Environmental entry points for peacemaking in Yemen

Berghof Foundation

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AU	African Union
CARPO	Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient
CBMs	Confidence-Building Measures
CSS	Center for Security Studies
DDR	Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration
DPPA	United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs
ETH Zürich	Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich
FSO	Floating Storage and Offloading
HRW	Human Rights Watch
NUPI	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
STC	Southern Transitional Council
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
ZIF	Zentrum für Internationale Friedenseinsätze - Center for International Peace Operations

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1 Overview

Environmental issues remain marginal in mediation practice. Fewer than one per cent of peace agreements signed between 1990 and 2023 explicitly reference climate change, and where they do, references tend to be limited in scope.[1] In practice, mediators tend to prioritise immediate security and political issues, while environmental concerns are seen as longer-term and harder to integrate. However, mediators are increasingly exploring environmental and climate-related issues as potential entry points for engagement.[2] This shift reflects growing recognition that these pressures can shape conflict dynamics and offer practical entry points for engagement, particularly where other avenues remain constrained.

Concrete evidence for how these approaches work in practice remains limited, particularly in active conflict settings. Nevertheless, Yemen provides a useful case to examine these dynamics, drawing on ongoing engagement and research.[3]

Yemen has been split between an administration in Sana'a aligned with the Houthi Movement and an internationally recognised government in Aden, since the Houthis seized Sana'a in late 2014. The conflict has become strongly internationalised, with Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates playing important roles. Despite multiple efforts by international mediators, including a 2022 UN-negotiated truce, a lasting political settlement remains elusive. The United Nations has warned of a worsening humanitarian crisis in Yemen, with around 21 million people, roughly two-thirds of the population, needing aid.[4] The situation became even more complex in December 2025, when the Southern Transitional Council (STC),[5] a coalition of groups demanding independence for the south, backed by the UAE, moved to seize parts of Hadramawt, prompting a Saudi-backed counteroffensive that expelled the STC from the province and much of southern Yemen. The UN Special Envoy's office continues to play a central role in Track 1-level mediation efforts, but since 2022, progress has been limited.[6]

Against this backdrop of political fragmentation and stalled negotiations, environmental pressures may appear peripheral. In practice, however, they are central to how conflict is experienced by Yemenis daily. Water scarcity, floods, waste management and pollution affect the provision of basic services, drive local grievances, and increasingly intersect with political and security dynamics.[7] They create shared vulnerabilities that no single side can manage alone. This makes them a potential entry point for both peacebuilding and peacemaking in Yemen.

First, this policy brief argues that environmental issues can offer one practical way to reduce harm and maintain dialogue, especially when they cut across core areas of negotiation, like governance and resource-sharing, which are closely linked to underlying grievances and questions of authority. Addressing them in a targeted way can help make agreements more sustainable. Second, evidence from Yemen shows that communities and local authorities are already negotiating around environmental pressures, often through informal confidence-building measures.[8] These practices are uneven and fragile, but they can provide a foundation for cooperation. Finally, the policy brief outlines some practical lessons for mediators in Yemen and beyond.

2 Environmental stress and service delivery politics

Environmental pressures in Yemen are closely linked to the breakdown of services. Water supply, waste management, flood protection and environmental health are all areas where state capacity has eroded over years of conflict. As a result, environmental risks are not only ecological issues, they are also service delivery failures.

In Aden, for example, heavy rains regularly flood neighbourhoods, with floodwater mixed with sewage and uncollected garbage. Youth groups and neighbourhood committees organise clean-ups and basic drainage, sometimes alongside municipal workers. Although actions such as these build solidarity, they remain limited in scope and cannot match the scale of the problem. Because environmental risks are shared and visible, failure to address them carries reputational and political costs for all parties. This creates a narrow but important space where cooperation can become politically viable, even in the absence of broader political agreements.

This has direct political implications for mediators. In many parts of Yemen, legitimacy depends less on formal authority than on the ability to provide or facilitate access to services and humanitarian aid. Yet these shared environmental risks can create practical incentives for cooperation and open limited but important spaces for dialogue, trust-building and coordination, even between politically divided groups.

In Yemen, local leaders regularly negotiate water access or coordinate flood responses, while technical staff maintain services across divided areas, often in the absence of formal agreements. In Taiz, for example, efforts have been made to reconnect parts of the water network across lines of control, allowing limited supply from wells located in Houthi-held Hawban to reach Taiz city.[9] These arrangements required technical coordination and tacit acceptance by both sides, despite the absence of broader political agreement.[10]

These practices demonstrate what is possible under current conditions and provide a foundation for mediation efforts to build on. The challenge is how to connect these local practices to mediation processes more deliberately and across various levels. At the local level, this means supporting and strengthening practical cooperation. In Track 1.5 and Track 2 processes, it means translating local experiences into technical dialogue and shared understanding. At Track 1 level, it means recognising these efforts and, where appropriate, linking them to broader processes.[11]

3 Key practical lessons from Yemen

Environmental issues can offer practical entry points for mediation, but their potential should not be overstated. If poorly timed or designed, efforts to link environmental cooperation to peace processes can discourage collaboration or undermine existing arrangements.[12] Environmental cooperation can support mediation, but it cannot replace political processes. Overloading these initiatives with political expectations and high-level attention can, at times, undermine them.[13] This requires careful judgement in deciding when and how such entry points should be used.[14]

The following lessons, drawing on insights from Yemen, highlight how environmental entry points can support mediation when grounded in existing practice.

1 Use environmental cooperation as a confidence-building measure and link it to mediation processes where this adds value. [15]

Environmental cooperation can provide practical, low-risk entry points for engagement, particularly in areas where coordination is already taking place. In Yemen, this includes arrangements around water access in places like Taiz and cooperation to address shared risks such as oil spills. [16] Even limited technical coordination can help sustain contact between parties and pave the way for deeper cooperation.

2 Ensure that environmental risks and resource pressures are reflected without overcomplicating negotiations.

Where appropriate, environmental initiatives can be reflected in mediation processes to signal progress and build momentum. At the same time, not all initiatives should be formalised. Some are more effective when kept local, informal and insulated from political bargaining. Experience in Yemen suggests that overloading such initiatives with political expectations or external funding can undermine them, while failing to connect them to broader processes may limit their longer-term impact. The focus should remain on areas where cooperation is feasible and linked to shared interests.

3 Base economic and recovery provisions on realistic assumptions.

Likewise, economic provisions and agreements on resource-sharing should be based on realistic financial assumptions, particularly where resource pressures and environmental risks affect revenue prospects. In Yemen, uncertainty around oil and gas revenues, combined with infrastructure damage and volatility in global markets, complicates expectations of post-conflict recovery. Climate finance may be used by mediators as an additional financial incentive but is better understood as a medium-term enabler with a potential contribution to longer-term stability.[17]

4 Identify opportunities to reduce environmental harm through security arrangements.

Negotiations on security arrangements may include joint disaster response and rescue operations as areas for cooperation. Integrating soldiers and other fighters into formal disaster risk management structures could be an option for supporting disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. When negotiating future security arrangements, mediators can also suggest that conflict parties refrain from attacking or interfering with critical water, sanitation and waste services to minimise environmental and humanitarian harm.

5 Apply a basic “risk filter” to major recovery and reconstruction decisions.

Mediation and peacebuilding organisations can encourage decision-makers to consider environmental and climate risks when drafting policies on reconstruction, decentralisation or investment, as part of conflict-sensitive recovery. In Yemen, where infrastructure is degraded and service provision uneven, overlooking these risks

may reinforce existing inequalities and create new sources of tension. A basic risk filter can help ensure that recovery efforts reduce vulnerability rather than deepen it.

4 Conclusion

Environmental pressures are intensifying in many fragile parts of the world, but they also create shared risks that can be used constructively. They offer a way to address immediate needs, build limited cooperation, and keep mediation grounded in everyday realities. They will not resolve all conflicts, but they can in many cases help reduce harm and preserve space for dialogue.

In Yemen, the ability to manage services, provide emergency aid, and respond to economic pressures has long been central to political authority, reinforcing the importance of practical, service-oriented entry points. These pressures cut across frontlines. Floodwaters do not stop at checkpoints. Aquifers are shared across areas of control. Waste and pollution travel across administrative and political boundaries.

In a context where formal negotiations remain stalled, environmental entry points could prove to be one of the few viable ways to keep pathways to peace open.

ENDNOTES

[1] While only seven of 2,003 peace agreements (1990–2023) explicitly mention climate change, analysis of 28 agreements shows that climate issues are often addressed indirectly, shape bargaining dynamics, and can lead to both positive and negative unintended environmental outcomes.

[2] See Mason, S. J. A., Kratzer, S. and Jackson, E. (2026). *Environmental Entry Points for Mediation*.

[3] In 2025, Berghof and its partners conducted governorate-level consultations in Aden, Taiz and Hadramawt and joint workshops with Yemeni and international actors. Local voices consistently emphasised that communities and local authorities are already managing tensions around water, floods, waste and land through a mix of formal and informal arrangements. These practices, although often fragile and uneven, provide an important foundation for thinking about environmental peacemaking in politically realistic terms.

[4] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). *Yemen Humanitarian Needs Overview 2024*.

[5] Wintour, P. (2025). "Saudi-backed forces gather on Yemen border as separatists face pressure to pull back", *The Guardian*, 18 December.

[6] In September 2025, the UN relocated the Resident Coordinator's office for Yemen to Aden, more than a week after at least 18 UN personnel were detained in Sana'a.

[7] See Koefoed et al. (2023) and Mohammed (2023). Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet: Yemen and *Environmental Crisis: The Forgotten Fallout of an Enduring Conflict*. Arab Reform Initiative.

[8] See Koefoed et al. (2023) and Mohammed (2023) on local environmental cooperation and informal service arrangements in Yemen.

[9] Human Rights Watch (2023). *"Death is More Merciful Than This Life": Houthi and Yemeni Government Violations of the Right to Water in Taizz*.

[10] See Koefoed et al. (2023) and Mohammed (2023), based on documented local practices around water access and infrastructure maintenance.

[11] See Mason, S. J. A., Kratzer, S. and Jackson, E. (2026). *Environmental Entry Points for Mediation*.

[12] See Mason, S. J. A., Kratzer, S. and Jackson, E. (2026). *Environmental Entry Points for Mediation*.

[13] United Nations Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) (2022). *The Implications of Climate Change for Mediation and Peace Processes*. DPPA Practice Note, September 2022. dppapracticenote-theimplicationsofclimatechangeformediationandpeaceprocesses.pdf

[14] Ibid. Suggests Mediation Entry Points Criteria 1) Parties have a shared political objective or vision beyond the environment, 2) Conflict parties or their constituencies are negatively impacted by environmental issues, or the lack of action on them, 3) The issue can be addressed by technical and cooperative actions, 4) Working on the environment leads to tangible outcomes, which both sides can sell as wins to their constituencies, 5) The entry point leads to further stepping stones enabling a move from environment to security issues, 6) Data-sharing is possible, creating a shared knowledge base, 7) Benefits outweigh the risks.

[15] Mason, S. J. A. and Siegfried, M. (2013). *Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in Peace Processes*, in: Managing Peace Processes: Process related questions. A handbook for AU practitioners, Vol. 1. African Union and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 57–77.

[16] The UN-led operation to address the FSO Safer involved negotiations with Houthi authorities to allow access to and removal of over one million barrels of oil from a deteriorating tanker off Yemen's Red Sea coast between 2022 and 2023, preventing a potentially catastrophic oil spill.

[17] In the context of Yemen's political division, weak institutions and security concerns, which have made

donors cautious and funding applications difficult to prepare and manage, a peace agreement will not automatically change this; rather, it will create an opening. See Aklan, M. & Mohammed (2025).

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