

ENVIRONMENTAL  
PEACEMAKING  
APPROACH IN  
LIPTAKO GOURMA



# Environmental Peacemaking Approach in Liptako Gourma

Supporting peace in the transboundary region of Mali,  
Burkina Faso, and Niger

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Report

# Environmental Peacemaking Approach in Liptako Gourma

## Supporting peace in the transboundary region of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger

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# About this paper

This paper outlines a rationale, a set of principles and possible entry points for an environmental peacemaking approach in The Liptako Gourma region of the Sahel. This strategy aims to foster peace by addressing and mitigating environmental conflicts.

As climate change progressively emerges as an additional challenge to our collective capacity to prevent and manage crises, mediators must increasingly factor in its short-, medium-, and long-term implications on conflict. It is, therefore, crucial to recognise environmental issues as potentially constructive entry points to peacemaking approaches. Incorporating environmental issues into a mediation process can contribute to its resolution by establishing the groundwork for a more sustainable peace and creating mechanisms for future collaboration. In this context, Environmental Peacemaking aims to enhance the prevention and resolution of conflicts by specifically addressing underlying factors linked to climate, environmental issues, and natural resource drivers.

The Sahel's Liptako Gourma region holds significant potential to benefit from the environmental peacemaking approach given its population's dependency on shared natural resources, whose rapidly increasing scarcity contributes to threatening ancestral ways of life, exacerbating tensions between communities and functions both as a contributor to and a victim of the widespread insecurity prevailing across the Sahel.

Based on this concept, the approach strives to improve peacemaking and cooperation by recognising the interconnectedness of conflict and ecosystems on the one hand, and that natural resources, environmental degradation, and climate change contribute to the root causes of conflict in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger on the other. The approach aims to contribute to a foundation for sustainable and lasting environmental peace through information-sharing, dialogue, mediation, and collaboration.

This document should not be considered a roadmap. It intends to serve as a source of inspiration for local, national, and regional actors to draw upon, tailor and incorporate environmental components in the design and implementations of strategies, roadmaps, and action plans related to the promotion of dialogue, practice of mediation, design of peace processes, and brokering of agreements.

# 1. Context

## 1.1 Security in the Liptako Gourma

The Liptako Gourma border region straddles Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger and spans an area of around 370,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Nearly 80 per cent of the region's population lives in rural areas, and livestock farming is a key component of the area's rural economy, both in terms of economic weight and as a factor in structuring rural areas. The Liptako Gourma region comprises some of the most abandoned and deprived areas in the three countries, despite the area's agropastoral, fishing, wildlife and mining potential. Climate variability, competition for scarce resources, poverty and demographic pressure, compounded by poor governance, political unrest and marginalisation, all contribute to increasing levels of violence, which has spread throughout the Liptako Gourma region.

Since 2015, the region has experienced a significant surge in armed conflict (Figure 1), primarily characterised by confrontations between communities and clashes between regular armed forces and Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs), including jihadist organisations. The two main Jihadist groupings operating in the region are Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) groups, as well as Islamic State-affiliated groups. It is important to bear in mind that both groups tend to compete for territorial control across the Sahel, adding an additional front to the already complex crisis in the region.

The intricate security landscape in the region evolves against the backdrop of increasing political instability, made salient by successive military coups. Violence has manifested in various forms, all contributing to deepening social rifts between communities and between these communities and the States supposed to ensure their protection. Often targeted first in jihadist attacks and subjected to an extensively militarised state-led counterinsurgency, along with intercommunal conflicts, civilians find themselves trapped at the crossroads of multiple challenges with no adequate governance structures to effectively address them. Concurrently, NSAGs have expanded their influence in rural and marginalised regions, encompassing border areas rather than concentrating efforts on urban centres (Figure 2).



As evidenced above, prospects for widespread and sustainable peace in the Liptako Gourma region are restricted by a number of destabilising factors that have continued to fuel instability. Among those factors, clashes between different communities occupy a determining place. These intercommunal conflicts have intensified due to the States' military strategies, involving alliances with local self-defence militias and armed groups that aid regular armed forces in counter-insurgency efforts - notably in Mali and Burkina Faso. These joint operations have led to numerous human rights violations against the population, particularly, though not exclusively, impacting the Fulani community due to suspicions about their alleged connections to jihadist groups.

### CONFLICT IN THE LIPTAKO GOURMA (MALI, BURKINA FASO, NIGER)

From January 2013 to November 2023. Source: ACLED

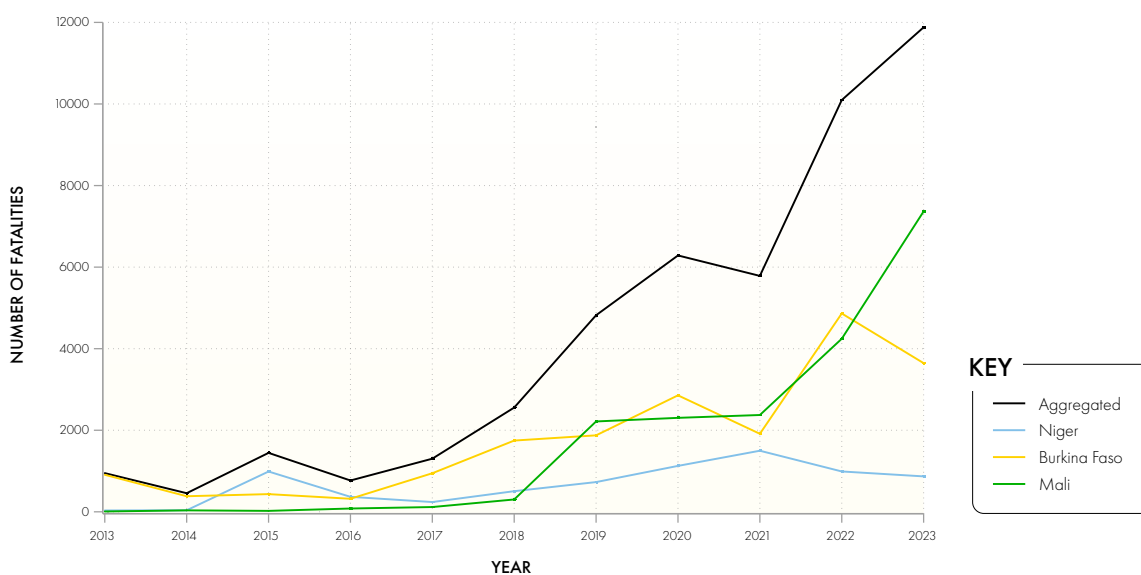


Figure 1: Fatalities resulting from armed clashes and battles in the Liptako Gourma region of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger (January 2012 to November 2023).

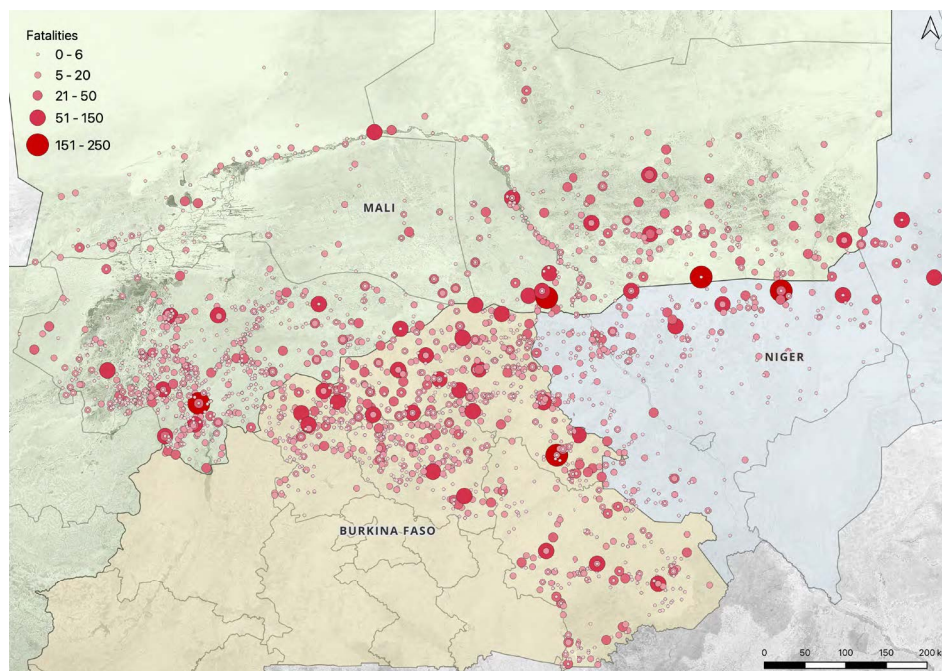


Figure 2: Location of conflict events in the region of the Liptako Gourma (January 2013 to November 2023)

Data source: ACLED (24 November 2023)

Moreover, climate change and environmental degradation have emerged as significant destabilising factors over the years. Their negative impacts on the region have led to more fraught tensions over the availability of land and agropastoral natural resources, particularly between farmer and herder communities. A considerable number of these are directly related to the mismanagement of said resources, either directly through practices such as land grabbing or destructive exploitation of minerals, or indirectly through maladaptation to climate change or the over-promotion of agriculture as a development policy.<sup>1</sup>

Unsustainable practices have led to significant consequences for the region's communities, as they reduce the availability and quality of scarce natural resources on which local communities depend for survival, especially in remote areas lacking state-provided basic services and the capacity to support their livelihoods and protection. Consequently, sedentary communities are forced to migrate to other areas, and nomadic transhumant groups change their traditional routes in search of more productive grazing land, further contributing to conflict dynamics based on competition for basic resources.

For example, in Mali, Fulani and Tuareg pastoralist communities have experienced increased violence due to water scarcity and land grabbing, leading to clashes between clans, and ultimately pushing them to seek protection for their group and cattle, which can sometimes be provided by jihadist actors operating in the region,<sup>2</sup> such as the JNIM, or other armed groups affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) under the banner of IS-Sahel. In the absence of effective State structures, these groups have exploited spiralling rural discontent to drive recruitment among the population. For example, in Tillabery (Niger), the Islamic State's local branch has exploited uncontrolled competition for natural resources and local authority among the Peul, Djerma, Tuareg, and Daosahak communities, progressively strengthening its position locally. This goes to show that while environmental pressures may not always be inherently political, their consequences are deeply tied to social and political dynamics.

Given the complex relationship between climate, natural resources and conflict, it is also crucial to consider that tensions and conflicts may arise in situations of resource abundance resulting from interventions aimed at addressing resource scarcity. For instance, after the Banibangou agreement was signed in Niger, numerous herders returned to the commune with their livestock, some after a decade away, capitalising on peace and restored pastures. This sudden influx created demographic pressures, requiring management not only for pastures but also water access, as many boreholes were sabotaged during years of conflict. In the case of central Mali, violence between jihadists and self-defence groups is partially connected to disputes over water reserves that have become accessible in recent decades through the construction of wells. Tensions between herders and farmers escalated as neither the State nor traditional local authorities demonstrated the capability or legitimacy to regulate land use and mediate conflicts over access to resources. These instances underscore that the problem goes beyond the mere availability of natural resources; it also hinges on wider issues of governance.

<sup>1</sup> G5 Sahel and ASSN, 2021. *Root Cause Analysis of Community-based Violence and Conflicts in G5 Sahel Countries*.

<sup>2</sup> UNOWAS, 2018. *Pastoralism and Security in West Africa and the Sahel*. p45.

## 1.2 Root causes of conflict in the Liptako Gourma region

**Centralised governance systems and marginalisation of rural areas:** States in the Sahel region tend to possess an excessively centralised governance system, which reinforces the geographical, economic and political marginalisation of those living in rural areas and border regions<sup>3</sup>, in which basic services are often lacking. This situation has fed into historical grievances that have sparked rebellions and led to autocratic regime changes. To move away from this centralised approach and because of their waning control over security in harder-to-reach regions, States have outsourced various areas of responsibility, be it natural resource management, administration, or security, to local and international actors, thereby pursuing a “hybrid”<sup>4</sup> form of governance. However, given the complexity and scale of the challenges they face, local authorities - both formal and traditional - frequently lack the capacity to handle outbreaks of violence efficiently.

**Lack of State presence and rise of civilian militarisation:** The security vacuum left by an increasingly absent State in some of the most conflict-affected zones of the Sahel led to a rise in civilian militarisation as self-defence groups formed in rural communities to compensate for the absence of military authorities. This is particularly the case in Mali and Burkina Faso. Unfortunately, this militarisation has translated into increased violence between communities, particularly concerning disputes over land/natural resource distribution and its contested use by herders and farmers. Tensions arising from resource scarcity are further exacerbated by the opportunistic actions of certain NSAGs and political elites. In a context of low trust towards State authorities, NSAGs are efficiently exploiting climate stressors and the absence of the State to bolster their attractiveness for recruitment, while also capitalising on anti-government sentiments. Conversely, climate-related issues can heighten the risk of local conflicts when exploited by local or national elites for personal interests.

**Weakening of customary and traditional conflict resolution practices:** Customary and traditional figures have had a historic role in amicably resolving disputes around the exploitation of natural resources. However, as a result of decentralisation policies and weakening social fabric, the mediation capacity of customary and traditional authorities has been undermined.<sup>5</sup> However, with their access to and understanding of the unique demographic and environmental contexts in their communities, customary and traditional mediators still hold important knowledge and legitimacy to gain the recognition of parties to a conflict and effectively facilitate the resolution of inter-communal conflicts.

**Promotion of large-scale agricultural practices:** Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have all shown a bias towards large-scale, often “peace-negative” agricultural practices. For instance, land ownership policies have generally benefited sedentary farmers at the expense of nomadic herders. Some States have even promoted the sedentarisation of previously nomadic herders, a practice which often drives an even further divide between communities.<sup>6</sup>

3 World Bank. 2022. *G5 Sahel Region Country Climate and Development Report*.

4 FEPS and IAI, 2019. *Governance and security in the Sahel: Tackling mobility, demography and climate change*.

5 HD, 2021. *Agro-pastoral mediation in the Sahel*.

6 International Crisis Group, 2020. *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*



**Dependence on revenues from valuable resources:** Mining of resources, particularly gold, is a frequent source of conflict, pitting private mining companies against local populations and artisanal miners and feeding disputes between local workers and migrant miners. The unregulated surge in mining has led to severe environmental repercussions, including water and soil pollution. This dependency on mining promotes detrimental practices such as deforestation, human rights violations, and illicit trade. These challenges disrupt people's livelihoods, intensify vulnerabilities, provoke resentment, drive individuals toward illicit means of survival, and potentially lead to recruitment by extremist or vigilante groups. In turn, such conditions create a fertile ground for recruitment by armed groups. Those concerns are not limited to Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso; they are also gaining attention in other West African states. For example, gold mining activity in south-eastern Senegal is suspected of potentially favouring an expansion of violent extremism into West African coastal states. Given the underlying tensions related to resource access, the significant movements of people and money resulting from artisanal and small-scale gold mining disturb social dynamics and often lead to conflicts. These extensive and unregulated movements are suspected to increase the risk of jihadists infiltrating vulnerable communities.

This is further explored in the TWG-EIP strategy for peace-positive natural resource management.

**Weak environmental governance:** Systemic mismanagement and widespread corruption can severely hinder effective natural resource governance. Although there are occasional attempts to address related issues through legislation, Sahelian States often lack comprehensive national regulatory frameworks or delegate oversight to local authorities who lack the capacity to enforce them. Inadequate coordination between the governance of security and natural resources results in states disregarding or overlooking the demands of local communities.



River Niger near Niamey, Niger.  
Credit: Michel Isamuna, 2022.

## 2.

# Mediation approaches in the Liptako Gourma

The Liptako Gourma region offers a wealth of mediation experience over the past decade, with different set of actors adopting different approaches over time. While the state-led strategies have tended to favour militarized approaches, they have also attempted various dialogues and helped brokered local agreements with armed groups. At the local level, a number of agreements have also been brokered both by insider mediators – traditional community leaders or religious figures - and with the help of local and international NGOs.

Mediation efforts are many and have often been underpinned by a recognition that access to natural resources is often at the root causes of conflicts. However, the specific provisions of most local agreements focus on putting an end to violence in the short-term and fall short of addressing these root causes and developing implementation mechanisms that can adapt to the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation in the medium to longer-term.

### 2.1 State approaches to mediation

Amid escalating violence in the Sahel, local and regional actors have adopted different approaches to mediation which have evolved over time. While the governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have occasionally considered engaging in dialogues with armed groups as a complement to their military-centred approach, the successive military coups in these countries appear to have hindered the prospects for a nationwide strategy supporting talks. State authorities' stances have varied, mindful of the level of popular buy-in. Consequently, dialogue initiatives, particularly those initiated by authorities in Burkina Faso ahead of the 2020 elections, were conducted discreetly. Furthermore, these official government positions have, at times, impeded the efforts of internal mediators and international mediation NGOs to initiate and sustain involvement in local peace initiatives in the region.

Nonetheless, since 2019, many local processes have been facilitated and subsequently, local agreements brokered. Such cases have received support from local and international NGOs, most notably in Mali and Niger. These agreements have outlined provisions for managing transhumance routes, preventing livestock theft, accessing grazing and water, and respecting customary verdicts and rules established by traditional authorities. **The chances such agreements withstanding the test of time has proven to be highly dependent on the extent to which States policies and strategies allow space for these agreements and help sustain them through meaningful peace dividends, including in the form of reforms of state governance notably at the local level.**

In 2020, the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) was mandated to lead discussions between Katiba Macina (JNIM) militants and Donso militants in Mali's central Niono commune - an area pivotal for its land and water resources and previously a site of conflict between these militants and Malian forces. The ceasefire was seen as a chance to address crucial issues such as fair land and water management as well as the protection of civilians from insurgent attacks. Unfortunately, a military coup in May 2021 removed Mali's transitional authorities who supported the dialogue-based solution, leading to the agreement collapsing by July. The withdrawal of national support post-coup was cited by one of its lead negotiators as the primary cause for this collapse.

Indeed, the lack of State backing resulted in unmet leadership commitments, causing a minor incident to escalate and erode trust among parties, ultimately causing the agreement to fail. With support from Russian military partners, the new Malian authorities have pivoted toward a predominantly military strategy in counterinsurgency, leaving minimal room for dialogue approaches. The recent victory of Malian armed forces in reclaiming control of Kidal in the country's North, with support from the Wagner Group, may well further embolden their military-focused stance.

A similar situation occurred in Burkina Faso when Captain Ibrahim Traore staged a coup on 30 September 2022. The ousted transitional authorities had been putting efforts into local dialogue initiatives, but the coup cut them short. Rather, Captain Traore has promoted a military strategy focused on popular defence against jihadist groups. This led to the recruitment of approximately 70,000 Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP), who serve as self-defence auxiliary militias to aid security forces in combating jihadists.

Niger, previously considered one of the most stable countries despite ongoing jihadi violence from the Islamic State's Sahelian branch and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), had adopted a distinctive approach, blending military actions with negotiations. A local peace agreement between representatives of Zarma and Fulani communities in Banibangou municipality (Tillabery region) on January 23, 2023, offered hope to long-standing conflicts rooted largely in competition over natural resources.

Just as the State of Niger (represented by the Haute Autorité à la Consolidation de la Paix (HACP) and the Ministry of Interior) had successfully brokered another peace deal in Ouallam, Tillabery region, in June 2023, a military coup led by a group of high-ranking military officers known as the Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP) ousted President Mohamed Bazoum in late July 2023, shedding uncertainty over the future of Niger's singular approach to dialogue.



Credit: Photo by YODA Adaman on Unsplash

### Box 1. The Banibangou agreement

One of the most significant recent local agreements signed in Niger (on 23 January 2023) took place between representatives of sedentary Zarma and nomadic Fulani communities in Banibangou municipality (Tillabery region), under the aegis of the State. The hope was that it would bring an end to a two-decade conflict that has killed more than 300 people, displaced many thousand and disrupted agro-pastoral activity. The massacres of villagers in Niger's northern Tillabery region in 2021 led to fears that a conflict previously characterized mainly by fighting between jihadists and security forces would spill over between communities. The 8-page agreement, which was mediated by the Niger's High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) over almost two years with support from the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), is meant to reduce tensions fuelled by competition for natural resources and armed violence in the Tillabery region.

The agreement was signed at the occasion of a forum that brought together representatives of the Tuareg, Arab, Zarma, Hausa and Fulani communities, for a peaceful coexistence; in the presence of key witnesses including religious leaders, the village chiefs, the coordinator of the self-defence groups, the regional administration and the Minister of Interior which had initiated the forum. A follow up committee to the agreement made of 23 representatives of the different communities was set up and meets on a quarterly basis. According to community leaders, the agreement quickly yielded stability. Markets reopened, farmers resumed working on their fields, displaced people began returning, and discussions were engaged regarding the disarmament of a militia that had been harassing civilians.

The HACP's work is guided by a holistic approach which aims to prevent the instrumentalisation of inter-community conflicts by jihadist groups. This approach to peace has been put to the test in the north of the Tillabery region, which is an essentially pastoral conflict zone where several communities with different socio-economic and cultural profiles live side by side. The area's economic vulnerability, combined with weak governance and exacerbated by recurring food and pastoral crises linked to conflicts and the consequences of climate change - the most common effects of which are exodus, migration, begging and conversion to small-scale trades - explains the widespread lack of sustainable prospects for livelihoods. The exploitation of natural resources shared by social groups with different economic and cultural models naturally leads to divergent interests, which are a potential source of recurring conflict. In 2015, in line with its holistic approach, the HACP began building "peace infrastructures", a series of projects in nomadic and/or at-risk areas designed as magnets for the creation of shared economic opportunities aimed at strengthening concerted resource management and dialogue. Such infrastructures aim to provide communities with the capacity to negotiate with each other by relying on local authorities.

## 2.2 Local approaches to mediation

The sheer number of local agreements signed in Liptako Gourma makes navigating them extremely challenging. In Central Mali alone, there have been over 40 agreements since 2019, with at least a third of them containing provisions concerning access to natural resources. In the case of most local agreements, while they acknowledge that the conflict primarily revolves around the sharing of natural resources, the provisions within the agreement only vaguely tackle this specific issue. What's more, the terms of these agreements are rarely made public and even when they are, they are often governed by unwritten clauses. Many agreements fall through after a short period of time and unfortunately lack robust follow-up mechanisms that would allow them to be monitored or replicated. At times, agreements also simply lose support among local communities.

Although many local agreements have led to temporary reductions in violence against civilians, some donors and governments have grown concerned that the terms of such deals may look like they are “giving in” to jihadi demands. The power imbalance in favour of jihadi armed groups indeed may give the impression that many of these deals are imposed rather than negotiated. The October 2020 siege of Farabougou in Central Mali and the February 2022 siege of Djibo in Burkina Faso are two emblematic examples.

### Box 2. The Djibo Process

This Djibo process consisted of secret ceasefire talks that took place in the months leading up to the November 2020 general elections between senior Burkina Faso security officials and jihadist representatives (but apparently not involving community leaders) in the predominantly Fulani Soum region. These talks subsequently led to a drop in violence - nearly five times fewer confrontations were reported between jihadists and security forces from November 2020 to January 2021 compared to the same period of the previous year. The government part of the deal included security forces and volunteer self-defence militias halting the targeting of Fulani men. Jihadists, for their part were to stop attacks in exchange for free movement in Djibo, including to the market and to visit family, without fearing any interference from the army. The deal also re-opened travel routes to Ouagadougou, lifting a blockade imposed by JNIM on Soum province since 2018, and allowing elections to take place. The agreement apparently also included the release of roughly 100 prisoners detained on accusations of links to the jihadists.

One of the challenges with the Djibo process seems to be that jihadists did not fully honor their part of the agreement. They reportedly continued to carry arms when visiting Djibo, to recruit, and to impose Islamic dress codes. Additionally, the local (Fulani) population and community leaders – largely left out of the negotiations – felt trapped between jihadi and government security forces. JNIM apparently used the ceasefire to reorganize, and they resumed blockades in the summer 2021 possibly in order to negotiate new local agreements that in turn gives them legitimacy vis a vis local population. The authorities retaliated by suspending the provision of all services including by the UN and NGOs in these areas under the control of armed groups. In January 2022, a military operation led by government armed forces destroyed several insurgent camps in the north, mostly in Soum Province. The following month, JNIM launched a new large-scale blockade against Djibo with attacks on the local infrastructure, ambushing supply convoys, and subjecting the population to starvation.

Traditional community leaders or religious figures often serve as insider mediators due to their intimate knowledge of disputing parties and the social and environmental dynamics within each community. Leveraging this understanding, they seek common ground and resolve conflicts arising from natural resource and environmental issues. However, the escalating conflict in the region has started to diminish the effectiveness of traditional leaders. Faced with a surge in violence and the looming threat of Jihadist groups, the means necessary to meet these challenges are progressively exceeding their capabilities, thereby harming their credibility.

### 2.3 A recognition of environmental root causes but limited environmental peacemaking and climate-informed practices

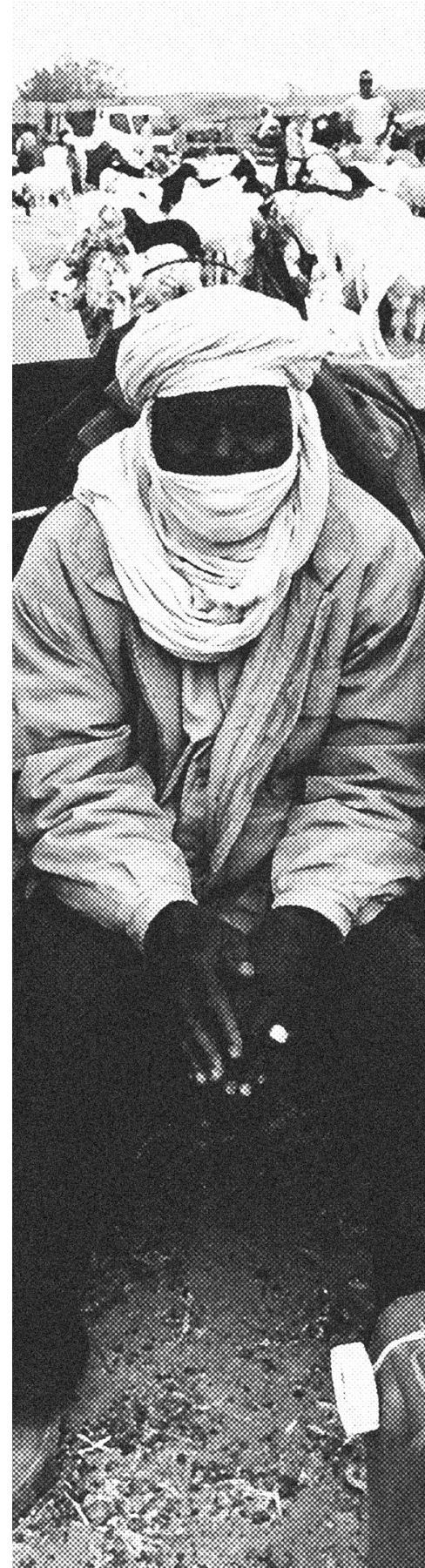
Despite multiple promising mediation efforts – supported by states in some instances but most often supported by NGOs - and a general recognition that access to natural resources is often at the root causes of conflicts, the specific provisions of most local agreements focus on putting an end to violence in the short term.

Some of these local agreements outline provisions for managing transhumance routes, preventing livestock theft, accessing grazing and water, and respecting customary verdicts and rules established by traditional authorities. However, rarely do they address issues of natural resource sharing and governance in a sustainable manner.

They also often fall short of developing implementation mechanisms that can adapt to the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation on these issues of natural resource sharing in the medium to longer term.

The limited ability of the state to regulate these issues at the local level and to accompany local agreements with peace dividends in the form of basic services and a return of state administration also means that powers are often delegated to traditional authorities with limited means to exercise them. Indeed, although traditional authorities can act as mediators, solve disputes between and within communities and prevent escalation, they are usually not equipped to provide tangible peace dividends, organise functioning follow-up committees, or deal with major violations of agreements. As a result, most local agreements are not respected or collapse within weeks.

Most importantly, the climate and environmental context in the region warrants practising mediation through an appropriate climate and environmental prism. More needs to be done to engage traditional and new actors in ways that better address the root causes of conflicts, particularly those related to the sharing of natural resources (land, water, mines, and protected areas) and provide tangible peace dividends and investments that factor in climate and environmental dynamics, and which are capable of sustaining agreements in the long-term.



### 3. Benefits of promoting a natural resource, environment and climate change lens in mediation and peacemaking

Natural resources, environment and climate change, have proven to be useful entry points for bringing parties together through dialogue initiatives, and this report argues in favour of better integrating environmental and climate-informed practices into mediation and other forms of peacemaking.

In doing so, however, one must first acknowledge some of the inherent risks associated with such an approach. Indeed, the overarching rationale of environmental peacemaking – which often emphasises climate change as an instigator or multiplier of conflict - **can, in some cases, diminish and de-emphasise the accountability of governments and State authorities in addressing governance concerns, therefore depoliticising some of the issues at hand.** While this framing can promote cooperation on relatively or at least comparatively uncontroversial ground, it also runs the risk of avoiding the core issues of governance, political economy, and accountability.

With that said, this pilot project has confirmed the pertinence and, indeed, imperative of adding a more deliberate natural resource, environmental and, to some degree, climate lens into peacemaking efforts in the Liptako Gourma. A natural resources and environmental framing may not only facilitate the resolution of certain local conflicts that may have more intractable ethnic and ideological elements but also help build trust between different communities while limiting the ability of armed groups - including jihadi ones - to exploit local tensions over access to natural resources.

The project has also demonstrated that adding an environmental peacemaking and climate-informed lens to the context analysis and mapping of actors is relatively easy. **Adding a climate change lens, however, can however require a more technical level of expertise.** One element that can be particularly challenging for mediators to digest is what can be referred to as the “clash of timelines” i.e., the fact that natural resource- and climate change-related issues tend to have a medium to long-term timeframe, where mediation imperatives are often short in nature to stop violence. And, as suggested above, while the technical inputs are helpful, they should not lead to a de-politicisation of issues, particularly when it comes to deeper governance reforms required for agreements to be sustained over the longer term.

It is important to note that **accounting for climate considerations in mediation may not be straightforward.** The main reason for this is that while conflicts driven or aggravated by natural resources, environmental factors may be easier to identify if they are root causes of conflict or directly contributing to them, disputes affected by climate change are indirect and tend to exacerbate existing socioeconomic, ethnic, or political tensions. Consequently, involved parties may not readily recognise the influence of climate change on conflict, given its involvement through complex pathways.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> DPPA, (2023). *The Implications of Climate Change for Mediation and Peace Processes.*

Moreover, **factors related to vulnerability, exposure and resilience to conflict and climate can differ depending on gender, ethnicity, livelihood, social and economic status, and even location.** Research and practice demonstrate how certain groups are inherently more vulnerable to the access and use of natural resources and the impact of environmental degradation and climate change. For example, gender norms and power dynamics shape how women and men experience conflict and insecurity in a changing climate. Additionally, nomadic communities in the Liptako Gourma depend on land and natural resources, rendering them exposed to the impact of climate change and vulnerable to the centralist policies and plans that often focus on urban areas.

Therefore, **local capacity and inclusive processes to mediate and resolve conflict over natural resources and climate change impacts are fundamental for sustainability in environmental peacemaking.** On the one hand, investing in strengthening community-based natural resources governance and climate adaptation capacity, as well as in mediation capacity and local conflict resolution mechanisms, ensures that small disputes can be addressed locally before escalating, which can also contribute to building trust in local authorities such as tribal and customary leaders. On the other, promoting inclusive processes can ensure that different groups' distinct needs and expertise are considered in local decision-making mechanisms and provide a platform for continuous dialogue and relationship building between and among resource users.<sup>8</sup>

Natural resources, environmental peacemaking and climate adaptation responses in conflict-affected countries can also offer opportunities for peacemaking under a conflict-sensitive lens, as further detailed in the Natural Resources Management Approach in the Liptako Gourma, for which it is **relevant for environmental practitioners to be aware and sensitive to the security context and try to promote and solidify peace dividends.**

Consequently, mediators in the Liptako Gourma may wish to continue exchanging over and refining their understanding of the role that natural resources, environmental and climate matters can play in the onset or prolongation of conflict, the potential opportunities for inclusion of marginalised groups, and peace dividends reached at the short- and long-term, thereby designing and implementing processes sensitive to the impacts of climate change in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

### 3.1 The benefits of taking an environmental peacemaking and climate-informed mediation approaches in Liptako Gourma

In the Liptako Gourma region – and, indeed, broader geopolitical context - that is increasingly polarised and suspicious of agendas that may be perceived as externally imposed, there is an important **risk that environmental peacemaking and climate-informed mediation be denounced as being externally-driven Western agendas.**

**It is, therefore, essential that initiatives that factor in environmental root causes - and climate change to the degree possible - be grounded in local analysis and practices and owned by the parties at the local and national levels.** Such an approach, however, should not prevent relevant regional and international actors from providing necessary technical expertise to the parties and local mediators on issues related to the environment and climate change.

In November 2023, Sahelian countries adopted a landmark declaration at the inaugural Sahel Climate, Peace and Security Forum, committing to bolstering climate security in the region. While the declaration focuses on regional and international collaboration in favour of climate security and financing, the recognition of the need to develop and operationalise inclusive national and regional strategies to strengthen climate resilience, peace and security in the Sahel, can provide useful entry points for promoting environmental peacemaking and climate-informed mediation approaches in Liptako Gourma.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> UNEP-EU, (2022). *Climate Change and Security Partnership. Final Report.*

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.undp.org/africa/waca/press-releases/landmark-declaration-adopted-strengthen-climate-security-sahel>



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Environmental peacemaking is a practice of dialogue and mediation that seeks to pursue more effective prevention and resolution of conflict by addressing core climate, environmental and natural resource drivers and bringing in environmental issues that can help resolution and more sustainable peace or create mechanisms for future collaboration.

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Many actors have long mediated and resolved intercommunal disputes over agropastoral resources, including sharing of land, demarcation of transhumance routes, and management of water points - often the sources of clashes between farmer and herder communities and between pastoral communities themselves. Indeed, the national pastoralists' code includes dispute-resolution mechanisms and specifies the roles of traditional leaders as mediators.

Understanding that conflicts in the Liptako Gourma often stem from mismanagement of and/or competition over natural resources and environmental degradation and considering the expertise of various local, regional, traditional, governmental, and international actors in mediating such disputes, using an approach that addresses environmental risks can significantly help prevent and resolve conflicts in the region. This approach offers several benefits, including:

- 1 Increase local environmental protection, better use of scarce resources, and climate adaptation in conflict-affected areas with weak governing institutions.** For example, as seen in the Local Land Charter process supported in rural areas of Burkina Faso by the ONF-BF, communities and groups of resource users make the link between customary practices and the legal framework when State institutions cannot.

See the ONF-BF Practice Note for further details.

- 2 Strengthen the authority, role, and function of customary, tribal, and traditional leaders in dispute resolution and conflict prevention, especially in rural areas where the government may be less present.** The Emir of Liptako, a customary leader in a remote rural area of Burkina Faso, showcased the vital role played by traditional leaders in resolving disputes among nomadic groups in transboundary regions with limited State presence.

See the Emir of Liptako Practice Note for further details.

- 3 Ensure local ownership of dialogue, negotiation, and implementation of mediated agreements.** The HACP's experience in Niger demonstrated that a holistic approach driven by communities themselves and backed by the State, fosters local ownership of the peace process. This leads to better adherence to outcomes and can potentially attract political and financial resources for sustaining local agreements. By empowering communities to negotiate and supporting local authorities, the HACP bolstered their legitimacy and capacity to engage effectively.

See the HACP Practice Note for further details.

See the **IMADEL Practice Note** for further details.

**4** Ensure tangible environmental peace dividends after dialogues, forums, and agreements to solidify peacemaking processes. The experience from IMADEL in Mali suggests that the initiation and implementation of projects aiming to ensure more equitable access to natural resources is conducive to other reconciliation agreements based on the trust built through sharing, cooperation and adaptation projects such as the demarcation of farms and transhumance routes or the establishment of conflict resolution committees. These can play a role in promoting new and more sustainable forms of local environmental and natural resources governance.

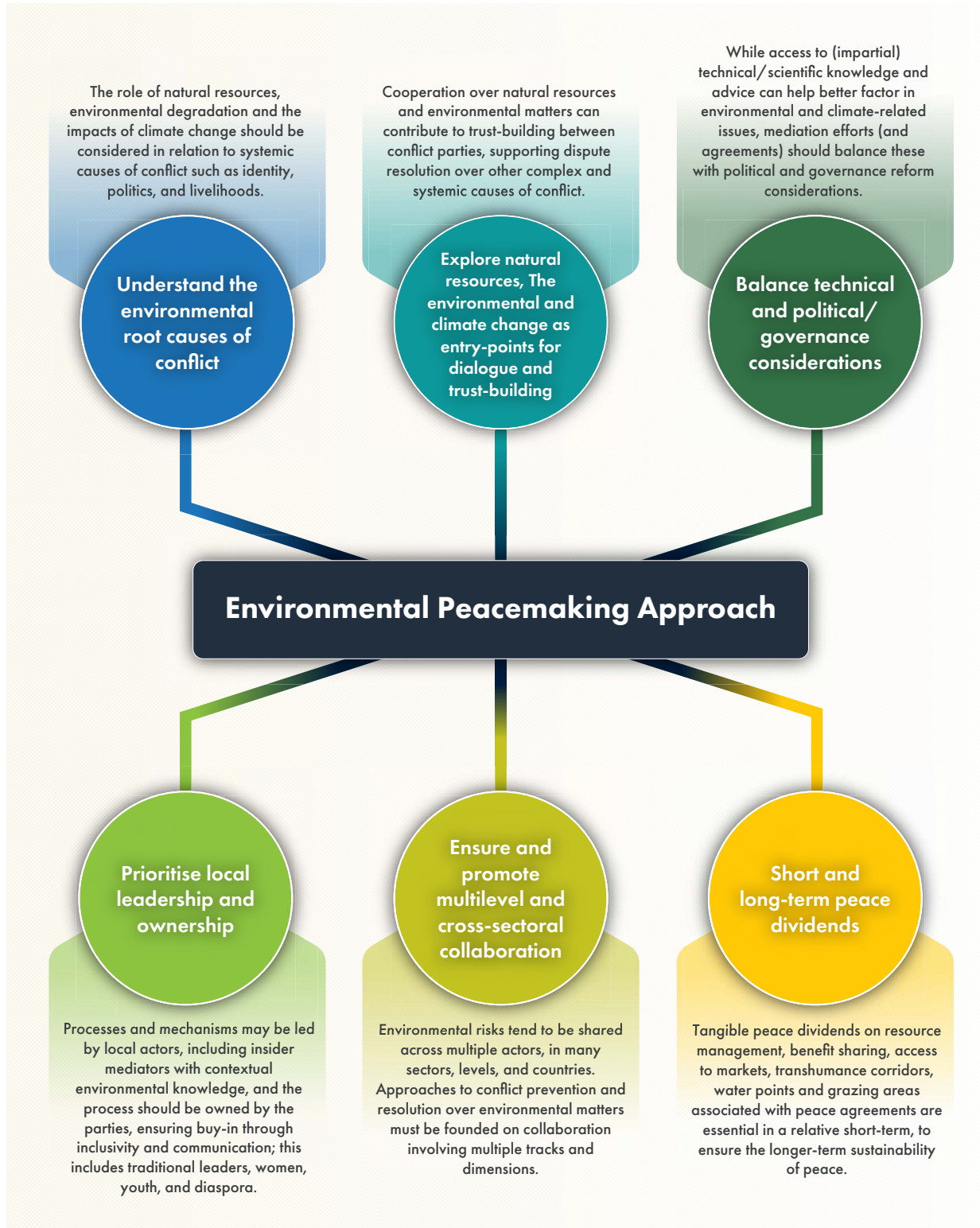
**5** Contribute to more sustainable and long-lasting agreements by being sensitive to the impacts of climate change. Climate-adaptive peace agreements can become irrelevant due to shifting climate patterns after a few years. Mediators may suggest including provisions to monitor and adapt identified climate change security risks<sup>10</sup> and promote the creation of a climate-resilient agreement that factors in the variability of climate change in order to ensure its sustainability while being mindful of preventing stakeholders from viewing adaptability as an invitation for frequent renegotiation, which could hinder or postpone implementation.



<sup>10</sup> DPPA, (2023). *The Implications of Climate Change for Mediation and Peace Processes*.

# 4.

## Principles for an environmental peacemaking approach



# 5.

## Environmental peacemaking: Good practices

Based on the experience of the local partners of this project, this section suggests a set of good practices to integrate environmental considerations in mediation in the Liptako Gourma, illustrating them with practical examples shared by these actors.

### 5.1 Analysis and information-sharing

- **Climate risk and conflict analysis:** Understand the role of natural resources, environment or climate in a dispute and relate them to systemic causes of conflict. Support parties' awareness of climate-related security risks and their implications in Liptako Gourma to ensure that peace processes and negotiations are sensitive to climate and agreements are more sustainable in the long run and help mitigate unpredictable climate-related crises.
- **Knowledge-sharing on habits and customs:** Encourage knowledge-sharing on various laws and customs. There can be a disconnect between the local habits and customs governing pastoral resource management and the laws and national or international conventions that the States have ratified. Pastoral communities often do not understand this overlap. This lack of understanding and shared perceptions can also manifest itself between different communities whose habits and customs vary from one another, leading to violence and conflict. For instance, transhumant Touaregs forbid animals from crossing a campsite for reasons of security and the respect of intimacy, but according to Fulani custom, this is authorised.
- **Local and regional networks:** Promote bilateral and multilateral exchanges with local and transboundary actors on environmental peacemaking, including traditional, customary, and state actors, all the way to rural and border areas, and not limited to urban centres.
- **Technical knowledge provision:** Facilitate the sharing of information, experiences, and best practices on conflict resolution, natural resources management and climate adaptation. For example, mapping natural resources to share impartial information with all actors of Liptako Gourma, which governance and conflict resolution committees can also support.

#### Box 3. The National Land Observatory of Burkina Faso (ONF-BF)

ONF-BF has as its mission to contribute to the improvement of land governance and the resolution of land-related issues through the production and dissemination of relevant information. Their approach contributes to the adoption and enhancement of practices, customs and legal frameworks related to environmental governance and alternative management of land conflicts. The ONF-BF's integrated strategy to helping communes bolster their capacity for governing their land and natural resources and the use of alternative methods to manage land disputes has helped resolve conflicts and ensure the sustainable management of natural resources. A potential entry point for implementing environmental peacemaking on a broader regional scale could involve following the example set by the ONF-BF's approach through knowledge-sharing, networking, and exchanging best practices. This approach could be adapted at a regional level, engaging authorities such as the Autorité Liptako Gourma (ALG) and the Comité permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel (CILSS).

## 5.2 Process and agreement design

- **Processes and negotiations design:** Include dedicated time and opportunities within dialogue process designs to discuss natural resources and the environment as potential paths for cooperation and confidence-building measures. Bring in specific local and international expertise, ranging from designing transhumance routes to understanding climate change impacts, during key stages of the process in order to integrate these aspects into the discussions effectively.

### Box 4. IMADEL - Inclusion of women and youth in conflict resolution in Mali

In an effort to address a conflict that broke out between the Fulani and Dogon communities in central Mali, a project entitled "Peacebuilding and Strengthening Livelihoods in the Koro Circle" was implemented by IMADEL (the Malian Local Development Support Initiative) with the aim of resolving the conflict, consolidating peace and restoring social cohesion.

In a context marked by the exacerbation of inter- and intra-community conflicts in the circle of Koro, the initiative consisted of a diagnosis of the conflict, its analysis, and the proposal of possible solutions. The analysis of the conflict context identified grievances over the management of natural resources, access to water, and the economic revival of young people and women as root causes. Approaches to address these included creating pastoral water points, animal crossings, the development of pastoral reserves, the multiplication of community water points, capacity building for young people and women leaders.

IMADEL also encouraged and supported the emergence of community groups composed of both men and women committed to peace and reconciliation - the most famous of which is "MONOBEME", which means "let's live together" in the local Dogon language.

The contextual analysis emphasized the significant role of women and young people in resolving the conflict. Women can play a facilitating role in inter-community integration through promoting income-generating activities such as mill management, market gardening, dyeing, and soap making. Young people, involved both as actors and victims in the conflict, hold the key to resolution and preventing future conflicts through their commitment to peace and harmonious coexistence.

- **Environmentally sensitive and climate-adaptive agreements:** Encourage the factoring in of environment and climate in the agreements (local and/or track 1) themselves and the establishment of properly staffed, equipped, and financed joint management frameworks for transboundary resources, such as transhumance routes, rivers, forests, and ecosystems.
- **Inclusivity:** Emphasize environmental peacemaking as an entry point for meaningful participation of women or other minority groups (youth, diaspora) as well as business actors throughout all stages of a process and can help ensure the sustainability of agreements through tangible peace dividends and more effective inclusive follow-up and monitoring mechanisms. Indeed, women hold a crucial position as the main providers of food and water for their households and play a pivotal role in agriculture, making their involvement indispensable in both understanding and addressing the impacts of climate change.

### 5.3 Implementation

- Promotion of environmental peacemaking initiatives: Highlight the importance of integrated initiatives that simultaneously tackle natural resources, environmental protection, and climate adaptation alongside peacemaking efforts. Such integration during the implementation phase becomes more feasible if the agreement includes specific provisions dedicated to these aspects. Similarly, implementation should be mindful to prevent any negative environmental side effect of an agreement, particularly if it risks exposing certain vulnerable populations – both among nomadic and sedentary groups – to adverse effects of climate change in the short or medium term.
- Environmental and conflict monitoring and reporting: Anticipate rising tensions due to changes in natural resources quantity or quality, natural hazards, and aggravated climate change with early-warning and monitoring systems, including at the local level through follow-up committees established following local agreements. In turn, this can help enhance communication between actors over technical matters, which, in turn, can promote transparency and willingness to cooperate on other more contested issues, and contribute to holding accountability.
- Multilevel and transboundary approach: Develop policies and projects that factor in cross-border issues where relevant (when natural resources such as water and protected areas go beyond the territory of one country and where violence may have led to cross-border displacements of populations and animals), through cooperation between neighbouring local authorities of different countries, as well as cooperation between traditional and customary leaders who are often already part of larger subregional networks.

#### Box 5. Subregional cooperation

The Association pour la Promotion de l'Élevage dans le Sahel et la Savane (APESS), the Réseau des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs en Afrique de l'Ouest (ROPPA) and the Réseau Billital Maroobe (RBM) are examples of subregional networks, which have been supported by the regional Liptako Gourma 3 Frontiers Project (P3F) launched in 2019 by the French Development Agency for three years. The project aims to support agro-pastoral communities to improve environmental protection, transhumance and the prevention and resolution of conflicts related to natural resource management.

# 6. Conclusion

**Environmental peacemaking is an approach aiming for more effective conflict prevention and resolution by addressing fundamental climate, environmental, and natural resource drivers of conflict.** It involves incorporating environmental issues to achieve sustainable peace and creating frameworks for future collaboration.

**Well-crafted interventions have the potential to foster sustainable peace and stability.** These efforts can address power imbalances and social injustices positively, encourage innovation to tackle current challenges, and incentivise long-term solutions. Given that climate-related issues require enduring solutions, it justifies the need for sustained implementation, monitoring, and management over the long term. This approach validates local commitment, investments, and ownership of processes aimed at resolving environmental causes of conflict.

So far, **the implementation of the environmental peacemaking approach in the Liptako Gourma region remains a work in progress.** Indeed, while many local agreements were brokered these past few years, and most peacemakers at different levels, local, national, and subregional - recognise that the sharing of natural resources is at the core of many conflicts, the agreements often fall short of substantially addressing some of the environmental and climate-related root causes and/or aggravating factors. The natural urge for peacemakers to stop the violence as quickly as possible and government policies that often continue to prioritise militarised responses over negotiated ones continue to be obstacles to advancing this environmental peacemaking approach in the region.

There is, however, **a growing recognition by peacemakers at all levels of the importance of better factoring in root causes of conflicts across the region, which most often relate to rivalries over the use and management of agropastoral natural resources** - farmer-herders clashes remaining by far the most recurrent in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger - which are often exploited by various armed groups including jihadi ones.

**The benefit of this approach lies not only in its local implications but also in its potential impact on a wider national level.** Many attempts at stabilisation in the region have been viewed through the lens of the security-development nexus, which suggests that security and development can reinforce each other, providing an opportunity for implementing projects that can lead to State redeployment and stability. However, this approach faced several challenges in practice. Despite military efforts to reclaim territories in the Liptako Gourma region, the redeployment of state services was often curtailed by renewed jihadist attacks. The military-centric strategy overlooked various complex factors fuelling intercommunal violence, including disparities in natural resource distribution and territorial gains that were short-lived.

Additionally, there was an assumption that civilians would prefer State governance over alternative forms offered by armed militants. Yet, in certain rural Sahel areas affected by resource conflicts, militants have effectively managed disputes, contrasting with the fear of state intervention among herders due to past agricultural policies favouring farmers.

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This goes to show that using the environment as an entry point to mediation will also allow communities to explore the underlying political, social and economic issues of conflict, thereby promoting a more holistic approach to their resolution.

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Mediators and international partners must be cautious not to impose external interests on local conflict resolution processes or to depoliticise issues through an environmental and climate change lens, but rather promote local anchoring and ownership of both the environmental and climate-informed analysis and mediation processes. Conflict dynamics often manifest at a highly localised level, and armed actors capitalise on intercommunal tensions, engaging at this local level. As a result, these dynamics profoundly influence the evolution of the crisis and should, therefore, be a core element of our understanding of it.

This paper aims to promote environmental peacemaking as a viable lens and approach to mediation by drawing insights from practitioners and initiatives in a region where this approach holds particular significance due to its reliance on shared natural resources - critical for farming and herding communities spanning across borders. Livelihoods in the Liptako Gourma are particularly facing threats posed by the rapid depletion of these resources, compounded by the effects of climate change, and overall insecurity in the region. In that context, this paper provides a set of principles and potential strategies to integrate environmental considerations into peacemaking efforts, serving as a guide for local, national, and regional stakeholders to incorporate environmental aspects into the design and execution of peacemaking strategies at various levels.







EUROPEAN  
INSTITUTE  
OF PEACE

European Institute of Peace (EIP)  
Rue des Deux Eglises 25  
1000 Brussels, Belgium

[www.eip.org](http://www.eip.org)  
[info@eip.org](mailto:info@eip.org)



TrustWorks  
Global

TrustWorks Global  
Rue de l'Évêché, 1  
Geneva 1204, Switzerland

[www.trustworksglobal.com](http://www.trustworksglobal.com)  
[info@trustworksglobal.com](mailto:info@trustworksglobal.com)