Can Environmental Peacebuilding Tools Effectively Combat Terrorism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo? A Case Study of the Islamic State’s Central Africa Province

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Abstract

Since the 2014 breakout campaign of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria, IS affiliates have proliferated across the African continent. Given the consistent failure of military campaigns against violent extremist groups (VEGs), policymakers have begun to explore the use of alternative tools like environmental peacebuilding to address the root causes of these conflicts. This paper discusses trends in violent extremism in Africa; highlights the relationship between the environment, conflict,

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and peacebuilding; and assesses the utility of employing environmental peacebuilding frameworks to combat the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an IS affiliate in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The author finds that while environmental peacebuilding may slow recruitment by VEGs in Africa and could reduce conflict within the DRC, it is unlikely that such strategies would effectively stop the Allied Democratic Forces because the group is not primarily reliant upon locally generated funding, does not draw voluntary recruits locally, and relies rather little on the local population for support.
ACRONYMS

ADF – Allied Democratic Forces
AQ – al-Qaeda
DDR – Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration
DRC – Democratic Republic of the Congo
GDP – Gross Domestic Product
HCI – Human Capital Index
HDI – Human Development Index
FARDC – Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo
FDLR – Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda
IBCSP – Ibi Batéké Carbon Sink Plantation
ICCN – Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature
IS – Islamic State
ISCAP – Islamic State Central Africa Province
ISWAP – Islamic State West Africa Province
JNIM – Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin
LRA – Lord’s Resistance Army
REDD+ – Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries
UMFF – Uganda Muslim Freedom Fighters
UN – United Nations
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme
UNEP – United Nations Environment Programme
VE – Violent Extremism
VEG – Violent Extremist Group
INTRODUCTION

With an increasing number of violent organizations across the African continent pledging themselves to international extremist groups, scholars and international organizations warn that Sub-Saharan Africa has become the global epicenter of violent extremism.¹ In 2021, violence driven by militant Islamist-linked groups in Africa increased by 22% and fatalities by 48%.² Of all the deaths resulting from terrorist activity in 2021, 48% took place in Africa, and its Sahel region now hosts the world’s fastest-growing terror group, al-Qaeda’s Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).³ Groups like the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ) consistently prey on local grievances to establish a strong foothold in frustrated communities across the continent. These groups have grown rapidly, recruiting from marginalized populations by promising them a better or, in some cases, more pious life. Through control of the local population and often with the help of criminal actors, these groups are then able to generate the necessary revenue required to conduct their operations locally or internationally.⁴

There is a clear and demonstrable link between the growth of violent

extremism in Africa and the effects of environmental degradation. In its 2022 Ecological Threat Report, the Institute for Economics and Peace found that 27 countries comprised of 768 million people are facing catastrophic ecological threats and are identified as having low institutional resilience. Two-thirds of these countries are in sub-Saharan Africa. Food and water insecurity, malnutrition, explosive population growth, and weak governance, particularly along borders, have driven many individuals into the arms of violent extremist groups (VEGs). As resource scarcity intensifies, many consider joining a criminal or extremist group to ensure their personal and familial survival.

Kinetic military action from governments has exacerbated already tenuous situations, with the majority of individuals who join VEGs in Africa citing government abuses as pushing them to violence. Despite their size and scope, military efforts have been largely unable to halt the spread of violent extremism due to a failure to understand and correctly address the underlying dynamics at play. Policymakers and practitioners alike are in search of other approaches to combat the VEG threat in Africa.

One such alternative to force-dominant approaches in combating VEGs is environmental peacebuilding, a strategy that considers how conflict actors and the natural world interact. This method attempts to find ways to de-escalate violence by protecting and enabling the natural environment. In the context of VEGs, the environmental peacebuilding frame-

work aims to address the underlying causes that motivate individuals to turn to and support violence. The strategy has been shown to be effective in slowing the spread and impact of violent extremist groups in case studies around the world and is increasingly being applied across sub-Saharan Africa. However, its efficacy as a targeted solution against specific VEGs remains unclear.

This paper explores the utility of environmental peacebuilding for combating one of the most dangerous VEGs in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC): the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), now known to many as the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP). The ADF has built an operational model unlike most other IS affiliates in Africa and other VEGs in the Eastern DRC, making it a unique case for assessing the effectiveness of environmental peacebuilding as a targeted solution. This paper explains how environmental peacebuilding works, how it can be harnessed to combat the environmental stresses that have bolstered violent Islamic extremist groups across Africa, and its efficacy in the case against the ADF. This paper finds that environmental peacebuilding, while perhaps successful against other VEGs in Africa, should not be considered a foundational strategy for combating the ADF.

Environmental peacebuilding will fail to be effective against the ADF for three main reasons. First, the ADF is not primarily reliant upon locally generated funding, and therefore is not significantly financially affected by the impact of environmental degradation on resource availability or by campaigns reclaiming land for sustainable use. Second, the ADF does not recruit locally, except in cases where it has forced people into its service, so its ranks would not be affected by a sudden change in the willingness of economically or socially disadvantaged groups and individuals to take up arms. Third, the ADF hardly relies on the population for support and prioritizes territorial administration over governance. This means that the group is unlikely to take part in efforts to protect land for constituents it does not have and will be less concerned with peace than with eradicating unbelievers from its territorial holdings.
This paper’s contribution to the literature is threefold. First, environmental peacebuilding mechanisms have been applied to conflict in the Eastern DRC, but not to combating terror groups in the region. As such, this paper will present a new case study in the field of environmental peacebuilding and VEGs. Second, while environmental peacebuilding theory has demonstrated great potential as a tool for combating violent Islamic extremist groups in Africa and the DRC, the extreme nuance of the situation in the Eastern DRC means that different approaches may be needed for different groups in the same location, or with iterations of the same group in different locations (i.e. the Islamic State in the Sahel demonstrates distinctly different dynamics from the Islamic State in the DRC).9 Finally, given the complexity of the DRC conflict, this paper seeks to reveal another layer of the conflict, allowing policymakers to better direct their resources towards the ADF threat.

**VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN AFRICA**

**Distinguishing between Terrorists, Insurgents, and Violent Extremists in Africa**

Defining and categorizing how individuals and groups use violence in Africa is crucial to understanding how to best combat violent extremist groups across the African continent. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the differences between terrorist groups, insurgent groups, and violent extremist groups.

With scholars, government agencies, and international organizations employing hundreds of different frameworks to describe ‘terrorism’, the term is notoriously difficult to define.10 Terrorism is understood by many to be a weapon of last resort, a vehicle used when all other routes have been exhausted in a group or individual’s effort to reach a given goal. Terror attacks showcase the grievances of radical individuals and groups and are intended to attract followers to their cause.

This paper will define terrorism as: 1. politically motivated; 2. involving violence or, at minimum, the threat of violence; and 3. designed to achieve publicity and/or to send a message.\textsuperscript{11} As terror is a “particular kind of extreme fear,” an act of terrorism involves the creation and manipulation of a sense of extreme fear in order to achieve a certain outcome.\textsuperscript{12} To engage in terrorism is to go to extremes, and to be a terrorist is to be willing to take the most extreme approach possible to reach a given goal.\textsuperscript{13}

In the modern African context, mistaking an insurgent group using terrorist tactics for a group engaged solely in terrorism mischaracterizes the goals of a group or a movement.\textsuperscript{14} Insurgent groups and terrorist groups can be distinguished by their tactics and goals. Insurgents bring to bear military force at a level that terrorist groups do not, operate in the open as armed units, and have the ability to mass-mobilize.\textsuperscript{15} Beyond using terror as a tool with coercive power to accomplish a goal or spread a message about a cause, insurgents typically wish to control and administer territory and overthrow or displace a government.\textsuperscript{16} These groups tend to be active for longer periods of time than terror groups due to their structure and goal orientation, are responsible for more fatalities, and are more likely to target police, military, or government of-


\textsuperscript{[15]} Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Counterinsurgency,” Joint Publication, \textit{Joint Chiefs of Staff}, April 25, 2018.

Terrorist and insurgent groups both qualify as VEGs and, as such, must be contextualized within the framework of violent extremism (VE). Extremists tend to see violence as a conflict resolution mechanism and politics as a zero-sum game, allowing them to employ various forms of violence to achieve a stated goal. VEGs must be driven by and organized around a unifying ideology and routinely employ violence to achieve their efforts. A gang driven by financial gain and with no binding political impulses, for example, would not qualify as a VEG.

Due to inconsistencies and confusion surrounding the application of these terms to some of the groups mentioned in this study, the term ‘terrorist group’ will be used to refer to those organizations designated by the United States as a foreign terror group and ‘VEG’ to refer to all organizations utilizing extreme violence as a tactic (including designated terror groups).

**Trends Amongst Violent Islamic Extremist Groups in Africa**

The violent Islamic extremist groups now causing mayhem throughout the continent have been derived from varied backgrounds and exhibit many different goals. Some have modeled themselves as insurgents, some as terrorists, and some appear to be something in between. One aspect of violent Islamic extremist groups in Africa tends to be somewhat consistent – most have maintained a fairly local dynamic. However, despite this shared characteristic, the mechanisms that drive individuals to join VEGs and the mechanisms informing VEG behavior can vary widely.

A given area’s conduciveness to VEG presence includes four main variables: 1. the existence of, and access to, useful infrastructure, 2. local financing and the ability to derive income locally, 3. a population “favorably disposed” to terrorists or insurgents, and 4. the ability of indi-

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[19] Ibid.
viduals and VEGs to hide from authorities. Terror groups in particular, given their need to maintain a lower profile than insurgent groups that can organize their own infrastructure need access to banking systems, communications facilities, and transportation networks that allow them to access targets. ‘Ungoverned’ spaces offer the best entry point for VEGs to take advantage of capital and labor, though in reality, these areas are rarely truly ungoverned, despite a distinct absence or fragility of state institutions. In most ‘ungoverned spaces,’ political and security gaps are plugged by ‘violent entrepreneurs’ and VEGs who use violence to provide physical security and political order while often simultaneously monopolizing both licit and illicit markets.

Many countries and sub-regions in Africa offer significant profit-making and operational opportunities to terror groups and VEGs. International terror groups have long used Africa as a training ground or logistics hub for arms trafficking, drug smuggling, money laundering, and other illicit purposes. With grievances ripe for exploitation, low levels of consistent governance, access to natural resources, corruption, under-policing, and a broad base of support from which to gain materiel and recruits, these groups have ready access to the ingredients which tend to make VEGs successful. Some scholars have likened terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda to multinational firms that produce terror against Western nations; like many firms, they locate where they can minimize costs and maximize profits. After all, terror groups and VEGs need to generate

income to operate, and generally will not be able to do this legally.

Though they benefit from being able to enter areas of weak governance, VEGs are incentivized to invest in local governance to build legitimacy and reduce the costs of controlling an area through physical force alone. Although subject to the VEG’s governance strategy, local conditions, and cultural norms, the less secure a VEG’s hold on an area is, the greater the violence that group will have to employ to extract rents. In order for many groups to achieve their political and financial goals, governance becomes a crucial part of the endeavor, allowing a given group to control the environment in which it operates. Like criminal gangs that integrate themselves into the fabric of communities to establish themselves as crucial providers of jobs, food, and income for struggling community members, VEGs have to decide whether to work within the existing system or tear it down to assume a position of power.

IS-aligned groups in Africa have exhibited a somewhat uniform modus operandi, with groups generally orienting themselves more toward localized territorial control and building governance structures than attacking distant enemies. The state-building strategy has seen long-term success as support for terrorist groups in weak and failing/failed states tends to be less contingent upon individuals’ specific ideological convictions and more oriented toward accessing benefits that their governments cannot provide. Insurgencies are typically described as bat-

tles waged for the hearts and minds of ‘the people;’ since the IS-aligned
groups springing up around Africa cannot seem to defeat government
forces using conventional military tactics, it appears they are trying to
win over the people by demonstrating that they are a more legitimate
authority than a given national or regional government. This strate-
gy has allowed the Islamic State to realize enormous success in build-
ing franchises all across Africa, with militant groups in Libya, Algeria,
Egypt, Tunisia, Somalia, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of
Congo, and elsewhere across the Lake Chad Basin region and the Sahel/
greater Sahara all pledging allegiance to the group since 2014. 

Why do People Join Extremist Groups in Africa?

The UN has released two major studies in the last two years describing
the six main pathways to recruitment on the African continent. The first
pathway relates to social and cultural factors that influence the environ-
ment in which people grow up. Vulnerability to VEG recruitment can
be increased when accounting for geographic isolation and remoteness,
poor familial relations and negative feelings by children towards their
upbringing, and access to education. 

The second is religion. Religion
has long been an excellent vector for the weaponization of grievance and
has been demonstrably important as an element of recruitment when
it comes to providing a feeling of identity. 

The third pathway is eco-
nomic. The number of individuals who cited economic opportunity as
a major motivation for joining a VEG increased 92% since the previous
2017 study. 

Fourth is a broken social contract. A VEG may appear to
be a better alternative than a government that has failed to provide basic
services or security, been involved in human rights abuses or margin-

Model,” In Blood That Cries Out From the Earth (Oxford University Press, 2008): 13,
https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195335972.001.0001.
[32] UNDP, “Hope for Better Jobs Eclipses Religious Ideology as Main Driver of Re-
cruitment to Violent Extremist Groups in Sub-Saharan Africa.”
[33] Howard, “Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 966–
68.
alized certain peoples,\textsuperscript{34} or if the population lacks trust in government and institutions.\textsuperscript{35} The fifth pathway refers to what the UN calls the “tipping point” - a single, specific event that prompted individuals to join a VEG. \textsuperscript{36} 48% of individuals in the 2023 survey joined VEGs after a specific “trigger” event, with 71% of these individuals describing the trigger event as human rights abuses committed by state security actors.\textsuperscript{37} Lastly, social networks are a key driver of recruitment across the continent. 45% of voluntary recruits joined VEGs with friends, compared to only 16% who joined alone.\textsuperscript{38}

The choice to join a terror or violent extremist group is a deeply idiosyncratic, individual decision, and the overarching trends for what motivates people to join VEGs change consistently; even the motivations of the individuals who join religious extremist groups can appear diverse and diffuse. While there is no doubt that the leadership and marketing of many extremist Islamic groups in Africa revolves around an idealized and specific type of Islamic extremism, it is plausible that many fighters see their groups more as vehicles for political, social, and/or economic gain than as organizations creating a society of religious purity.\textsuperscript{39} A 2010 study found that individuals across the continent are likely to support terrorism and political violence, and thus be favorably disposed to VEGs, if in their countries or communities there is a high level of perceived corruption, difficulty replacing elected leaders, or if the groups provide a way for individuals and communities to obtain tangible political, economic, and social goods.\textsuperscript{39}

One aspect omitted from the UN’s list that appears to be crucial to the recruitment strategies of IS is the way in which groups attract followers by demonstrating their capacity for and commitment to violence. When

\textsuperscript{34} United Nations Development Programme, “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement,” 18.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid, 17.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 120.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 19.
\textsuperscript{38} UNDP, “Dynamics Of Violent Extremism In Africa.”
\textsuperscript{39} Howard, “Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa,” 982.
VEGs compete with each other, the groups committing violence most successfully and consistently tend to attract the greatest number of recruits, even when the ideology and effort of a VEG is initially considered by eventual adherents to be “beyond the pale.” While most of the population will often reject brutal attacks, some individuals are susceptible to seeing these efforts as evidence of a group’s strength. As these individuals are recruited, the group’s increasing membership attracts further recruits, which in turn leads to greater influence and ability to carry out high-level attacks.\footnote{Stephen Nemeth, “The Effect of Competition on Terrorist Group Operations,” \textit{Journal of Conflict Resolution} 58.2 (March 2014): 337, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002712468717.}

\section*{THE ENVIRONMENT, CONFLICT, AND PEACEBUILDING}

\subsection*{The Environment and Conflict}

Research into the relationship between environmental stress and conflict over preceding decades has identified a strong correlation between the prevalence and intensity of ecological threats and the existence of conflict.\footnote{Trinkunas, Felbab-Brown, and Hamid, \textit{Militants, Criminals, and Warlords}, 120.} Ecological degradation tends to act as a multiplier that intensifies social issues like malnutrition, forced migration, and illness.\footnote{Institute for Economics & Peace, “Ecological Threat Report 2022,” 8.} In places with high population growth, ecological collapse, and weak societal resilience, these issues compound, often ensnaring countries in continuing cycles of conflict.\footnote{Ibid.} Feedback loops are created in which the degradation of resources leads to violence, which, in turn, puts further pressure on resources.\footnote{Ibid, 4.}

Resource scarcity can have a particularly destabilizing influence in ar-
eas of weak governance. While evidence does not reflect a direct causal relationship, a 2009 UNEP study found that more than 40% of violent conflicts are in some way correlated with resource mismanagement.  
Particularly in countries without the capacity to build resilience in their most vulnerable regions for their most vulnerable populations, the deterioration of the natural environment can have an outsized impact on human security as competition for basic needs leads to competition between different populations to get preferential access to necessary resources. Conversely, the oft-cited resource curse identifies some conflicts as being driven by elite and/or insurgent competition for control over rents derived from resource extraction. The participation of elites in this competition often prolongs conflicts to ensure their continued access to pursue wealth extraction. While the resource curse has manifested in different ways, it has commonly been identified closely with underdevelopment, autocratic regimes, and violent civil conflict.

It should be noted that empirical evidence has shown no direct or causal link between conflict and environmental stress due to the number of

confounding variables involved in the buildup of conflict.\textsuperscript{54, 55} However, the literature clearly demonstrates that such stressors interact with the complex political, historical, economic, and social contexts endemic to a certain country or subnational region, oftentimes magnifying the grievances or pressures felt within or between communities.\textsuperscript{56} This has led to climate change, associated with environmental shocks, commonly being termed a “threat multiplier” by militaries, intelligence agencies, and international organizations.\textsuperscript{57 58 59 60}

The Link Between Environmental Stress and VEGs Across Africa

The inextricable link between resource stress or environmental shocks and the activities of VEGs has been demonstrated repeatedly across the African continent. Governments are often overwhelmed by a multitude of challenges and are unable to provide the level of services the domestic population finds acceptable, causing individuals across sub-Saharan Africa to be more willing to support political violence so long as it provides them the opportunity to acquire tangible political, economic, and social goods.\textsuperscript{61} Rapid population growth across Africa has led broadly to the overexploitation of limited resources, intensifying relative socioeco-

\textsuperscript{[56]} Klare, “The New Geography of Conflict.”
\textsuperscript{[58]} Wong, Saeedi, and Rizk, “The Climate Security Nexus and the Prevention of Violent Extremism.”
\textsuperscript{[61]} Howard, “Failed States and the Spread of Terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa.”
onomic deprivation and related grievances that could lead to conflict. Increasingly, VEGs in Africa have been weaponizing and exacerbating food insecurity through conflict-related supply interruptions by bringing large numbers of fighters that require resources to operate in already food-stressed regions and by demonstrating a capacity to govern in regions failed by their national institutions.

VEGs consistently demonstrate an ability to gain control over scarce natural resources, further damaging ecosystems and restricting communal access in order to sustain illicit networks and boost recruitment by those now dependent upon the VEG. The loss of livelihoods due to desertification and other forms of environmental degradation, particularly in peripheral or marginalized communities, provides VEGs with excellent fodder upon which to build narratives of injustice as a means of bolstering recruitment and credibility. These narratives are especially nuanced and complex as they tend to go beyond the political dynamics and identity politics inherent to a given context and include an element of grievance related to the relationship between human populations and their ecosystems.

Rebel and militia groups have demonstrated an ability to “more than cover their costs” by exploiting natural resources during conflicts. In Somalia, for example, the VEG Al-Shabaab has strengthened its legitimacy and improved its recruitment by providing services the government cannot to individuals affected by drought, internal displacement, and food insecurity. Al-Shabaab has derived much of the income it

[63] Ibid.
[66] Ibid, 48.
uses to provide these services from logging and charcoal production, further contributing to land degradation and deforestation. This increases the vulnerability of the very people it provides for, increasing reliance on the group and lowering social capacity for resilience.\textsuperscript{69}

Instances of violence linked to VEGs aligned with the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Sahel doubled in 2021 from the previous year.\textsuperscript{70} The impact of climate change, malnutrition, food and water insecurity, and poverty has left a society with little adaptive capacity in the face of severe resource strain and few economic opportunities.\textsuperscript{71} This has created an environment wherein “illicit economic activities are not only considered socially legitimate but are often essential for survival,” and where the vast and largely unemployed youth population is at risk of recruitment by criminal and violent extremist groups.\textsuperscript{72} Marginalized groups with diminished livelihoods are manipulated by government and business elites to promote consistent instability that elite-linked businesses can exploit for profit, ensuring steady recruitment opportunities for various extremist groups.\textsuperscript{73} Criminal groups have found religion a useful vehicle through which to defend their actions and many have pledged allegiance to religiously-affiliated groups such as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda.\textsuperscript{74} Still, it seems that it is the lack of economic opportunity, inadequate governance, brutal repression of dissent, and high levels of corruption and state weakness – all of which have exacerbated the low adaptive capacity of the region to environmental shocks – rather than compatibility with the ideology of violent Islamist extremist groups that

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{71}] Muggah and Cabrera, “The Sahel Is Engulfed by Violence.”
  \item[\textsuperscript{72}] Marshall, “Africa’s Crime-Terror Nexus.”
  \item[\textsuperscript{73}] Muggah and Cabrera, “The Sahel Is Engulfed by Violence.”
  \item[\textsuperscript{74}] Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2022,” 45.
\end{itemize}
draw people to protect them and fight with them.\textsuperscript{75}

In the Lake Chad Basin region, ecological threats including water scarcity, high population growth, drought, desertification, land degradation, and food insecurity plague the local population.\textsuperscript{76} 90\% of the population relies on lake water and rainfall for their livelihoods, but worsening droughts, inconsistent rainfall patterns, and growing desertification is intensifying conflict over water resources.\textsuperscript{77} VEGs like Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have sought to exploit grievances and local fragilities by taking control of large areas of territory and their associated resources.\textsuperscript{78} There is broad academic consensus that Boko Haram’s longevity can be attributed to its continued access to a broad range of resources.\textsuperscript{79} Boko Haram’s access to such resources has allowed them to offer unemployed and food insecure young men between US$600 and US$800 each month, an 830\% to 1,111\% increase over the local average monthly income of approximately US$72.\textsuperscript{80} For many community members, working with Boko Haram is simply the only opportunity they have for making a living. In order to discourage people from joining the group, ecological conditions must improve to allow livelihoods to flourish and local resilience to be boosted.\textsuperscript{81}

**Environmental Peacebuilding**

The theory of environmental peacebuilding argues that governments should identify conflict-induced environmental challenges and look for areas where environmental initiatives can drive peace and improve ca-

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\textsuperscript{76} Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2022,” 58–59.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{80} Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2022,” 54.

\textsuperscript{81} Samuel, “Boko Haram’s Deadly Business.”
Experts hope that the strategy can naturally address gaps that governments have proven unable to fill by providing sustainable stability at the local level through improving and maintaining the viability of individual and communal livelihoods. By building ecological resilience into local systems, the scheme aims to prevent people from supporting or partaking in conflict, instead offering stability and decent livelihoods. It also intends to protect natural resources and spaces from being used for active conflict or which are involved in financing a conflict, and works to lessen conflict drivers through leveraging and protecting the natural environment. It is a highly interdisciplinary concept, stressing the need for a variety of simultaneous approaches and uses of the natural world to promote conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution, and recovery.  

There is often a perception that conserving the natural environment means taking resources away from humanitarian projects. This is simply not the case, for it is through conserving the natural world on which people rely in locations with no government capacity to step in when the environment is degraded that conflict can be mitigated. Under the framework of environmental peacebuilding, conservation and development are not seen as distinct concepts; rather, the theory promotes a path through which conservation, security, and development are considered part of a unified strategy. The stability it proposes would ideally stop VEGs from taking advantage of environmental degradation and grievances over land and water management practices and keep them from positioning themselves as just regulators and providers of resources.

[85] Ibid, 872.
Improving societal resilience to stressors and societal ability to adapt to external shocks are key tenets of environmental peacebuilding, with ecological, institutional, and social capacity to withstand shocks key indicators of the potential for conflict. The field of economics refers to a substantial change to a system, whether endogenous or exogenous, as a “shock” which can cause shifts in a society’s functioning based on the severity of a given shock and a given society’s resilience. Ecological shocks work in much the same way, having the potential to undermine a society depending on its level of resilience. More resilient countries tend to better manage natural resource endowments and the socio-economic requirements of their citizens, allowing them to respond holistically to natural disasters and shifts in natural environmental patterns.\(^{87}\) Building adaptive capacity to weather these shocks often involves strengthening or building measures for diversifying livelihoods, ensuring access to key natural resources, and supporting conflict resolution institutions.\(^{88}\) From an intercommunal perspective, natural resource management and the level and quality of environmental governance is an area of high-stakes interaction; properly managing the land and its resources can be crucial for determining whether or not conflict occurs.\(^{89}\)

Examples of environmental peacebuilding strategies include adaptive strategies such as co-management of resources and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) campaigns. Peace parks are one way in which groups can co-manage a resource base to the benefit of all, with the idea that such parks would provide economic, security, and ecosystem benefits to actors on all sides of the conflict.\(^{90}\) Peace parks are created when post-conflict zones are transitioned into protected biodiversity hotspots that provide economic, security, and environmental

benefits to a great majority of the actors in a conflict.\textsuperscript{91} Evidence shows that environmental challenges can themselves create peacebuilding opportunities due to acknowledging and building upon shared interests, promoting confidence-building, deepening ties between groups, and helping to reconstruct identities.\textsuperscript{92} Collaborative efforts may also convince actors to consider longer time horizons, potentially stimulating opportunities for cooperation, reconciliation, and the creation of institutions promoting conflict resolution due to better communal integration.\textsuperscript{93}

DDR strategies are more specifically designed to prevent and reduce armed violence in ongoing or post-conflict environments.\textsuperscript{94} Demobilized fighters can make excellent managers of intercommunal initiatives like peace parks, given they already will have some training with weapons and, given that forests make great hiding places for rebel forces, often know the land to be protected well.\textsuperscript{95} Ownership of and access to land is a crucial part of the DDR process in most cases, with one study finding that around 50-80% of ex-combatants reintegrate into the agricultural sector.\textsuperscript{96} It is thus crucial that there is a productive ecosystem and natural environment for militants to return to, or jobs for them in the protection of the natural environment as rangers and forest managers. If given jobs in any of the aforementioned areas, militants would be investing in the long-term efficacy of the natural environment and

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Conca and Wallace, “Environment and Peacebuilding in War-Torn Societies,” 486.
\textsuperscript{93} Ide et al., “The Past and Future(s) of Environmental Peacebuilding,” 4.
\textsuperscript{96} United Nations Environment Programme, Greening the Blue Helmets: Environment, Natural Resources and UN Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations Environment Programme, 2012, 64.
should have greater incentive to maintain its stability.\textsuperscript{97} However, DDR plans need to be made carefully, as the schemes are especially difficult to implement in a way that ensures no members of a community are excluded from a plan that may give just one group access to land, resources, and the weaponry to protect it.\textsuperscript{98}

**CASE STUDY: THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO**

**Eastern DRC Context**

If resource endowments were enough to go on, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) should be the wealthiest country in Africa, if not the world.\textsuperscript{99} The DRC has some of the world’s most productive soil and enormous hydroelectric potential; a country the size of Western Europe, it has the capacity to feed and power all of Africa.\textsuperscript{100} Its mineral wealth is astounding; the country sits on an estimated USD 24 trillion in untapped minerals, including the world’s largest coltan (source of tantalum) reserves.\textsuperscript{101} The DRC is also home to more than half of the world’s cobalt reserves, a crucial ingredient for reducing global dependence on fossil fuels via battery energy storage, and contributes 70% of world cobalt production.\textsuperscript{102} Additionally, the country holds another key ingredi-


ent for fighting climate change – it is covered in dense forests twice the size of France, earning it the moniker “the Lungs of Africa” and making it the largest carbon sink in the world.\textsuperscript{103}

Despite the immensity of its resource wealth, the DRC is one of the five poorest nations in the world, with a GDP per capita of $577.2 USD per year, or about $2.15 USD per day.\textsuperscript{104} Its GINI coefficient is 42.1, indicating that even this paltry per capita income is unfairly distributed: 90% of the population sees a daily income of less than $3.10 USD and are considered “working poor;” 77% lives below the poverty line of $1.9 USD per day; and 42% falls into the category of severe multidimensional poverty.\textsuperscript{105} The DRC is ranked 179 out of 191 countries on the human development index (HDI),\textsuperscript{106} with a birth rate of 6.2\textsuperscript{107} (births per woman over their lifetime) and with 47% of the population younger than 14.\textsuperscript{108} The DRC's Human Capital Index (HCI) is 0.37, meaning that a Congolese child born today can expect to achieve only 37% of their potential compared to the possibilities they might have had under optimal health conditions and with quality schooling. Though the DRC is home to half of Africa’s water and forest resources, more than half of its population

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does not have access to potable water.\textsuperscript{109} Furthermore, despite the country’s incredible agricultural potential, 25.8 million people were expected to become acutely food insecure in the first 6 months of 2023.\textsuperscript{110}

The DRC undoubtedly suffers from the resource curse, with consistent violence throughout the nation’s postcolonial history largely driving widespread levels of extreme poverty despite its abundance of natural wealth.\textsuperscript{111} The current iteration of conflict in the Eastern DRC can be linked directly to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the ensuing political transition away from the DRC’s dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko. Nearly 2 million Tutsi and Hutu fled Rwanda and Uganda into the Eastern DRC in the years leading up to and following the Rwandan genocide,\textsuperscript{112} bringing the population far above the local ecosystem’s carrying capacity.\textsuperscript{113} There was little infrastructure previously built in the area and very low communal adaptive capacity, so as refugees made their way into the forests to access critical resources, severe stress built up upon ecosystem services exacerbated by excessive pollution and resource mismanagement.\textsuperscript{114} Former rebels from various conflicts hiding amongst the refugees turned to gang activity to finance themselves and retain access to capital for arms.\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{111} Jason Stearns, Verweijen, and Baaz, The National Army and Armed Groups in the Eastern Congo.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
The landscape is now one of endless insurgents and continues to evolve rapidly. In 2017, a report estimated that there were nearly 70 non-state armed groups in the DRC, but by 2022, the figure had increased to an estimated 120.\textsuperscript{116} 5.7 million people were internally displaced as of February 2023,\textsuperscript{117} making it one of the 5 countries with the highest levels of internal displacement due to conflict.\textsuperscript{118} Since 1994, over 5 million people have died in the current iteration of the conflict in the DRC, far more than the 300,000 killed in Darfur and the approximately 1,000,000 killed in the Rwandan Genocide.\textsuperscript{119} Agreements aimed at stemming violence have served instead to drive the seemingly perpetual proliferation of these groups; even as some agreements helped to decrease the number of internally displaced people in the DRC in the short term, the consistent failure to reform the army, perpetual extreme poverty, and the effective weaponization of identity politics led to a massive increase of independent armed groups in the region.\textsuperscript{120} Given high unemployment, high birth rates, and few institutions that can provide structure and order, many people feel that the steady income VEGs can offer is the only way to make a living.\textsuperscript{121}

**Environmental Peacebuilding in the DRC**

70% of individuals in the DRC live in rural areas and rely on the natural environment and forests for food, fuel, medicine, and other ecosystem services.\textsuperscript{122} With a significant proportion of the population being subsistence farmers, the cycle of impoverishment, environmental degradation, and armed conflict has been difficult for most individuals to

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[120] Stearns, “A War Turned in on Itself.”


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break.\textsuperscript{123} When an opportunity to live peacefully arises, a large proportion ex-combatants will go back to the agriculture sector, but if not given the ability to own or access agricultural land to make a living, many will quickly revert to illicit and/or violent activity to provide for themselves, their families, and their communities.\textsuperscript{124,125} Therefore, environmental peacebuilding strategies offer significant potential dividends to ensure that people who are reliant on the natural world can continue to benefit through the sustainable management of resources and reduced conflict.

Transnational environmental crime has unquestionably played a significant role in driving protracted conflict in the Eastern DRC.\textsuperscript{126} Five provinces in the Eastern DRC produce 71\% of the DRC’s revenue and 95\% of its exports, making it an exceedingly resource-dense region from which to derive income.\textsuperscript{127} In all, as of 2015, the illicit exploitation of natural resources in the Eastern DRC alone was estimated at over 1.25 billion USD per year (a figure equivalent to more than 20\% of the DRC’s national budget in 2021).\textsuperscript{128} Between 10\% and 30\% of that income is thought to go directly to transnational organized criminal groups.\textsuperscript{129} The “lootability” of resources is also important in the DRC context, as resources are easily accessible and there is a good return on their extraction, allowing groups to benefit immediately from their investment in armed activity.\textsuperscript{130}

Gold, timber, charcoal, 3T minerals (tungsten, tantalum, and tin), di-

\textsuperscript{123} Miburn, “The Roots to Peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 876.
\textsuperscript{124} United Nations Environment Programme, \textit{Greening the Blue Helmets}, 66.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 65.
\textsuperscript{130} Brunnschweiler and Bulte, “Natural Resources and Violent Conflict,” 653.
amonds, the illicit wildlife trade, illegal fisheries harvesting, and can-
nabis, respectively, make up the bulk of illicit income for VEGs.\textsuperscript{131} The volume of gold smuggled out of the DRC, for example, is thought to be “significantly higher” than the amount legally traded.\textsuperscript{132} Though legal trading and traceability schemes have been instituted to make it more difficult for armed groups and criminal networks to benefit from illic-
it trade in the aforementioned resources, their effectiveness has been hampered by factors on the ground.\textsuperscript{133}

VEGs in the Eastern DRC tend to operate in densely forested national parks where the terrain makes it difficult for these groups to be tracked and where they simultaneously have easy access to valuable resources.\textsuperscript{134} Through their territorial occupation, these VEGs often can control the output of and derive the income from palm oil farms and other cash crops that civilians grow within forests.\textsuperscript{135} The illegal wildlife trade, par-
ticularly of elephant ivory, has contributed to the destruction of enor-
mous populations of animals; elephant populations across the DRC are estimated to have fallen by 80\% within the last 50 years, with VEGs such as the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), the Armed Forces of the Dem-
ocratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC), and the Ugandan Army all having made significant income from ivory sales.\textsuperscript{136} Destructive and pol-
luting mining practices, poaching for bushmeat, and the overcutting of trees to provide fuel and food for nearby communities have all ravaged

\textsuperscript{[131]} UNEP-MONUSCO-OSESG, “Experts’ Background Report on Illegal Exploita-
tion and Trade in Natural Resources in Eastern DR Congo,” 3–4.
\textsuperscript{[133]} United Nations Security Council, “Letter Dated 2 June 2020 from the Group of Ex-
\textsuperscript{[134]} Jasom Palmer and Ore Ogunbiyi, “Bloody and Forgotten: Conflict in Eastern Congo,” \textit{The Intelligence from the Economist}.
\textsuperscript{[135]} Ibid.
Timber is a massive resource driving income for a variety of armed groups. It is estimated that the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), a rebel group whose membership has links to the Hutu genocidaires that perpetrated the Rwandan genocide, earn up to 28 million USD annually from its control of the charcoal trade. The FARDC similarly appears to be using the presence of VEGs in national parks to justify its presence in areas in which it seems to spend more time logging and making charcoal than it does fighting its adversaries. A 2014 report found 90% of logging in the DRC is either informal or illegal, with actual log harvests estimated to be at least 8 times greater than the official figures in the report. At its current pace, experts believe that 25% of the Congo Basin's forests will be gone by 2050. Domestically, these changes threaten about 75 million Congolese who rely on forests for their livelihoods.

Implementing DDR campaigns is one way the DRC could transition current combatants into citizens that have the skills and the motivation to protect natural spaces currently being pillaged by armed groups and desperate individuals. Demobilized militia members and other VEG members could be trained under a variety of schemes to become armed rangers and to patrol and protect their newfound investment in the natural environment. Through gainful employment and incentivizing locals and local elites to protect such spaces, such a scheme could reduce

[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.
[141] Ojewale, “Protection and Profit in Congo.”
[142] Ibid.
the risk of individuals participating in extractive activities that fund conflict and degrade land. Hopefully, it could also increase the security of the protected areas for the benefit of locals and tourists. The potential for tourism in a country having such incredible natural beauty as the DRC is unquestionable - even in the midst of what amounts to a war zone, the part of Virunga National Park that is safe for tourists hoped to generate $12.5 million last year – but peace must be secured before such revenues can benefit the people living there.\textsuperscript{144}

Peace parks are one recommendation commonly made by experts that could benefit the DRC. Government organizations like the ICCN, the DRC’s wildlife authority, could work with local and regional organizations to guard protected areas and the associated resources so that people can make use of the forests and natural resources to promote their livelihoods in an equitable manner.\textsuperscript{145} People would benefit from employment as well as consistent and sustainable access to livelihood-providing resources and improved food security.\textsuperscript{146} Ideally, the efforts of transnational terror groups operating around the Congo Basin to exploit natural resources in the area could be stopped or hindered, with some of the fighters even being susceptible to recruitment for a better cause.\textsuperscript{147}

The promotion of Initiatives similar to the Ibi Batéké carbon sink plantation (IBSCP) could also be leveraged within the Congo to improve carbon capture, drive greater physical and environmental security in the region, and derive income from conservation.\textsuperscript{148} The IBSCP has established large-scale tree plantations that help reduce deforestation, provide food and some timber for products like charcoal, and attract income from carbon markets.\textsuperscript{149} One researcher estimated that the DRC could earn one billion dollars from carbon markets using schemes like

\textsuperscript{144} Palmer and Ogunbiyi, “Bloody and Forgotten: Conflict in Eastern Congo.”
\textsuperscript{146} Milburn, “Mainstreaming the Environment into Postwar Recovery,” 1096.
\textsuperscript{147} Ojewale, “Protection and Profit in Congo.”
\textsuperscript{148} Milburn, “The Roots to Peace in the Democratic Republic of Congo,” 880.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid, 880.
REDD+ and investing in projects like the IBCSP.\textsuperscript{150}

**The Islamic State in the DRC**

One of the preeminent threats to peace in the DRC comes from a group calling itself the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), also known as the Islamic State Central Africa Province - DRC. The group primarily operates in the Beni region of the Eastern DRC but has been steadily increasing its territorial range and rapidly improving the effectiveness of its attacks since becoming aligned with the Islamic State. The Institute for Economics and Peace lists the ADF as a more purely terrorist group than many of the other armed groups in the Eastern DRC, a reflection of how its tactics and goals distinguish it from other VEGs in a complex environment.\textsuperscript{151} The story of the ADF offers a unique window into how the Islamic State is attempting to expand its global footprint and why smaller groups across Africa hunt for its recognition. Though not much is readily known about the group, with much of the information from government and academic sources being contradictory, its intentions and goals are becoming clearer as the group’s media presence has grown alongside its involvement with the Islamic State.

The group, originally known as the Salaf Foundation with an armed wing called the Uganda Muslim Freedom Fighters (UMFF), was founded by Jamil Mukulu in 1995 and quickly gained followers frustrated by their lack of control over the state-recognized authority governing the Muslim community in Uganda. Soon after its inception and before it could launch any attacks, the short-lived insurgency was defeated and the remnants of the group fled to the Eastern DRC. There, it won the sponsorship of Congolese dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who was interested in directing proxy forces against Uganda which, along with Rwanda, was sponsoring insurgent forces in the DRC aiming to overthrow Mobutu.\textsuperscript{152} Thus the ADF’s cause in the DRC changed to become one


\textsuperscript{151} Institute for Economics & Peace, “Global Terrorism Index 2022,” 62.

\textsuperscript{152} Ryan O’Farrell, “Neither Local, Nor Transnational, But Both: The Islamic State in
directed at overthrowing Ugandan President Museveni, an angle which allowed it to draw recruits from a large population of discontented Muslims in Uganda.\footnote{153}

The ADF staged a variety of attacks in Uganda from its Congolese base during the late 1990s, but weakened steadily due to effective counter-insurgency efforts by the Ugandan military which used the group's attacks as a pretense to invade the DRC in 1998.\footnote{154} In 2005, the FARDC and the UN's peacekeeping force in the DRC, MONUSCO, launched operations against the ADF, forcing it into a period of relative dormancy.\footnote{155} In 2010 and 2011, a resurgent ADF began committing indiscriminate mass attacks against the civilian population in Beni as retribution for the help some offered to the FARDC.\footnote{156} Beginning in 2013-2014, the ADF launched a new offensive, again massacring civilians and attacking DRC security forces. It built alliances with local militias and other armed groups opposing the state (and, reportedly, with FARDC officers), working to foment as much unrest as possible in the run-up to 2016 elections.\footnote{157} But the FARDC pushed back, bringing the group to “the brink of extermination”\footnote{158} and causing its leader, Makulu, to flee Congo,” \textit{New Lines Institute}, December 14, 2021, https://newlinesinstitute.org/isis/neither-local-nor-transnational-but-both-the-islamic-state-in-congo/.


\footnote{155} Ibid.


\footnote{157} Mahtani, “The Kampala Attacks and Their Regional Implications.”

the country.\textsuperscript{159} By 2017, the ADF, facing supply and financing shortfalls, seemed to be largely fading into the background.\textsuperscript{160}

That same year, a new leader named Musa Baluku began changing the direction of the organization. Baluku turned the ADF away from Uganda and concentrated instead on building an Islamic State in the DRC governed by a transnational Salafist-jihadist ideology.\textsuperscript{161} A series of at least thirty-five videos posted by an ADF member from 2016-2017 demonstrated a distinct shift in the rhetoric employed by the group and marked its efforts to align itself with other Islamic extremist organizations.\textsuperscript{162} As one former group member said in a 2018 interview, “Before, the ADF attacked Uganda. It was a political struggle, they killed civilians within that context. Now, they kill the Congolese who they used to live with.”\textsuperscript{163} Baluku pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi in June 2018, and that same year ISCAP was acknowledged as a formal province of the Islamic State.\textsuperscript{164} Islamic State propaganda outlets first claimed an attack by the ADF on April 18, 2019.\textsuperscript{165}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{159} O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”
\bibitem{160} Mahtani, “The Kampala Attacks and Their Regional Implications.”
\bibitem{161} O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”
\bibitem{162} Congo Research Group, “Inside the ADF Rebellion,” 3.
\bibitem{163} Ibid, 19.
\end{thebibliography}
There has been a clear shift in the ADF’s operational capabilities since it announced its connection to IS, with fatalities attributed to the group consistently trending upward since the group first made contact with IS in 2017.\textsuperscript{167} The ADF was in dire financial straits, without the income to provide basic necessities like salt or medicine for its fighters,\textsuperscript{168} but was promised financial assistance from IS emissaries and began receiving transfers in 2017.\textsuperscript{169} Since then, it has consistently increased the scope, geographic range, and complexity of its attacks on targets.\textsuperscript{170} In 2021, the ADF began releasing beheading videos and for the first time carried out suicide bombings, demonstrating technical proficiency and making

\[\text{[166] O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”} \]
\[\text{[167] Candland et al., “The Islamic State in Congo,” 22.} \]
\[\text{[170] O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”} \]
an effort to shift toward alignment with broader IS strategy.\footnote{171} Despite the massive influx of FARDC forces to the region and the declaration of martial law in April 2021, the ADF averaged 84 civilian deaths per month from May 2020 to September 2021, compared with 22 per month over the preceding 12 months.\footnote{172} North-Kivu army spokesman Brigadier General Sylvain Ekenge claimed that over 2,000 soldiers had been killed in the Beni region where the ADF operates over a 6-year period between 2014 and 2020.\footnote{173}

It is believed that IS Somalia has facilitated “trainers, tactical strategists, and financial support” to help ISCAP efforts, with IS-affiliated trainers having likely conducted trainings in Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, Mozambique, and the DRC.\footnote{174,175} In 2021 the ADF targeted Uganda’s capital city, Kampala, with suicide bombings, an attempted attack at a Ugandan general’s funeral, and a failed assassination attempt on a government minister.\footnote{176} The incidents marked the first Islamic State-claimed attacks in Uganda and continued to demonstrate the “significant escalation in the ADF’s operational reach” since beginning its relationship with the Islamic State.\footnote{177} Rwandan authorities also announced the arrests of a few ADF cells on their soil, where the ADF had not formerly conducted attacks but where IS members had been recruited.\footnote{178}

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{172} O’Farrell, “Neither Local, Nor Transnational, But Both: The Islamic State in Congo.”
\item \footnote{174} Weiss et al., “Fatal Transaction,” 26.
\item \footnote{175} Mahtani, “The Kampala Attacks and Their Regional Implications.”
\item \footnote{176} Candland et al., “The 2021 Transformation of the Islamic State’s Congolese Branch,” 49.
\item \footnote{177} O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”
The “existence of sustained, durable, and substantial links between the ADF and the Islamic State are incontestable,” yet the exact nature of the relationship between the ADF and IS Central is still unclear.\footnote{O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”} After all, being classified as a formal affiliate does not mean that IS necessarily has a strong and direct element of command and control.\footnote{Candland et al., “The Islamic State in Congo,” 10.} Somewhat conflicting reports have demonstrated a lack of IS oversight over the ADF’s day-to-day operations while still documenting extensive ties between the groups.\footnote{O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”} Although IS has been able to strengthen and shape affiliate tactics in other cases, such as those of the Boko Haram faction that became ISWAP, there is little evidence to suggest that they have done so to the same degree with the ADF.\footnote{Vincent Foucher, “The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad,” \textit{International Crisis Group}, October 29, 2020, \url{https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/nigeria/islamic-state-franchises-africa-lessons-lake-chad}, 3-4.} For example, there are multiple videos evidencing the manner in which the ADF uses women and children as combatants, carrying weapons and playing active roles in attacks,\footnote{Dino Mahtani, Nelleke van de Walle, Piers Pigou, and Meron Elias, “Understanding the New U.S. Terrorism Designations in Africa,” \textit{International Crisis Group}, March 18, 2021, \url{https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/understanding-new-us-terrorism-designations-africa}.} a topic on which IS Central has reportedly been at odds with ISWAP.\footnote{Congo Research Group, “Inside the ADF Rebellion,” 3.} Similarly, a 2020 UN report found that the details of IS Central claims of ADF attacks were often inaccurate, raising questions about the level of knowledge and control that IS Central had over those operations.\footnote{United Nations Security Council, “Letter Dated 23 December 2020 from the Group of Experts on the Democratic Republic of the Congo Addressed to the President of the Security Council,” \textit{United Nations Security Council}, December 23, 2020, \url{https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N20/329/42/PDF/N2032942.pdf?OpenElement}, 7.}

**CAN ENVIRONMENTAL PEACEBUILDING**
ADDRESS THE ISCAP THREAT?

The ADF is unique amongst its cohort in Africa; whereas most IS affiliates embed themselves into local communities experiencing environmental stress, weaponize and deepen existing grievances, derive income and recruit locally, and build governing capacity, the ADF has taken a different approach. While environmental peacebuilding looks promising for slowing terrorist group recruitment in Africa and acting as a mechanism to reduce conflict in the Congolese context, it is unlikely that such strategies would do much to stop the ADF. There are several reasons for this, falling under three main categories: funding, recruitment, and the ADF’s strategy and goal orientation.

Funding

Since becoming a part of the Islamic State machinery, the ADF has been able to continually increase its funding from outside sources. Internationally, the ADF became connected with Waleed Ahmed Zein and Halima Adan Ali, smugglers and hawala network operators who moved money on behalf of the Islamic State and the ADF. The US Treasury Department found that Zein moved over $150,000 through hawala networks, sending funds to IS fighters in Syria, Libya, and Central Africa until his arrest by Kenyan authorities in 2018. Though Zein was eventually found to have only sent about $11,000 to ADF collaborators in Uganda, the amount of money being moved to the ADF has continued to grow, with a June 2023 report finding $281,000 of verified funds having been sent by IS to the ADF since 2017. The real amount is likely much higher, with the same report finding at least $211,000 that was transferred by Islamic State agents through Nairobi to recipients in Uganda, the United Arab Emirates, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Kenya from September 2019 to September 2020.

[189] Ibid, 40.
[190] Ibid, 32.
IS also engaged in extensive overland smuggling, with one ADF defector claiming to have smuggled as much as $30,000 into Uganda from a network of safehouses in East and Southern Africa in one trip.\textsuperscript{191} In South Africa, ADF operatives engage in kidnapping, extortion, and robbery to supplement their income, moving money into East Africa through money-transfer agencies and playing an outsized role in the revenue generation and coordination of funds to affiliates.\textsuperscript{192,193} Money generated in Somalia and South Africa is pooled and laundered through extensive networks that finance IS activities in the DRC, Uganda, Tanzania, and Mozambique.\textsuperscript{194} Much of the money going to ISCAP is sent to Uganda and then smuggled into the DRC.\textsuperscript{195} The steady stream of difficult-to-trace funds led one US counterterrorism official to say, “Unless these money transfers are cut, no amount of military operations are likely to stamp out this problem.”\textsuperscript{196}

\textsuperscript{[191]} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{[193]} Weiss et al., “Fatal Transaction,” 27.
\textsuperscript{[194]} Ibid, 28.
\textsuperscript{[196]} The Economist, “The Spreading Menace.”
Figure 2: Transfers by Islamic State Networks in East Africa

While the ADF is known for deriving some income directly in the DRC through both legal (mining and agro-pastoralism) and illegal (timber, drugs and wildlife products) mechanisms, the derived value is relatively small compared to its other sources of income. The ADF has continually forced Congolese farmers in its area of operation to pay monthly taxes of $10 to $25 per acre per farmer or give up part of their harvest. The ADF has been known to steal cocoa and kill farmers in order to access their crops, smuggling the Congolese product into Uganda to sell at a higher price. The incentive to do so can be significant; cocoa prices in 2020, for example, were on average $6 USD higher per kilo in Uganda than in the DRC. Researchers focusing on the ADF’s income in 2018-2019 also found that the ADF made around $15,000 annually from

[201] Ibid, 9.
exploiting timber and about $20,000 annually kidnapping-for-ransom operations.\textsuperscript{202}

Most important for understanding how to combat the ADF is recognizing that, despite the aforementioned methods of income generation, locally derived sources of income account for relatively little of the group’s income. The Islamic State provides the ADF with significantly more money than the group sources locally: the estimated $35,000 it derives annually from timber and kidnapping only makes up about 20\% of the $163,000 estimated to have been transferred through the Islamic State’s network in a year.\textsuperscript{203} Since the ADF is not wholly reliant upon forest resources and income that can be derived from the natural world, environmental peacebuilding mechanisms that could reduce the group’s access to mining, timber, and agricultural products would not likely stop the group from operating as it might other militias in the area who are dependent upon such access.

Recruitment

The ADF uses three main methods to recruit combatants: forced recruitment (via abduction), deception, and voluntary recruitment through propaganda or by co-opting individuals.\textsuperscript{204} Most of the Congolese combatants within the ADF are forcibly recruited, either through abduction or via false promises of employment.\textsuperscript{205} The senior leadership of the ADF remains predominantly Ugandan, though it makes efforts to recruit from across the East African region.\textsuperscript{206} These international recruits have proved needed for the group’s forward momentum; a 2021 UN report found that Burundians, Kenyans, and Tanzanians were espe-

\textsuperscript{203} Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{205} O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”
\textsuperscript{206} Congo Research Group, “Inside the ADF Rebellion,” 3.
cially important contributors to the advances seen in the techniques of ADF bombmakers and the increased frequency in the use of explosive devices on the battlefield.²⁰⁷

Fighters who have joined the group for ideological reasons tend to be from other countries in East Africa, as there is not a sizeable local Muslim population in the Eastern DRC, nor has that limited population been co-opted or indoctrinated into the ADF and IS’s particular brand of violent Islamic extremism.²⁰⁸ ADF camps have long practiced a version of Sharia law, with some camps offering schools through which children can receive an Islamic education in line with ADF theology.²⁰⁹ These education structures are likely oriented less toward the local population than they are to IS recruits. The ADF has become a major destination for IS recruits from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Burundi, with IS networks facilitating the travel of numerous individuals to the DRC.²¹⁰ The ability of the ADF to recruit from such a range of countries suggests that regional radicals see the ADF as sufficiently in line with IS’s ideology to be considered a viable struggle to join.²¹¹

Given that the ADF does not rely heavily on voluntary local recruitment and does not care to make a play for local governance, efforts to improve local governance and social service delivery are unlikely to have any meaningful impact on the ADF’s foreign leadership and foreign recruits. The ADF has no real constituency that would benefit from the implementation of environmental peacebuilding strategies, nor would its membership fragment if better livelihoods were offered to locals. While this could change if the group begins to work on a voluntary re-

[209] Postings, “The Tentative Ties between the Allied Democratic Forces and ISIS.”
[211] Postings, “The Tentative Ties between the Allied Democratic Forces and ISIS.”
cruitment basis with marginalized local communities, under the current structure it would seem to be an ill-fitting effort.

**Strategy and Goals**

Most insurgencies consist of local or regional actors who want to build a liberated zone or counter-state in a certain area but cannot confront a national military head-on.212 As such, they rely on the local population as a base of support and membership and must do their best to win the hearts and minds of the people living in the territory they wish to occupy and administer.213, 214 Throughout Africa, Islamic State affiliates have typically worked to embed themselves in local communities and demonstrate their ability to govern.215 While their allegiance to the Islamic state and relationship to IS Central does shape their identity and objectives, these affiliates tend to be fundamentally local.216

The way that the ADF interacts with the local population in the DRC does not match the pattern of relationship building that many other jihadist insurgencies in Africa have attempted with the inhabitants of their respective areas of operation.217 The purpose of the ADF seems to be twofold: to carve out its own area that it can administer, and to be able to support itself and provide funding to other IS partners. The group has made little effort to portray itself to locals as a preferable alternative to the Congolese state, has not provided social services, and continually attacks the predominantly Christian local population.218 It has employed a strategy that seems to revolve around cleansing its territory of anyone not already part of its group rather than building governance

[218] Ibid.
structures. The ADF’s leadership and many of its fighters have no interest in local political issues, and it is not integrated into the communities that such schemes would be aimed at helping.

For environmental peacebuilding to be effective, the parties in conflict must wish for their constituencies to prosper and benefit from stability. The ADF has no interest in the stability of the Eastern DRC, preferring instead to foment instability as it expands its territory. Its goal is to control territory on which it can build an Islamic State and, given a dearth of local populations susceptible and open to its ideological pronouncements, it will continue to import foreigners who believe in its cause. Foreigners do not tend to understand the complex social fabric of a highly diverse and grievance-ridden area and will likely not see that the outcomes from environmental peacebuilding benefit them. They came to fight for an Islamic State more than they came to feed local communities.

**Policy Recommendations**

Funding mechanisms should be the primary target of policies aimed at countering the ADF. While programs centered on improving livelihoods could reduce overall levels of instability and allow the FARDC to focus more closely on physically combatting the ADF, these programs will not have the intended direct impact on the group. In fact, if livelihood programs improve agricultural and mining yields in the region, the ADF may be able to reap the benefits of other’s hard work by taxing and stealing their products. However, if outside funding can be choked off and if environmental peacebuilding measures are able to create more stability in the Eastern DRC, the ADF will have no local support and little other income they can force out of people in one of the poorest countries on earth.

It is possible that the successful introduction of DDR and peace park schemes could affect the ADF’s ability to operate and generate illicit funds if mechanisms are created that empower locals to defend them-

[219] Ibid.
selves against ADF attempts to control local illicit trades. Improving reporting tools could also make it harder for the group to elude detection by local authorities and the FARDC. However, the willingness of the ADF to use extreme violence would likely be overwhelming for local rangers, and the collaboration of locals with the government might cause the ADF to launch retributive mass attacks.

Perhaps, then, the answer to combatting the ADF lies outside the DRC, in the countries ADF fighters come from. Maybe environmental peacebuilding strategies can be leveraged to drive employment and food security and reduce the incidence of government abuses in these countries, reducing the flow of recruits and funds to the ADF.

**Additional Considerations**

There are some indications that the ADF may be adopting behaviors and practices that are more in line with other IS groups around the continent. Failure to note these important shifts in ADF operations risks misjudging its trajectory.\[220\] For example, it appears the ADF may be making efforts to build deeper local roots; it has recently begun proselytizing certain marginalized groups to convert them to Islam, a clear shift in its historical strategy.\[221\] For example, the ADF has begun inserting itself into the conflicts between the Banyabwisha, a Kinyarwanda-speaking Hutu Christian minority with a long history of targeted marginalization, and other communities in an attempt to build the constituency it has thus far lacked in the DRC.\[222\] It remains to be seen whether the ADF will be able to ally with the group long-term, but this could signal an effort to match the modus operandi of the Islamic State writ-large. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the group may move to a pattern of operations in the future that could be more impacted by environmental peacebuilding measures. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the ADF is a complex organism that may never match or align with other IS groups.

\[220\] O’Farrell, “The Islamic State in Congo.”
\[221\] Weiss and O’Farrell, “The Islamic State’s Expansion.”
\[222\] Ibid.
CONCLUSION

In the case studies across Africa referenced in this paper, Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates took on clear governance roles and set objectives that helped them to govern effectively by dividing and weaponizing populations. Each of these groups has taken a decidedly local approach, working with a population base that supports its struggle, and almost all have been financially self-sufficient. In each of these cases, there was a component of environmental stress and an effort to govern by the IS or AQ affiliate, providing an opportunity for environmental peacebuilding mechanisms to be leveraged. Environmental peacebuilding can help reduce support for VEGs as alternative providers to governments and hinder their ability to operate. Given this, it would be logical to expect that strategies to combat the ADF could follow the same path, shifting from the highly militarized approach thus far used to disrupt the group toward environmental peacebuilding strategies that could deter people from joining VEGs and provide them with alternative ways to support their families and communities.

Unfortunately, these tactics are unlikely to stop the Eastern DRC’s ADF from operating and wreaking havoc across the region. The context in which the ADF sits makes effectively combating the group a fundamentally different exercise from the way other IS provinces and affiliates can be addressed. While there have been some operational changes to the ADF that indicate a possible shift towards the strategies employed by other successful IS affiliates in some limited areas, the group retains a very different organizational pattern than the majority of IS provinces around the continent.

Employing environmental peacebuilding strategies will not stop the recruitment of foreigners – the foreign nationals joining ISCAP need to be kept from wanting to leave their homes in the first place. Congolese nationals will continue to be forced into the ADF’s ranks, or, worse, the ADF may ally with other groups with significant grievances against the

Congo state and amplify their efforts to expel the government from certain territories. The ADF does not rely on the support of local populations, so there is no one to convince to stop supporting the group by offering them a better life.

The ADF’s “unwillingness to be neatly categorized as solely a local rebel group or transnational terrorist affiliate” has made it a particularly difficult terror group for Congolese and international authorities to combat, and continued failure to understand the group’s unique nature will ensure progress against the group remains stagnant.224 As military action continually fails to dislodge the ADF and as environmental peacebuilding efforts seem doomed to fail to dislodge the group, a new approach to combating the group must be taken.

[224] O’Farrell.
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