant academic work preceding the data collection. Also the engagement with the TBI network during the internship and the interviews creates background knowledge that supports this first round of open coding. While codes were created in some parts of the data, the coding was reviewed in other parts of the data to see if the new codes were also applicable for other interviews. This creates an overall collection of the data that will have some kind of similar codes, which make it possible to compare the data in a later stage (Straus & Corbin, 1990).

After the initial coding, the codes are put together in code groups, based on overarching themes. By thematically coding the interviews, this research takes a qualitative approach, focused on linking the theory to the outcomes of the interviews (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). Such themes arise from the collection of codes present. The themes will show what topics were most present and important in the data (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). This second round of coding also provides room to again look at the data and see if quotes indeed fit within the themes or should be moved to different codes. Also rereading the data makes sure that missed notions can still be added to the created themes,

although they might have been neglected before as they were not part of a specific code yet (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This second phase of coding has created the analysed data set from where results have been collected. The benefit of working with such themes is the possibility to compare the data from the different interviews. As all interviews are with people from different organisations in different contexts, either within the TBI network or from outside organisations, the themes create a structural approach to comparting the examples and topics (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). With a comparative analysis, the differences and similarities between the experiences and cases discussed in the interviews can be highlighted (Bennett, 2004). This will help in concluding the best practices, lessons and issues across the different contexts. The results from this analysis will be linked to theories that have been discussed in the theoretical framework, to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

3.4 Challenges and limitations

The chosen methodology for this research presents several challenges and limitations. First, organizing the interviews was difficult. Securing participation from two types of respondents was necessary: practitioners from partners within the Tropenbos International (TBI) network and other organisations. TBI operates in various localities, necessitating considerations of cultural, linguistic, and time zone differences. Many practitioners were also preoccupied with their work, complicating communication and scheduling.

Fortunately, my position as an intern at Tropenbos International facilitated contact and communication with TBI network partners, allowing me to interview those deemed most experienced in conflict transformation and peacebuilding. For most, this meant the director, because of the most experience in the organisation and on these topics. For the DRC, interviewing the director was the only option, as he was the only person in the organization with a sufficient level of English to conduct a proper interview. In Bolivia and Colombia, interviews were conducted with practitioners that have been working on conflict related projects, instead of with the directors of the organisations. Tropenbos Suriname and PENHA in Ethiopia additionally arranged interviews with external consultants on conflict topics, providing valuable insights. However, Tropenbos Uganda and Tropenbos Ghana did not participate due to their unavailability, resulting in two of the ten partners being excluded from the research. Despite this, both Uganda and Ghana contributed through active participation in focus groups and conflict analysis workshops.

The focus groups were conducted as part of the TBI network sessions through Zoom. The virtual format had its limitations, such as communication difficulties and inability to monitor all breakout rooms simultaneously. Additionally, it is not possible to see who voted for what option in the Zoom polls, therefore this specific information could not be included in the data of what approaches partners already incorporate on conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding. The data from these polls are thus only used as general information on the state of knowledge of the TBI network in

general. The conflict analysis workshops, led by Hesta Groenewald and Julia Gorricho from the Peace Nexus Foundation, posed another challenge. Since the content was predetermined by Peace Nexus, it could not be fully tailored to the research needs. Despite this, the workshops provided useful data on the TBI network's current stance on integrating conflict sensitivity into their programs and strategies and their willingness to work on these topics. Active participation in the second workshop round provided additional background knowledge on specific network members, contributing valuable information to the research, although not perfectly aligned with the research needs.

Online interviews through Zoom and Teams sometimes suffered from poor internet connections and audio quality, affecting the transcriptions. This issue made transcribing the interviews more difficult, but did not significantly impact the overall possibility to analyse the data. Language barriers also posed challenges, particularly in interviews conducted in English with non-native speakers, like in the cases of Viet Nam and Bolivia, limiting the depth of discussions. With Suriname, interviews were conducted in Dutch and later translated by the author when certain parts or quotes were used for the research. Despite these challenges, the interviews provided substantial input on participants' experiences and approaches.

Arranging interviews with participants outside the TBI network was even more challenging. Contacting the right individuals proved difficult, so the participant pool relied on TBI's existing connections. These included participants from Peace Nexus, RECOFTC and Pax for Peace. Out of these first three interviews, new connections were made to schedule interviews with Conservation International and the FAO. While this offered diverse perspectives, it also presented challenges due to differing organizational focuses and contexts, complicating comparisons. The established relationships between some of these organisations and TBI made it possible to discuss the approaches of TBI in these interviews as well. The interviews were mostly conducted online, except for the Pax for Peace interview, which was in person and in Dutch. Again, some parts of this interview have been translated to English by the author, when used as quotes in the thesis. Language and connection issues were less problematic for these interviews, as participants were fluent in English and had better access to internet.

The research scope, focused on the TBI network with limited external input, restricts the generalizability of the findings. The perceptions primarily reflect those of TBI network practitioners, who share a common strategy and may have similar views, limiting the broader applicability of the results. These practitioners, though locally based and often coming from the regions they work in, are affiliated with an INGO and dependent on Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs funding through the TBI secretariat, which may introduce a western bias. The TBI network partners do act as independent local NGOs, giving them the ability to speak freely, but this might still be influenced by the relationship with TBI for funding. This research does not fully capture traditional local knowledge, which is crucial

for the topic. Due to time and capacity constraints, this was not feasible for this study. Future research should include local perspectives on how conflict sensitivity can enhance environmental peacebuilding, to also better understand how INGOs or other external partners could play their role in supporting the local communities.

Finally, researcher bias is a consideration. As a student from Radboud University Nijmegen in The Netherlands, there is an inherent western educational bias. At the same time further background also lies in The Netherlands, influencing the positionality and ultimately further influencing a western bias. Efforts were made to mitigate this by incorporating non-western academic works and voices from the TBI network partners from the global south. Acknowledging this bias is essential for maintaining openness to diverse inputs and countering preconceived notions. With an open view for multiple types of input and knowledge, this research has aimed to be inclusive and critical at the same time. Even with these efforts, it must be acknowledged that a bias will still be present and should be taken into account when reading the thesis and its conclusions.

4. Discussion

This chapter highlights the perspectives of the practitioners interviewed for this research on several topics related to conflict sensitivity in climate resilience work and environmental peacebuilding. Starting with the link between climate resilience and conflict as it has been mentioned by the practitioners and the possibility of climate resilience programs to contribute to peacebuilding. Hereafter, this chapter will discuss the specific topics that have been mentioned as key principles of conflict sensitive and peace positive approaches. In between some examples of the different contexts and different programs will be highlighted to provide the field examples related to the organisations that are included in this research.

4.1 Conflict in climate resilience work

The link between climate resilience and conflict resilience has been on the rise in the academic literature, as we have seen in the theoretical framework in chapter 2. Environmental changes like land use change can exacerbate tensions in certain areas, which from there could spark conflict if not managed sufficiently (Froese & Schilling, 2019). As other examples have come up on the links between climate change impacts and conflict, more organisations have been aiming to address these two issues at once (Abdulraham, Schaap & Van Sluijs, 2023; Alston-Vovticky & Kumskova, 2023). This is also the case for the link between climate resilience and peace, as such resilience against environmental changes will help establishing stable and peaceful landscapes (Vivekananda, Schilling & Smith, 2014). Part of this development on the link between climate change impacts and conflict is the development of conflict sensitivity in climate related programming (Joireman & Haddad, 2023;

Nadiruzzaman et al., 2022). In the practices of Tropenbos International these issues also play a big role. The network partners are often active in areas where tensions can rise due to climate change impacts or land use changes. One of the examples, mentioned by Karen, is of the tensions on land use and natural resources in the area in Bolivia that IBIF is operating in.

> It's a small territory and it's under pressure and it's suffering the climate change consequences. – Karen Mendoza (Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024).

Also in Suriname, natural resources are under pressure, leading to conflicts between and within communities. Tropenbos Suriname sees and acknowledges the difficulties of working in such conditions, where external influence also plays a big role.

> We are confronted with conflicts from outside. For example when there is a company that is working on logging, often in collaboration with local people. But this does result in conflicts with others. – Rudi van Kanten (Interview 1, Tropenbos Suriname, 01-03-2024).[1]

Other interviewees have also mentioned the difficulties of dealing with land use change, tenure security and natural resource conflicts in their work. In Ethiopia conflicts between pastoralists and local farmers have been exacerbated due to the pressure on the land, caused by more draughts and the changing climate. Water shortages mean that there are less green fields for cattle to graze, thus competition over these resources rise (Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024). In Colombia, Tropenbos is working in the midst of an ongoing conflict. With armed actors in the territories where Tropenbos Colombia is also active, they have to be careful, both for their own staff as for the local communities they work with. These conflicts can be increased due to logging and mining practices in the area. Understanding the impacts of these practices have also become part of the analysis that Tropenbos Colombia does prior to program planning (Green Livelihoods Alliance, 2023). Furthermore, conflicts have effected programs both in Colombia and DRC, as delays have been noticed in program implementation. These interactions between the programs and conflicts in the operating areas have not only been mentioned by the practitioners themselves, but have also been included in reports and evaluations (Green Livelihoods Alliance, 2023; Bokombola, 2023). These examples show the importance of addressing the link between environmental change and conflict in the work of Tropenbos International. In the academic work, the way to address conflict through climate resilience related work starts at conflict sensitivity (Bob, Bronkhorst & Sala, 2014). In the next part we untangle why conflict sensitivity could be a good entry point for addressing conflicts in climate resilience work.

4.1.1 From conflict sensitive to peace positive

As addressing conflict through climate resilience work is perceived as important, the approach needs to be constructed. Many organisations have started from a conflict sensitivity lens, based on the

[1] Translated from Dutch by the author.

principles of ‘do no harm’ (Nadiruzzaman et al., 2022). This could be a “first step to reducing, or at least not increasing, existing tensions”, helping to manage relationships and conflicting interests (Gullette & Rosenberg, 2015, p. 710). Although conflict sensitivity thus is a crucial part of addressing conflicts, it is also argued to be insufficient when organisations want to make a real impact on a peaceful coexistence (Ernstorfer, Stockman & Weijer, 2023). Further steps would need to be taken, based on insights from organisations and academics that have been actively working on integrating conflict sensitivity for the benefit of peacebuilding (Interpeace 2019; Goldwyn 2016; Barber and Bowie 2008; Peace Nexus Foundation 2020).

While conflict sensitivity has been a growing and developing concept ever since the first operationalisation by Anderson (1999), the peacebuilding side of such conflict sensitive programs has been overlooked. One of the organisations that does aim to take a step from conflict sensitivity to peacebuilding is Peace Nexus Foundation. They are working with a conflict sensitivity spectrum, addressing different layers of addressing conflict. In an interview, Hesta Groenewald, conflict and peace specialist from Peace Nexus, explained the steps within this conflict sensitivity spectrum.

> Are you currently turning a blind eye and trying to avoid it, or are you trying to be conflict sensitive, or are you trying to directly address issues that are causing conflict and division. – Hesta Groenewald (Interview 4, Peace Nexus, 19-03-2024).

This does not only stay with the perspective of Hesta Groenewald on how an organisation could act, but also in earlier documents Peace Nexus argues that becoming “more responsive to their contexts” can help organisations to address conflict better and become “more effective peacebuilding agents” (Peace Nexus Foundation, 2020, p. 15). Moving through the conflict sensitivity spectrum means putting more focus on leaving the negative effects of programs behind and focusing on positive effects for social cohesion and peace (ZOA & Peace Nexus Foundation, 2020). This process has also been started at Tropenbos International, where it became clear that most network partners are still lacking a strong conflict sensitive approach in their programs. Based on their own perceptions during conflict analysis workshops, most network partners noted to be around the ‘Do No Harm’ position, while most of them would want to move towards ‘Contributing to social cohesion & peace’ or ‘Directly address drivers of conflict’ (see figure 2; Gorricho & Groenewald, personal communication, May 2, 2024). In the Interviews, Tropenbos partners also stay away from mentioning direct impacts on drivers of conflict or peacebuilding. Only practitioners from PENHA mention that they are working on peacebuilding in their Ethiopian context through their work (Interview 14, PENHA, 12-04-2024; Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024). Some other interviewees have mentioned impacts of their projects that might have influence on peaceful coexistence, but they didn’t dare to call it peacebuilding (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024; Interview 1, Tropenbos Suriname, 01-03-2024).

Figure 2: Conflict Sensitivity spectrum, filled in by the TBI network partners. Blue dots are 'where we are now' and yellow dots are 'where we want to be'. Left figure is from first set of workshops, with half of the network, right picture is from second set of workshops with the other part of the network. (Gorricho & Groenewald, personal communication, May 2, 2024).

Outside the Tropenbos network, other organisations also have shown interest in moving towards peacebuilding through conflict sensitivity. With a same approach, partnering with Peace Nexus, ZOA has committed to developing their conflict sensitivity and to seeking peacebuilding opportunities (ZOA & Peace Nexus, 2020). In the sector of nature conservation, peacebuilding has also become more present, as we see with Conservation International (CI). Although Janet Edmond, Senior Director, Peace and Development Partnerships at CI, explains that many conservationists would not call their work 'peacebuilding', it could contribute to peace and social cohesion (Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024). As the discussion on conflict in political ecology in chapter 2 already explained, conservation work has been linked to conflict for a long time already, although not always in a positive way. Fortress conservation has been pushing people out their living spaces and therefore created tensions and conflicts (Duffy, 2016; Le Billon, 2001). Therefore, local communities and civil society actors have advocated for more cooperation with local people, acknowledging their livelihoods, traditions and knowledge (Siurua, 2006). This is also what CI has been aiming for with their increased focus on Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), together with other big conservation organisations (WWF et al., 2021). In line with this aim to create stronger social cohesion, they have been working on their conflict sensitivity. In their guide, CI directly links conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding with each other in the conservation activities (Moraga-Lewy & Edmond, 2022). In line with the conflict sensitivity spectrum presented by Peace Nexus, Janet Edmond explains that conflict sensitivity asks for listening to local communities and being open to make sure no harm is done. At the same time this is also the first step in being able to work on finding solutions to rising conflicts, she argues (Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024). By taking this conflict sensitive approach, including perceptions of IPLCs in conservation work, the environmental issues of access to land and power relations in environmental management can be addressed. When these aspects are taken as the key aspect of conflict sensitivity, organisations can

work on their contribution to equal distribution of resources to avoid conflicts (Mahalwal & Kabra, 2023; Escobar, 2006). Janet Edmond argues that conservationists can play a big role in peacebuilding when addressing environmental issues:

> There are really big level conflicts and so being able to look at those root causes and drivers of the environmental threats and then also probably more benefit sharing, equitable distribution of benefits from the livelihoods, I think that's a huge part of environmental peacebuilding. – Janet Edmond (Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024).

Aiming to address the root causes of conflict as a peacebuilding approach is more commonly used by organisations that work on climate resilience. David Gritten, consultant for the FAO, argues that working for a better environment, both natural and social environment, helps in addressing the underlying causes of conflict (Interview 8, FAO, 28-03-2024). For him, this comes back to understanding the situation, thus back to conflict sensitivity, before addressing the drivers of conflict can start. Taking these steps to understand the context are key to conflict sensitivity, as we will see later on in this chapter. Again, this shows a perception in line with the conflict sensitivity spectrum, that works towards environmental peacebuilding opportunities.

Elise Wolters, working at Pax for Peace on a catalogue on nature based solutions for peace and security, tells that many projects that she has seen from organisations that work on climate resilience do not necessarily aim at peacebuilding, but still contribute to addressing the root causes of conflict (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024). In one of the examples she mentions, the case of an elephant sanctuary in Mali, the understanding of the context and application of this understanding shaped the program in such a way that it benefited peacebuilding in the area. As the director of the program started to understand the broader context they were working in, they decided to include the local communities in the work and with that created alternative livelihoods for the local people. This kept them away from the recruitment of armed groups in the area (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024). In this way the conflict sensitive approach does not only contribute to doing no harm, but also has positive impacts on peace and stability in the region. This again argues for not only looking at doing no harm, but moving forward towards peacebuilding opportunities. Climate resilience projects that take such conflict sensitive and peace positive approaches can benefit both social and environmental development and counter rising conflicts (Wolters & Schellens, 2024). Based on these insights, environmental peacebuilding can be activated through a conflict sensitive approach of climate resilience related programs and initiatives.

4.1.2 Contributions to peacebuilding

The partners within the Tropenbos International network are working on climate smart landscapes and good governance of natural resources, which can help in tackling the root causes of conflict. Theory suggests that these aspects of strong natural resource management contribute to sustainable peace

(Bruch et al., 2009; Castro & Nielson, 2003; Ratner et al., 2017). As we have seen above, the practitioners of TBI partners did not show confidence of their current position on the conflict sensitivity spectrum, which suggests that they would also be less confident about their contribution to peacebuilding (Gorricho & Groenewald, personal communication, May 2, 2024). At the same time, the other interviewed organisations argued that climate resilience work does have a high potential for contributions to peacebuilding (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024; Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024). Therefore it is interesting to look at the different perspectives of the practitioners related to the program structures and the potential that has been given to them in academic works.

Environmental peacebuilding through improved natural resource management can be split up in three pathways, according to Krampe, Hegazi and VanDeveer (2021). Firstly, cooperative management of the commons can contribute to trust building and social cohesion by reducing biases and prejudices. This first mechanism is called the contact hypothesis, build upon participatory management. A second approach would be to address social issues, like including a gender focus to environmental projects. By diffusing the transnational norms, the environmental projects could support human empowerment and strengthen civil society. The last mechanism is the equitable sharing of resources, to tackle the underlying drivers of grievances and human insecurity. As the sharing of resources is often managed by the state or other authorities, this should be done through strengthening the governance, which would result in more legitimacy for the state or other authority figures and thus smaller chances to descent into conflict (Krampe, Hegazi & VanDeveer, 2021). These three mechanisms have been discussed with the TBI network in the first focus group session to create an understanding within the network of the possibilities to contribute to environmental peacebuilding through their work on natural resource management. In this session, they were asked to show and explain what their current approach entails related to these mechanisms. From the ten participants present, from seven different TBI network partners (Colombia, Ghana, Uganda, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Suriname and Bolivia), four mentioned to mainly focus on the contact hypothesis, due to their participatory approach and their emphasis on locally owned solutions. Two of the partners mentioned their attempt to diffuse transnational norms, mainly due to their focus on gender inclusion in the projects. One partner was seeking to better the equitable resource sharing, through cooperation with local governments

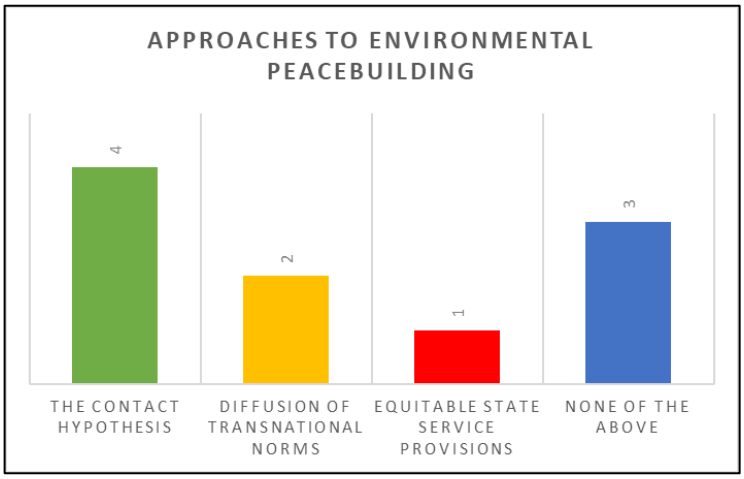

Figure 3: Approaches to environmental peacebuilding by the TBI network (Tropenbos International, personal communication, March 12, 2024)

and their aim to influence the resource management of the local government. Only three partners stated that they were not actively involved in any of these three approaches (See figure 3; Tropenbos International, personal communication, March 12, 2024). This shows that most of the TBI network feels like they are already contributing to some parts of environmental peacebuilding. This is a different outcome, compared to their input on the conflict sensitivity spectrum, where the majority of the network said not to be directly addressing drivers of conflict (see figure 2; Gorricho & Groenewald, personal communication, May 2, 2024). This difference can be appointed to the fact that the definition of the mechanism of environmental peacebuilding has been clearly explained. These aspects of natural resource management clearly link to their work in the field, thus for the practitioners this feels like something they can relate to. Compared to this, the direct question if they feel like they contribute to conflict prevention or peacebuilding might not feel like this is directly linked to their work, thus they will tend to say no. Janet Edmond sees the same difference between these perceptions of direct and indirect links to peacebuilding in her organisation. At Conservation International, she explains, they have been working on environmental peacebuilding ever since they started, although many practitioners will rather use terms like ‘better natural resource management’, ‘sustainable livelihoods’ or ‘inclusive governance’ (Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024).

> We surveyed our field teams and key people and they said, 60% of them said they recognise that they work on conflicts. But they didn't really call it that. That wasn't a term that they were using. They would never have said peacebuilding, never. – Janet Edmond (Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024).

The use of the direct terms like conflict prevention or peacebuilding might not be that present in environmental organisations, but the actions that contribute to it are. The same goes for TBI, where partners do not state peacebuilding or conflict prevention as a direct aim of their workplans, but they do mention objectives related to inclusive governance structures, enabling rights to access natural resources and creating sustainable livelihoods (Intituto Boliviano de Investigación Forestal, 2024; Tropenbos Uganda, 2024; Tropenbos Colombia, 2024; Tropenbos Ghana, 2024; Forest Foundation Philippines, 2024; Tropenbos Viet Nam, 2024; Tropenbos Indonesia, 2024). With plans to address these issues, they could contribute to environmental peacebuilding, if we follow the theoretical arguments from Krampe, Hegazi and VanDeveer (2021). The focus on equitable distribution of natural resources is one of the main activities of Tropenbos International. With the theme on ‘Gender & Youth’ as part of their global strategy, they aim for equal terms in decision-making practices, argued to result in sustainable livelihoods for the local communities (Tropenbos International, 2022). These claims are backed by practical experiences of the interviewees, like the examples from Alphonse Maindo, director of Tropenbos DRC (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024). By including women and youth in the cacao agroforestry practices, they address both the diffusion of transnational norms and the inclusiveness of decision-making practices.

> We must make sure that the women, youth and migrants, they also have their rights guaranteed in the landscape. They also participate in decision making about the landscape, also about the natural resources. – Alphonse Maindo (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024).

Another side of the contributions to environmental peacebuilding is by bringing together conflicting parties, while working on climate resilience related topics. Environmental collaboration can help in sustaining peace agreements, as it fosters trust and creates collaboration (Sommer & Fassbender, 2024). One of such an example can also be found in the work of Tropenbos. In Colombia a peace agreement has been signed between the Colombian Government and the FARC in 2016. In the area where Tropenbos Colombia has been working, this created a power vacuum, filled up by large-scale ranchers that took over large parts of the land for their livestock to graze. This created new tensions between the ranchers and the indigenous peoples, thus again threatening the peace and stability of the area. While addressing issues like natural resource management or land use, thus still focusing on their own topics related to climate resilience, Tropenbos Colombia aims to act as a bridgebuilder to construct better and peaceful communication between the different groups (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024). Together with The Nature Conservancy they are tackling both climate resilience related issues as well as the social issues resulting in the tensions, through approaches on environmental cooperation (Tropenbos International, 2019).

> The organizations are working to bring cattle ranchers and indigenous peoples together so that a dialogue can be established to discuss conflicts. Initial talks took place in a tense atmosphere, but since then a great deal of trust and respect has been built up between the two groups. (Tropenbos International, 2019).

The two groups are working together on environmental issues, related to water management, wildlife management and agroforestry (Tropenbos International, 2019). While this benefits the sustainable livelihoods and climate resilience of the social-ecological system, it also clearly benefits the peace and stability of the area. Still Zunil Lozano, researcher and field coordinator from Tropenbos Colombia, argues that their goal is not per se aiming for peace, but she would rather call it “a way to be happy, to be safe” (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024). Again the practitioners stay away from using the direct terms, while clearly seeing the benefits of their work for the stability and welfare in the areas where they are working. This shows the potential for organisations with a focus on environmental issues to contribute to peacebuilding, even if they do not directly use those terms. The case of Tropenbos Colombia does prove the impact on peaceful coexistence in the landscape:

> Recently, some peasants called me and told me that now they discuss something and they could discuss it together with the new mayor, and they are happy with that. – Zunil Lozano (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024).

4.2 Relevance of the context

A crucial part of conflict sensitivity, as we have seen in the theoretical framework, is a good contextual understanding and knowledge of the different dynamics in the area. Before implementation of the interventions, it is important to do proper research of the context (Gullette & Rosenberg, 2015). The Resource Pack, created by an alliance of peacebuilding organisations, defines this approach to conflict sensitivity through three main steps (Africa Peace Forum, et al., 2004):

- Understand the context in which they are operating;
- Understand the interaction(s) between their intervention and the context;
- Act upon the understanding of this interaction in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts.

These steps have been put to the test for this research, to understand the perspectives of practitioners towards this approach to conflict sensitivity and the implementation in their projects.

Within the TBI network, most of the practitioners from the network partners claim to act upon the understanding between the context and their interventions (See figure 4; Tropenbos International, personal communication, March 12, 2024). Based on the input of twelve practitioners from seven different countries (Colombia, Ghana, Uganda, Indonesia, Viet Nam, Suriname and Bolivia), none of them said to do nothing to understand the context they are working in. This shows the perception of the partners within the TBI network on how important the context is. To move towards contributions to peacebuilding, one should acknowledge the contextual differences between the different localities. Peacebuilding should in its core be a context-specific process, able to adjust to the specifics of a certain situation (De Coning, 2013). Alphonse Maindo explains clearly how Tropenbos DRC is following these rules, as they aim to adjust their programs to the context they operate in.

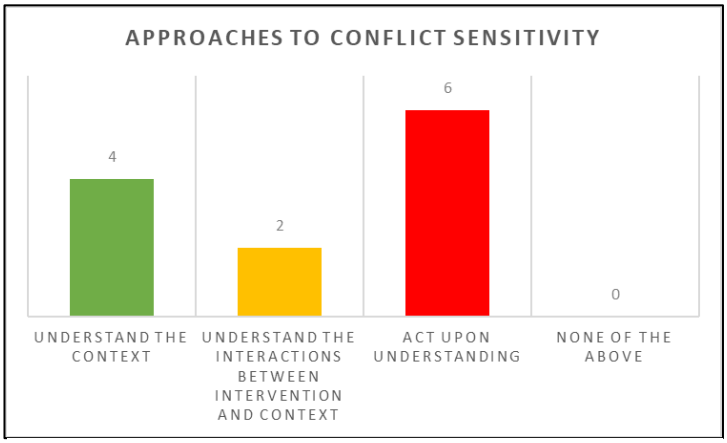

Figure 4: Approaches to conflict sensitivity by Tropenbos International (Tropenbos International, personal communication, March 12, 2024)

> For each specific issue, each specific conflict we try to make specific analysis because conflicts are different, each conflict is unique, so we need to have an understanding of it. – Alphonse Maindo (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024).

Other organisations outside the TBI network also put an emphasis on the contextuality when addressing issues of peace and conflict. Elise Wolters explains that Pax for Peace has this focus on the

cultural and contextual specifics in the core of their operations (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024). The same goes for Peace Nexus Foundation, where Hesta Groenewald notes that conflict sensitivity should be anchored in the analysis of the context. Part of understanding the situation an organisation operates in, should be analysing the conflicts and tensions that are present, according to her (Interview 4, Peace Nexus, 19-03-2024). Such differences per context are also part of the dilemma's while creating conflict sensitivity tools. These tools would have to be beneficial for multiple applications and at the same time have to flexible enough to adjust to the differing localities (Barbolet et al., 2005). Different skills are needed in different contexts, making it hard to prepare for every situation. Still it is possible to learn from each other within networks like that of TBI, because learning about approaches in other contexts can spark creative solutions for your own contexts, argues Rejani Kunjappan, Training and Learning Networks Officer from RECOFTC (Interview 5, RECOFTC, 20-03-2024). In the next three sections of this discussion, the three different steps of contextual understanding in conflict sensitivity will be further analysed within the TBI network. Even though most of the network partners claimed to act upon the contextual understanding in favour of conflict sensitivity, this analysis will unravel how far this goes, through the results of the interviews linked to the approach of contextual analysis in their project reports and workplans.

4.2.1 Contextual understanding

As demonstrated, the practitioners of the different organisations have argued that they see the importance of understanding the context. Through different types of analysis they aim to create this knowledge of the context before implementing the programs. Some have also mentioned that they aim to be flexible throughout the program, to adjust the interventions to changing contexts. This finetuning of programs based on the context is also one of the important pillars of conflict sensitivity in the academic works (Uvin, 2002). In this part, we first see how and to what extent the network partners work on their contextual understanding.

The results of the interviews show the devotion to a contextual understanding, as all interviewees mention that they are using tools or analyses to understand the context they operate in. Suriname, Viet Nam and Indonesia seem to be less active in using such tools to create this understanding for each intervention. Although they still argue to understand what is happening in the area they work in, the way of creating this contextual understanding seems to be weaker. While all TBI partners conduct a context analysis prior to implementing their projects, some do not see this as important related to possible conflicts. Rudi van Kanten, director of Tropenbos Suriname, explains they analyse "on the go", with which he shows the lack of focus on conflict in the prior contextual analysis. (Interview 1, Tropenbos Suriname, 01-03-2024)[2]. Tropenbos Viet Nam does seem to get an understanding of the context, but they neglect looking at possible conflicts or negative impacts, as

[2] Translated from Dutch by the author.

clarified by Tran Huu Nghi, director of Tropenbos Viet Nam. He told that they don't do specific conflict analysis, arguing that they "don't have the conflict" in the areas that they work in (Interview 2, Tropenbos Viet Nam, 01-03-2024). Even if one expects no conflicts in the area, an analysis focusing or at least including conflict, is a necessary step to understand if conflicts might be happening and what the impact of projects are on such possible conflicts. Especially because the work that TBI does on forest governance and natural resource management can be sensitive for rising tensions. When leaving the understanding of the local context behind, interventions will be less successful in addressing objectives that can contribute to peace and stability of the region (De Coning, 2020). This is also the case for objectives related to peaceful management of resources, as for such good governance stability is necessary. Tropenbos Viet Nam would do good to open up their approach to include a conflict analysis, to make sure they can limit their negative impacts on the local communities they work with. The workplans from Viet Nam do show an aim to address land conflicts in the region, but it is not mentioned in the chapter on the changes in the contexts, nor presented as a risk or challenge (Tropenbos Viet Nam, 2024). During the workshops, it also became clear that the practitioners from Tropenbos Viet Nam do see certain conflicts in the region, over land use and land boundaries (Gorricho & Groenewarld, personal communication, May 22, 2024; Le, 2024). Due to a lack of skills and tools for conflict analysis, they have neglected further research into these conflicts, thus also leaving behind possibilities to address these. The example of Viet Nam shows that often it is not the lack of interest in addressing conflict situations through their climate resilience work, but mainly the lack of understanding and knowledge on the possibilities to address these issues in the right way. This backs up the arguments of Lee (2020) on the lack of a bridge between the academic works and practitioners' knowledge. He argued that peacebuilding practitioners fall behind on an understanding of the local turn, resulting in weaker implementations. This research shows that the same goes in the case of conflict sensitivity, where capacity building and communication between research and practice is needed to create better suited interventions.

In Indonesia they also lack an active stance in doing analyses specifically on conflict. Edi Purwanto, director of Tropenbos Indonesia, argues that they do have eye for the context they work in, but rather focused on power, politics and governance without looking at the possible conflicts between the actors in the region. He also explained that, even though they do have to conduct a contextual analysis prior to entering the region, this does not have priority in the preparations:

> We don't have any tool for before we enter the area. – Edi Purwanto (Interview 11, Tropenbos Indonesia, 03-04-2024).

This shows that they don't set the priority at analysing the conflict and adjusting their programs to it. Even though they don't use these specific tools, they still present a certain amount of understanding in their workplans. Without specific focus on the conflicts, they use terms like 'turmoil', 'escalation' and 'commotion' to explain the political and social context they have to deal

with (Tropenbos Indonesia, 2024). Together with the fact that they do use analyses during the project to better understand what specific interventions are necessary, this does show some devotion to working in a conflict sensitive way, although not directly in those words (Interview 11, Tropenbos Indonesia, 03-04-2024). This relates to what we have seen before on addressing peacebuilding through climate resilience work, where most organisations and TBI partners also argued that they do benefit peace and stability, but won't use those direct terms. Elise Wolters and Janet Edmond, from Pax for Peace and Conservation International respectively, also see this in their own work. Without using those direct terms, the context is still analysed and used for programming to create positive impacts without doing harm, thus acting in a conflict sensitive way without mentioning it (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024; Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024).

Other partners in the TBI network are more actively working with tools to analyse the context in order to understand possible tensions. In Bolivia they are using tools like stakeholder analysis and power mapping, in the DRC they are analysing the traditional ways of addressing conflict to understand how to act upon this and in Ethiopia they triangulate their knowledge of the context with the local communities to make sure they get the full picture (Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024; Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024; Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024). Using these traditional knowledge systems in context analysis is important to act in a conflict sensitive way. TBI included in its strategies the aim to work on locally owned solutions, meaning to include local perspectives and local knowledge in the interventions. Therefore including local knowledge in conflict analysis should also be part of this approach, which has been implemented by some partners in the network, like in the Philippines:

> We also used traditional knowledge, actions and practices for the stakeholder mapping, the power mapping and the power analysis. – Nelissa Maria (Interview 13, Forest Foundation Philippines, 04-04-2024).

How could you be sensitive to local communities and the socio-ecological system if you don't understand the traditional mechanisms and local knowledge? Indigenous knowledge has already proven itself useful in addressing conflicts and contributing to peacebuilding (Loveness & Mathew, 2017; Izugbara, Ugal & Ukwayi, 2003; Werner, 2010). So far it has been neglected in the academic debates on conflict sensitivity. From the practitioners' view, the local knowledge proves to be important in order to understand the full context (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024; Interview 14, PENHA, 12-04-2024). Not only within the TBI network, where local approaches are the core of the strategies, but also at other organisations the importance of such inclusive approaches to contextual analysis is mentioned (Interview 4, Peace Nexus, 19-03-2024; Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024; Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024). As understanding the context is the crucial first step towards conflict sensitivity, local knowledge and traditional mechanisms can't be left

behind when talking about conflict sensitivity. Future academic work should thus also focus on including traditional mechanisms and local knowledge into the development of conflict sensitivity.

4.2.2 Interactions between program and context

While understanding the context is the first step, this does not immediately mean that there is a conflict sensitive approach. It is also important that an organisation understands how their project might influence the context, even if this is unintended or indirect (Gullette & Rosenberg, 2015). Babcicky (2013) showed that climate change adaptation projects often created unintended spillover effects that influenced the socio-economic and political context. To avoid this and maximise the positive impact, acting upon the understanding of the context and possible impacts should be part of the organisations' work. That is why in this section it is assessed how the practitioners of the organisations in the TBI network think about the interactions between their programs and the context.

The TBI partners often have a good understanding of the context, although in some cases they do not yet use the sufficient tools or include the traditional knowledge. In Colombia, they do actively work on this understanding and aim to take the next step. Based on the workplan, it becomes clear that they understand the conflict situation they operate in and link this to challenges and opportunities for their interventions (Tropenbos Colombia, 2024). The broader socio-political and cultural understanding brings them the possibility to think about what the possible negative impacts could be and how to manage this. Zunil Lozano explains how they work on the participation of women in decision making practices, but have to be careful for the tensions that this creates among men in the area:

> We have to keep analysing, because we have to be quite, slowly, be careful to not create a new struggle between women and men. – Zunil Lozano (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024).

By constantly analysing the interactions between their program and the situation on the ground, they want to make sure gender related violence does not increase due to their push for women participation. In another example, Zunil Lozano explains that they are promoting the local communities not to set the forest on fire for fast crops. Tropenbos Colombia wants to help the local communities towards agroforestry, with which both the local communities as well as the forest would be able to survive. In the last year, they realised that there were armed groups that also asked those local communities not to set the forest on fire, as a dense forest would help those armed groups in their guerilla fight against the government forces. Through analysis of the situation, Tropenbos Colombia tried to figure out what position to take and if they would have to keep the same narrative. For this, they kept strong communication with the local communities, to include their perspectives in deciding how to adjust the interventions. In the end they made sure that their narrative would be different than that of the armed groups, while they could still help the communities to further develop their

agroforestry practices without setting the forest on fire (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024). This shows flexibility of the programs, making it possible not only to understand the context, but also act upon this understanding. This example shows the combination of contextual understandinng, including local knowledge, and flexibility of the programs, which all benefit conflict sensitivity.

Understanding the interactions between the context and the program also relates to understanding how to act in different localities. Different contexts ask for different interventions, which is also the case for different locations within countries or regions. To be able to understand what should be implemented differently, research and analysis per context is needed. Karen Mendoza, director of the resilience and climate change program for IBIF in Bolivia, for example, mentions that they have different tools ready to create a more in-depth understanding. These tools include, stakeholder analysis, actor mapping, power mapping and conflict analysis, which helps them to identify the links of collaboration and conflict between actors in the area (Villarroel, 2023). She explains that at IBIF, they analyse how the external context affects this local context, by examining the power relations, influence, and interests of actors in the field (Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024). This results in a thorough understanding of the socio-economic context, including threats to the rights of local communities due to unequal power relations that have been identified (Villarroel, 2023). As they work in multiple different localities, they understand how the different context asks for a different implementation:

> Guarayos is next to Monte Verde. Monte Verde is next to Lomerío, but the context is very different between those territories. – Karen Mendoza (Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024).

The main conflict differs between those areas, as the one operating region is bigger, involving more power relations and external actors that influence the dynamics with the communities, while in the other the main conflict relates to land access between the local communities, which can be governed on a smaller scale. This understanding of the contexts can be created through a good analysis of the situation, in collaboration with local communities and by working with experienced local staff in their teams. The final evaluation of the Working Landscape program in Bolivia argues that the efficiency of the program has been improved with the opening of a local office in the Guarayos landscape (Villarroel, 2023). This proves their willingness to specifically focus on addressing the local context by being present in the area. The tools that are used have been developed to adapt to the specific context since 2021, which boosted the results of the programs. This adaptability to different socio-economic situations benefits the possibility to increase the social-cohesion (De Coning, 2020). Understanding the interactions between the context and being flexible enough to adapt to it, proves to be a valuable asset for the interventions in Bolivia.

The operations of Tropenbos DRC also show the interactions between the context and the interventions. As the operating region in Congo is a post-conflict area, there are still many aspects from the past conflict that effect the implementation of projects. External influences into the operating landscape can harm projects, like the possibly violent election period that has been mentioned as one of the concerns for project implementation by TBI (Green Livelihoods Alliance, 2023). Alphonse Maindo from Tropenbos DRC, explains that they are forced to carefully examine the situation day by day, as there are both communal conflicts as well as armed militias in the region.

> If you want to operate quite well and effectively we need to understand all these conflicts and try to reduce at least the impact of these conflicts on our activities and also on the communities we are working with. – Alphonse Maindo (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024).

This shows the active attitude to creating a contextual understanding linked to the conflict dynamics. Due to the situation, they feel the need for understanding the dynamics and aim to influence these where possible. They aim to do this through consultation with local people and the use of traditional mechanisms (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024). From research of the Green Livelihoods Alliance, local communities have mentioned to act as community monitors to alert NGO partners about changes in the region. This relates to illegal activities by outside actors and unwanted relations being formed between those illegal actors and people from the community (Green Livelihoods Alliance, 2023). A relationship based on trust with the local community creates the option to have eyes and ears on the ground, which boosts the contextual understanding. External influences are taken into account in the creation of workplans for the DRC, including shifts in power dynamics in the region (Green Livelihoods Alliance, 2023). This shows an acknowledgement of the need to address conflict sensitivity through a political ecology lens, by including power relations as a possible influence on the implementation of projects. The influence of power relations on creating a contextual understanding, implementing conflict sensitive approaches and contributing to environmental peacebuilding, will be discussed in the next part of this discussion.

4.3 Local knowledge and power relations

From a political ecology lens, the inclusion of local knowledge and power dynamics is key to addressing conflict sensitivity. Climate resilience is based on the capacity of the socio-ecological system to be flexible to external influences, in which local livelihoods are a key factors. Although these local livelihoods have often been neglected in addressing climate resilience, they are the core of sustainable development of a certain landscape (Nataraja et al., 2022). Such local livelihoods in tropical forest regions are often dependent on good governance of land and natural resources, for which most local communities have their own ways and practices. Some have therefore argued that the inclusion of these local perspectives should be key to initiatives that aim to enhance good land and natural resource management (Matose, 2009). The benefits of the inclusion of local knowledge and

traditional mechanisms have sparsely been analysed and proved (Petzold et al., 2020). This part of the discussion aims at contributing to this debate on how to use local knowledge and traditional mechanisms, with a special emphasis on their inclusion in conflict sensitivity. Based on the experiences of practitioners within the TBI network and other relevant organisations, this research argues that a conflict sensitive approach and contributions to environmental peacebuilding will not be sustainable if these have not made use of the local knowledge and traditional mechanisms.

4.3.1 Using local knowledge for contextual understanding

Throughout the sector it is acknowledged that a better understanding of the context provides better capacity to plan and implement projects and achieve the wanted outcomes. To do so, many academic works and practitioner manuals advice on including local knowledge in building contextual understanding (Africa Peace Forum et al., 2004; Gulette & Rosenberg, 2015; ZOA & Peace Nexus, 2020). In the section above on contextual understanding it is discussed how important this is to be able to act in a conflict sensitive way and how partners within the TBI network do this. The good case practices are not build upon western knowledge or scientific analysis, but rather on strong communication with the local communities. In the Philippines the local knowledge is used in conflict analysis tools, Tropenbos Colombia keeps short links of communication with the local communities to adapt their programs accordingly and in Bolivia practitioners work with local staff in a local office to make it easier to include these local perspectives in their contextual understanding (Interview 13, Forest Foundation Philippines, 04-04-2024; Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024; Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024). The good communication with the local communities helps these TBI partners in adjusting the programs to the needs of the local communities and understanding the conflict situations from their perspectives. The inclusion of local perspectives is a general focus point of the TBI network. At the network partners where they already focus on conflict and peace in their programming, the perspectives of local communities are often consulted through the already existing communication structures. Unfortunately, the topic of conflict and peace does not always have the full attention of practitioners within the TBI network, which results in lacking a listening ear to the local communities related to these topics. Though, the local knowledge and traditional mechanisms do form a great starting point when the organisations want to directly address the drivers of conflict and contribute to environmental peacebuilding. In the broader TBI network, the local communities could be a key partner in starting and further developing their approaches to conflict and peace.

Other organisations outside the TBI network argue the same, related to the importance of local perspectives in conflict sensitivity. As director at Conservation International, Janet Edmond has seen how important it is to include the local people in conservation work. She argues that listening to the local communities is a crucial factor in acting in a conflict sensitive way (Interview 9, Conservation International, 28-03-2024). When entering a region, an organisation should be open to the local

context and aim to understand the perspectives of the people that are already there. Elise Wolters backs this up based on the cases she has seen at Pax for Peace:

> The best practices are really from community based conservation and community based resource management. – Elise Wolters (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024).

The cases that were driven by the community and based on local knowledge were the ones that had the most potential in being successful and sustainable. These practitioners' perspectives are in line with the academic works that argue that traditional knowledge is paramount in conflict sensitive climate change adaptation (Bob, Bronkhorst & Sala, 2014). This is mainly because the projects that are based on local knowledge and traditional mechanisms will be seen as legitimate by the local people, giving it more chance for local ownership and survival of the project (Pankhurst, 2003). It is not only in the contextual understanding that local knowledge would be beneficial, but also in the implementation of the projects. In the next sections, the inclusion of traditional mechanisms be analysed to see the possible contributions it can have for environmental peacebuilding.

4.3.2 The role of traditional mechanisms

In the peacebuilding field, more emphasis has been put on using local knowledge in peacebuilding practices. This focus on the 'local turn' is a means of inclusion of local agency in peacebuilding practices through bottom-up approaches. Crucial to this approach is to "listen to the voices from below", meaning that peacebuilding practitioners should encourage inclusion of local communities and use traditional mechanisms in their practices (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2018, p. 832). This approach to peacebuilding asks for changing the power dynamics in peacebuilding practices, as the western or external actors would have to hand in power to the local mechanisms (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Although the local turn has been part of the peacebuilding debates for over 15 years now, still the peacebuilding field is dominated by western organisations and scholars (Johnson et al., 2022). Steps are being taken, as the influence of non-western knowledge is growing in academic works and international organisations are also putting more emphasis on the localisation of their peacebuilding practices, but this is going in a slow pace (De Coning, 2013; Alston-Voyticky & Kumskova, 2023). In the climate-conflict nexus and environmental peacebuilding field, the local turn has been under addressed. While local actors and their traditional knowledge systems can play a big role in addressing climate conflicts, the academic focus has not yet been towards their contributions (Sändig et al., 2024). At the same time, using the local knowledge to contribute to environmental peacebuilding is something that does play a big role for many of the TBI network partners. In this section, the relevance of traditional peacebuilding mechanisms for contributing to environmental peacebuilding will be highlighted through the implementation of TBI network partners.

With the global strategy of the Tropenbos International network focussing on 'locally owned solutions', it is expected that the network partners will have to work closely with the local

communities and promote the use of traditional mechanisms (Tropenbos International, 2023a). Karen Mendoza argues that they implement this vision through the projects of IBIF in Bolivia. As the ways of knowing between the globalised western institutions and the IPLCs are very different, they will also have different priorities. Karen Mendoza explains that they aim to understand the ways of working of the local communities, in order to let them work in their own time and space as necessary. In relation to peacebuilding, she explains that IBIF wants to promote IPLCs to use their own ways of resolving conflicts, which can be different in the various areas that IBIF operates in (Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024). This links to their interventions on climate resilience, as working with the traditional mechanisms builds trust between the local communities and the organisation. Mutual trust is often a difficult topic within environmental management, as a lack of understanding each other's cultures, language and practices make it difficult to address environmental issues on the local level. Working with traditional knowledge systems can help in building trust, as the local communities already have a feeling and understanding of these ways of knowing and the mechanisms that are linked to these traditional systems (McPherson et al., 2016; Roth, 2004).

If conflict resolution is done through the use of traditional mechanisms, the questions is what the role of NGOs would be with their interventions. Based on the cases from TBI network partners, the most often discussed position is to promote and support the use of such traditional mechanisms (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024; Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024; Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024). From experience in the DRC, Alphonse Maindo has seen that traditional ways of conflict resolution often have a more sustainable impact compared to externally implemented interventions.

> We know the people there have their own mechanisms. So promote also traditional forms, the local mechanisms for conflict resolution. – Alphonse Maindo (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024).

In order to work towards co-management of forests in the operating areas, Tropenbos DRC aims to identify the traditional mechanisms for conflict resolution in place, as those can be useful in solving conflicts over land rights and natural resource management (Bokombola, 2023). Alphonse Maindo relates the topic of traditional knowledge systems to the earlier discussed contextual understanding. He argues that a good contextual understanding will help in using these traditional mechanisms for a peaceful management of the forests. By identifying how the mechanisms work and who is responsible, they know who they would have to contact at the moment that tensions rise towards possible conflicts (Interview 10, Tropenbos DRC, 02-04-2024). In the DRC this possibility for a quick response to rising conflicts is crucial, as tensions are always high in the conflict ridden region. Conflicts between community forest management and outside actors, including government officials, remains a challenge for the implementation of interventions of Tropenbos DRC (Tropenbos International, 2023b). In these battles over power, from which conflicts can rise, Tropenbos DRC tries

to encourage the use of these traditional mechanisms as the power structure in place to resolve conflicts and push for sustainable forest management.

In Ethiopia, the same focus on promoting traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution can be found. The conflict situations in Ethiopia have been subject to research on traditional ways of conflict resolution before (Tesfay, 2020). Often these conflicts happen over land or water management. Informal ways of resolution are the most used forms of solving such conflicts in the region, although government authorities often try to undermine the local traditions and install their own favoured processes (Pankhurst, 2003). The local government has a weaker position compared to the traditional authorities of the communities in terms of trust and legitimacy for the local people. Due to this construction of the power dynamics in favour of the traditional mechanisms, local people will prefer listening to the traditional authorities over the laws of the government (Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024). The weaker position of the government asks for bottom-up approaches and support of traditional mechanisms, as otherwise the policies would not work for the local people. Mitiku Haile, professor at the Mekelle University and advisor for PENHA, argues that the national government should learn from such traditional ways of solving conflicts, as it is beneficial for the peace and stability in the region (Interview 14, PENHA, 12-04-2024).

> Communities have the right to address their conflicts in their own way, and then our role should be to listen, to correlate, and also to comment these activities through different mechanisms – Professor Mitiku Haile (Interview 14, PENHA, 12-04-2024).

During their practices in the landscape to promote peaceful natural resource management, they notice that it is paramount to build upon those mechanisms that are already in place. Not only in terms of trust as we have seen before, but also in terms of local ownership for the new structures and land laws. As director of PENHA in Ethiopia, Amsale Shibeshi notices that the local people believe more in the traditional institutions than in the government. She explains that this is mainly due to the way of implementation used by the government, which lacks of communication with the local communities and therefore won't build up any local ownership (Interview 15, PENHA, 12-04-2024). By using the traditional mechanisms, the local communities believe in the system, which creates a feeling of ownership among the local communities. Because of these insights, PENHA will seek collaboration with the traditional leaders in the Tigray and Afar region (Tropenbos International, 2023b). Those traditional leaders, the Abo Gerebs, are responsible for natural resource management and conflict resolution, thus also the main apparatus to contribute to environmental peacebuilding (Tesfay, 2020). The structure of the Abo Gerebs, combining conflict resolution and natural resource management, provide for the perfect mechanism to engage in environmental collaboration, through bringing conflicting parties together over co-management of land and forests. This relates to the arguments of Sommer and Fassbender (2024) on possible contributions to peace and stability through an environmental collaboration approach. At the same time the contact hypothesis on participatory

environmental management, and the equitable sharing of resources are approaches to environmental peacebuilding that can be achieved through the existing structures of the Abo Gerebs (Krampe, Hegazi & VanDeveer, 2021). This would only be possible if organisations that want to promote and support such initiatives know how these structures operate and which stakeholders are present. Therefore, the contextual understanding of conflict sensitivity is still the key first principle towards contributions to environmental peacebuilding. One approach that seems to be more difficult to address through these traditional mechanisms is the changing of social norms. An inclusive approach to peacebuilding is not in line with the traditional ways of operating by the Abo Gerebs, creating difficulties between their processes and the inclusivity view of PENHA on such forest management and peacebuilding practices (Interview 15, PENHA, 12-04-2024). In the next section, these difficulties will be discussed, based on the present power dynamics in those traditional systems.

4.3.3 Reshaping local power dynamics

Working with the traditional structures in place can also bring difficulties, as these structures already have their own power dynamics as well. Power relations are at the core of environmental peacebuilding, as the relations between actors in the landscapes determine the positive or negative outcomes of the management of the landscape, thus related to the level of peace and stability in the region (Davis et al., 2023). These power dynamics often put elderly men at the front, deciding over natural resources and conflict management. Such processes, like the system of the Abo Gerebs in Ethiopia, would benefit from more inclusive approaches through participation of women and youth in the peace processes (Tesfay, 2020). PENHA is working directly to make this happen, by including women in the stakeholder dialogues and conflict resolution meetings they set up with the traditional leaders (Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024). This does bring difficulties, as it contradicts the power dynamics in place and asks for reshaping the power relations in the region. Again, such interventions ask for a strong contextual understanding and a sensitive approach to make sure that no harm would be done and the outcomes would be beneficial for environmental peacebuilding.

PENHA did a thorough analysis of the situation in Tigray and Afar, which gave them the understanding of the context that they needed to take further steps towards inclusion of women and youth in the decision making processes. Amsale Shibeshi explains that they triangulate the information that they get from the local authorities, either the Abo Gerebs or the local government. With the project proposals that have been made with that information, they go to the women and youth of the communities to ask if they were consulted and if they agree with such projects. This helps PENHA to make sure that the whole community is behind the interventions and they can adjust the projects where necessary (Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024). The gender inequality in the operating region is large, effecting the participation level of women in stakeholder dialogues, as mentioned in the progress report on the working landscapes program. Through active participation of women in local economies,

PENHA aims to also involve women in the stakeholder dialogues over natural resource management and peacebuilding (WL progress report, 2022). In this way, while PENHA works together with traditional mechanisms, they also try to reshape the power dynamics in order to create more participatory mechanisms in the region.

Through these goals of more participatory processes for natural resource management, TBI network partners aim to diffuse transnational norms in multiple regions. In the DRC such strategies are also implemented, as Tropenbos DRC aims to change power dynamics in certain situations to benefit better governance of land and natural resources. Alphonse Maindo explains what he expects to do with these strategies:

> When you make your intervention, you make change in power relation. You can create a kind of shift of power from one stakeholder to another one. – Alphonse Maindo (Interview 10, 19-04-2024).

Providing certain groups with more power in the social systems can create changes in what is accepted in the communities related to topics of gender or youth participation. This benefits the strength of civil society, as more participatory institutions for natural resource management will benefit the climate resilience and social cohesion in the region (Conca, 2001). With those steps, this contributes to environmental peacebuilding, as it works towards a more resilient socio-ecological system, both in terms of environmental change as well as proneness to conflict. In conclusion, the reshaping of power dynamics through diffusion of the shared understandings of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour will benefit climate resilient peace (Barnett, 2018; Krampe, Hegazi & VanDeveer, 2021).

To benefit climate resilient peace, Tropenbos Colombia is also actively working on the participation of women in stakeholder discussions on deforestation issues. Their approach to reshaping the current structures in the region is to combine local knowledge with academic knowledge. With this creation of hybrid knowledge, they want to influence the expectations of gender norms towards the acceptance of women participation (Tropenbos Colombia, 2024). Zunil Lozano mentions that working on participation of women in political discussions sparks up changes in power in the region.

> For men it is difficult that women start to be in power, not only in the family, taking care of the babies. For us it is very important to analyse, how can we make the transition. – Zunil Lozano (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024).

The reshaping of these power dynamics is not only difficult in terms of getting it done, but also brings the danger of creating new tensions. Such environmental peacebuilding approaches focusing on inclusive environmental collaboration and diffusion of norms in the region asks for sensitive approaches. These approaches include identification of where tensions might rise over such inclusive approaches and changes of power dynamics.

Identifying the situation related to changing power dynamics is something that is done by more TBI partners. In Bolivia, IBIF also aims to strengthen the role of women and youth, which goes against the current power relations in the local communities. Through analysis of the context IBIF understands the current situation and creates strategies to influence this. Karen Mendoza explains that it is difficult to navigate in these power relations, especially when the traditional leaders are also influenced by outside actors (Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024). Companies from outside the region have no interest in investing in peaceful co-existence of the local communities, but rather aim for financial benefit from illegal activities in the area. Such interests and positions of stakeholders in the region need to be identified to understand how to react to this, thus asking for the implementation of conflict sensitivity tools. Topenbos Suriname also sees this influence from external stakeholders as a negative effect on the power dynamics within the Saamaka community, which is the local community in the operating area. Hugo Jabini, spokesperson of the Association of Saamaka Communities (VSG) and advisor to Tropenbos Suriname, explains this further:

> There are authority figures who think to act in name of the whole community without consulting the community and they give permission [*for logging*] only because they have direct benefit from it. – Hugo Jabini (Interview 3, Tropenbos Suriname, 11-03-2024).

Through such misuse of power by the traditional leaders of the communities, land grabbing is made possible in the forests where the Saamaka community lives. This is often done in collaboration with the local people, meaning that the culprit is also within, explains Rudi van Kanten (Interview 1, Tropenbos Suriname, 01-03-2024). This collaboration from the tribe elders, called the Granmans and Captains, undermines the other members of the communities. Trust in the traditional system is breaking down due to these activities, leading to tensions over economic development versus nature conservation. Bribes by outside actors for illegal logging activities further undermine the aimed goals of Tropenbos Suriname to work together with the local communities on sustainable land use and agroforestry (Ebus, 2024). Such local power dynamics bring difficulties for implementing interventions to improve the socio-environmental system, especially because these power dynamics cannot be seen independent from the external powers. The bottom-up approaches of environmental management or peacebuilding prove to be more fragile than some argue. The local aspect of these approaches are often presented as fairer and more equal, while this is not necessarily the case if the local power relations are analysed (Lane & Corbett, 2005). The dynamic structure of the communities can also make it harder for outsiders, like NGOs working in the region, to mediate and influence the situation. The power relations present a blind spot in many local approaches, especially the local power dynamics within the communities, as those are often forgotten to take into account when analysing stakeholders (Berbés-Blázquez, González & Pascual, 2016). By approaching conflict sensitivity with a political ecology lens, as this research does, the local power dynamics can be exposed and included in the contextual understanding. Taking such an approach to conflict sensitivity

proves to be important when an organisation wants to contribute to environmental peacebuilding on the local level.

Hugo Jabini argues that the current situation in the region is also influenced by a lack of knowledge of how to deal with the global economy. External actors, like private companies, incluence the situation in the region by proposing financial opportunities to the local communities that seem to be interesting for them, as they don't have enough knowledge to think about the long term. As the communities have not been taught how to deal with such a western system, but at the same time are drawn into this, this puts pressure on the local ways of living (Interview 3, Tropenbos Suriname, 11-03-2024). Through workshops with members of the Saamaka community, Tropenbos Suriname aims to provide the communities with support in dealing with these outside pressure. Samunda Jabini, Youth Engagement Consultant to Tropenbos Suriname and youth from the Saamaka tribe herself, tells about working with hybrid knowledge in these workshops to prepare the communities on the outcomes of the power dynamics in the area.

> We can't do with traditional knowledge alone, and we can't do with western knowledge alone.
> – Samunda Jabini (Samunda Jabini, personal communication, April 23, 2024).

By including traditional knowledge to conflict resolution they aim to create an understanding between the communities and promote the Granmans and captains to consult their communities for activities in the landscape. Through such trainings Hugo Jabini hopes to create a better understanding within the community and teach the leaders to act in a neutral way when dealing with their powers in natural resource management. He believes that this approach will reshape the power dynamics in the region and prepares the communities to external influences in order to work towards a peaceful coexistence in the region (Interview 3, Tropenbos Suriname, 11-03-2024). Reshaping the power dynamics towards more equitable natural resource management could, with these strategies, result in more peaceful relationships between and within the communities.

4.3.4 Locally owned solutions

As the strategies of Tropenbos International state, they are aiming for a locally owned approach (Tropenbos International, 2023a). This means that the local communities are involved and preferably the solutions and programs are operationalised from the bottom up. This has been called 'locally owned solutions', as the local communities would have ownership over the initiatives that are taken in the areas (Tropenbos International, 2023a). This is done through strategies that are build upon the input from local communities and encourage the use of traditional mechanisms. Peacebuilding practices also prove to be more vital when this is based on local inputs (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; De Coning, 2013; Werner, 2010). Combining these perspectives from the TBI strategies and academic debates on the need for local ownership, this seems to pave the way for locally owned environmental peacebuilding.

Addressing environmental peacebuilding at the local or community level has not been the focus of academic developments within the field. Rather, the environmental collaboration approaches and practices of natural resource management have been addressed in the light of international or regional peace and stability (Sommer & Fassbender, 2024; Ide et al., 2021). TBI network partners have a good position to address environmental peacebuilding from the bottom-up, as they have included this approach to their climate resilience work across the network for many years already (Tropenbos International, 2023a). Also their strong connections to the local communities in the operating landscapes could help in including local perspectives in environmental peacebuilding practices. Applying projects along the needs of the IPLCs they work with is something that resonates with many of the interviewees' stories (Interview 1, Tropenbos Suriname, 01-03-2024; Interview 2, Tropenbos Viet Nam, 01-03-2024; Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024; Interview 12, IBIF, 03-04-2024; Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024). Zunil Lozano from Tropenbos Colombia, elaborated on their focus on the needs of local communities:

> Our approach is to ask all the time to the people, how are they and maybe if we can help. – Zunil Lozano (Interview 7, Tropenbos Colombia, 21-03-2024).

This also relates to what other organisations claim is key for a conflict sensitive and peace positive approach. Remarks from both Pax for Peace and RECOFTC highlight the importance of the use of local knowledge and ownership of programs among the local communities (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024; Interview 5, RECOFTC, 20-03-2024). Elise Wolters explains an example from her experience at Pax, in which communities started to get funding for forest management, in order to set up rules and regulations that would create possibilities for agroforestry and sustainable land use. As these regulations were set up by the communities, with help from NGOs, they felt ownership over the program. This resulted in a sustainable implementation, as even without funding and external support continuing, the communities kept the regulations in place and continued with these sustainable forestry practices (Interview 6, Pax, 21-03-2024).

Looking at the practices of partners within the TBI network, there are similar cases where the ownership of the program creates sustainable solutions. One key example is the case of Ethiopia, of which the director of PENHA claims it is supported and owned by the local communities. Amsale Shibeshi argues that the approach that PENHA takes has created this local ownership, as they aim to include the whole community in the process and implementation of their programs.

> We have this big dialogues where everybody is contributing. Then we decide when to do it with the community, what time of the year it's supposed to be done and what they think is missing from what we are doing and then ask them their previous experiences and sometimes as well we ask them for community contribution to any project, so that there is, it's their own. When we leave that, there is community ownership. – Amsale Shibeshi (Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024).

She also explains what could happen if such an approach is not taken, based on an example of bad communication from the local government. The government needed to use the land in a specific area, for which they decided to fence the area. They did this without consultation of the local people. A day after they fenced the area, the local government officials came back and found no fence there. The local communities had taken down the fences, as it was on their land without prior permission and they were angry about it. This, Amsale Shibeshi argues, shows the need for participatory dialogues and consensus building before action is taken, in order to act in a conflict sensitive way and contribute to locally led environmental peacebuilding (Interview 15, PENHA, 19-04-2024).

Although the importance of such local ownership is neglected so far in academic debates on conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding, it proves to be crucial for the implementation by practitioners in the TBI network. Without the local ownership, rebellion against the interventions might start, sparking conflict in the region. A truly conflict sensitive approach would have taken this into account, as conflict analysis would show the differing needs of local communities against the positions of other stakeholders. In line with the arguments of Ide et al. (2021) on the future of environmental peacebuilding, the outcomes of the analysis on implementation of conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding by the TBI network shows the need for focus on the local level. Sustainable livelihoods and natural resource management is part of environmental peacebuilding and asks for the inclusion of local perspectives and traditional mechanisms. Through a conflict sensitive approach, including the ownership of the interventions by the local communities, the management of environmental issues proves to contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

5. Concluding remarks

The topic of environmental peacebuilding has earned more attention in the academic world in the last couple of years. This has also resulted in the inclusion of the topic into the practices of both peacebuilding and environmental organisations. Still, the field has only started to grow, with a lot of potential for future research. On the local level, including local knowledge, traditional mechanisms and power dynamics, there is a gap to be filled in the environmental peacebuilding debates. Especially in terms of filling the gap between theory and practice, as the localisation has been discussed in academic works more often, but practitioners still struggle with its implementation, which is also the case for environmental peacebuilding. This research has aimed to contribute to bridging this gap, by analysing how an environmental organisation working on climate resilience could contribute to environmental peacebuilding by including conflict sensitivity in its locally oriented interventions.

Without using the terms related to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, many practitioners from the Tropenbos International (TBI) network are already actively addressing conflict related issues. Through interventions related to inclusive governance structures, enabling rights to access natural

resources and creating sustainable livelihoods, TBI network partners already contribute to environmental peacebuilding in the operating areas. This is related to the theoretical arguments of Krampe, Hegazi and VanDeveer (2021), linking such practices to contributions to positive peace. By including women and youth in the agroforestry and decision making processes, they address both the equitable distribution of natural resources and the diffusion of transnational norms, as has been shown in the examples of Tropenbos DRC and PENHA in Ethiopia. The example of Tropenbos Colombia has also shown the practices on environmental collaboration, as they bring conflicting parties together based on collaborative management of natural resources. This has created trust between stakeholders in the region and contributed to sustaining peace.

With conflict sensitivity as a key element of environmental peacebuilding, this research has taken conflict sensitivity as the starting point to analyse the TBI network. The steps of conflict sensitivity related to a contextual understanding, as discussed by Gullette and Rosenberg (2015), have been tested, based on the experiences of the TBI practitioners. The whole TBI network is actively analysing the context, although some neglect a focus on possible conflicts in the landscape. Understanding the context is the crucial first step in acting in a conflict sensitive way, for which the TBI partners argue that local knowledge and traditional mechanisms cannot be left out. Although the local perspectives within conflict sensitivity did not get a lot of attention in academic works so far, the examples of the TBI network show the importance of those perspectives to truly understand the broader context.

Using the local perspectives for the contextual understanding and creating flexible projects to adapt to this contextual understanding proves to be important for IBIF in Boliva, as they are working in various contexts with different local ways of living. Other TBI partners also argue that acting upon the understanding of the context is important to act in a sensitive way, with special focus on the local knowledge and traditional systems. With the good communication that many local partners in the TBI network have, they have a great basis to adapt their programs to the needs of the local communities. This not only helps in the effectiveness of the environmental interventions, but also helps in acting in a conflict sensitive way, as it becomes easier to build trust with the local communities and create local ownership. Listening to the local communities proves to be a crucial factor for conflict sensitivity, especially when one wants to make the step towards environmental peacebuilding on a local level. Projects that include local knowledge and encourage the use of traditional mechanisms will have more opportunities to contribute to environmental peacebuilding. Based on the cases from the TBI network partners, the best position for an NGO to take is to support the use of such traditional mechanisms and empower the local voices. This can build trust between the parties, contributing to sustainable and resilient peace.

Addressing the local power dynamics also proves to be important in the cases of TBI network partners, as these are at the core of environmental peacebuilding practices. Relations between actors in the landscapes can determine the positive or negative outcomes of the management of the landscape, thus related to the level of peace and stability in the region. Without addressing these power dynamics, it will not be possible to have a sufficient contextual understanding to act in a conflict sensitive way, nor will it be possible to truly address the drivers of conflict and contribute to environmental peacebuilding. The local perspectives to these power relations are important, as that can provide with different views on the conflict situation. The power relations present a blind spot in many local approaches, particularly in relation to the local power dynamics within and between the communities. These dynamics are often overlooked when analysing stakeholders. By adopting a political ecology lens in conflict sensitivity, as this research has done, the local power dynamics can be exposed and included in the contextual understanding. Adopting such an approach to conflict sensitivity is important when an organisation wants to contribute to environmental peacebuilding on the local level.

6. Recommendations

This research aimed to contribute to the link between conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding, by taking a political ecology lens to conflict sensitivity. To do so, the topics of power relations and local knowledge have gotten a special focus. These topics have been underdiscussed in the academic works on conflict sensitivity, but are crucial if organisations truly want to implement their projects in a sensitive way. From the discussion and results of this research there are some questions that still remain and some action steps to take. These will be discussed in this chapter on the recommendations for future research and practical implementation for the Tropenbos International network.

6.1 Future research

Based on the findings of this research, there are a number of recommendations for future research to better understand conflict sensitivity as part of environmental peacebuilding and how to include power dynamics and local knowledge in these debates:

- Environmental peacebuilding has been growing as a research field, but mainly on the international or regional level. To little attention has been given to the possibilities for environmental peacebuilding on the local and communal level. This research has shown that there is a lot of potential for environmental peacebuilding to deal with local level conflicts between or within communities. Some researchers have started this process of analysing local environmental peacebuilding initiatives, but more academic contributions are necessary to better understand these local dynamics (Ide, Palmer & Barnett, 2021; Morales-Muñoz et al.,

2021; Huda, 2021). This should be expanded, with specific focus on the already existing traditional mechanisms and the local dynamics that play a role. Such future research could contribute to understanding the locally driven initiatives and dynamics between and within communities, with a specific emphasis on marginalised groups.

- A local focus should also be explored on the topic of conflict sensitivity. With contextual understanding as the core of conflict sensitive approaches, this research has shown that local knowledge is a powerful tool to create a stronger contextual understanding. There is a gap in the academic world on the inclusion of local knowledge in conflict analysis and contextual understanding. Research on the input of local communities and traditional mechanisms on conflict sensitivity is lacking. Conflict analysis so far has been about analysing it from the outside, while inside perspectives from the local communities will provide with a better understanding of the situation and the local dynamics, as this research has shown. Future academic work therefore should focus on how local knowledge and traditional mechanisms can play a role in conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity, to contribute to the development of conflict sensitivity implementation on the local level.
- One of the aims of this research was to contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice on the topics of conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding. Currently, the academic works and scientific knowledge on these topics have not yet been passed on to the practical implementation and the other way around. To work on this link between practice and theory, more research should focus on the implementation of conflict sensitive programs, especially on the local level. While some researchers have looked at the implementation of environmental peacebuilding in this way to understand the practical use of the theories, there is a lack of such research in conflict sensitivity related to environmental peacebuilding. Conflict sensitive programming in environmental interventions has not been researched enough to understand the struggles and needs, which is necessary before a strong framework can be created that practitioners can build upon. Future research could contribute to this, with special focus on the local levels and inclusion of marginalised groups into the conflict sensitive programming of environmental interventions.

6.2 Practical recommendations for TBI

Based on the analysis of the implementation of conflict sensitivity by the Tropenbos International network and their perceptions on environmental peacebuilding contributions of their interventions, there are some practical recommendations for the organisations within the Tropenbos International network:

- This research has shown that there is already a lot that has been done to create conflict sensitive interventions and contribute to environmental peacebuilding, although this has not

always been recognised as such by the practitioners of the local network partners. By building knowledge and capacity on conflict analysis, conflict sensitivity and environmental peacebuilding, the practitioners would better understand in what way their interventions already contribute to these topics and how to further enhance this. Therefore, one of the practical recommendations for the TBI network is build their IQ and theoretical knowledge on these topics, to combine this with the practical experience that is already present in the organisation. By putting more effort into understanding the current theoretical debates on these topics, this will also help in bridging the gap between theory and practice that is still present.

- The interviews with the different practitioners from various contexts have shown that there is a lot of experience and practical knowledge present in the network. Although this all plays out in different countries in three different continents, some of the examples overlap in some ways. Both in Suriname and Ethiopia they have to deal with local power relations between the community and the traditional leaders. In Viet Nam and Colombia they are seeing influx of migrants in the region, which is challenging the indigenous people's land use. In the DRC and in Bolivia they are aiming to use traditional knowledge systems to better understand the context. Both in Colombia and Ethiopia they see possible rising tensions due to empowerment of women in decision making processes. Such examples from different contexts ask for different interventions, but some struggles may be the same. Therefore, the practitioners from the different local organisations could learn from each other's experiences and implementations to see how that could be adjusted to be effective in their own contexts. The TBI network should invest more in this experience sharing.
- The analysis has shown that in some cases there has been a lack of including local knowledge into conflict analysis and program planning. Although the TBI network has its global strategy focused on locally owned solutions, the use and inclusion of traditional knowledge systems could be increased. As a network, TBI could take steps to include a broader context analysis within their program planning, to build conflict sensitivity into the core of the organisation. In doing so, the inclusion of local knowledge should also be part of it, both in order to fulfil their own wishes of their global strategy as well as for the better implementation and effectiveness of their locally oriented programs. If these steps are taken, their conflict sensitivity will be increased and it will be easier to work on environmental peacebuilding together with the local communities and their traditional mechanisms that are already in place.

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8. Appendices

8.1 Appendix A – List of participants

Nr.	Name of interviewee	Name of organisation	Location of organisation	Date of interview	Method of interview
1	Rudi van Kanten	Tropenbos Suriname	Suriname	01-03-2024	Online
2	Tran Huu Nghi	Tropenbos Viet Nam	Viet Nam	01-03-2024	Online
3	Hugo Jabini	Association of Saamaka Communities (VSG) / Tropenbos Suriname	Suriname	11-03-2024	Online
4	Hesta Groenewald	Peace Nexus Foundation	Switzerland	19-03-2024	Online
5	Rejani Kunjappan	RECOFTC	Thailand	20-03-2024	Online
6	Elise Wolters	Pax for Peace	The Netherlands	21-03-2024	In person
7	Zunil Lozano	Tropenbos Colombia	Colombia	21-03-2024	Online
8	David Gritten	Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)	Thailand	28-03-2024	Online
9	Janet Edmond	Conservation International	United States of America	28-03-2024	Online
10	Alphonse Maindo	Tropenbos DRC	Democratic Republic Congo	02-04-2024	Online
11	Edi Purwanto	Tropenbos Indonesia	Indonesia	03-04-2024	Online
12	Karen Mendoza & Juan Pablo Baldiviezo	Bolivian Institute of Forestry Research (IBIF)	Bolivia	03-04-2024	Online
13	Nelissa Maria Rocas & Joy	Forest Foundation Philippines	Philippines	04-04-2024	Online
14	Professor Mitiku Haile	Mekelle University / PENHA	Ethiopia	12-04-2024	Online
15	Amsale Shibeshi	PENHA	Ethiopia	19-04-2024	Online