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Exploring the potential of community-based environmental peacebuilding projects in fragile settings. The case of the border of the Amhara and the Afar regions in Ethiopia.

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Resumo

As abordagens convencionais do topo para a base no que respeita à construção da paz ambiental revelaram-se inadequadas para enfrentar a crise complexa do Antropoceno. O discurso da segurança ecológica realça a interdependência complexa entre o ambiente e o bem-estar humano, defendendo uma abordagem holística para assegurar a estabilidade socioecológica global, regional e local. Esta tese contribui para o atual debate sobre a viragem local na construção da paz ambiental, reagindo às críticas de iniciativas anteriores. Através de um estudo de caso exploratório, examina o potencial da construção da paz ambiental inclusiva baseada na comunidade na promoção da paz e da segurança ecológica, centrando-se no conflito fronteiriço intra-estatal nas regiões de Amhara e Afar, na Etiópia. Os dados foram recolhidos através de entrevistas semi-estruturadas com ONG e ONGI envolvidas em projectos ambientais nas regiões, cujo trabalho visa contribuir direta ou indiretamente para a consolidação da paz através de uma abordagem de base comunitária. Além disso, foram efectuadas entrevistas a peritos e uma análise da literatura cinzenta. Os resultados indicam que uma abordagem inclusiva baseada na comunidade pode contribuir para a adaptação à paz através da capacitação de grupos marginalizados, da melhoria das relações entre as partes em conflito e da redução da degradação ambiental. Ao promover a segurança ecológica através de uma mudança sistémica a longo prazo, os resultados sugerem que a abordagem pode promover uma mudança para uma governação transformadora. Os principais desafios identificados em relação à implantação foram o financiamento limitado, a curta duração dos projectos e a simplificação das realidades complexas nas regiões dos projectos. Este estudo sublinha a importância de adotar soluções específicas ao contexto para abordar as ligações entre os conflitos violentos e a degradação ecológica nas zonas fronteiriças que vão além das perspectivas ocidentais e destaca a necessidade de mais investigação sobre a aplicabilidade das abordagens transformadoras.

Palavras-chave:

Construção da paz ambiental, Etiópia, Construção da paz com base na comunidade, Segurança ecológica, Conflitos fronteiriços intra-estatais

Abstract

Conventional top-down approaches to environmental peacebuilding have proven inadequate to address the complex crisis of the Anthropocene. The ecological security discourse highlights the complex interdependence between the environment and human well-being, advocating for a holistic approach to ensure global, regional, and local socio-ecological stability. This thesis contributes to the current debate on the local turn in environmental peacebuilding, reacting to criticisms of previous initiatives. Through an exploratory case study it examines the potential of inclusive community-based environmental peacebuilding in fostering peace and ecological security, focusing on the intra-state border conflict in Ethiopia's Amhara and Afar regions. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with NGOs and INGOs engaged in environmental projects in the areas, whose work aims to contribute directly or indirectly to peacebuilding through a community-based approach. In addition, interviews with academics and analysis of grey literature were conducted. The findings indicate that an inclusive community-based approach can contribute to peace adaptation by empowering marginalized groups, improving relations between conflict parties, and reducing environmental degradation. By promoting ecological security through long-term systemic change, the results suggest that the approach can promote a shift toward transformative governance. The main challenges identified regarding the implantation were limited funding, short project durations, and a simplification of the complex realities in the project regions. This study underscores the importance of adopting context-specific solutions to address the linkages between violent conflict and ecological degradation in border zones that go beyond Western perspectives and highlights the need for further research into the applicability of transformative approaches.

Key words:

Environmental peacebuilding, Ethiopia, Community-based peacebuilding, Ecological security, Intra-state border conflicts

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List of Abbreviations

UNSC: United Nations Security Council

NGO: Non-governmental organization

UNEP: United Nations Environment Program

ILK: Indigenous local knowledge

UNDP: United Nations Development Programme

UN: United Nations

IPCC: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

OSCE: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

INGO: International Non-governmental organization

EU: European Union

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

SESF: Social-Ecological Systems Framework

CBOs: Community-Based Organizations

CCA: Climate change adaptation

USD: US Dollar

UNSDCF: United Nations Development Cooperation Framework

TPLF: Tigray People's Liberation Front

LPC: Local Peace Committee

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1. Introduction

Environmental considerations have increasingly become integral to peacebuilding endeavors, reflecting the recognition of the profound impact of resource scarcity and climate change on conflict dynamics (Krampe & Gignoux, 2018; Ide, 2020). The 2020 International Committee of Red Cross report revealed that 14 of the 25 countries deemed most vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate change are also currently facing violent conflict (ICRC, 2020). The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), as well as international NGOs have highlighted the need to integrate environmental concerns into peacebuilding strategies (UN, 2023). The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) has taken a leading role in integrating environmental concerns into peacebuilding, facilitating the inclusion of environmental considerations in peacebuilding initiatives in over 33 countries, including recent endeavors in Colombia (2017), Iraq (2019), and Sudan (2018) (UN, 2023). Furthermore, there has been a noticeable increase in United Nations Security Council Resolutions that incorporate references to natural resources and the environment, rising from 2.6 percent of resolutions between 1946 and 1989 to an estimated 19 percent between 1990 and 2016 (Ide et al., 2021).

This trend has been followed and, to some extent, motivated by academic debates. While often disregarded by traditional peace and conflict research contemporary literature on conflict resolution, peace, or even state-building often emphasizes environmental concerns. Still, early literature in the field of environmental peacebuilding predominantly centered around inter-state conflicts, conventional scenarios involving two opposing parties with a primary focus on top-down, command-and-control, instrumental approaches that are underpinned by reductive, anthropocentric, state-centric conceptions of both conflict and human-nature relations (Dresse et al., 2019). However, contemporary research emphasizes the significance of comprehending bottom-up strategies and mechanisms for fostering peace utilizing natural resource management, particularly in the context of intra-state conflicts (Hachmann et al., 2023). Another significant shift in the field of environmental peacebuilding has occurred recently, driven by the recognition of the Anthropocene era, which highlights the deep interconnection between humans and nature (Cudworth & Hobden, 2011). The ecological security discourse highlights the complex interdependence between the environment and human well-being, advocating for a holistic approach to achieve global stability (McDonald, 2018). This discourse fundamentally challenges current global political structures and, as a result, has had only limited impact on policy-making and academic discussions (McDonald, 2018). While both the Anthropocene and ecological security discourses address the impact of interactions between humans and the environment, the Anthropocene discourse focuses more on the broad-scale changes in the Earth system caused by human activities. In contrast the ecological security discourse emphasizes the direct links between environmental sustainability and human security (McDonald, 2018).

Critical gaps persist despite the recognition of the importance of integrating environmental considerations into peacebuilding efforts. Local communities often suffer the most from violent conflicts and find their participation in environmental peacebuilding initiatives constrained (Tollefsen, 2020). Moreover, dominant power structures in environmental peacebuilding continue to marginalize certain groups, reinforcing Western-centric approaches that neglect ILK (Indigenous Local Knowledge) and local agency (Brown & Nicolucci-Altmann, 2022). While indigenous communities themselves have engaged in environmental peacebuilding for decades, environmental peacebuilding still tends to suffer from Western-centric perspectives, which, among other problems, maintains the belief that ecosystems and communities in non-Western regions require guidance and management of Western interventions (Nair, 2022). Researchers specifically argue that environmental peacebuilding must go beyond promoting inclusion and, in addition to that, try to provoke structural socio-ecological changes by including gendered and non-Western perspectives into the project designs (Zenda et al., 2022; Ide et al., 2021). According to this line of inquiry, to implement effective inclusive environmental peacebuilding initiatives, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of the local context, including cultural norms, power dynamics, and resource management practices (Ide et al., 2021). However, limited research focuses on understanding the local context and how it influences the success of these initiatives (Mac Ginty, 2015). In light of these challenges, the main objective of this thesis is to examine the transformative potential of inclusive environmental initiatives toward peacebuilding and ecological security. This approach foregrounds local actors, ILK, and more-than-human relations, thereby assessing the extent to which it is able to promote socio-ecological peace and offering a pathway for the development of a more effective, inclusive, and sustainable approach to environmental peacebuilding. Hence, the thesis seeks to address the following research question:

‘Can an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding projects effectively foster both peace and ecological security in fragile border settings?’

To address this question, this thesis will apply a qualitative single-case study to the Amhara region and neighboring Afar region in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has endured numerous violent conflicts for many years, each with severe consequences (Abebe et al., 2023). The intra-state conflicts extend throughout almost all parts of the country with devastating consequences, such as the Tigray War, which has claimed an estimated 600,000 lives, potentially making it the deadliest conflict of the 21st century (Naranjo & Nyssen, 2023). These conflicts arise from a multitude of complex factors, encompassing issues such as land ownership, competing pastoral and agricultural land uses, water resources, and conflicting demands for autonomy and political representation (Abebe et al., 2023). In particular, conflicts between different ethnic groups have increased in recent years (UN, 2023; Coning & Krampe, 2022). These conflicts encompass a wide range of issues, from resource disputes to boundary conflicts and cattle raids, and have become increasingly violent, driven by evolving state policies and ethnic

federalism, all now intertwined with the proliferation of modern arms and militarization (Abebe et al., 2023). Simultaneously, Ethiopia lacks substantial natural resources and is currently experiencing one of the most severe droughts in decades after four uninterrupted rainy seasons (Coning & Krampe, 2022). This led to a lack of vital resources, such as scarce and unusable agricultural and pastoral land, as well as severe water shortages (Coning & Krampe, 2022). This development severely impacts the country because pastoralists inhabit approximately 61% of the land mass (Mohamed, 2019).

The research objectives are intended to fill the presented research gap and are of considerable social relevance for improving of local livelihoods in the selected regions. To answer the research question, data was collected by revising secondary data, including grey literature (project reports, newspaper articles) and semi-structured interviews with international and local NGOs (Non-governmental organizations) engaged in environmental initiatives that apply an inclusive community-based approach in the Amhara or Afar region in Ethiopia have been conducted to assess the influence of these projects on peace and ecological security. To triangulate the data further interviews have been conducted with with researchers who provide extensive experience in the field.

This thesis is structured into six chapters to provide an in-depth analysis of the topic. The thesis starts by reviewing the relevant concepts for this thesis, including environmental degradation and climate change as a security concern and the concept of ecological security. These concepts are crucial to consider to fully understand the concept of environmental peacebuilding, on which the following chapters are based on. The theoretical framework forms the basis for the research question as well as the interview questions. Subsequently, it examines the critiques of environmental peacebuilding identified in prior research, along with recommendations from previous studies on how to address these criticisms through a more inclusive approach to environmental peacebuilding. Chapter three presents the applied methods, how the interviews were conducted as the primary data collection method, and outlines how the qualitative content analysis has been accomplished, as well as the case description. Followed by chapter four, which presents the findings of the interviews. Afterwards, in chapter five, these findings are set into context with the literature, thereby answering three sub-research questions:

- *SRQ1: Could the positive effects of the 'inclusive community-based peacebuilding' approach be confirmed in the case study?*
- *SRQ2: Is the link between environmental degradation and conflict seen as a matter of national, international, human, or ecological security?*
- *SRQ3: What specific practices have evolved from this discourse, and do they predominantly aim at peace mitigation, adaptation, or the transformation of socio-ecological relations?*

Ultimately, the final chapter addresses the research question, outlines the limitations of this paper, and concludes by emphasizing the most crucial findings and suggests future avenues for research.

2. Literature review: From the problems of environmental security to the possibilities of an inclusive approach to community-based environmental peacebuilding

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of this study. The first section elaborates on the concepts of environmental degradation, climate change as a security concern, and ecological security, which are closely related to environmental peacebuilding. Followed by an outline of the evolution of the concept of environmental peacebuilding. Afterward, the concept is defined, and the milestones, positive effects, and recent developments are discussed. The third section explores key criticisms of environmental peacebuilding, while the fourth section examines an inclusive approach to address the previously outlined criticisms. Overall, the chapter points out the current critiques of environmental security and outlines the transformative potential of an inclusive approach to community-based environmental peacebuilding.

2.1. From Environmental degradation and climate change as a security concern to the concept of ecological security

To understand the ideas underpinning environmental peacebuilding, it is important to consider its differences and similarities to some related concepts such as environmental degradation and climate change as a security concern, as well as ecological security, illustrated in the following section.

Environmental degradation as a security concern refers to the deterioration of environmental quality, encompassing various factors such as deforestation, rising environmental pollution, climate change, and a loss of biodiversity. These factors consequently lead to population displacement, increased vulnerability to natural disasters, economic decline, and negative and cumulative social consequences that can weaken or delegitimize states and can lead to severe consequences for global security (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Lead author in environmental scarcity and conflict Homer-Dixon (1999) discovered that predicting conflict was not solely dependent on environmental issues. However, environmental degradation, even when not directly causing conflict, emerged as a significant element that can weaken or delegitimize states and can significantly contribute to escalating tensions (UN, 2023). It became apparent that in crises, elites often took action to strengthen their power and control over resources (Homer-Dixon, 1999). Due to the constantly growing population, the demand for global resources has increased, which has even intensified the impacts of environmental degradation and competition over natural resources (UNEP, 2016). This includes uncertain and reduced water supply and diminished arable land, which threatens livestock and agriculture production, ultimately increasing the decline of food production (UNEP, 2016).

In consequence, especially developing countries, which frequently allocate over half of their income to food expenditures, became even more susceptible to these rising prices on the global market (Swain & Öjendal, 2018). Research indicates that environmental degradation that leads to shortages of essential

renewable resources significantly raises the probability of states getting involved in intra-state conflicts (Swain, 2021; Swain & Öjendal, 2018). Specifically, fragile states, in terms of environmental stability and conflict, where groups often center around social or cultural identity, face stronger vulnerability due to conflicting land rights and inadequate protection from environmental harm (FP, 2022). Furthermore, Indigenous groups bear disproportionate risks from increased resource scarcity, facing environmental, health, and socio-economic repercussions (FP, 2022). This effect will even intensify in the following years and threaten the living conditions of current and forthcoming generations (Swain & Öjendal, 2018).

Since 2007, climate change has been recognized as a security concern, particularly in regions where low socio-economic development, weak governance, and historical social tensions exacerbate the destabilizing effects of environmental shocks (Ide, 2020; FP, 2022). In areas dependent on natural resources, rain-fed agriculture, and pastoralism, mismanagement, and exclusionary policies can intensify inequalities, driving groups toward violence as a form of justice-seeking (FP, 2022). Although climate change is seldom a direct source of conflict, it is rather a multiplier, reinforcing existing crises and intensifying conflicts (Pacillo et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to consider other related factors, including the history of conflicts, political instability, and oppression, that can have a stronger explanatory value for violence (Destrijcker et al., 2023).

Even though there is no common definition for environmental or climate security, there is a broad understanding that stable weather conditions play a crucial role in human well-being, directly impacting agricultural societies and indirectly affecting vulnerabilities of urban societies (Dalby, 2020). McDonald (2018) explored the link between climate change and security and identified four climate security discourses organized around different conceptions concerning climate security, including national security, human security, international security, and ecological security.

The concept of national security is based on the idea of climate change as a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation-states (McDonald, 2018). It frames a global problem in terms of its implications for individual states, often neglecting the root causes of climate change (McDonald, 2018). This approach exposes vulnerable populations, such as impoverished communities and future generations, to climate effects and potentially misrepresents them as threats to national stability (McDonald, 2018).

The international security discourses concerning climate change acknowledge climate change itself as a problem that needs to be addressed. However, the emphasis on maintaining existing international systems is problematic, as current political and economic structures drive climate change (OECD, 2023). While the concept of international security acknowledges climate change as a global issue requiring action, it is primarily concerned with upholding international stability. In this regard, McDonald (2018) criticizes that this concept often overlooks the role of contemporary political and economic institutions

in driving climate change, thereby failing to address deeper structural issues. Differently, the human security discourse shifts the perspective from preserving the status quo to addressing the rights of individuals, particularly those whose livelihoods are threatened by climate change (McDonald, 2018). Human security has been endorsed by various international bodies, including the UNDP, UN General Assembly, and the IPCC. It emphasizes mitigation actions to address the problem itself rather than its symptoms (McDonald, 2018).

Against that backdrop, McDonald (2018) argues that prevailing discourses of climate security, particularly those rooted in national and international security, are inadequate for addressing the global climate crisis because these dominant discourses prioritize preserving the status quo of nation-states and the international society, which fails to align with the magnitude of the climate challenge. National security-oriented approaches may even lead to counterproductive responses, such as closing borders to climate-displaced refugees (McDonald, 2018). Alternative environmental security discourses, such as human security and ecological security, reevaluate the relationship between humans and the natural environment, advocating for a fundamental rebalance and thereby representing a marginalized form of knowledge that challenges dominant discourses (McDonald, 2018).

The concept of human security, which gained prominence with the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report, shifts the focus from state security to individual security (UNDP, 1994). It recognizes environmental degradation as both a direct threat to human security and a critical threat to the livelihoods of vulnerable populations (Barnett, 2003; O'Brien, 2006). Human security originally sought to redirect state security practices, priorities, and funding from military readiness to addressing global inequalities, aligning with the UNDP's goals to combat poverty and underdevelopment (McDonald, 2013). To effectively tackle these challenges, theorists recommend not only reducing emissions but also addressing structural forces and inequalities, such as poverty and marginalization, that create vulnerability (UNDP, 2022). However, even at this fundamental level, the discourse on human security risks perpetuating a human-nature separation that must be challenged in the context of the Anthropocene (UNDP, 2022). Indeed, from the Anthropocene perspective, the discourse on human security appears inherently anthropocentric and focuses on a narrow time frame, concentrating on the present within the context of a geological epoch (UNDP, 2022). The Anthropocene challenges traditional notions of agency, as human and natural systems are deeply intertwined (Peireira, 2023).

The ecological security discourse focuses on preserving ecosystems based on the assumption that prioritizing ecosystem resilience is crucial for protecting vulnerable populations, other living beings, and future generations (McDonald, 2013). The holistic concept urges immediate action necessary to sustain the conditions for life on Earth (Harrington & Shearing, 2017). Ecological security is founded on the premise that proponents of security must define major threats, setting priorities, and assigning responsibilities (McDonald, 2018). The progress toward an environmental security discourse is evidenced by global civil society mobilization and intensified international climate action efforts, such

as the 2015 Paris Agreement (McDonald, 2018). Ecological security focuses on protecting ecosystems and biodiversity to restore ecosystems and maintain a stable and healthy environment (McDonald, 2013). Although this is fundamentally a normative argument, it also implies that acknowledging the demands of ecological security could progressively challenge and reshape our practical understanding of both security and the environment (McDonald, 2013). Unlike other discourses, this approach recognizes moral obligations to protect and restore biodiversity, sustainable resource management, and the prevention of environmental degradation to ensure the well-being of both ecosystems and the most vulnerable, including marginalized groups, future generations, and other living beings (McDonald, 2018).

Advocates of the concept of ecological security emphasize the importance of recognizing the interdependence between human activities and the environment to transform damaging political, economic, and social structures and to reach environmental stability and sustainability of diverse ecosystems that are resilient and capable of maintaining essential ecological functions (Dalby, 2020; McDonald, 2018). This holistic approach aims to reconcile socio-economic development with ecological considerations in order to create a stable and resilient environment (Dalby, 2020). The imperatives of this approach necessitate a fundamental restructuring of society and our relationship with the environment (Barnett, 2001; Dalby, 2009). Lövbrand et al. (2015) further elaborate that addressing unprecedented ecological challenges may require moving beyond existing institutions and norms and envisioning radical alternative arrangements and practices. Nguyen et al. (2023) suggest that rural land use should prioritize resource conservation and biodiversity, promoting agroforestry, diversifying crops, and using climate-resilient and under-utilized plants. They argue that these strategies are essential for enhancing planetary health and building resilience among vulnerable communities facing climate change, food insecurity, and environmental degradation in the Global South (Nguyen et al., 2023). Responses to climate change in this discourse go beyond conflict mitigation and adaptation, exploring the embedded nature of climate change in cultural practices, political economy, and international norms (McDonald, 2018). Recognizing ecological security imperatives could reshape how security and the environment are conceptualized in practical terms. This discourse challenges the traditional approach to environmental security, suggesting that the focus should extend beyond the impact of security logic on environmental issues to consider changing security practices in response to environmental changes (McDonald, 2018).

This section has highlighted the significant threats environmental degradation poses to global security, accelerating marginalization, intensifying conflicts, and increases vulnerabilities, particularly in developing countries. Climate change further exacerbates these challenges, acting as a multiplier for crises and conflicts. Alternative discourses, including ecological security emphasize the complex interdependence between human activities and ecological stability and advocate for a fundamental restructuring of the socio-ecological relationship and the need for a holistic approach to ensure global

stability. Despite its potential to reshape how security and the environment are addressed, ecological security discourse faces obstacles in influencing policy due to its fundamental challenge to existing political structures.

2.2. The concept of environmental peacebuilding

The following section introduces the concept of environmental peacebuilding on which this thesis is based on. As outlined by Galtung (1976), it is one of three key approaches to achieving peace, alongside peacekeeping and peace-making. Peacekeeping primarily revolves around maintaining ceasefires, while peace-making entails diplomatic negotiations or military actions aimed at resolving conflicts (Galtung, 1976). The concept of environmental peacebuilding has derived from its initial framing ‘environmental peacemaking’ into a comprehensive framework encompassing diverse initiatives focused on fostering lasting peace and reconciliation among conflicting parties by transforming relationships and addressing the root causes of violence (Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Carius, 2006; Dresse et al., 2018). This transition entails moving away from disputes toward cooperative efforts. Tackling shared environmental challenges, such as environmental degradation, has the potential to be less politicized among the parties involved, as it may be viewed as a lower priority in political considerations (Conca, 2018). Dresse et al. (2018) criticize that conventional peacebuilding tends to prioritize political and economic liberalization, security sector reform, and transitional justice while paying inadequate attention to ecological aspects and environmental protection that underpins the majority of contemporary conflicts.

Before the concept of environmental peacebuilding emerged at the end of the Cold War, during the late 1990s, the focus within the academic debate on environmental conflict, which predominantly recognizes environmental concerns, especially due to the increased lack of resources, as the reason for violent conflict as opposed to environmental peacebuilding that is built upon the assumption that environmental challenges can catalyze promoting peace (Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Swain, 2021). The research field started as a niche area in the academic debate developed into a research field of substantial international interest not only in the academic sphere but also among policy-makers (Ide et al., 2021). Scientific literature has demonstrated that environmental peacebuilding is an essential strategy to address the severe consequences of climate change, which can create societal insecurity that exacerbates existing conflicts and triggers new ones (Homer-Dixon, 2001; Swain, 2016; Ide, 2020). A study conducted by the UN Security Council, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the African Union, and NATO demonstrates that recognizing the role of environmental degradation, climate change, and natural resource management in violent conflicts has a significant impact on peacebuilding practices (Ide et al., 2021). Acknowledging these factors might enhance the integration of these interconnected topics into politics and peacebuilding endeavors (Ide et al., 2021). During the emergence of environmental peacebuilding scholars mainly focused on the positive spillover

effect of environmental cooperation on inter-state conflicts (Conca & Dabelko, 2002). Although recently, there has been a shift toward intra-state conflicts, inter-state conflicts still dominate the environmental peacebuilding literature (Krampe, 2017).

The definition of the concept of environmental peacebuilding slightly varies and is not limited by rigid disciplinary boundaries (Dresse et al., 2019). According to Dresse et al. (2019, p.2), environmental peacebuilding can be defined as ‘the process through which environmental challenges shared by the (former) parties to a violent conflict are turned into opportunities to build lasting cooperation and peace’. Ide et al. (2021, pp. 2-3) describe environmental peacebuilding as encompassing ‘multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated into and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery.’. Research proved that environmental peacebuilding, as opposed to peacekeeping and peace-making has the potential to transform every phase of conflict, spanning from conflict prevention and de-escalating conflicts, as well as to foster sustainable development in post-conflict settings (Conca & Beevers, 2018; Dresse et al, 2018; Ide, 2019). Recently, there has been a shift in environmental peacebuilding projects striving to achieve sustainable peace by promoting the essential conditions for sustainable development as a prerequisite for lasting peace (Conca et al., 2005). Early environmental peacebuilding projects were predominantly concerned with maintaining and consolidating peace, while more recent projects also aim to foster sustainable development (Dresse et al., 2018). In this regard, it has been recognized that the significance of cooperation concerning environmental issues in violent conflicts, including natural resource management and climate change adaptation, can significantly contribute to peacebuilding and facilitate successful and sustainable conflict resolutions (UNESCO, 2017).

When discussing how to reach peace it is essential to have a common definition of peace. However, various authors have presented diverse concepts of peace. Galtung (1990) outlines the contrast between negative peace, defined as the absence of physical violence or war, and positive peace, emphasizing the integration of human security, and addressing social injustices and inequalities. The goal of environmental peacebuilding is to achieve positive peace that extends beyond the mere absence of violence (Vernerová, 2021), including factors such as inequality and discrimination, addressing cultural factors such as class, race, and gender in peacebuilding endeavors (Björkdahl, 2012; Galtung, 1990; True, 2020). Moreover, environmental peacebuilding encompasses a wide array of endeavours, yet is largely influenced by rational decision-making and neoliberal perspectives based on the assumption that conflicting parties are more inclined toward mutually beneficial cooperation than zero-sum conflict (Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Dresse et al., 2018). Consequently, several environmental peacebuilding programs center on leveraging the economic benefits of environmental resources to attain mutually beneficial outcomes, prioritizing economic recovery and the advancement of sustainable livelihoods (Büscher, 2013; Green, 2015).

A milestone in the field of environmental peacebuilding was the inaugural general conference held by the Environmental Peacebuilding Association established in late 2019, whereby over 40 participants from approximately 40 nations participated (Ide et al., 2021). However, Nikitine & Scott (2022) raise awareness that although the international community has recognized the crucial link between the environment and conflict in peacebuilding, it remains a major challenge to provide the political will to connect them (Nikitine & Scott, 2022). Global organizations and policy-makers are increasingly prioritizing environmental collaboration as an effective strategy for peacebuilding, expanding its application beyond conflicts directly related to resource scarcity. This emphasis presents significant opportunities for funding available through bilateral agencies or multilateral funds such as the UN Peacebuilding Fund, the UN-EU Partnership on Natural Resources, Conflict, and Peacebuilding, and the United Nations Environment Programme's Environmental Cooperation for Peacebuilding Programme. Donor agencies, INGOs, and NGOs serve as neutral mediators in financing environmental peacebuilding projects (Dalbai, 2021).

Environmental peacebuilding recognizes environmental challenges not as triggers for violent conflict but as opportunities for fostering transboundary cooperation (Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Krampe, 2017). Johnson et al. (2021) revealed that cooperation on environmental topics can have several positive effects, including building livelihoods, political inclusion, distributional equity, and building trust. Many developing countries, as previously shown, are often most vulnerable to environmental degradation, resulting in conflict, finding environmental peacebuilding more acceptable compared to concepts like environmental security or climate conflicts (Johnson et al., 2021). This preference stems from its focus on empowering local communities in significant conflict resolution and environmental conservation, steering away from perpetuating stereotypes that label the global south as incapable and prone to violence (Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Ide, 2016; Verhoeven, 2013). Ecological cooperation can potentially appease groups that perceive themselves as disadvantaged due to ecological injustice, reinforcing their socially and economically disadvantaged status (Carius, 2006; Swain & Öjendal, 2018).

Furthermore, several scholars have highlighted that environmental peacebuilding can improve environmental conditions while simultaneously facilitating cooperation and the establishment of trust among former adversaries at the community, state, and international levels when diplomatic and political efforts have failed (Conca & Beevers, 2018; Frontani, 2009; Ide, 2019). This approach aims to foster peace by generating willingness among prior conflicting parties to negotiate mutual problem-solving mechanisms for common ecological challenges (Swain & Öjendal, 2018). One of the advantages stressed by several scholars is that environmental concerns can serve as a platform for dialogue and a foundation for cooperation, facilitating the resolution of disputes, particularly among neighboring communities (Carius, 2006; Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Swain & Öjendal, 2018). Even amidst strong political tensions, adversaries have notably entered peacebuilding treaties and negotiations, resulting in the establishment of surprisingly resilient institutions in certain regions (Carius, 2006). For instance,

environmental conservation projects, including Peace Parks, may not always resolve existing conflicts but can serve as a first step to fostering communication among conflicting parties (Carius, 2006). A further successful project involved all ten riparian countries along the Nile River, which share a collective interest in fostering sustainable socio-economic progress in the region through equitable utilization of the Nile Basin's resources and are actively engaged in high-level governmental decisions (Carius, 2006). Even in the long term, these projects have proven to enhance the living standards of local communities and drive social, economic, and political progress resulting from environmental collaboration (Carius, 2006).

Even when the conflict does not originate from ecological causes, initiatives that aim to foster dialogue among conflicting parties can foster transboundary environmental cooperation (Conca et al., 2005). This can be especially beneficial when the relationship between countries or parties is characterized by distrust and hostility (Carius, 2006; Conca & Dabelko, 2002; Ide et al., 2021). Shifting attention away from political borders and toward socio-ecological systems, environmental peacebuilding holds the capacity to transform relationships among participating entities. It highlights the importance of joint endeavors in the stewardship of shared resources (Ide, 2017). By promoting a more equitable allocation of natural resources, this strategy supports both social and environmental justice, ultimately contributing to the progress of sustainable development (Harwell, 2016; Kashwan, 2017). The 'Good Water Makes Good Neighbours' project in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region shows how collaborative work on water is evident in initiatives like the Regional Water Data Banks Project (Carius, 2006).

Researchers have criticized that early intervention in environmental peacebuilding did not take the considerations of the Anthropocene into account. However, in recent years, the foundation of environmental peacebuilding has undergone significant changes due to the recognition of the Anthropocene era, emphasizing the interconnectedness of humans and the natural environment (Cudworth & Hobden, 2011). This is in contrast to the traditional Holocene perspective that separates natural processes from human actions (Berger, 2021). Nevertheless, existing literature on environmental conflict still largely aligns with the Holocene view (Berger, 2021). The evolution of research in this area highlights two key phases: The initial focus on whether environmental scarcity could lead to violent conflict, concentrating on its impact on social stability and state legitimacy, and a subsequent wave marked by quantitative analyses of climate-conflict links by various scholars and institutions, yet with less emphasis on theoretical models (Hardt & Scheffran, 2019). Simultaneously, the shift requires fundamental changes of the concept of environmental security that include to avert the severe risks posed by fragile states unable to cope with the pressures arising from environmental degradation or potential economic disruptions resulting from the important transitions to a post-fossil fuel economic system (Dalby, 2020). The shift to the recognition of the new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, aligns closely with the shift in environment peacebuilding literature toward sustainable

development. This necessitates acknowledging the altered context of the Anthropocene, where safeguarding ecosystems takes precedence over extracting resources to ensure security on a global scale (Harrington & Shearing, 2017). It goes beyond mere resilience-building strategies for societies. Kareiva & Fuller (2016) argue for a crucial shift toward transformative thinking to be prepared for unavoidable disruptions, even if there is the chance that decarbonization might result in a stabilized earth system.

In conclusion, environmental peacebuilding has emerged as a crucial approach to fostering lasting peace and reconciliation, by addressing root causes of violence and transforming relationships, environmental peacebuilding provides a pathway toward cooperative efforts. It emphasizes the economic value of environmental resources and sustainable livelihoods. This approach has gained international recognition and is increasingly integrated into peacebuilding projects. Despite the challenges posed by political will, environmental peacebuilding offers significant potential to promote positive peace. Key benefits include empowering disadvantaged communities, improving environmental conditions while simultaneously facilitating cooperation and the establishment of trust among former adversaries. Moving forward, the field is evolving to promote the essential conditions for sustainable development as a prerequisite for lasting peace and adapting to the realities of the Anthropocene era, highlighting the interconnectedness of human societies and the environment, thus offering transformative opportunities for peacebuilding and global security.

2.3. Criticisms of environmental peacebuilding

Despite the positive effects of environmental peacebuilding and the importance of the topic that has been highlighted in the previous sections, most recently the field has faced several criticisms. The following section summarizes the main criticisms of the concept.

Even though it has been shown how environmental peacebuilding projects can foster dialogue, to induce political cooperation oftentimes remains elusive (Carius, 2006). One of the major criticisms of the field is that especially in fragile settings affected by conflict, the enforcement of environmental peacebuilding initiatives potentially causes several dangers and therefore needs to be carefully executed (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023). It has been shown how environmental projects peculiarly in regions characterized by political instability, have caused adverse effects including appropriation of land crucial to traditional livelihoods, political exclusion, displacement, and discrimination of marginalized groups (Ide, 2020; Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023). This can result in a delegitimizing of the state, increased political instability, and a resurgence of the conflict at stake (Ide, 2020). In Mali, for example, recent research shed awareness on the harassment of Fulani pastoralists by state services responsible for safeguarding natural resources (Pacillo et al., 2021). State services, influenced by an environmental agenda largely shaped by international donor priorities, justify these actions to combat desertification amidst climate change (Pacillo et al., 2021). However, these securitized approaches not only fail to

achieve significant conservation outcomes but also breed grievances that undermine social unity and trust in the state (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023). This erosion of trust is exploited by armed groups and criminal networks for recruitment, leading to increased military intervention by the state (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023). Even smaller-scale initiatives and grassroots projects, such as urban gardens, can indirectly result in the displacement of local communities (Ide, 2020). These projects often have been accused of greenwashing (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023). The concept of greenwashing has emerged to describe the process of companies and organizations conveying false impressions of a sustainable and environmentally friendly narratives without taking sufficient actions.

Scientific literature proved that 'securitization' of climate change can cause discrimination and thereby reinforce ethnic, social, or gender-based discrimination and thus perpetuate socio-economic hierarchies (Ide, 2020). The primary criticism revolves around several case studies in environmental peacebuilding that have disregarded the role interests of local communities and the long-term effects on site (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023; Conca & Beevers, 2018; Johnson et al., 2021). The main critics are the failure to acknowledge customary tenure or governance systems and the lack of community involvement in decision-making that exacerbates deep-seated grievances and local conflicts (Sarmiento Barletti & Larson, 2019). Vulnerable groups including indigenous and other marginalized groups are particularly susceptible to discrimination in the context of these initiatives (Ide, 2020).

The traditional top-down approaches of outsider-driven state-building and democratization based on predetermined liberal principles in environmental peacebuilding have been questioned by researchers, particularly for their technocratic approach, and have been accused of neglecting the local context including the culture and history of the countries where the projects have been conducted (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2009; Öjendal et al., 2017; Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). Furthermore, researchers criticized that environmental peacebuilding projects are often designed in a Western-centric, one-size-fits-all manner, whereby the historical and social context have been ignored (Conca & Beevers, 2018 & Ide, 2022). The IPCC special report (2018) advises caution due to potential sample biases and the possible overestimation of these connections as well as an over-simplification of the topic (Hardt & Scheffran, 2019).

The disappointing outcomes and questionable legitimacy of external interventions have prompted critics to advocate for bottom-up approaches of development and humanitarian aid sectors, that are rooted in local communities, traditional authorities, and indigenous institutions (Mac Ginty, 2008; Richmond, 2009; Sändig et al., 2018). While there has been a push for local ownership and localization since the mid-2000s, the practice often does not match the rhetoric (Granzow, 2018). These critiques call for a fundamental transformation of the sector toward bottom-up/ on-the-ground solutions (Easterly, 2007). However, a bottom-up approach might also cause negative outcomes. The major criticisms of a bottom-up approach in environmental peacebuilding are first, the shift of responsibility toward local communities (Hardt & Scheffran, 2019). Second, both bottom-up and top-down strategies have

demonstrated the potential to solidify divisions within the state's society, leading to a destabilization of social cohesion (Lederach, 2017). Grassroots efforts often lack a vital link to larger-scale peace initiatives at the national and international levels, including international organizations and regional political institutions (Wolff, 2022). Establishing this link would streamline and support the exchange of skills between local peace advocates and those on a broader scale, benefiting both sides (Wolff, 2022). Third, despite the vital role of local communities in empowering grassroots movements, scholars criticize the assimilation and manipulation of participation within neoliberal post-conflict efforts (Campbell, 2011). Essentially, peace initiatives that are supposedly locally driven have perpetuated economic structures akin to those during wartime neoliberalism (Wolf, 2022). This has led to intensified exploitation of natural resources by agricultural and mining industries, undermining subsistence agriculture and rural livelihoods and steering communities away from progressive political ideologies (Berman-Arévalo & Ojeda 2020; Jakobsen & Grajales, 2021).

A further criticism concerns various aspects within the methodological framework of environmental peacebuilding projects. Specifically, the excessive reliance on mixed method approaches and geographical biases, also termed as 'streetlight effect' often concentrates on specific regions, such as Africa, while neglecting other regions such as Asia or Oceania, has been criticized (Ide et al., 2018; Adams et al., 2018). It has been argued that the sampling bias in environmental conflict and peacebuilding research is influenced by factors such as geopolitical interests or data availability, resulting in the disproportionate representation of specific regions, which consequently leads to these areas being stigmatized as inherently predisposed to violence and incapable of peacefully managing the impacts of climate change (Adams et al., 2018). Another methodological criticism within the academic debate is the lack of monitoring and evaluation processes of environmental peacebuilding projects (Ide et al., 2021). Scholarly evidence supporting core theoretical claims remains inconsistent and fragmented, attributed to divergent methodologies, uneven empirical investigations, and a failure to integrate diverse findings systematically (Conca & Beevers, 2018; Dresse et al., 2019). Environmental peacebuilding currently lacks a well-defined set of practical activities and a unified theoretical foundation with robust evidence support (Maas et al., 2013). Rather, it has evolved into a broad concept that covers diverse aspects of the interplay between the environment, conflict, and peace (Maas et al., 2013). The broadening of the term raises concerns about its potential to be exploited as a buzzword, particularly to attract international funding (Mac Ginty, 2015). Additionally, the varied meanings of terms such as "environment" and "peace" across disciplines contribute to a lack of coherence in both empirical and theoretical aspects (Dresse et al., 2019). A further conceptual critique within environmental peacebuilding is the tendency to prioritize scientific and technical solutions over addressing the political underpinnings of environmental problems (Ide, 2020). This tendency can result in the oversight of underlying disputes and societal divisions, which hinders the resolution of fundamental causes of conflicts (Ide, 2020).

In sum, the main criticisms of environmental peacebuilding that have been identified from the literature revolve around their potential adverse effects and the risk of exacerbating existing conflicts and political instability, particularly in fragile settings if not carefully implemented. Moreover, researchers in the field have claimed that both top-down as well as bottom-up approaches disregarded the interests of local communities and lacking sustainability. Furthermore, several conceptual criticisms have been identified from the literature. The main ones are that the projects have been designed in a Western-centric, one-size-fits-all manner and a sampling bias of the projects that are influenced by factors such as geopolitical interests or data availability, raising doubts about their effectiveness and potential for exploitation.

2.4. Towards an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding?

Given the problems outlined in the previous section, this section delves into the concept of a community-based approach within the framework of environmental peacebuilding, specifically focusing on inclusivity, aiming to address various criticisms of the concept and assess its potential as a more enduring solution. The local turn in peacebuilding studies emerged as a critique of the prevailing liberal model of peacebuilding, which is based on liberal notions of peace, democracy, human rights, and justice (Wolff, 2022). The local turn emphasizes the importance of local actors, dynamics, and concepts of peace and argues for a move away from universal templates (Wolff, 2022). Resulting from these findings, scholars, policy-makers, and international institutions advocate for a resilience-focused approach and conflict sensitivity guidelines in environmental peacebuilding that emphasize inclusive and equitable participation of local stakeholders to mitigate the elaborated risks (Ben-Shmuel & Halle, 2023; Ide, 2020). As the former UN Peacebuilding Commission Chair, Muhammad Abdul Muhith underscores the necessity to ‘enhance support for national peacebuilding priorities and the importance of the full, equal and meaningful participation of women, and of the inclusion of youth in peacebuilding processes’ (UN, 2023). As acknowledged by the literature, the Anthropocene demands a critical rethinking of fundamental assumptions about the world and the perception of humans in and as part of the earth, making valuable contributions that can no longer be ignored (Hardt & Scheffran, 2019). To face the previously highlighted discrimination within environmental peacebuilding projects, scholars in the field have introduced critical and alternative approaches that take a perspective that recognizes the interplay between local and international factors that shape peacebuilding processes and simultaneously shed light on the complexity of developing peaceful solutions (Leonardsson et al., 2019).

Building on the Social-Ecological Systems Framework (SESF), an analytical tool created by Ostrom and her colleagues to explore and manage the interactions between human societies and ecological systems, Hachman et al. (2023) developed a framework specifically for community-based environmental peacebuilding. This approach effectively incorporated ecological aspects into the

understanding of environmental peacebuilding in post-conflict settings (Haider, 2009). Haider (2009) showed that a community-based approach is adaptable to different stages of conflict and suitable to adapt in fragile settings, although they require adjustments depending on the stage of conflict. To achieve successful conflict resolution initiatives, community-based approaches are essential, as they help achieve sustainable peace from within (Hancock, 2017; Saaïda, 2023). These initiatives empower conflict-affected communities by fostering inclusivity, leveraging ILK and expertise, strengthening social cohesion, and fostering trust (Lemay-Hébert & Kappler, 2016; Saaïda, 2023). Instead of imposing top-down solutions, a community-based approach prioritizes empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making processes, enabling local communities to become agents of change in their own peace consolidation processes (Altiok, Porras, & Lee, 2023). To foster dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building, it is vital to find common ground and resolve underlying tensions among conflicting parties (Saaïda, 2023). By actively listening and acknowledging each other's experiences, dialogue goes beyond mere communication and helps to generate empathy and mutual respect among participants and to overcome mistrust (Kilmurray, 2023; Haider, 2009). Especially the reconciliation process plays a crucial role by offering a platform to address historical injustices (Carmichael, 2023).

The concept of "glocality" in peacebuilding practice underscores the necessity of allowing local populations to define and shape the peacebuilding process in their communities (Leonardsson et al., 2019). Researchers advocate for a deeper comprehension of local relationships and a critical examination of power dynamics at both local and international levels (Kluczevska & Kreikemeyer, 2021). It acknowledges that lasting peace is closely linked to socio-economic development, and the importance of identifying early warning signs, such as social tensions, economic disparities, or political grievances, allows communities to implement preventive measures to avoid escalation (Carmichael, 2023). Community-based approaches use representative community institutions as platforms for discussion, decision-making, and implementation (Haider, 2009; Hancock, 2017). These institutions provide the link between communities, local and national authorities, and external development agencies. Key community institutions include local associations, community leaders, and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), which vary in size and focus and may also include local arms of NGOs and concerned individuals (Haider, 2009; Hancock, 2017).

The concept is founded on the idea that local communities are best suited to identify their needs and the steps necessary to address them, avoiding generic and ineffective approaches (Brigg, George, & Higgins, 2022; Haider, 2009). It gives them direct authority over investment decisions, as well as planning, implementation, and monitoring of the projects (Haider, 2009; Saaïda, 2023). This comprehensive approach addresses the underlying roots of conflict and strives to develop context-specific solutions aligned with local needs, facilitating a peaceful transition tailored to the specific social, cultural, and political realities of the community and strengthening political structures in the regions affected by conflict (Brigg, George, & Higgins, 2022; Leonardsson et al., 2019). Compared to other

peacebuilding approaches, this approach can be more effective because it gains stronger legitimacy and acceptance within the community because it recognizes and incorporates the richness of cultural diversity (Sila & Fealy, 2022; Hancock, 2017). Moreover, this approach is more responsive, which fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, thereby enhancing their long-term responsibility toward sustaining peace and stability (Kilmurray, 2023; Saaida, 2023; Haider, 2009).

Authority in vertical governance is often still concentrated on a single central state authority. In contrast, horizontal governance involves a decentralized and collaborative approach to decision-making and management in which power and authority are shared among multiple actors or organizations. Different stakeholders, including governments, the private-sector, INGOs, and local NGOs, collaborate in decision-making to achieve common goals and ensure that a range of perspectives and interests are considered. This approach guarantees that local voices, including those of marginalized groups, are heard and that these groups actively participate in shaping the peace process. Such partnerships are usually based on mutual respect and shared responsibility.

In fragile settings, public institutions are often weak. Therefore, community-based approaches can be utilized to re-establish a relationship between citizens and state institutions and to strengthen local governance (Haider, 2009). Community-based processes support governance reform by empowering communities and providing them with ongoing skills. For example, the Community Development Council in Upper Nawach, part of Afghanistan's National Solidarity Programme, evolved into a participatory and authoritative dispute-resolution body (Haider, 2009). Effective community-based projects require extensive training and capacity-building for the local communities and government officials, especially in conflict areas where capacity is often limited (Haider, 2009).

Sändig et al. (2024) raised awareness that local actors and solutions are not necessarily broadly legitimate, as local communities are not homogeneous and consist of diverse subgroups, including disadvantaged groups (e.g., youths, women, migrant workers, landless peasants, and artisanal miners). These communities often reflect broader societal inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, religion, and social status (Daoud, 2021). Therefore, community-based approaches need to consist of inclusive participatory decision-making, combining all relevant stakeholders, including marginalized groups, women, elders, and youth (Altiok, Porras, & Lee, 2023), to ensure that their priorities, and aspirations are integrated into peacebuilding initiatives (Saaida, 2023). Johnson et al. (2020) showed that environmental peacebuilding efforts initiated from the grassroots level, either at an individual or community scale, seem more inclined to contribute positively to peacebuilding goals by contributing to fairness, transparency, and accountability (Haider, 2009). Furthermore, research indicates that women are often disproportionately impacted by both environmental degradation and conflict (UN, 2023). Nevertheless, it has been highlighted that women's involvement can potentially serve as influential agents for fostering positive change and peace, even in settings where they face disadvantages (Zenda et al., 2022). Scholars stress that integrating women into decision-making processes related to natural

resource management, alongside creating informal institutions at the community level to govern the utilization and stewardship of natural resources has emerged as an effective approach in mitigating conflicts (Zenda et al, 2022).

Recognizing the previously outlined risk of environmental peacebuilding projects operating in fragile contexts, particularly the danger of exploitation of local populations and discrimination of marginalized groups, Sändig et al. (2024) emphasize the crucial role of Northern-based institutions such as international organizations, development agencies, and INGOs. These institutions must acknowledge their responsibility and recognize knowledge, identities, and capacities for change of local actors from the Global South (Sändig et al., 2024). This approach simultaneously addresses the criticism of Northern-based institutions that often apply Western-centric one-size-fits-all approaches, as outlined previously. A community-based approach emphasizes empowering communities by strengthening local institutions, enhancing capacities, and supporting grassroots initiatives (Le Billon et al., 2020). Kluczevska & Kreikemeyer (2021) advocate for stronger collaboration of public institutions and international organizations with local institutions, which can channel environmental peacebuilding projects through patrons and neighborhood committees (Dresse et al., 2019). In addition, the approach acknowledges that local civil society organizations that are deeply rooted within the community, possessing valuable knowledge, networks, and expertise, are essential for peacebuilding efforts (Carmichael, 2023; Zaaïda, 2023).

Furthermore, the researchers suggest these institutions can be more effectively influenced by offering normative guidance through social and religious leaders who draw upon local social structures rooted in kinship, gender, age, and economic status (Kluczevska & Kreikemeyer, 2021). An empirical example is Mali's 'Partnership for Water, Peace, and Security', showcasing tangible cooperation across water boundaries (Kluczevska & Kreikemeyer, 2021). This initiative united participants at the national, subregional, and local levels to cultivate a shared awareness of the intricate connections among water utilization, livelihoods, and related conflicts within the interior Niger Delta (Hartog & Kortlandt, 2022).

Community-based peacebuilding emphasizes the importance of traditional and indigenous approaches, recognizing their profound wisdom in achieving enduring peace (Sila & Fealy, 2022). These ILK systems, practices, and customs are invaluable for reconciliation and conflict resolution efforts (Sila & Fealy, 2022). Incorporating traditional and indigenous approaches means recognizing and engaging with the cultural heritage and identity of a community (Bar-On & Adwan, 2020). It involves incorporating traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation and traditional justice systems, based on cultural norms and values (Bräuchler, 2022). This approach recognizes the legitimacy of indigenous legal systems reinforcing cultural resilience and identity (Richmond & Mitchell, 2012). It promotes a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for sustainable peace, by ensuring that community members feel their cultural heritage is recognized and valued accordingly (Hachmann et al., 2023). Customary laws can foster justice and reconciliation within

communities, helping to rebuild trust and social cohesion (Hancock, 2017). This, in turn, reinforces the sustainability of conflict resolutions (Zaaida, 2023). Berger (2003) demonstrates the extent to which NGOs can enhance their capacity for environmental management and stabilize pastoral systems. His work shows that traditional conflict resolution mechanisms among pastoralists have become less effective due to national government interventions (Berger, 2003). To counter the marginalization of pastoralists, robust pastoralist networks and associations need to be established to advocate for the recognition of pastoralists' needs. As seen in Kenya, NGOs have collaborated with traditional pastoralist entities and stakeholders to modify regulations, managing the complexities arising from partial settlement and shared land governance (Berger, 2003).

A further crucial factor of community-based approaches is the strong acknowledgment of the value of ILK (Saaida, 2023). ILK is based on a deep understanding of the local context and the accumulation of experiences over years to develop the best suitable techniques and practices (Filho, 2023). The emerging risks of climate change highlight the need for more effective knowledge to guide climate action, as modern scientific knowledge alone is often insufficient, especially considering the risks of climate change for vulnerable populations (Filho, 2023). ILK can help bridge this gap by providing valuable insights into climate adaptation, resource management, and hazard prediction (Filho, 2023). To ensure climate change adaptation (CCA) actions are legitimate, effective, and peaceful, it is crucial to incorporate multiple perspectives and collaborative knowledge formation (Leonardsson et al., 2019). Reconciliation can be achieved through collaborative and respectful knowledge production (Lang et al., 2012). This learning approach can also serve as a powerful tool to challenge and counter the prevalent colonial and Eurocentric biases in knowledge, which have been regrettably overlooked in previous endeavors, as highlighted previously by Burman (2017). The author has drawn attention to 'coloniality' as the less visible aspect of modernity that has outlasted formal colonialism and continues to underpin the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems (Burman, 2017). By leveraging ILK and promoting inclusivity, expertise, and resources, stakeholder-driven approaches have the potential to cultivate lasting peace from within (Lemay-Hébert & Kappler, 2016). Only recently, and often with condescension or instrumentalism, ILK has been considered in climate change adaptation initiatives, resource governance, conservation, and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems (Nakashima et al., 2012). According to Lang et al. (2012), different forms of knowledge must be harmonized to establish inclusive, socially just, and sustainable governance that can be adapted to variable circumstances. To genuinely engage with alternative knowledge systems and perspectives in knowledge production, decolonial spaces for symmetrical dialogues and shared learning must be created (UN, 2022). This goes beyond mere empty promises to diverse stakeholder perspectives, requiring a thorough reassessment of whose knowledge is deemed valid and whose realities are considered authentic in climate change adaptation initiatives and policies (UN, 2022).

Next to the potential of an inclusive community-based approach drawbacks need to be taken into account. Rodríguez & Inturias (2018) suggest moving from simply "resolving" conflicts to "understanding" them by assessing how land defenders and indigenous communities engage in environmental peacebuilding and critically analyzing the colonial influences on these efforts. 'Grupo Confluencias' Socio-environmental Conflict Transformation Framework' is an empirical example of this approach, which focuses on addressing indigenous marginalization, decolonizing environmental injustices, and transforming environmental conflicts (Rodríguez & Inturias, 2018). Drawing on the criticism of Sändig et al. (2024) on earlier liberal top-down and technocratic interventions in environmental peacebuilding and the risk of bottom-up initiatives to shift the responsibility toward the local population, hybrid peacebuilding that integrates liberal frameworks, donor support, and traditional conflict resolution mechanisms seems promising to effectively address these challenges. This approach, which combines external interventions with local capacities, has the potential to balance the various risks and ethical concerns, such as the previously highlighted discrimination within environmental peacebuilding projects and trade-offs, while seeking to enable intersectional participation within locally led initiatives (Sändig et al., 2024). Despite the significant value of ILK, it faces challenges such as rapid climate change, environmental degradation, inadequate knowledge transfer, and lack of recognition that limit its effectiveness and relevance in addressing current and future climate impacts (Filho, 2023). Sändig et al. (2024) raised awareness of the risk that ILK can be idealized, causing unintended and perhaps counterproductive effects. While local actors may have valuable insights into environmental changes, their knowledge can be parochial, partisan, and insufficient for addressing complex, multi-level issues like climate change and related conflicts. Given these complexities, it is important to recognize the peacebuilding potential of civil societies in such contexts while also acknowledging that external assistance may be indispensable (Sändig et al, 2024). Some local actors interpret environmental changes through cosmologic belief systems, such as attributing them to God's will (Dzuverovic, 2021). While these views should not be dismissed, they can be difficult to reconcile with science-based approaches (Bankoff, 2004). Moreover, local communities can have pragmatic views that prioritize economic opportunities over environmental conservation, such as welcoming deforestation (Amador-Jimenez et al., 2024). It also needs to be noted that traditional conflict resolution can involve violent practices, including blood feuds, forced displacement, segregation, and mass killing (Dzuverovic, 2021).

This section has shown that an inclusive and community-based approach, particularly involving marginalized groups in environmental peacebuilding, appears to offer a promising solution to address several criticisms identified in prior research, as outlined in the previous section. However, the drawbacks have been pointed out as well. Therefore, the following chapters aim to measure the impact of an inclusive community-based approach to environmental projects for peacebuilding and ecological security in an empirical case study. Conceptually it is crucial to develop a strategy for environmental peacebuilding projects designed for the specific conflict's needs. Doing so requires including the local

population in the decision-making process, thus ensuring that the strategy developed fits the specific requirements of the regions at stake. According to Hardt & Scheffran (2019), environmental peacebuilders must consistently communicate best practices and what has not been successful approaches and make them accessible to policy-makers to be integrated into capacity-building programs and actors outside the research field of peacebuilding (Ide, 2020). Scholars and practitioners should acknowledge persistent criticism regarding the lack of empirical evidence and poorly specified causal mechanisms linking environment, climate change, and conflict since the inception of research in this area (Dresse et al., 2019; Ide, 2019; Krampe, 2017). Given that most contemporary conflicts are intrastate, additional case studies are needed to explore them in greater depth. Existing research needs robust monitoring and evaluation, and best practices must be integrated into capacity-building programs.

3. Research Design

This section outlines the methodology employed in this thesis to explore the research question: ‘Can an inclusive approach to environmental peacebuilding foster both peace and ecological security?’. A qualitative approach has been utilized that allows for an in-depth examination of the complex relationships between environmental peacebuilding, inclusivity, peace, and environmental security. By using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, this study attempts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon in the context of a single case study in the Amhara and Afar regions in Ethiopia. Furthermore, secondary data on this case study was collected through grey literature, including project reports of NGOs, newspaper articles, and online interviews). Both inductive and deductive thematic content analysis have been applied to gain more comprehensive and robust findings. While a deductive approach allows to validate theories through a structured approach, an inductive approach allows the researcher to be responsive and provides flexibility to discover unexpected findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The following chapter first outlines the research approach, introduces the case study, reflects on the selected research method, and elaborates the procedure of the analysis of the gathered data.

3.1. Case study

Qualitative research is particularly well-suited to uncover viewpoints and to understand local structures and belief systems by opening room to assess the perspectives and viewpoints of local actors and communities (Kardorff et al., 2008). This is particularly important due to the nature of the research question. Given the primary aim of this single case study to analyze the potential of inclusive community-based environmental peacebuilding and whether this approach can serve as a solution to the criticisms to previous environmental peacebuilding endeavors, as well as to foster peace and ecological security, a qualitative approach was chosen.

In-depth single case studies involve comprehensive examinations of social phenomena, allow comprehensive research of a unit, and intend to describe the selected topic in a real-world context (Gerring, 2006; Yin, 2014). They are most effective in addressing contemporary events, places, and practices while tracking developments over time (Yin, 2014). Consequently, case study research represents a holistic approach, offering an understanding of the interactions between human action and the context in which it takes place (Gerring, 2006). While methods like surveys or experiments are variable-based, case studies do not rely on this approach (Gerring, 2006). Moreover, researchers have limited control or influence over the studied case (Gerring, 2006). Common misconceptions, such as the belief that findings from an individual case cannot be generalized are refuted (Flyvberg, 2006). Case studies allow for the combination of inductive and deductive insights. If well-designed case studies are valuable for both testing hypotheses and building theoretical knowledge (Flyvberg, 2006; Baxter, 2010).

A major advantage of case studies is their ability to explore and reflect concepts within their real-life context, offering rich, detailed insights into how the concept of inclusive community-based environmental peacebuilding is applied in practice. This approach can lead to a more nuanced and accurate understanding of complex concepts (George & Bennett, 2005). In sum, compared with other approaches such as statistical modeling, case studies allow for a more fine grained detailed, understanding of the social mechanisms of specific social and political phenomena.

The case study of the Amhara region and its neighboring Afar region in Ethiopia was selected due to three major reasons. First, the environment has an immense significance for certain Ethiopian communities, encompassing socio-economic, cultural, and religious dimensions (Dibaba, 2020). Dibaba (2020) highlighted that resolving violent intra-state conflicts, addressing insecurity, and establishing peace requires not only political measures but also continuous environmental initiatives. Integrating environmental considerations into peacebuilding efforts enables these communities to revitalize their Indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms and environmental protection practices, playing a vital role in achieving lasting peace (Dibaba, 2020). Meanwhile, a series of alternative, eco-centric, bottom-up approaches to environmental peacebuilding have been developed. This means that this region can provide us with a privileged entry point to assess the extent to which these alternative models of environmental peacebuilding can redress the problems identified in more conventional, top-down approaches.

The second main reason is that for more than two decades, prolonged communal conflicts based on resources have hindered development and intensified poverty in the Amhara region and neighboring Afar communities in Ethiopia. Abebe et al. (2023) emphasize the necessity of consistently employing conflict-sensitive development approaches and suggest assessing the potential impact of development projects on peacebuilding in borderland regions prior to their implementation. Therefore, this thesis explores the potential of environmental development projects in the region. The third main reason is that the regions show a high potential for inclusive environmental peacebuilding initiatives. Local peacebuilding initiatives that applied an inclusive approach through local peace committees contributed to the reduction of violence and the promotion of reconciliation among the different conflicting parties (Aragaw, 2024). However, the promising approach also showed some drawbacks, including commercialization and politicization of local peace committees, which should be considered when designing environmental peacebuilding projects in the area (Aragaw, 2024). In addition, most of the NGOs in Ethiopia that focus on environmental peacebuilding and thereby applying an inclusive approach focus mainly on projects in the Afar and the Amhara regions. Therefore, it is a promising location to assess the potential of an inclusive approach in environmental peacebuilding to foster both peace and ecological security.

Based on the research question and the identified gaps in the literature on environmental peacebuilding, this thesis focuses on an inclusive community-based approach applied to intra-state

conflicts in a fragile setting. In doing so, it fills a gap in the literature and extends theoretical understanding by examining aspects that have been previously understudied. This exploratory case study seeks to identify the underlying links between an inclusive approach to environmental cooperation, environmental security, and sustainable peace.

3.2. Setting the scene: Contextualizing the border the Amhara and Afar regions

With a population of around 126.5 million in 2023, Ethiopia is the country with the second largest population in Africa after Nigeria. Although Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing economies in the region with an estimated growth rate of 7.2 % in the fiscal year 2022/23, it is still struggling with high levels of poverty, which is reflected in a per capita gross national income of USD 1,020 (World Bank, 2024). The “Inclusive Governance and Conflict Management Support for Ethiopia“ project, funded by the Peacebuilding Fund, aimed to enhance peacebuilding efforts in Ethiopia and to achieve the goals consistent with the UNDP country program and the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF): By 2025, ‘all people in Ethiopia should live in a society that is inclusive, equitable, just, and democratic’ (UNDP, 2021, p. 5). However, to reach these ambitious goals currently seems unrealistic. Ethiopia has faced numerous violent intra-state conflicts for many years, with devastating consequences across the country. One of the most severe conflicts is the Tigray War, which has resulted in an estimated 600,000 deaths, potentially making it the deadliest conflict of the 21st century (Abebe et al., 2023; Naranjo & Nyssen, 2023). The Pretoria Agreement, signed in November 2022, is a peace treaty between the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), in which both parties agree to a permanent cessation of hostilities to end the Tigray war after the two-year conflict (Gleixner-Hayat, 2023). However, the agreement has only led to a partial respite, as there is a significant need for post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation (Gleixner-Hayat, 2023). The country's stability remains very fragile and continues to face escalating deadly conflicts with armed groups, especially in the Oromia, Amhara, and Afar regions, fueled by various grievances and tensions (Gleixner-Hayat, 2023).

Despite the serious conflicts between the Ethiopian government and rebel groups, numerous conflicts between pastoralist groups extend across almost the entire country (Ali et al., 2022). Pastoralist conflicts represent a historical phenomenon, but they have dynamically evolved since the early 1990s and are increasingly being fought violently in many parts of the Ethiopian lowlands (Mulugeta & Hagmann, 2008; Tadesse et al., 2015). The establishment of formal property rights over pastoral land and large-scale land leasing by the Ethiopian government have intensified pastoralist conflicts, significantly limited the access to land, and caused exclusion (Ali et al., 2022). Land used by pastoralists but unrecognized by the government has often been leased to foreign and domestic investors (Ali et al., 2022). This enclosure policy has restricted the ability of pastoralists to adapt to climate change and

strongly limits their migration routes (Ali et al., 2022). Alemayehu (2016) observed that pastoralist mobility can both trigger and result from conflict. While resource scarcity remains a key conflict driver, competition for new revenue sources, such as government funds, market centers, and strategic locations further exceeds contemporary conflicts (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019).

Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's assumption of office in 2018 initially raised hopes for democratic reform, but challenges remain, including criticisms of the government's response to internal security threats (Gleixner-Hayat, 2023). Despite engaging in dialogue to resolve political differences, the government's response to internal security threats has been criticized for human rights violations and an excessively security-based approach (Gleixner-Hayat, 2023). Institutional configurations, such as the Ethiopian Reconciliation Commission and the Ministry of Peace, have been established to anchor political reform and revitalize peacebuilding initiatives (EPI, 2023). In its initial two years, the Ministry implemented community, elite, and public-service dialogues aimed at fostering a culture of peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution (EPI, 2023). The Ministry played a crucial role in drafting significant national documents such as the Ethiopian Police Doctrine and the Ethiopian Peace Policy (EPI, 2023). In addition, the Ethiopian Peace Index (EPI), developed in 2023, aims to support the Ministry in formulating effective policies, strategies, and intervention mechanisms for the maintenance of peace and the prevention of conflict (EPI, 2023). The EPI identified economic well-being, food security, and challenging gender norms, as well as the need to improve harmony between ethnic groups, as inter-community and inter-group relations as critical factors to achieve peace in Ethiopia (EPI, 2023). Recommendations include utilizing the potential of youth, women, and people with disabilities through education and training for violence prevention, active engagement in peacebuilding, and simultaneously promoting social and economic inclusion. Even though gender equality and women's empowerment are included in the national strategies, particularly in rural areas of Ethiopia, women mostly do not have access to the financial, technical, and knowledge barriers that are required to adapt to climate change (EPI, 2023; Coning & Krampe, 2022; Ali et al., 2022). For example, reduced availability of water leads to long access queues, which are very time-consuming (Ali et al., 2022).

One of the primary triggers of conflict among Ethiopian pastoralists is resource scarcity that increases the insecurity and unpredictability of people's livelihoods (UN, 2023). About 85 percent of the population's livelihoods depend on agriculture, especially small-scale farming and rain-fed crops (Ali et al., 2022). Due to the increasing frequency and intensity of droughts and floods resulting from climate change, livelihoods dependent on agriculture are at risk (Tofu & Wolka, 2023). Changing seasonal patterns, accelerated biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation alter the mobility patterns of pastoral communities in the region, which is a key mechanism for coping with seasonal fluctuations (Ali et al., 2022). As seasonal variability and predictability shift, pastoralists adjust their migration patterns, resulting in heightened tensions between farmers and herders over land and resources (UNDP, 2023).

The Amhara and Afar regions are among the ten regional states in Ethiopia, which are divided based on ethnolinguistic criteria under the country's current federal administrative structure (Abebe et al., 2023). The Afar pastoralists' seasonal migration clashes with the sedentary agricultural practices of its neighbor region Amhara. Pastoralist migration is an essential strategy for coping with the outcomes of increasingly water-intensive agriculture and significant population growth that led to unpredictable rainfall, livestock diseases, and limited natural resources (Coning & Krampe, 2022). Getachew (2004) emphasized that the Afar's seasonal migration, which has existed for centuries, results in highly efficient and well-organized land use, settlement, and herd management, allowing them to sustain their livelihood without over-exploiting or damaging environmental resources. The Amhara region mainly practices agriculture and is sedentary in one place (Abebe et al., 2023). Resource sharing, especially in drought-prone areas, has led to conflicts between pastoralists, agro-pastoralists, and farmers (Coning & Krampe, 2022). Reports from regional government peacebuilding forums in 2020 emphasize that violent conflict is a critical social challenge that undermines cohesion between the two ethnic groups and leads to inter-ethnic homicides, vandalism, cattle raiding, and destruction of resources (Abebe et al., 2023).

Figure 1

Map of the Afar region. Map of Ethiopia (Source: Degarege, 2015).

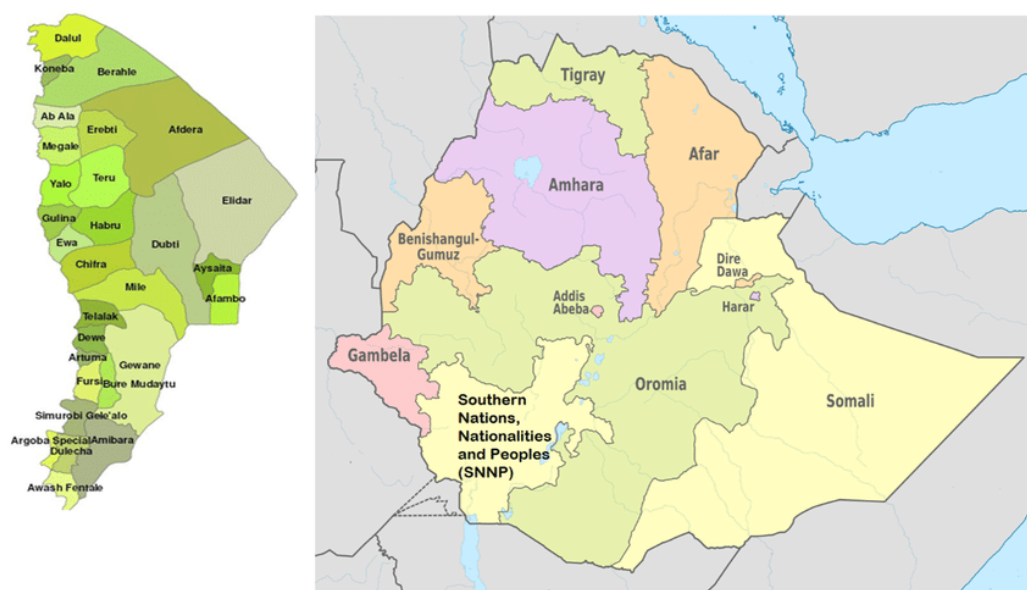


Figure 2

Map of the Amhara region (Source: Nekorchuk et al, 2021).



Disputes over water access between the kebeles of the Chifra district (Afar) and the Sodoma area in the Habru district (Amhara), along with land conflicts in areas like Shulgora, underscore ongoing tensions (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019). The Afar pastoralists claim common rights to water sources such as Akela, while Sodoma pastoralists seek exclusive control, leading to disputes (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019). Similar disputes occur in Garriro, where Afar and Gafera herders claim different ownership rights over water resources (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019). Since 2010, conflicts between Amhara sedentary agriculturalists and Afar pastoral communities over crop damage caused by animals, and vice versa, have intensified in both frequency and severity (Admasu, 2016). Especially in the Awra district, border disputes over farmland between kebeles at the village level often extend to neighboring areas due to kinship relations (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019). While mutual agreements sometimes defuse tensions, prohibitions against sharing grazing land can escalate conflicts into mutual attacks and cattle raiding (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019).

A report on the Pastoralist Community Development Program (Ministry of Peace, 2019) outlines the conflict resolution mechanisms used by pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities, which include traditional mechanisms led by community and clan leaders, modern institutions like local courts, and religious institutions such as Sharia courts (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019). In formal courts, professional jurists provide judgments enforced by various administrative and security personnel (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019). Customary institutions involve clan leaders and elders, while Sharia courts are managed by religious judges (*qadi*) (Alifnur & Van Reisen, 2019). The border communities

of both Afar and Amhara have established traditional institutions called *Abegars*, *Shimagles*, and *Sheh-legas*, alongside contemporary conflict resolution mechanisms such as local joint peace committees aimed at addressing inter-clan and inter-ethnic violence (Belay, 2020). Comprising 15 members each, including religious figures, elders, youth, kebele administrators, community police officers, and woreda security officers, these peace committees operate at both district and kebele levels (Abebe et al., 2023). While these committees have excelled in mediation and successfully returning looted property and compensating for human and animal losses, they have been ineffective in inter-community negotiation, facilitation, and conflict analysis, often requiring federal security force intervention (Abebe et al., 2023). Challenges hindering the effective use of modern conflict resolution structures include insufficient training support from local administrations and NGOs, ongoing community conflicts requiring federal security force intervention as a temporary measure, irregular peace committee meetings despite scheduled bi-weekly gatherings, and limited actual participation of women despite their theoretical encouragement (Abebe et al., 2023).

3.3. Methodology and Methods

The primary data collection method was conducting semi-structured expert interviews, complemented by revising secondary data, including grey literature. Semi-structured interviews in comparison to structured interviews, allow interviewees the flexibility to react to unexpected answers while maintaining a systematic structure within a predetermined framework (Wyborn et al., 2009). The questions are typically broader than those in structured interviews and the interviewer has the flexibility to ask additional questions during the interview based on significant responses (Byrman, 2016). Legard et al. (2003) pointed out that the interactive nature of interviews allows for in-depth exploration, capturing data in its natural form. Previous research in environmental peacebuilding pursuing similar objectives identified interviews as a suitable method to retrieve valuable data (Ide & Tubi, 2019; Myrntinen et al., 2015). The secondary data was revised to identify criticisms of the concept of environmental peacebuilding and to determine how an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding could address these criticisms. Grey literature, including project reports, scientific literature, and online interviews were analyzed to provide a holistic view of the case. Furthermore, secondary data provided by the interviewees, including relevant project reports, were analyzed to enhance the reliability of the collected data and to gain further information. These documents were utilized to cross-check interview data, bolstering confidence in the field-collected data and mitigating bias risks.

Three experts from local NGOs, as well as two international NGOs working in the Afra or Amhara region in Ethiopia, have been interviewed. The interviewees were found by searching for the most relevant projects that aim either to directly or indirectly foster peacebuilding through

environmental projects and which set a specific focus on a local, community-based approach. They were contacted via email and social media, including Facebook or Linked In, when the email address could not be found through Google search. In addition, the snowball method was employed to get in contact with further potential interviewees relevant to this case study.

Furthermore, to enhance the validity of the data and gain insights from a different perspective, interviews were conducted with two academics, specialized in environmental peacebuilding in the region. Their articles were found during the research process and the researchers were contacted via email. Through their extensive experience in the field, they were able to provide in-depth insights of the socio-political context of the Amhara and Afra regions. A purposeful selection of interviewees was chosen to encompass diverse expertise and specialization to ensure that each interview provided valuable insights to answer the research question. To triangulate the data effectively, interviewees from different socio-economic background, age, and gender have been selected. In the selection process of the interviewees, care was taken to present various perspectives. Therefore, NGOs who focus on peacebuilding or environmental projects or both were selected. All of the selected NGOs prioritize the application of an inclusive community-based approach in their project design. However, the primary focus on inclusiveness varies from women, pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, youth, people with disabilities, to people who live in very rural areas. The sample breakdown of the anonymized interviewees can be found in *table 1*. 56 NGOs and INGOs were contacted, of which ten replied and five agreed to the interview. In addition, nine academics who focus on peacebuilding in the Amhara and Afar regions were contacted. Thereof, two replied and agreed to the interview. After conducting seven interviews, it was determined that no additional insights were acquired to enhance understanding of the research questions further. The amount of data collected was sufficient to capture the key topics to answer the research questions, indicating saturation was achieved. The interviews conducted in English via MS Teams between April and June 2024 lasted on average 43 minutes. They were designed to ensure that the interviews would not exceed one hour to retrieve as much information as possible but at the same time to be able to fit in with the workload of the participants.

Two different interview guides were designed, one for the INGOs and NGOs and the other one for the researcher. Both guides are divided into the same six main sections to have a clear structure of the interviews, to ensure a better flow, and to enhance the comparability of the answers during the data analysis (Bryman & Harley, 2018). The order of the questions, as well as the specific questions in each category of the two guides slightly varies. The guide allows the researcher to be able to delve deeper into specific topics (Bryman & Harley, 2018). The majority of interview questions were designed to be open-ended, enabling respondents to provide more detailed responses. Within each group of questions, general questions should precede specific ones (Bryman & Harley, 2018). Because it is suggested to start with more non-threatening questions the interview guide starts with general introductory questions (Wyborn et al., 2009). More sensitive questions can follow when trust has been established (Trochim,

2005). The second section explores the inclusivity of the projects, followed by questions drawing a connection to the main topic of peacebuilding. Additionally, the guide explores the relation of the projects to ecological security. Afterward, the guide delves into the challenges that the NGOs and INGOs have encountered to promote an inclusive approach to the environmental projects, as well as possible solutions to face these challenges. The guide concludes by inviting interviewees to provide their perspectives on strategies to further enhance inclusivity in their projects and their thoughts on the future of environmental peacebuilding in Ethiopia. Follow-up questions were asked in accordance with Legard's (2003) suggestion to attain a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the meanings conveyed in the participant's responses.

This case study followed ISCTE ethical guidelines, emphasizing voluntary and informed consent of participants, safeguarding confidentiality, and ensuring the anonymity of the interviewees. Special attention was paid to ethical considerations when dealing with sensitive political information, and measures were implemented to minimize any potential risks for the participants. The interviews were recorded, which was emphasized prior to the recordings and highlighted in the consent forms. Before the analysis of the interviews, they were transcribed through the internal recording program in MS Teams, transcribed through Word and if necessary manually adjusted afterward, followed by the rules of Selting et al. (2009). Sensitive, private, and personal information were anonymized. Potential limitations may include the subjective nature of interviews, the potential of participant bias, and the fact that, due to the organizational capacity of this thesis, not being physically present in the country might have limited the ability to gain deeper insights through trust-based relationships.

Table 1

Sample breakdown of semi-structured interviews (n=)

Gender			Organization		Position		
M	F		Local NGO	International NGO	Researcher	County Director	Program director
N	3	4	3	2	2	1	4

Table 2

Most significant interview questions

Category	Questions
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Inclusivity	• How does (...) define inclusivity in the projects? Who do you try to include in the projects? • How to you reach the participants? • Why does (...) prioritize an inclusive approach? • Can you share specific examples of how (...) engages local communities and marginalized groups, especially in projects with a focus on natural resource management/environmental cooperation?
Connection to peacebuilding	• Do you think cooperation in environmental projects can lead to collaboration in other areas? Have you experienced that development? • Do you think that community-based environmental projects can contribute to peacebuilding and sustainable development in Ethiopia? Why/why not? → If yes to what extent? (e.g. conflict mitigation, adaptation, transformation of socio-ecological relations)
Connection to ecological security	• Do you aim to contribute to ecological security/resilience of ecosystems through your projects? • If yes have the projects been successful in contributing to ecological security/resilience of ecosystems?

3.4. Data Analysis: Qualitative Content Analysis according to Kuckartz

Thematic content analysis facilitates comparing and correlating different segments within transcripts. A significant challenge in content analysis is maintaining a data-driven approach, ensuring that the categories accurately reflect the data (Schreier, 2014). Coding involves assigning a label to a data segment based on the researcher's understanding of its meaning, requiring precise analysis of the text (Bazeley, 2013). This method is effective for analysing attitudes as the method allows a profound engagement with the textual material (Bazeley, 2013). Therefore, qualitative content analysis, applicable to various text types, was chosen as the most suitable method for analysing both interviews and secondary literature. MAXQDA software was used for thematic coding of the retrieved data, to identify patterns and to interpret the qualitative data collected through the interviews (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The evaluation was carried out using qualitative content analysis, according to Kuckartz (2018), to achieve maximum compatibility between the analysis technique and the supporting computer program MAXQDA that has been developed by Kuckartz. To answer the research questions, the themes were first designed deductively through the literature review and closely align with the interview questions, as recommended by Kuckartz (2018). The analysis aims to structure large sets of qualitative data selected through the interviews and secondary data and to link them to the findings previously identified in the literature analysis. Transcribing and analysing interviews offer invaluable introspection,

enabling researchers to refine techniques and dive into data critically (Boellstroff et al., 2024). In the second step, the responses to the interviews were systematically categorized, and new themes were created inductively. Inductive research aims to find theoretical concepts or patterns from observed data (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The main themes identified were (...). A detailed version of the themes pertinent to the analysis is provided in the table below (*Table 5*). Tags, codes, and themes have been designed that according to Wyborn et al. (2009) are not mutually exclusive and should complement each other.

Table 3

Coding Themes

Category	Themes
Inclusivity of the environmental projects	I.1. Relevance of inclusivity on PB I.2. Implementation I.2.1. Selection criteria of participants I.2.2. Accessibility I.2.2. Localization/ Participatory approach
Environmental projects	E.1. Topics E.2. Guidelines E.3. Sustainability E.3.1. Capacity building E.3.2. Strengthen community resilience
Challenges of environmental projects	C.1. Financial challenges C.2. Security issues C.3. Limited commitment of the government C.4. Poverty
Connection to peacebuilding	P.1. Conflict trigger P.2. Reasons for ineffective peacebuilding P.3. Spillover effect P.4. Primary aim P.4.1. Conflict mitigation P.4.2. Conflict adaptation

	P.4.3. Transferring socio-ecological relations
	P.5. Challenges
Link environmental degradation and conflict	ED.1. Ecological security
	ED.2. Human security
Recommendations	R.1. Humanitarian interventions
	R.2. Stronger commitment by the government
	R.2.1. Checks & Balances
	R.2.2. Peaceful dialogue
	R.2.3. Strengthen LPC's
	R.4. Holistic approach
	R.5. Funding
	R.5.1. Longer project durations
	R.5.2. Enhanced flexibility

4. Results

4.1. Projects summary

The main environmental projects that were illustrated by the interviewees are related to livestock, landscape restoration, water resources, and energy production. These projects react to the severe resource scarcity in the region, aiming to restore biodiversity and ensure to contribute to improved food security and ecosystem resilience, prevent further environmental degradation to secure the livelihoods of the local population, and protect marginalized groups, which suffer the most from the severe developments. Furthermore, simple projects locally managed and easily operated show rapid effects on the well-being of the community have been implemented.

Regarding livestock and cattle, projects that showed successful results in environmental protection are controlled and zero-grazing of cattle (I3, I5). Usually, once the crop is harvested, cattle are free to graze, which destroys the seedlings (I3). In addition, the interviewees highlighted the necessity to 'inform about over farming and overgrazing and develop alternatives with the local community' (I5). Training centers have proven effective in teaching environmental protection, introduction of dryland farming techniques, agriculture production, and disaster risk reduction (I5, G1, G3, G6). A further recommendation is to 'restock livestock/ livestock distribution and to provide veterinary assistance for pastoralists, training programs on livestock disease control and eradication, and animal feed processing plants to prevent livestock death (I5, G1, G6).

In terms of landscape restoration, projects include agroforestry and rangeland rehabilitated with indigenous grasses (I3, I5, G1). Forest protection programs, as well as plantation of indigenous and exotic species of tree seedlings to increase forest cover of the region, have shown effective results in increasing biodiversity (I3). The interviewees stressed that to rehabilitate the rangeland, it is also crucial to work on ‘eradicating and removal of invasive species’ (I7). To enhance biodiversity by restoring highland flora and fauna species and conserving lowland areas, Participatory Forest Management (PFM) was promoted by the NGOs (I4). Another measure that showed to be effective is to ‘undertake plantations in communal land and state-owned lands and then hand it over to the community.’ (I4). In the Amhara region, different kinds of physical and biological conservation measures were implemented, including soil bunds, stone bunds, trenches, micro basin gabion construction, and rehabilitation of critically degraded land (G3).

Other projects that showed effective results are related to limited water resources that have a significant impact to the region. It is recommended to ‘rehabilitate/expand/ and upgrade the basic water infrastructure’ (G1). The projects encourage communities to engage in household water harvesting techniques, including pond construction, spring development, and solar and motor water pump construction (G1, G2). This is done through the development of water points (G6) and two of the interviewed NGOs recommended to apply a watershed approach, whereby the water resources are managed within a given watershed (I1, I5, G1). This approach also involves terracing, where they take the local as a drystone measure, ‘also called water spreading, where they try a river that is normally dry and in the rainy season becomes a torrential rain, then they try to put a wire across the river, spread the waterside to silos that you get soil moisture and the dried forests and dried grasses will come back again’ (I5). Regarding limited water resources construction of irrigation schemes, depending on the type of water source available, and projects that promote water-saving practices were implemented successfully (I2, C3). Erosion was stopped particularly in the Western border in the Afar region, as the water comes very strongly from the highlands down to the lowlands (I5). Particularly, the construction of an irrigation dam in the Amhara region has become a crucial water source for the communities and the establishment of bylaws and monitoring of water usage helped to prevent conflict (I2). Additionally, establishing or strengthening community-led WASH committees to manage water schemes is advised (G1). In terms of energy, alternatives to biofuel, solar energy, and biogas projects were suggested (I3).

Another interviewee specifically recommended ‘very simple projects locally managed and easily operated’ (I2). For example, provide locals with farming equipment, which can be used by hand; provision of improved seeds; build hand-dug wells, and generators if very perennial rivers are available to rehabilitate degraded landscapes on community farmlands (I2, G1, G3, G6). These measures allow for quick and cost-effective results.

An integrated landscape approach, combining natural resource management with environmental and livelihood considerations has improved food security and ecosystem resilience in the project regions

(I1, G1, G3). This multidisciplinary approach involves identifying all stakeholders within a given landscape and collaborating with specific ones in the private-sector economy, particularly in value chains, to create synergies across different projects (G1). Moreover, it created effective mechanisms for a broader expansion to the target areas and established systematic monitoring (G1). It has become a prominent topic, especially in private-sector development cooperation. One NGO outlined that it has been employing this landscape approach for over 15 years (I1). The Ethiopian government supports this method by promoting terracing and earthen bunds to capture rainfall and improve soil infiltration, as well as introducing drought-resilient crops as well as diversification of crops (G2). Additionally, support is provided for livelihood activities such as poultry farming, solar panels, and biogas plants (G2).

Overall, the main topics of the projects identified are: Sustainable livestock management, landscape restoration, rehabilitation water resource management, alternative energy production and integrated, simple projects that can be easily operated, and apply a landscape approach. The projects addressed the interconnected challenges of environmental degradation, resource scarcity, reducing conflict triggers and community well-being through inclusive community-based projects.

4.2. Necessity and implementation of a Community-Based Approach focusing on inclusivity in Environmental Projects in the Amhara/Afar Region

The results indicate that current traditional peacebuilding endeavors in the border region of the Afar and Amhara regions do not show effective results. Major concerns include weak conflict resolution systems (I4) and the limited consultation of the local communities by the federal and regional governments (I4, G8). Specifically in the Afar region, the interviewees raised attention to the limited governance available in the region (I5). According to the interviewees, government agencies are constrained by laws, bureaucratic requirements, and objective criteria designed to ensure an equitable distribution of resources, preventing them from adapting to local circumstances when negotiating (I7). Equality-oriented authorities face challenges when negotiating with local parties, as they cannot easily reach specific agreements tailored to local circumstances without risking corruption (I7). As a result, the rigid nature of government work prevents the flexibility needed to effectively address local grievances (I7).

Particularly one of the local NGOs harshly criticized previous efforts by international NGOs ‘the Western world cannot tolerate people who move as nomadic people do. People who have a traditional livelihood, as they do’ (I5). One of the academics who is conducting research on peacebuilding in the boarder of the Amhara and Afar regions explained that the in the region three types of peace and conflict resolution institutions exist, called Joint Peace Committees (I4). Traditional conflict resolution, modern conflict resolution, and a mixture of both systems (I4). His research uncovered that the traditional conflict resolution and the modern conflict resolutions are weak the ‘mixed one is better in mediation, but it is weak in conflict analysis in early warning in conflict communication

and other paradigms' (I4). Consequently, a reform is necessary to achieve successful peacebuilding in the region. Another expert working in the region confirmed these findings, highlighting a lack of 'understanding, trust and cooperation among the local population and government agencies' (I7). He stated that 'despite the existence of many indigenous institutions such as Zewold, Shimgelina, Duberties, Sheh Legas, Abegars, local peace committees, and other social organizations to make peace in the area, people are dying as the result of conflict. The reason is clear. Either these institutions are not working for peace from their heart, or the government is not creating a conducive environment for such institutions to play their part' (I7). These results demonstrate the weakness of existing peacebuilding institutions and arbitration mechanisms in the regions and stress the importance of alternative peacebuilding endeavors.

The findings show that environmental peacebuilding is particularly suitable for the region, as all of the interviewees emphasized that environmental degradation significantly impacts the local population and is one of the main triggers of conflict in the region. Two of the interviewees further illustrated the crucial link between high rates of poverty and conflict as well as environmental degradation (I1, I3). Particularly one of the INGOs explained that poverty is not viewed solely in economic terms (I1). They also consider poverty in relation to available assets, recourses, and socio-economic capital (I1). In addition, the interviewees stressed that poverty does not only exacerbate environmental degradation and triggers conflict in the region but also intensifies poverty and environmental degradation, creating a vicious cycle (I7). Other identified triggers of conflict are conflicting ownership claims and property rights that divided the two communities into two regions (I4). Communities in certain districts were joined to the Amhara region, while others were moved to the Afar region. Despite this division, both communities continue to share and utilize the same resources (I4). Currently, the region also has to suffer of 'invasive noxious weeds such as the invasive tree (*Prosopis juliflora*), persidious gras which is poisonous to the animals and destroys crop and livestock' (I5). The fundamental lack of resources occurred due to several reasons. One of the main reasons is that severe droughts and flooding which cause erosion of the riverside, which destroys livelihoods (I5). Another factor is the continuously growing population multiplied with displaced people from Tigray and Oromia (I5). In particular the 'Afar region is significantly affected by the Tigray conflict even though there have been very limited reports on the media. However displaced people from Tigray come there, so they are highly affected as well' (G8).

Therefore, the interviewed NGOs designed a community-based approach that aims to be more inclusive compared to other peacebuilding projects. The interviewees pointed out the strengths of an inclusive community-based approach in their projects. Criticism was directed at international NGOs for not applying local approaches in their development projects, instead imposing their own systems (I5). 'Most effective are projects based on local thinking. So, I mean hardly anybody does it. So, most people want to bring their own ideas. They got their own system. They want to shove it down your throat. And

if you don't like it, it is too bad.' (I5). The results show that it is fundamental to integrate ILK and to create solutions that come from within the community 'using the local values, knowledge, and skill of peacebuilding is important to create sustainable peace.' (I7). To effectively support resilience, peace, and sustainable development in unstable and conflict-affected areas of the region, it is crucial for peacebuilding organizations to adopt an inclusive and participatory approach in their environmental peacebuilding activities (G2). This involves actively engaging local communities in their own power and decision-making systems, starting from the planning phase and continuing throughout the entire implementation process, while ensuring that power is not abused (I7). This close collaboration also includes the significance of feedback from the locals 'feedback loop supports strong data system and feedback loops to drive quality improvement' (I6). A specific feedback mechanism implemented by one of the NGOs called 'Community Risk Accountability Response Mechanism' showed to be an effective method (I6). This approach provides a platform for all community members to offer feedback, suggestions, complaints, and concerns in a safe, confidential, transparent, and accessible manner, enabling NGOs/INGOs to respond appropriately, make necessary programmatic or safeguarding adjustments, and to ensure the empowerment of the participants (G2, G4).

The interviews illustrated the necessity to recruit local staff to implement the projects 'if possible, people from the area itself who speak the local language and understand the whole situation, all the nuances and the dynamics in ways that we as outsiders are not going to understand anyway' (I1). One of the local NGOs underscored the drawbacks of relying on INGOs, noting their lack of understanding of the local context and the required sensitivity (I3). 'They can recruit local staff to enhance their understanding, but it is more efficient to support local NGOs to fulfill this role from their independent effort' (I3). According to the interviewee local NGOs and community-based organizations possess a significant advantage over international NGOs and government entities due to their deeper historical, social, and cultural connections to the local communities (I3). The NGOs and INGOs operating the region emphasized that peacebuilding projects are only fruitful if they are supported by the community at the very grassroots level and tailored to the specific needs of the communities (G2). Every peacebuilding project should be based on the ILK of peacebuilding and conflict resolution skills (G2). NGOs and INGOs can only act supportive (I5). However, the solutions must be developed by the locals who know the underlying reasons for the conflicts best (I5). Furthermore, the results showed that it is crucial to integrate ILK regarding environmental protection and sustainable grazing (I5).

The interviewees suggest an implementation of the projects through a peace committee at the community level, selected by the entire community, including clan leaders, elders, religious leaders, youth, and women representative (I6, I3, I5). 'It depends a lot on your local facilitators. I mean, obviously, as outsiders coming in, one can sort of push certain things, but other things, I mean, we are outsiders to the situation and these solutions have to come from within' (I1). Therefore, peacebuilding projects should focus on enhancing and helping the peace committee from below to be successful in its

endeavors (I7). The NGOs reported that customary institutions are the ones that always needs to be at the center of the program (I6). Furthermore, the interviewees stressed that particularly clan leaders need to support a specific project, otherwise it should not be executed (I6).

A further recommendation is to strengthen community resilience through capacity-building, which aims to empower communities by improving skills, resources and capabilities of individuals, organizations and communities to effectively achieve goals and ensure autonomous development (I2, I6, G7).

Additionally, it was pointed out especially to include marginalized groups in the region, which can be defined as the ones ‘who have the fewest resources, both material (economic, physical, biological) and in terms of social/political capital’ (I1). In the Amhara and Afar regions, these include women, people with disabilities, and people living in very rural areas, often overlooked but essential for sustainable outcomes of the projects and to address human rights, fairness, and equity (I1, I2, I7, G2). Regarding the implementation of an inclusive community-based approach, the interviewees recommended several strategies. First, it needs to be clarified who to select. Therefore, the organizations operating in the region recommended to start with a stakeholder analysis: ‘You need to try and analyze who all the different stakeholders, the different actors are, and try to work with them accordingly, sort of looking at who is likely to be the best change agents in a given situation’ (I1). After the stakeholder analysis the organizations need to select the best suitable participants for the environmental peacebuilding projects. The potential of including women in the projects was particularly pointed out for several reasons (I1, I2, I5, I7). On the one hand, women are usually more marginalized than men (I1). On the other hand, women are portrayed as agents of change. They were characterized as ‘more reliable and productive’ (I5). The academics operating in the area raised attention to the importance of transformation of the societies recognition from limiting women’s role in the domestic task to the role of peacemaking. (I7). One of the INGOs explained their gender transformative/ gender responsive strategy, which goes beyond ‘recognizing that there are differences in the needs of women and men, but actually sort of really trying to respond to that in a way which changes the lives of women.’ (I1, G3). This approach aims at egalitarian relations by changing the gender relations completely (I1). Further recommendations are to establish gender programs and to provide training awareness for both men and women (I3). The findings show that women can also be reached through women extension workers (I5).

Furthermore, the results show that although are not marginalized, they are often viewed as ‘sources for the instability’ (I7). ‘Youth are considered as war managers, not peacemaker (I7).’ The interviewees stressed that the Tigray conflict in Northern Ethiopia also negatively affected the Amhara and Afar regions, creating unresolved animosities (I5). ‘You still see instances all over the place. You hear of terrible, terrible things happening. Particularity, young people who didn’t understand and don’t understand taking the issue in their own hands and doing something that is really obviously unacceptable and very very brutal often’ (I5). Because youth question traditional/customary conflict resolution

mechanisms as backwardness, the government oftentimes excludes youth from peace projects despite their potential to contribute to long-term peacebuilding. It was recommended by the scholars operating in the field to engage youth as peacebuilders and their constructive potential should be harnessed, despite their skepticism regarding traditional conflict resolution mechanisms (I7, G2).

In contrast, the elderly are often not participating in the peacebuilding projects facilitated by the communities because ‘they are labeled as the supporter of the government for there is a belief that the government is using the elders’ (I7). Specifically in the context of the Amhara and Afra regions, the results show the necessity to include pastoralist and sedentary farmers because they think in ecological terms and ‘want to preserve the environment for the sake of the future. They want to preserve rangeland and water sources. They don’t want to damage them. So they are very protective’ (I5). To select the best suitable participants for their projects the interviewees recommend close cooperation with local administrators (I3, I2, I1, I6).

In conclusion, the results indicate that traditional peacebuilding efforts in the Afar and Amhara border regions have failed mainly due to weak conflict resolution systems, limited local community involvement, and inflexible governance structures. The findings emphasize that environmental peacebuilding initiatives that apply an inclusive community-based approach are particularly suitable to the region as they address the fundamental lack of resources resulting from the intense effects of climate change, conflicting ownership claims and property rights, and a significantly growing population emerged through immigration from displaced people from Tigray and Oromia. The results show that environmental degradation significantly impacts the local population and is one of the main triggers of conflict in the region. This approach showed to be a more effective alternative to traditional peacebuilding, as it is based on local thinking and applies a participatory approach throughout the entire project. This strengthens autonomous development and improves the resilience of the communities through capacity-building. It ensures that the projects are supported by the community at the very grassroot level and tailored to their specific needs, which has proven to be the main requirement for projects to be efficient. Furthermore, the approach significantly empowers marginalized groups, particularly women and youth, as agents of change. Additionally, the knowledge of elders and pastoralists plays a vital role in promoting environmental preservation and sustainable practices.

4.3. Effects and outcomes of an inclusive community-based approach environmental projects in the Afar and Amhara region

The results show that according to 86 % of the interviewees an inclusive community-based approach to environmental projects in the Afra and Amhara region directly contributes to peacebuilding efforts. While one interviewee emphasized that a direct contribution might be illusive, they acknowledged that

the projects support the peace process (I6). How the projects contribute to peacebuilding is outlined in the following section.

The main reasons that were enumerated by 43 % of the interviewees is, first, that these projects provide a neutral platform for communication, where different parties can express their concerns, needs, and perspectives (I1, I6, I7). It is described as a ‘starting point to facilitate local level dialogue’ (I1), and it ‘brings different stakeholders together’ (I6) by providing a neutral platform for dialogue, which addresses disputes in a way that it empowers local communities and fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility for conflict resolution (I7). Even though it can be challenging to initiate the projects and to bring conflicting parties together ‘trying to involve multiple stakeholders with different interests is never going to be easy. You have to try and find common ground and that is always the challenge. Trying to find a common point where everybody can agree and sort of then moving forward from that. But it's never going to be easy.’ (I1). Furthermore, the interviewees pointed out that the facilitated dialogue develops a framework for resolving the conflict and addressing its underlying causes (I7).

Second, the results showed that according to 43 % of the interviewees the projects fostered ‘a sense of shared responsibility and mutual understanding between the Afar pastoralists and Amhara farmers’ (I7, G2) which strengthens trust-building, and therefore it is possible to fundamental change social dynamics between the conflicting parties (I4, I6). ‘It is also possible to create a sense of shared responsibility and mutual understanding between the Afar pastoralists and Amhara farmers. By actively involving the two local communities in the decision-making process, trust can be built, and cooperation will be fostered in which agreed-upon solutions can be designed.’ (I6). This also had direct effects on reducing cattle raiding problems during foraging and minimized the destruction of the crops belonging to Amhara farmers when Afar pastoralists bring their livestock the Golina river to drink water, unintentionally trampling on the crops (I7).

Third, 57 % of the interviewees pointed out that these projects address interconnected issues such as social justice and poverty mitigation, thereby create an understanding of the interdependencies, laying a foundation for future collaboration (I6). Conflicts in these regions are complex, encompassing political, environmental, and resource scarcity issues. Adopting a holistic approach that integrates these factors into peacebuilding efforts could help decrease the chances of violent conflicts in these parts of Ethiopia. The interviewees pointed out that ‘The environment is often at the center of resource-based conflicts, such as disputes over water, land, and natural resources. Conflicts involving these resources can threaten human security and exacerbate poverty and inequality. Community-based environmental projects have shown to impede long-term development and stability’ (I7). These projects have also shown to foster income-generation activities such as value chain development, small-scale irrigation and fuel-efficient stove production lead to poverty mitigation (I1, G1, G2). This economic productivity has shown to reduce animosity and negative thinking (I5).

Fourth, the projects showed to be effective because ‘80% of the community living in the area directly depends on natural resources’ (I3). They were effective in building ecological resilience, at the same time as supporting sustainable livelihoods and foster ecological security, which was pointed out as crucial for sustainable development, conflict mitigation and prevention by 42,86 % of the interviewees (I1, I2, I4). Concerning ecological security, the results showed that the projects are effective in contributing to ecological resilience (I1, I2). However, the interviewees did not describe that they fundamentally restructured the relationship human-environment relationship in line with the concept of ecological security. In addition, the interviewees highlighted that instead of receiving income through destroying the environment, as it was previously the case, through the projects the communities generate their income by protecting the environment (I2, I3). Furthermore, the projects showed to be effective in balancing the health of ecosystems by restoring degraded environment (I3). These projects, for instance, promoted agroforestry, landscape restoration, enhanced hydrology, and stopped soil erosion (I3, I6). Incorporating ILK showed to be specifically effective in promoting environmental security (I5).

Fifth, one of the interviewees highlighted that the projects showed to be effective in creating ‘synergies because community-based environmental projects can leverage resources, expertise and funding from multiple sources’. Academics working in the field go beyond that by stating ‘through this facilitated dialogue, it is possible to develop a framework for resolving the conflict and addressing its underlying causes’ (I7).

The results indicate that community-based environmental projects in the Afar and Amhara regions can significantly contribute to peacebuilding efforts and socio-economic stability. The projects showed several advantages, including offering a neutral platform for dialogue among conflicting parties, empowering marginalized groups and rebuild a trustful relationship between communities. By involving local stakeholders in decision-making, these projects can address practical concerns such as cattle raiding and crop destruction while at the same time addressing broader interconnected challenges such as social justice, poverty, and resource management. The approach addresses interconnected issues such as social justice and poverty mitigation to foster income generation, which helps to reduce animosity and the negative thinking that lays the foundation for future cooperation of the conflicting communities. The holistic approach has proven effective in contributing to long-term development and stability. Concerning ecological security, the results showed that the projects are effective in contributing to ecological resilience. However, the interviewees did not report that they fundamentally restructured the human-environment relationship in alignment with the concept of ecological security.

4.4. Limits and recommendation for future projects

The interviews revealed several limitations current projects are facing. 57% of the interviewees emphasized insufficient funding as a strong challenge to execute the projects and continue them in a

sustainable way until the final goals are reached. NGOs and INGOs executing the projects rely heavily on external funding, primarily from national development cooperation budgets. The interviewees pointed out that the funding was going down in the last years for Ethiopia, due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the escalating conflict in Palestine and Israel, where a lot of national budgets of Western countries for peacebuilding and humanitarian aid flow (I1). As conflicts intensified and conditions became more fragile during the last years in Ethiopia, a lot of funds previously allocated to peacebuilding are now redirected to humanitarian aid (I1). Another significant challenge related to funding is that funding often comes with restrictive conditions regarding priorities and management processes, limiting NGOs' ability to address local needs effectively (I7). Many community-based environmental peacebuilding projects are constrained by current trends in development cooperation, which do not take the complex realities in the Amhara and Afar region into account 'Yeah, it's easier to get funding that way and that of course it is often what drives things. If you can make a good story over one concrete aspect, and it is easier to make a good story over one thing. But, you know, the real world is more complicated.' (I1). Another risk relating to funding that has been enumerated is the danger of greenwashing by the national government, where funds are allocated to projects that project an image of environmental action without addressing urgent local needs. According to the interviewees development funds are often allocated to projects to 'green Ethiopia'. For example, one of the interviewees stressed that the government 'planted billions of trees for their image. They even got a project at one place (...) in Afra where they are still paying for the water tracking for the trees, whereas the people in the communities are dying of thirst (...) It just costs them millions and millions of Ethiopian Birr. And the people don't have water' (I5).

Additionally, 71% of the interviewees emphasized the strong challenge of short project durations, often limited to a maximum of four years, with some projects are even limited to just one year. These short timeframes often result in only raising awareness on certain topics without achieving meaningful and sustainable outcomes (I2). The interviewees criticized that several INGOs are only intervening in the region for one program and withdraw after the implementation is completed (I6). It was highlighted by the interviewees that specifically environmental peacebuilding projects require sufficient time because first, the planning of the projects takes a lot of time because the projects are very context specific. Second, these projects require more time because nature needs time to regenerate (I3). Third, building trust within the communities is a crucial factor for the success of the projects. However, the interviews showed that establishing trust requires significant time because 'it needs intense dialogue' (I4) to overcome mistrust and dishonesty within the communities. However, 'most funders they need a quick read of project reports' (I3). During the implementation phase of a project the NGOs/INGOs already have to apply for funding for the following projects. The interviewees explained that even though they try to interrelate the projects, it not always possible, as new trend topics emerge on the development cooperation agenda (I3). The interviewees stress that projects often have to come to an end

before the final targets are reached (I2, I3). Particularly, INGOs were accused of not working in a sustainable manner and being in the region only ‘very short term’ (I5). The interviewees pointed out the significance of follow-up support to ensure sustainability (I2, I3).

42% of the interviewees raised awareness of significant security issues during the project implementation. When conflicts intensified, projects had to be paused or could only continue in certain parts of the region (I6). It was noted that most of the Afar region was occupied by the TPLF (I6). The lack of electricity, and telecommunication prompted people to migrate to the cities (I6). Consequently, the budget of the non-profit sector had to be modified and shifted to humanitarian assistance to provide shelter (I1, I6). Projects had to be paused due to blockages and the risk of land mines and vehicle artilleries (I6). Particularly in 2022, severe droughts and floods had devastating effects on the region. It was reported that the conflict escalations during the last years shifted the governments attention away from environmental concerns toward security issues as ‘environment destruction is becoming a day-to-day activity’ (I6). However, one of the NGOs reported that their projects had not been affected by the conflicts (I3).

While 14% of interviewees pointed out the high motivation of local populations to participate in these projects, but they also noted that the visible effects of climate change increase the pressure on already scarce resources, leading to competition rather than cooperation (I1).

The recommendations to address these challenges include increasing funding flexibility to allow a better allocation of the budgets and to be able quickly adapt to changing circumstances adequately (I1, I2, G2). The interviewees suggest, if conflicts escalate or environmental degradation intensifies extremely, for example, due to floods or severe droughts, budgets should be shifted to humanitarian interventions to be able to react quickly (I2). They further argue that if the situation stabilized peacebuilding projects should be continued (I2). Concerning this problem, geographical spread of the projects is also a factor that was recommended (I7). The interviewees point out that continuous support is vital until sustainable change is achieved, and local governments should prioritize projects focusing on environmental protection (I2, I7, I4).

A further recommendation concerning the government is to develop a comprehensive early response strategy which can help to react before conflicts escalate and irreversible environmental destruction emerges (I7). Strengthening checks and balances, rule of law, and equitable access to justice systems are recommended to prevent abuse of power, to ensure effective conflict management, and to establish understanding and trust between the people and government is a crucial requirement for the peacebuilding projects to be fruitful (I7). Those who are vulnerable especially need equitable access to these systems of arbitration and representation (I7). Another recommendation is to share best practices with other INGOs/ NGOs and the local governments to enhance collaboration and efficacy of future projects (I6). In addition, task forces have been proven to be an effective tool for facilitating such

exchanges and to discuss updates on what strategies are working well and where additional support is needed (I6).

Lastly, a strong emphasis was placed on supporting and strengthening kebele and woreda peace committees (I7). Conflicts among the two communities are preferably handled by the joint LPCs (Local Peace Committees), who know the roots of conflicts between the two communities (I4). Regular communication between kebele and woreda peace committees is required to ‘enable the LPCs to expand their capacity, capability and ability to provide more integrated and sustainable conflict resolution’ (I7). Moreover, experts recommend providing LPCs with their own financial budgets to cover expenses of training programs, meetings, and transportation costs of the peace makers, which could enhance their ability to effectively solve conflicts (I7).

Overall, the interviewees highlighted several key limitations faced by current projects in the Afar and Amhara regions. The most significant challenges include insufficient funding and ineffective and inflexible allocation of budgets, short project durations, and significant security concerns. These limitations restrict NGOs and INGOs ability to respond to local needs effectively and reduce the sustainability of the projects. The interviewees particularly emphasized the need for increased flexibility of funding resources, better coordination and stronger collaboration between the different stakeholders, and continuous support for the communities to ensure fundamental change. To ensure lasting peace, further significant recommendations include strengthening LPCs and establishing comprehensive early response strategies.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to critically reflect the concept of an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding and to analyze its effect on ecological security and peacebuilding. This chapter aims to reflect and contextualize the results from the case study, based on the literature review, the qualitative interviews and the grey literature that has been analyzed. The presented findings of the case study are discussed in the following to answer the sub-questions of the thesis.

5.1. Learnings from community-based environmental peacebuilding projects in the Amhara and Afra region

This section aims to discuss the first sub-question:

‘Could the positive effects of the 'inclusive community-based environmental peacebuilding' approach be confirmed in the case study?’

Most of the advantages that can be found in the literature regarding inclusive community-based environmental peacebuilding and explanations why the concept holds more potential compared to other approaches have been confirmed in this case study however some findings differ from the literature. The following section reveals what specific projects showed the best results and discloses the requirements for the projects to be effective from the experience of the projects in the case study. This could serve as a starting point for future projects in the Amhara and Afar regions or be extended to different regions with similar intra-state border conflict contexts.

According to Altiok, Porras, & Lee (2023), community-based approaches prioritize empowering communities to actively participate in decision-making processes, enabling local communities to become agents of change in their own peace consolidation processes. Kilmurray (2023) adds that an inclusive community-based approach is more responsive, which fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, thereby enhancing their long-term responsibility toward sustaining peace and stability. In line with this statement, the results show that an inclusive community-based approach is suitable to empower local communities and to foster a sense of ownership and responsibility for conflict resolution. The results confirmed this statement by demonstrating the importance of integrating ILK and creating solutions that come from within the community, utilizing local values, knowledge, and skills for sustainable peace. The interviewees emphasized that to effectively foster resilience, peace, and sustainable development in conflict-affected areas. Peacebuilding organizations must ensure their activities are inclusive and participatory, allowing communities to manage power and decision-making from the planning stages through implementation without power abuses. The literature suggests that communities are best suited to identify their specific needs and should be given direct control over

investments at every phase of the projects (Haider, 2009; Saaida, 2023). This could only partly be confirmed by the findings of the case study. On the one hand, the findings show that local communities play a fundamental role in project planning, execution and feedback mechanisms, with particular emphasis on the project monitoring, including feedback loops to drive quality improvement. The implementation of feedback mechanisms such as the 'Community Risk Accountability Response Mechanism' has been effective in fostering community empowerment. On the other hand, the results indicate that direct control over investment decisions of the locals still remains elusive and that NGOs and INGOs involved in environmental peacebuilding projects continue to face significant challenges regarding project funding.

Saaida's (2023) findings show that inclusive community-based environmental peacebuilding promotes dialogue, negotiation, and consensus-building were also validated by the results of the case study. Academics working in the field take this a step further by stating that facilitated dialogue not only helps to develop frameworks for resolving conflicts and addressing their underlying causes but also fosters cooperation among conflicting parties, such as the Afar pastoralists and Amhara farmers. By actively involving these communities in decision-making, a sense of shared responsibility and mutual understanding is cultivated, addressing its underlying causes of conflict. It has been added that it strengthens trust-building and encourages cooperation.

Another key assertion by Carmichael (2023) that was strongly confirmed by the results of the case study is that inclusive community-based approaches can foster socio-economic development which is closely linked to lasting peace. The results show that, particularly in the fragile Amhara and Afar regions, conflicts often center on resource-based issues, such as disputes over water, land, and natural resources (IOM, 2023). Conflicts involving these resources can undermine human security and intensify poverty and inequality (IOM, 2023). The interviewees highlighted the interplay between poverty, environmental degradation, and resource competition as major triggers of conflict. That is why the interviewed NGOs and INGOs also aim to promote social justice and poverty migration to create an understanding of the interdependencies and to build a foundation for future collaboration. Furthermore, the projects aim to impede long-term development and stability and have demonstrated success in encouraging income-generation activities that help to alleviate poverty. The results show that increased economic productivity reduces animosity and negative sentiments. For example, it eliminates underlying reasons of conflict and contributed to peace and security through reduced conflicts and problems regarding cattle raiding and foraging.

In line with Haider (2019), the interviewees recommended to empower communities by providing them with specific skills in environmental protection, dryland farming techniques, agriculture production, and disaster risk reduction. Training centers have proven effective in this regard. Furthermore, the findings show that strengthen community resilience through capacity-building is a crucial aspect of the projects, contributing significantly to positive durable transformation.

Altiook, Porras, & Lee (2023) argue that community-based approaches need to consist of inclusive participatory decision-making, engage key stakeholders, including marginalized groups, women, elders, youth, people with disabilities, and people living in very rural areas. The findings support this view and emphasize the importance of incorporating pastoralists, whose inclusion is often overlooked but crucial for achieving sustainable project outcomes and addressing human rights, fairness, and equity. The interviewees suggest that selecting the most suitable participants can be effectively done through stakeholder analysis and close collaboration with local administrators. In the literature women's involvement is described as a significant factor for successful environmental peacebuilding projects. According to Zenda et al. (2022), women can serve as influential agents for fostering positive change and peace. The potential of including women in the projects was also particularly pointed out by the interviewees for several reasons. On the one hand side, women are usually more marginalized than men. On the other hand, women are portrayed as reliable and productive agents of change. Academics in the field stress the need to shift societal perceptions from limiting women to domestic roles to recognizing them as key contributors to peacebuilding. One of the INGOs explained their gender transformative/ gender responsive strategy, which aims to create egalitarian relationships by fundamentally altering gender dynamics and addressing differences in the needs of women and men. Further recommendations include establishing gender programs and to provide awareness training for both genders.

Regarding the participation of youth in environmental peacebuilding projects the results surprisingly show mixed results. The results show that youth are often not portrayed as marginalized group but as 'source of conflict' and 'war managers'. The results show that particularly because youth often question traditional/customary conflict resolution mechanisms as backwardness, the government often excludes youth from peace projects despite their potential to contribute to long-term peacebuilding. Scholars operating in the field suggest engaging youth as peacebuilders and harnessing their constructive potential, despite their skepticism of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms.

In contrast to the findings in the literature, the results show that the elderly are often not participating in the peacebuilding projects facilitated by the communities, due to the perceptions that they support the government's attempts to pacify conflict. Specifically in the context of the Amhara and Afra region, the results show the necessity to include pastoralist and sedentary farmers, as they think ecologically and are committed to preserving the environment, including rangeland and water sources for future generations. This is in line with Berger's finding (2003) to counter the marginalization of pastoralists, robust pastoralist networks and associations need to be established to advocate for the recognition of pastoralists' needs.

Sändig et al. (2024) claim that northern-based institutions, such as international organizations, development agencies, and INGOs, must acknowledge their responsibility and recognize knowledge, identities, and capacities for change of local actors from the Global South (Sändig et al., 2024). This approach simultaneously addresses the criticism of Northern-based institutions often apply Western-

centric one-size-fits-all approaches, as outlined previously. A community-based approach emphasizes empowering communities by strengthening local institutions, enhancing capacities, and supporting grassroots initiatives (Le Billon et al., 2020). The results of the case study also raise attention that INGOs still tend to impose Western-centric approaches on local communities and not respect their traditional lifestyle. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that NGOs and INGOs operating in the region emphasized that peacebuilding projects are only fruitful if they are supported by the community at the very grassroots level. Every peacebuilding project should be based on the ILK of peacebuilding and conflict resolution skills. While these organizations can provide support, solutions must be developed by the locals who best understand the root causes of conflicts. The literature also underscores the need for decolonial spaces that facilitate symmetrical dialogues and shared learning to engage alternative knowledge systems and perspectives in knowledge production (UN, 2022). This aligns with the interviewees' recommendations to include pastoralists and sedentary farmers in environmental peacebuilding projects, recognizing their proactive efforts to preserve the environment for future generations.

Kluczevska & Kreikemeyer (2021) recommend in their study normative guidance through social and religious leaders who draw upon local social hierarchies based on kinship, gender, age, and wealth (Kluczevska & Kreikemeyer, 2021). Moreover, it is recommended in the literature to incorporate traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, such as mediation and traditional justice systems, based on cultural norms and values (Bräuchler, 2022). This approach legitimizes indigenous legal systems, strengthening cultural identity and fostering collective responsibility for sustainable peace, by fostering a sense of ownership and collective responsibility through the recognition of cultural heritage (Hachmann et al., 2023; Richmond, 2012). Even though the results of the case study reveal that traditional conflict resolution systems are currently ineffective, local communities should be supported in transforming these institutions and mechanisms. The interviewees support this finding specifically by stating that customary institutions are the ones who always need to be at the center of the program. They also noted that if clan leaders do not endorse a project, it should not proceed. Additionally, the interviewees recommend implementing projects through a peace committee at the community level, selected by the entire community, including clan leaders, elders, religious leaders, women's representatives, and youth representatives.

The major drawbacks of the concept in the literature: The risk of idealized ILK (Sändig et al., 2024), the image of environmental changes through cosmologic belief systems by locals in contrast with science-based approaches (Bankoff, 2004); violent traditional conflict resolution (Dzuverovic, 2021); and pragmatic views of local communities prioritizing economic opportunities over environmental conservation (Amador-Jimenez et al., 2024), only the latest was also mentioned by the interviewees. The results show that, on the one hand side, the local communities in the region are highly motivated to participate in the projects. On the other hand, the severe impacts of climate change have created a sense

of urgency, intensifying pressure on resources and leading to a stronger inclination toward self-interested decision-making.

In conclusion, the findings of the case study support the positive effects of the inclusive community-based environmental peacebuilding approach, confirming most of the advantages outlined in the literature. The most outstanding positive effects include the empowerment of local communities and marginalized groups, fostering a sense of ownership, facilitating dialogue between conflicting parties and trust-building, as well as promoting socio-economic development. These advantages showed to significantly improve the livelihoods of local communities in the project regions. However, significant challenges faced by the inclusive community-based approach are limited control of local communities over investment decisions and continues dependence on external funding.

5.2. Environmental Degradation and Conflict: A Question of National, International, Human, or Ecological Security?

This section addresses the second sub-question:

Is the link between environmental degradation and conflict seen as a matter of national, international, human, or ecological security?

Rather than framing environmental degradation as a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the nation-states or as a factor in maintaining international stability in line with the concept of national security and international security, the findings show that environmental degradation is primarily perceived as a threat to the local population, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups. The results show that the link between environmental degradation and conflict in the Amhara and Afar regions is primarily viewed as a matter of human and ecological security, with a stronger emphasis on human security. However, the findings indicate that these dimensions are interconnected, often requiring coordinated efforts to effectively address the complexities of global challenges. Compared to national and international security, the concepts of human security and ecological security offer a more progressive approach to address climate security by recognizing climate change as a direct threat to ecosystems rather than just a threat multiplier (McDonald, 2024). Both approaches focus on significantly reducing greenhouse gas emissions and addressing the root cause of climate change.

The results of the case study illustrate how environmental degradation, particularly through overexploitation of natural resources and climate change, has led to severe resource scarcity and environmental degradation, which fundamentally destroys the livelihoods of local communities and promotes poverty in the Afar and Amhara region. The analyzed projects focused on improving the local living conditions and to preserve the ecosystem through environmental projects. These projects address structural issues such as marginalization and poverty reduction, indirectly reducing conflict through

spillover effects. However, the projects also target the immediate impacts of environmental degradation on local communities, especially marginalized groups, based on the assumption that vulnerable groups are most affected by environmental change. In the project regions, capacity-building has proven successful in strengthening autonomous development and fosters resilience of the communities. The projects notably strengthened women and youth as agents of change. Additionally, the knowledge of elders and pastoralists plays a vital role in the project in promoting environmental preservation and sustainable practices.

Recognizing that a stable environment is essential for local livelihoods, the projects also focus on promoting environmental resilience to reduce food insecurity and increase economic productivity. Although the analyzed projects in the case study were designed in a sustainable manner and aimed contribute to structural change and continue after the predetermined project duration, the results show that the projects were constrained by a narrow time frame, varying from one to five years. This has been criticized by several interviewees because they outlined that the limited project duration, the rapidly changing political trends in development cooperation that do not take the complex realities on the ground into account, and the dependence on external funding made it challenging to create long-term achievements and fundamental systematic changes to create ecological security. This aligns with the findings of Pirages (2005), who argues that achieving structural change of the human-environment relationship, in line with ecological security is challenging. Furthermore, the projects do not specifically address the transformation of damaging political structures, as outlined in the concept of ecological security. Unlike the ecological security approach, the findings revealed that the projects mainly focus on improving the well-being of the individuals rather than addressing other species and future generations.

Finally, this demonstrates that environmental degradation is primarily framed as a matter of human security in the project designs in the Afar and Amhara regions. However, the interviewees suggest an ecological security approach could lead to more sustainable outcomes. Additionally, it has been observed that most of the projects incorporate elements of ecological security, highlighting the complex relationship, as human security and environmental security are closely intertwined. Environmental degradation often accelerates competition over essential natural resources such as water and arable land, as evidenced by the case study. In fragile regions like Afar and Amhara, where resources are already scarce, and economies rely heavily on agriculture, environmental degradation intensifies competition over resources, often destroying livelihoods, resulting in economic instability and conflict. In turn, environmental degradation significantly affects ecological security by undermining the health of ecosystems, causing biodiversity loss and degrading soils. Moreover, environmental degradation further exacerbates climate change, intensifying extreme weather events that significantly affect human security by disrupting agriculture. This illustrates how environmental degradation can fuel conflict, which in turn can further degrade the environment, creating a vicious cycle. It underscores the need to

address both human and environmental security equally in environmental peacebuilding projects to achieve sustainable peace.

5.3. Core Objectives of Community-Based Environmental Peacebuilding Initiatives

This section seeks to answer the third sub-question:

What specific practices have evolved from this discourse, and do they predominantly aim at peace mitigation, adaptation, or the transformation of socio-ecological relations?

Given the connection between environmental degradation and conflict is mainly seen as a matter of human and ecological security in the analyzed projects in the context of the case study, these projects predominantly target peace adaptation and the fundamental transformation of socio-ecological relations. Short-term efforts that focus on reducing the immediate risk of conflict aiming at peace mitigation could not be observed in projects observed in the case study. Conflict adaptation, aiming at coping with resulting conditions from environmental degradation and conflict, such as diversifying incomes and developing sustainable agricultural practices that can withstand environmental changes has been implemented. Specific initiatives observed include training programs for livestock disease control, the establishment of animal feed processing plants to reduce livestock mortality, and landscape restoration through agroforestry and the rehabilitation of rangelands with indigenous grasses. Additional conservation measures involve the implementation of sustainable soil and water management techniques, such as soil and stone bunds, trenches, micro-basin gabion construction, and irrigation schemes tailored to available water resources. These adaptation mechanisms intend to develop resilience to these challenges resulting from environmental degradation and climate change, such as resource scarcity.

In contrast to peacebuilding projects, which are mostly based on the thinking of external peacebuilders and organizations, adaptive peacebuilding aspires to enable local communities to develop their own political and judicial systems and institutions that align with their norms and beliefs according to their individual history and culture (Coning et al., 2023). Therefore, adaptive peacebuilding approaches emphasize context-specific local solutions, while international actors may play a role in facilitating the process instead of being full-fledged stakeholders, if invited to do so (Coning et al., 2023). This was also recommended in the case study, where the projects rely on participatory approaches. It was pointed out that customary institutions are key to achieve sustainable peacebuilding, and external actors can provide support to create effectively functioning local peace committees. Adaptive peacebuilding mainly focuses on capacity-building and to foster resilience of the conflicting parties, enhancing a society's capacity to handle future challenges and conflicts (Coning et al., 2023). Furthermore, capacity-building is a fundamental element of the strategies of the NGOs and INGOs for peace adaptation in the case study region. It aims at enhancing local capacities for conflict resolution,

governance, and mediation, which are core strategies the projects based on and aim at strengthening community resilience. Moreover, the projects showed to fundamentally challenge relationships between conflicting parties by fostering the understanding of interdependencies, creating synergies and recreating trust among conflicting parties. The results show that community-based environmental projects impede long-term development and stability.

However, it can also be perceived as an element of transforming socio-ecological relations because several of the capacity-building projects focused on sustainable environmental management. Capacity-building was also a fundamental element of several of the analyzed projects and the results showed that it had a significant impact on strengthening community resilience. It promotes both horizontal and vertical participation in the peacebuilding process, ensuring resources are allocated where they are most effective on the ground. This approach emphasizes an adaptive organizational culture, ongoing conflict analysis, monitoring, and evaluation to navigate the ever-changing dynamics of complex conflicts (De Coning, 2019). Feedback loops of the local population have shown to drive quality improvement of the projects.

Transformation of socio-ecological relations goes beyond peace adaptation, involving a systematic change of the structures and dynamics of socio-ecological systems through long-term, radical changes to create new pathways for development (Folke, 2021). Rather than being a completely new and revolutionary idea, the concept of socio-ecological transformation combines alternative development approaches (Degenhardt, 2018), drawing on social ecology, developed by the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social-Ecological Research, which emphasizes predicting human-nature crises (Wissen, 2010; Brand, 2012). It is closely linked to anti-capitalist, eco-feminist, eco-socialist, and indigenous movements based on a critique of hegemonic neoliberal discourses of growth (Degenhardt, 2018). Socio-ecological transformation recognizes the irreplaceable value of nature and prioritizes social and environmental factors over economic growth (Michelsen & Adomssent, 2014). The concept of sustainable development was initially appealing because it suggested that economic growth could coexist with social justice and environmental stability (Danso-Dahmen & Degenhardt, 2018). However, left-wing critics argue that this concept is misleading, as it often prioritizes economic growth over genuine social and environmental concerns and ignores the root causes of inequality (Danso-Dahmen & Degenhardt, 2018). SES (Socio-ecological systems) resilience scholars distinguish transformation from adaptation, defining it as a change that exits the existing dominant system and creates new pathways when the current system becomes unsustainable due to environmental, economic, or social conditions (Folke, 2021; Olsson & Moore, 2023). This approach addresses the root causes of conflict and environmental degradation, fostering new cultural attitudes toward environmental stewardship and altering land use patterns such as controlled and zero grazing to promote ecological restoration and social equity, as applied in several of the projects. The alternative concept aims to reconfigure relationships, thereby establishing entirely new systems that tackle the root causes of vulnerability and

conflict, seeking to achieve social inclusion, economic efficacy, and environmental justice (Folke, 2021).

The results show that elements that aim at transforming socio-ecological relations have been applied to the projects in the case study and are a fundamental part of the project design for several of the projects. For example, one of the INGOs described that they apply a gender transformative/ gender responsive strategy that addresses systematic inequalities that seeks to transform the lives of women through completely changing gender relations and create egalitarian relations. The other NGOs and INGOs also highlighted that they not only include marginalized groups such as women, youth, and pastoralists but make them the leading actors of the programs, therefore challenging structures and contributing to a transformation of socio-ecological relations. These actors are described as agents of change. The ultimate goal is to achieve long-term sustainability, social equity, and resilience by fundamentally rethinking and restructuring the relationships between society and the environment (Folke, 2021). This involves addressing inequalities in resource access and empowering marginalized groups through capacity building, participatory governance, and integrating ILK (Reyes-Garcia, 2023). These three components have also been emphasized by the interviewees as profound elements that have showed to contribute to successful peacebuilding in the region. Additionally, the integration of ILK and practices to contribute to more equitable and sustainable socio-ecological systems played a crucial role in the analyzed projects.

6. Conclusion

Drawing on the current developments in environmental peacebuilding toward localized intra-state peacebuilding and the recognition of the Anthropocene, this thesis filled the presented gap by analyzing the potential of an inclusive community-based approach to foster ecological security and peace. It addressed prevailing power structures that continue to marginalize certain groups, highlighting the interconnection between environmental concerns and conflict and the resulting threatening effects that intensify inequality and environmental degradation. The primary aim of this thesis was to answer the main research question: ‘Can an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding projects effectively foster both peace and ecological security in fragile border settings?’. The results of the case study unveiled fundamental critiques of traditional environmental peacebuilding endeavors and showed that an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding projects have the potential to directly foster both peace and ecological security in fragile border settings. The analysis of the environmental projects in the Amhara and Afar regions uncovered elements of both narratives: human security and ecological security, with a stronger emphasis on human security. Resulting from this framework, the findings showed that projects primarily aim at peace adaptation, although some elements of the analyzed projects also aim to transform socio-ecological relations.

This case study revealed that community-based environmental projects have proven particularly successful in empowering local communities and marginalized groups by fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility for conflict resolution. Further benefits are improved relations between conflicting parties and reduced environmental degradation. These initiatives promote a shared sense of responsibility and mutual understanding, which strengthens trust-building and helps communities find common ground. By addressing interlinked issues such as social justice and poverty alleviation, these projects created synergies that contribute to improved livelihoods and stability. Furthermore, they increase economic productivity, which in turn reduces hostility and negative thinking and supports the overarching goals of peace and sustainable development. However, this research also disclosed the significant challenges these projects face, including limited project funding and inflexibility of funding allocation, short and unpredictable project durations, a simplified representation of complex realities in the project regions, and project interruptions caused by severe security issues.

Based on this observation, practitioners should increase the number of local environmental peacebuilding projects that involve diverse stakeholders, empower marginalized groups, extend the project duration, and allow flexible allocation of the budgets to adapt to rapidly changing conflict situations. The central argument presented in this thesis is that the current structures of foreign aid and development cooperation, including the inflexible guidelines and short project durations, hinder structural change and exuberate dependency. By fundamentally reforming the systems, the implementing organization would be able to achieve more sustainable outcomes, create fundamental change, and prevent budget waste.

This thesis highlights the importance of a localized and inclusive approach to environmental peacebuilding projects in fragile contexts. However, even though these executed projects have been successful in peace adaptation and preventing conflict, the region still suffers from ongoing tensions and severe environmental degradation. To develop an approach that goes beyond what could be achieved through an inclusive community-based approach and directly fosters peace and ecological security in fragile border settings, adopting a transformative governance approach seems promising to elevate the effectiveness of the projects. Unlike the community-based approach, transformative governance seeks to create systemic change by addressing persistent power imbalances and dominant ideologies, with the goal of reconfiguring social, political, economic, and technological systems, as well as the norms, rules, and values that drive ecological concerns (IPBES, 2019; Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). The approach utilizes crisis to challenge prevailing beliefs and aims to strengthen ecosystem resilience and adaptability while simultaneously fostering sustainable development (Pereira & Terrenas, 2021). In line with ecological security, transformative governance overcomes anthropocentrism by recognizing the rights of nature and animals and advocating for the inclusion of vulnerable communities and non-human beings in governance processes (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021; Scoones et al., 2020). Leonardsson et al. (2019) found that climate change adaptation (CCA) and peacebuilding can be mutually supportive through a transformative governance approach. Furthermore, it strengthens the adaptive capacity of ecosystems through normative change, technological innovation, and the promotion of epistemic and cultural diversity. The model of transformative governance consists of four major components. It needs to be integrative, inclusive, pluralist, and adaptive (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021).

The inclusive and pluralistic elements of transformative governance are also integral to the inclusive community-based approach examined in the case study. An inclusive model combines various actors from different backgrounds into the decision-making process, thus addressing power asymmetries and empowering marginalized groups (Dedeurwaerdere et al., 2016). By extending rights to nature and animals and considering future generations and non-humans in governance, this approach moves beyond a human-centered perspective and a human security focus (Chapron, 2019). This approach enables the participation of various stakeholders, promoting diverse values, enhancing capacity, and ensuring accountability and social equity (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). It empowers those whose interests are often overlooked and addresses inequalities rooted in gender, race, and culture, as well as the exclusion of indigenous and local communities from environmental decision-making (Clapp & Dauvergne, 2005). The case study highlights the importance to design environmental peacebuilding projects in an inclusive manner. The results disclosed that this approach, among other benefits, empowers marginalized stakeholders and enhances the legitimacy of the projects.

Pluralist governance emphasizes the recognition and integration of diverse value and knowledge systems, including non-Western perspectives (Turnhout, 2018). As well as the integrative component,

this approach has also been a fundamental component of the community-based approach analyzed in the case study, requiring a shift in how knowledge is produced, with collaborative methods showing promise in generating credible outcomes (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). However, unlike the inclusive community-based approaches, which primarily focused on promoting ILK, transformative governance seeks to connect the different knowledge systems of policy-makers, academics, practitioners, and Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (Lam et al., 2020). This integration can be challenging due to different definitions, concepts, and resistance to non-scientific knowledge (Lam et al., 2020). Nonetheless, incorporating multiple perspectives and fostering collaborative knowledge formation is essential for ensuring climate change adaptation (CCA) actions are legitimate, effective, and peaceful (Leonardsson et al., 2019). The project's success relies on fostering open discussion and contesting these diverse knowledge claims (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021).

The integrative and adaptative components of transformative governance seem promising in advancing environmental peacebuilding projects further to reach sustainable outcomes. Integrative governance seeks to target indirect drivers of change by focusing on the relationships between governance systems and instruments (Visseren-Hamakers, 2018). The approach ensures comprehensive solutions by addressing the interdependencies across different places, sectors, issues, and levels and ensuring that local solutions create wider impacts (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). Thereby, it promotes collaboration across different levels of governance, from local to global, and across different sectors, including public, private, and civil societies (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). To achieve transformative change, integrative governance strategies must be combined and directed toward addressing the root causes of changing ecosystems (Gavin, 2015).

Adaptive governance strengthens resilience by providing opportunities for continuous learning and adaptation of the projects in response to uncertainty, social conflicts, and complexity (Visseren-Hamakers et al., 2021). It stimulates dialogue and involves feedback loops, networked actors, nested scales, and multiple stakeholders (Chaffin et al., 2014). Feedback loops are a method that has also been recommended by the interviewees and was applied in some of the analyzed projects in the Amhara and Afar regions. However, the potential of an adaptative approach could be further extended. It remains difficult to tackle the root causes of vulnerability and address inequalities, power dynamics, and disagreements between actors (Karpouzoglou, 2016). These challenges can be tackled through integrative, participatory processes (Karpouzoglou, 2016).

The most outstanding advantage of a transformative governance approach is its ability to supplement the benefits of a community-based approach. By addressing structural problems, it can create broader societal change across multiple levels of governance. The holistic approach addresses the root causes of environmental degradation and conflict and, therefore, does not only improve community resilience but addresses systemic resilience, capable of adapting to future challenges. Particularly the

integrative and adaptative aspect of the concepts could contribute to ecological security and peacebuilding. In specific, the coordination and across different places, sectors, issues, and levels ensures that local solutions create wider impacts and addresses not only the root causes of conflict but also root causes of changing ecosystems.

Finally, this research found that an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding faced most of the critiques associated with environmental peacebuilding. However, it suggests that a transformative governance approach could be utilized for achieving long-term and sustainable change regarding peacebuilding but also ecological security. Nonetheless, the practical implementation remains uncertain, as all projects in the case study were funded through development cooperation budgets from Western countries and international organizations. The system is designed to achieve rapid and visible improvements, making it difficult to justify a shift toward a transformative governance approach, which would require a fundamental systemic change. Future research should focus on whether this approach could be effective in practice and how it could be implemented.

6.1. Implications

Even though the results of this section cannot be generalized, due to the nature of single exploratory case studies, the findings can contribute to the improvement of designing and implementing environmental peacebuilding projects in the Amhara and Afar region or in similar fragile contexts, as well as contributing to the theoretical discourse. Furthermore, the findings can serve as evidence-based foundation for NGOs, INGOs, and international donors that actively engage in peacebuilding in the Amhara and Afar regions but also for these stakeholders that aim to start environmental peacebuilding projects in similar contexts. By foregrounding the critiques of traditional environmental peacebuilding, this research offers valuable insights on the potential of an inclusive community-based approach to environmental peacebuilding as well as exposing the challenges and possible solutions to foster the effectiveness toward peacebuilding and ecological security. Through this in-depth case study, the urgency of challenging standards in development cooperation of Western countries and international organizations was raised. The research findings suggest that a transformative governance approach offers the potential to tackle the complex challenges of the instability of the Anthropocene while also identifying challenges and potential solutions to enhance the effectiveness of peacebuilding and ecological security efforts.

This in-depth case study has also contributed to the recently expanding body of literature root on community-based environmental peacebuilding. It stresses the importance to adapt the concept further to recent developments and to analyze the potential of applying a transformative approach in environmental peacebuilding projects in fragile contexts. Furthermore, it contributes to the discussion

on border conflicts, which primarily focus on inter-state conflicts. This study is among the first case studies to focus on intra-state environmental peacebuilding in border conflicts.

6.2. Limitations

The conflict in the Amhara and Afar regions, examined in this in-depth case study, is often overshadowed by the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia. Even the Tigray conflict has not received significant attention from the international community, Western media, or researchers despite its serious consequences and high level of brutality. Consequently, there is even less research and limited budgets of international donors in the Amhara and Afar regions, which underlines the importance of this case study in drawing attention to these areas. As a result, only a few INGOs and NGOs are active in the region, and some of those present reported that they have reached their capacity due to the intense conflict dynamics. Furthermore, not all environmental projects in the region that aim to foster peacebuilding apply an inclusive community-based approach. Consequently, the number of interviews conducted was limited to five NGOs and INGOs. In addition, academic research on environmental peacebuilding in the region is very limited. Consequently, only two researchers were available for interviews. Nonetheless, the interviews provided enough information to profoundly answer the research questions, and the data was supplemented by grey literature.

The interviews reflect the subjective experiences of the NGO and INGO staff as well as the participating researchers. While subjectivity is often seen as a strength of qualitative research, it also carries the risk of bias due to individual experiences and personal viewpoints. The researcher relies on the honesty of the interviewees but is also aware of possible biases, such as loyalty or unconscious influence from the organizations with which the interviewees are affiliated.

Because of the language barrier the interviews were conducted with NGOs and INGOs as well as scholars operating in the international context. Therefore, the language barrier was only a mirror issue during the interviews. However, a researcher fluent in the local language could uncover new opportunities for more in-depth engagement with local communities. The interviews were conducted via video conference. Although being physically present in the country might have enabled deeper insights through the development of trust-based relationships, this was beyond the organizational capacity of this thesis.

Due to the scoping requirement, it was not possible to empirically test whether a transformative governance approach can directly and significantly contribute to peacebuilding and environmental security in fragile intra-state border conflicts. This question remains open for future research.

6.3. Further research

Future research could investigate whether a transformative approach to environmental peacebuilding could be effective in practice in intra-state border conflicts and if these projects are still suitable if the conflict further escalates or how the approach needs to be adjusted. The growing body of literature on transformative governance points out its potential. However, its applicability in diverse and highly volatile intra-state settings remains under-explored. To achieve a more comprehensive picture and to better understand the potential, further research should include comparative case studies in different regions with a similar context. This would allow researchers to develop more context-specific and pragmatic solutions and enrich the academic discourse on community-based peacebuilding and transformative governance.

Currently, the academic literature on community-based environmental peacebuilding predominantly focuses on inter-state disputes and international/transnational borderlands (Barquet et al., 2014; Van Amerom & Büscher, 2005; King & Wilcox, 2008). However, this case study highlights the need to shift attention to intra-state borderland conflicts. The case study revealed that intra-state conflicts, often marked by complex socio-political and environmental challenges, require peacebuilding interventions that are tailored to the specific needs of the local context and that take the underlying drivers of conflict, such as resource scarcity and marginalization, into account. Future research should address their unique challenges to understand how transformative environmental approaches can be customized to address their unique challenges and contribute to sustainable peace and development.

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Annex

Annex A¹

Interview Questionnaire: NGOs focusing on environmental projects in the Amhara or Afar regions

Introductory questions:

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about your work at (...)? (Position, since when do you work for (...), how does your daily work look like?)
2. Can you provide an overview of the environmental/natural resource management projects your NGO is currently carrying out in Amhara and Afar and the most outstanding projects that have been carried out in the past?
 - a. In which regions are these projects carried out in particular?
 - b. How do you choose the project locations?

Inclusivity:

3. How does (...) define inclusivity in the projects? Who do you try to include in the projects?
 - a. How to you reach the participants?
 - b. In your experience, how willing is the local population to participate in the projects?
4. Why does (...) prioritize an inclusive approach?
5. Can you share specific examples of how (...) engages local communities and marginalized groups, especially in projects with a focus on natural resource management/environmental cooperation?

Connection to peacebuilding:

6. Do you think cooperation in environmental projects can lead to collaboration in other areas?
 - a. Have you experienced that development?
7. Do you think that community-based environmental projects can contribute to peacebuilding and sustainable development in Ethiopia?
 - 3.1. Why/why not? → If yes how? Have you encountered that?

Connection to ecological security:

8. Do you aim to contribute to ecological security/resilience of ecosystems through your projects?
 - b. If yes have the projects been successful in contributing to ecological security/resilience of ecosystems?

Challenges:

¹ The interview transcripts and grey literature can be made available upon request.

9. What challenges have you encountered in promoting an inclusive approach to the environmental projects?
10. Can you discuss specific strategies or solutions (...) has implemented or is planning to implement to address these challenges?

Outlook:

11. What approaches or strategies does your NGO plan to implement in the coming years to further enhance inclusivity in its projects?
12. What advice would you give other organisations who are trying to implement an inclusive approach to environmental peacebuilding elsewhere?

Annex B²

Interview Questionnaire: Academics focusing on peacebuilding in the Amhara and Afar regions

Introductory questions:

1. Can you briefly introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about your work as a researcher?
(Research focus/topics; research area/locations)

Peacebuilding in the Amhara/Afar:

2. What do you think from your experience in the region is currently going wrong in peacebuilding projects the Amhara and Afar region?
3. How to strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of existing local peacebuilding committees?
4. How can peacebuilding projects from local or international NGOs be more effective?
5. What changes are needed from the local and federal government to effectively foster peacebuilding in the region?

Connection to ecological security:

6. Do you think that community-based environmental projects could contribute to peacebuilding and sustainable development in the region?
 - a. If yes to what extent? (e.g. conflict mitigation, adaptation, transformation of socio-ecological relations)
 - b. If no: why not? What changes would be needed?

Inclusivity:

7. Who do think must be included in peacebuilding projects in the region? And why?
 - a. Are these groups already included in peace negotiations?
 - i. If not: Why do you think this is the case? And what are the main challenges?
 - ii. Do you have a suggestion how to better include these groups?

Challenges & Outlook

8. What do you think is needed in the coming years to promote and maintain peace in the region?

² The interview transcripts and grey literature can be made available upon request.