

From Silent Victim to Bridgebuilder: The Potential of Environmental Peacebuilding in Ukraine

Coordination Workshop Report

Lviv, 7-8 December 2023

Summary

From the pollution caused by land mines and abandoned military equipment to the catastrophic flooding following the explosion of the Kakhovka Dam in 2023: the war has brought unprecedented levels of environmental damage to Ukraine. In December 2023, a diverse group of Ukrainian and international experts in the fields of environmental protection and peacebuilding¹ met in Lviv to take stock of the environmental damage caused by the war in Ukraine and current efforts to document it, as well as to develop recommendations on how to advance environmental protection and social cohesion through environmental peacebuilding approaches.

The discussions highlighted both the potential of linking environmental projects with peacebuilding approaches as well as the need to include mechanisms for meaningful community participation in the planning and implementation of environmental restoration and reconstruction activities. Such environmental activities have a tremendous potential for building trust and enhancing communication within communities, thereby furthering social cohesion through a concrete shared project or shared vision for the future. Yet, reconstruction and restoration plans run the risk of generating mistrust and being rejected by the communities they are meant to serve if they are not planned transparently and in accordance with the community's needs.

This illustrates the need for interdisciplinary cooperation between environmental experts and activists, peacebuilders, local governments and other actors contributing to the development of reconstruction plans in order to ensure that Ukraine's villages, towns and cities really do "build back better" in all relevant areas. A national platform on environmental peacebuilding bringing together different stakeholders could develop further recommendations on inclusive, sustainable and conflict-sensitive recovery.

The workshop was convened by the Berghof Foundation. Representatives of the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD), the Crimean Tatar Resource Center, NGO "Dialogue", ForestCom, USAID, Infinite Lambda, Caritas, the Ukrainian Community of Dialogue Practitioners, the Norwegian Refugee Council, "Environment People Law" and Building Ukraine Together participated and contributed with their ideas and expertise.

¹ In this context, "peacebuilding" refers specifically to the process of strengthening social cohesion within Ukraine itself. The term, as used by the Berghof Foundation, emphasizes the internal development of a resilient and unified society, as opposed to facilitating peace negotiations or cooperation with external actors. The focus is on fostering a sense of community and mutual understanding among Ukrainians, which is seen as a vital component of the nation's long-term stability and resilience, as well as environmental rehabilitation efforts.

The Environmental Impact of the War in Ukraine

Since the beginning of the conflict in Donbas and the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, the conflict with Russia has led to severe environmental destruction in Ukraine. The danger of toxic leakage to groundwater by flooded mines in occupied Donbas has been well-established, while the indigenous Crimean Tatar population have seen access to their ancestral lands severely infringed since the beginning of the Russian occupation.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the instances and extent of environmental destruction as a result of the war has multiplied. Without a doubt the most well-known instance of environmental damage was the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023, which led to the massive flooding along the Dnipro river. This resulted in an extreme humanitarian emergency as well as soil erosion with implications for the local agricultural economy and pollution of the Black Sea, with land mines being washed ashore as far as Odesa. Remarkably, despite the initial catastrophic forecasts, the area has demonstrated a swift and robust recovery to conditions similar to before the building of the dam, illustrating the dynamic recuperative powers of the environment.

Furthermore, vast stretches of land and soil close to the frontline have been polluted by landmines, also causing disastrous economic and ecological effects on forestry and agriculture, and there has been widespread ecological damage in occupied areas, especially in former protected areas. The workshop's participants pointed out that these profound long-term environmental consequences of the war, including the necessary rehabilitation of contaminated zones, constitute a major challenge on Ukraine's path to recovery.

Documenting Environmental Damage

The documentation of environmental damage and potential environmental crimes is a complex challenge due to the lack of standardized approaches, the vast scale of the damage, prevailing insecurity and the deficiency of available baseline data for comparison. Current methodologies employed to that end range from remote documentation utilizing satellite images to direct on-site assessments. The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's office has established a special office on the documentation of environmental crimes, and with the Ministry of the Environment's open access EcoZahroza app, the Ukrainian government has furthermore developed a digital solution for documenting environmental threats. The participants recognized the need to involve a broad spectrum of stakeholders in the documentation process in order to ensure widespread dissemination and the effective use of the information collected.

These resources are anticipated to be instrumental in supporting the assessment of environmental damage from the war as well as potential legal proceedings and claims for compensation. The example of Kuwait presented by Samira Omar Asem from the Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research illustrates that the process of documenting environmental damage and pursuing the case for compensation at the United Nations is extremely arduous, even for a country that is geographically the fraction of the size of Ukraine. Furthermore, while Kuwait was successful in receiving close to three billion US dollars in compensation from the Iraqi government, a similar outcome might be out of reach for Ukraine, considering the larger geographical scale and the Russian Federation's status as a permanent veto-wielding member of the United Nations Security Council. Therefore, it is far from evident whether Ukraine will be able to claim compensation for the environmental destruction resulting from the war in the current international context.

Prospects for Environmental Peacebuilding in Ukraine

The concept of environmental peacebuilding emerged out of an increasing recognition of the linkages between the environment, climate, conflict and peace, and approaches to this concept were presented by Amanda Woomer from Oxford Policy Management. Common methodologies in environmental peacebuilding include reducing conflicts over natural resources, providing “peace dividends” while protecting the environment and reducing conflicts, and developing social cohesion through conservation mechanisms. For instance, the Berghof Foundation has been integrating environmental aspects into peacebuilding activities in Somalia, utilizing the expertise of local environmental experts and building the capacity of local actors to better understand conflict from an environmental lens.

The emphasis on inclusivity, active participation and the importance of monitoring and evaluation in these projects resonated very much with the workshop’s participants, who saw great potential for applying the approach in Ukraine. The participants recognized that environmental challenges can deepen social tensions and undermine trust in institutions. They mentioned that such challenges can directly impact social cohesion by exacerbating resource scarcity, which intensifies competition and heightens tensions within communities. Contaminated water supplies or reduced agricultural yields can disproportionately affect the most vulnerable, leading to discontent and diminished trust in the ability of institutions to safeguard the well-being of citizens. Additionally, economic disruptions caused by environmental damage often result in job losses, escalating financial stress of the population and fueling the perception inadequacy of government institutions.

The workshop participants discussed many entry points for this approach in Ukraine. For instance, applying environmental peacebuilding principles could address the post-war rebuilding of infrastructure, ensuring that new construction is both environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive. Another example is the restoration of agricultural lands, which could be managed through community-led initiatives that reinforce local engagement and trust in recovery efforts. Furthermore, protecting the environment was seen as a powerful avenue for enhancing social cohesion, as such efforts often require cooperative action and joint problem-solving, thus bringing people together with a shared mission. Various examples of ongoing activities in this regard were mentioned, such as engaging veterans in conservation activities to support their reintegration into civilian life. Other projects that symbolize new beginnings, such as families planting trees in their new location to signify their uprooted lives and hopes for regrowth, were highlighted for their emotional and social impact.

The conversation also brought to light the politicization of environmental issues and how misinformation can skew public perception and policy. The politicization of environmental issues arises when they are used as leverage in political agendas, potentially distorting facts to fit narratives. In Ukraine, this phenomenon, compounded by misinformation, can misdirect public perception and policy, emphasizing the need for rigorous fact-checking and transparent communication to guide environmental action and governance. For instance, the situation surrounding the Kakhovka water dam may be subject to such politicization. False narratives or exaggerated claims about the dam’s previous condition or operation, driven by political motives, can lead to public confusion and misallocated resources. This, in turn, harms the environment by preventing the implementation of scientifically grounded water management strategies, which are crucial for maintaining regional ecosystems and human livelihoods.

Why Community Inclusion Matters

The environmental crisis that Ukraine is living at the moment has far-reaching implications for peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts. There is an urgent need to adopt sustainable and inclusive strategies for already rebuilding during the ongoing conflict, while the extensive environmental damage is a major obstacle to the nation's long-term recovery, necessitating major investment, planning and human capital to

succeed. Very difficult decisions lie ahead with regard to the prioritization of projects and how to approach the reconstruction of utterly devastated areas in Eastern Ukraine.

The participants recognized that effective reconstruction necessitates collective effort and widespread consensus in order to guarantee the collective ownership of all Ukrainians as well as to prevent societal and political conflicts in the future. Meaningful and inclusive community participation is vital for the planning and implementation of measures in order to make them responsive to communities' needs and ensure public support. Community participation can also lead to greater accountability of government institutions and transparency of decision-making, thereby contributing to increasing citizens' trust in their government.

In the case of Ukraine, the participants stressed the need for open and transparent discussions within communities, in order to address concerns of potential corruption and to ensure that reconstruction efforts not only promote peace but also honor the rights of marginalized and minority groups, such as the Crimean Tatar population. A concrete suggestion was the creation of "people's assemblies" to facilitate community-driven decision-making, ensuring that reconstruction activities are grounded in the needs and insights of local populations. These assemblies could serve as a platform for engaging citizens and ensuring a democratic approach to rebuilding efforts.

Mediators and peacebuilders can play a key role in promoting community participation and the development of community-led plans for inclusive reconstruction and environmental restoration. Along with international organizations, they can bridge the gap between communities, scientific experts and government authorities, particularly in contexts in which there is limited trust in the government. And they can support the deployment of an inter-disciplinary approach that is conflict-sensitive and involves all relevant stakeholders.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

The ongoing war in Ukraine has caused immense human suffering and destruction. Tragically, it will take Ukrainians decades to rebuild their country physically and come to terms with the violence they have endured as a society. This is why it is essential to start supporting Ukrainians already in order to enable them to face the challenges ahead.

There is a pressing need to collectively confront the environmental challenges resulting from the war and to ensure the holistic and inclusive restoration of the Ukrainian environment and society. Environmental peacebuilding approaches have an enormous potential to contribute to social cohesion and inspire inclusive, sustainable and conflict-sensitive reconstruction and environmental restoration. Utilizing an interdisciplinary platform for environmental peacebuilding efforts can magnify the impact of these efforts and offer best practices for restoration. By showcasing insights from various fields, such a platform can drive sustainable and conflict-sensitive reconstruction, ensuring that every facet of society contributes to, and benefits from, the restoration process.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed during the workshop in order to promote the integration of environmental considerations into broader peacebuilding efforts and provide a guide for ensuring effective community participation in reconstruction efforts.

Recommendations for International Organizations and Donors

- ≡ Support the formation of an interdisciplinary platform for collaboration among different organizations, with the involvement of local authorities, to pilot environmental peacebuilding projects that further conflict-sensitive and inclusive reconstruction in Ukraine.
- ≡ Fund sustainable development projects which integrate environmental aspects into their design and planning.
- ≡ Provide expertise for documenting and assessing environmental damage and maintaining admissible evidence to the Ukrainian government and civil society.

Recommendations for Ukrainian NGOs and Civil Society

- ≡ Increase efforts and mobilization at the grassroots level through community dialogues and initiatives involving local communities, to enhance participation and ownership in environmental peacebuilding processes and to strengthen community resilience and cohesion.
- ≡ Use terminology sensitive to the unique context in Ukraine, focusing on conflict resolution and tension reduction, to ensure that communication aids in bridging divides and fostering an atmosphere conducive to healing and unity.
- ≡ Ensure collaboration among environmental organizations for a unified approach in project design and policy influence, to ensure coherence and efficiency in addressing ecological concerns, and in advocating for robust, environmentally-focused legislation that supports sustainable development in Ukraine.
- ≡ Develop a media portfolio of best practices of successful projects in the field of environment, (environmental) peacebuilding and conflict resolution to raise public awareness and increase the understanding of the need for community participation in decision-making processes.
- ≡ Create platforms for volunteer participation in environmental activities and experience sharing, which will serve to broaden community engagement and foster a collective knowledge base beneficial for the sustained health of both the environment and society in Ukraine.
- ≡ Explore and utilize technological innovations to support environmental and peacebuilding work.

Recommendations to the Ukrainian Government

- ≡ Leverage established institutions and legal frameworks to bolster efforts in environmental protection and peacebuilding initiatives. Promote active dialogue on environmental issues, particularly in rural areas.
- ≡ Include comprehensive environmental plans in the reconstruction of war-affected communities.
- ≡ Initiate the recovery process immediately, rather than waiting for the conflict to end.
- ≡ Ensure that issues concerning marginalized and minority groups as well as indigenous people, especially in Crimea, are a central part of policy discussions.

General recommendations for all stakeholders

- ≡ Ensure that environmental assessments and dialogues with communities are conducted in accordance with established best practices and internationally recognized guidelines to guarantee accuracy, transparency and meaningful community involvement.
- ≡ Advocate for social justice and realistic assessments of resources needed for damage recovery and emphasize accountability for environmental damage, which in the context of Ukraine means ensuring equitable distribution of resources and support for all affected communities, especially those disproportionately impacted by the war.
- ≡ Recognize the healing power of environmental engagement, particularly for veterans and other affected groups.