

IFP REGIONAL COOPERATION ON ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY  
AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CLUSTER

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# REGIONAL COOPERATION ON ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

How can it contribute to peacebuilding?

Synthesis report

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Initiative for Peacebuilding (IfP) Regional Cooperation on Environment, Economy and Natural Resource Management Cluster has been looking at the role regional cooperation initiatives in these three areas can play in peacebuilding.

Regional cooperation initiatives are a common mechanism for supporting an improvement in relations between parties, or achieving transboundary goals (such as improving the environmental situation or increasing trade). Many claim to have a positive contribution to peacebuilding. The EU supports and funds various such regional cooperation initiatives.

The cluster's work primarily focused on researching initiatives in the Andean Region of Latin America, the Great Lakes Region of Africa, the Middle East and the South Caucasus, with the view of assessing their current contribution to peacebuilding and extracting lessons learned for regional cooperation initiatives in other areas, whether geographic or thematic.

This synthesis report highlights and extracts common patterns from the following case studies:<sup>1</sup>

- Conflict, economy, international cooperation and non-renewable natural resources in the Andean Region;
- Regional cooperation in the Great Lakes - A contribution to peacebuilding;
- Regional water cooperation and peacebuilding in the Middle East; and
- Regional cooperation in the South Caucasus – Lessons for peacebuilding.

The first section of the findings presented in this synthesis report introduces different types of regional cooperation. They are derived from the mapping and research of the case studies and serve the purpose of giving an analytical overview. The second section briefly summarises the opportunities presented by different themes for regional cooperation. The third section discusses important obstacles to regional cooperation and gives examples from the case studies.

The report concludes that while regional cooperation may play an important role in developing constructive relations between countries, these and general peacebuilding benefits cannot be assumed as an automatic outcome of regional cooperation initiatives. Drawing on the case studies and synthesis findings, the report then makes recommendations to policy-makers designing new or overseeing existing initiatives with the aim of contributing to peacebuilding.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the case studies on which this synthesis report is based, please see the "Regional Reports" section at the end of this paper.

# INTRODUCTION

Regional cooperation is often promoted with an objective to build peace. The proposed logic is that cooperation over issues of mutual interest, such as the environment or economy, will build trust between (former) conflict parties, create mutual incentives in each other's stability and prosperity, and facilitate more constructive relationships between enemies. The model of the EU is often invoked in such situations.

Indeed, environmental and economic topics lend themselves to regional cooperation since neither the environment nor markets are confined to physical borders or boundaries. To the contrary, these policy areas provide mutual benefits and hold incentives for cooperation. Equitable and fair regional economic development, resulting from long-term cooperation efforts can build trust, while the resulting interdependence increases the costs of potential conflicts, therefore serving as an escalation prevention mechanism. Regional environmental cooperation can lead to similar results, for instance, joint water management of river basins or aquifers allows improvement of water supply and quality with subsequent effects on human security and livelihoods.

This synthesis report of the IfP cluster 'Regional cooperation on environment, economy and natural resource management' builds on the four regional case studies compiled for the cluster. It highlights and extracts common patterns and findings from regional cooperation on environment and economy in the South Caucasus, energy and trade in the African Great Lakes Region, minerals and mining in the Andean Region and water projects in the Middle East. All case studies begin with the premise that regional cooperation may be a constructive approach to peacebuilding, as it creates opportunities and channels for communication and can help build trust between groups or countries. The case studies examine regional initiatives addressing different topics and involving different actors (governments, civil society, international organisations, donors) with the aim of understanding how regional cooperation contributes to peacebuilding – or how it neglects existing conflicts and risks prolonging them. Drawing on these case studies, the synthesis report offers recommendations on regional cooperation to policy-makers and donors supporting transboundary and regional initiatives, with the view of gearing their efforts towards a meaningful contribution to peacebuilding.

The different approaches of regional cooperation analysed for this cluster reveal differences in regard to objectives, scope, degree of formalisation, engaged parties and impacts. However, they all clearly indicate that the peacebuilding outcome of regional cooperation cannot merely be assumed and is not pre-determined. Regional cooperation initiatives only become mechanisms for peacebuilding if they clearly address it in their strategic design, processes and implementation. If poorly conceived or executed, regional cooperation efforts can backfire and exacerbate conflict. This synthesis report provides findings, conclusions and recommendations to support the contribution of regional cooperation initiatives to peacebuilding.

## KEY FINDINGS

The key findings of the case study reports are synthesised here from different perspectives, first, categorising the types of regional cooperation for the purpose of giving an analytical overview, second, highlighting the opportunities given by different topics of regional cooperation and third, discussing important obstacles to regional cooperation and giving examples from the case studies.

### TYPES OF REGIONAL COOPERATION

The case studies in this cluster have dealt with numerous regional cooperation initiatives which are supported by the international community (with a particular focus on EU-supported projects). The many initiatives analysed in the case studies can be clustered into three types according to the degree to which they incorporate peacebuilding elements: those primarily aiming to build peace through cooperation, those focusing primarily on regional cooperation, with anticipated peacebuilding “side-effects”, and those not aiming to contribute to peacebuilding at all.

#### REGIONAL COOPERATION INITIATIVES AS A DIRECT MECHANISM TO BUILD PEACE AND ADDRESS CONFLICT

Efforts of this type support a particular political peace process or explicitly aim to support wider peace initiatives, using regional or transboundary cooperation as a vehicle. Examples include technical accompaniment of implementation of economic or natural resource components of peace agreements. Best practices in supporting peace initiatives are longer term and incorporate a strong and systematic confidence-building element. Their programme design reflects this aim, including the choice of partners and issues to be addressed. Less successful examples often explicitly state their desire to contribute to peace through a framework of regional cooperation, without however reflecting this in the design, processes or concrete activities.

#### REGIONAL COOPERATION INITIATIVES AIMING TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION ON PARTICULAR ISSUES, WITH ANTICIPATED PEACEBUILDING SIDE-EFFECTS

This type of initiative seeks to pursue two aims: cooperation in an area, such as environment, energy or trade, while at the same time contributing to peacebuilding, sometimes implicitly. There are numerous reasons why a cooperation initiative will not explicitly state its aim as a direct contribution to peacebuilding. Sometimes these are political, in particular if countries are reluctant to pursue the aim and are content with the notion of cold peace. In other cases, these are rather technical, when those involved realise that setting multiple goals (such as improving trade relations and building peace at the same time) may be counter-productive to achieving them and that priorities have to be set. The dual approach is sometimes merely rhetorical, when peacebuilding is either not mentioned in order to not raise expectations that cannot be fulfilled, or conversely, when peacebuilding is added as a goal to raise the profile of a (technical) initiative. Most examples in the regional case studies reports are of this type (see also the following section, ‘Themes for regional cooperation’).

#### REGIONAL COOPERATION MECHANISMS WITHOUT PEACEBUILDING OBJECTIVES

The final type of initiative simply aims to improve regional cooperation on a specific issue, such as natural resource management or energy cooperation. Such initiatives may aim to support economic development of the particular region or increase trade between participating countries. If implemented in conflict-affected regions, however, they can potentially be harmful if they are not conflict-sensitive. There are few examples of conflict-

sensitive approaches (well developed in the humanitarian and development sectors over the last few years) being systematically adapted and applied to regional cooperation initiatives in conflict-affected countries. This is a serious gap in policy and practice.

## THEMES FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION

Clearly not all areas of cooperation offer equal opportunities for peacebuilding. However, in most cases, the risks as well as entry-points for peacebuilding are not systematically assessed, meaning that real opportunities are lost. To integrate peacebuilding potential, regional cooperation initiatives should learn from and adapt peace and conflict analyses and sensitivity that inform peacebuilding approaches in other sectors.

As demonstrated by the case studies, some of the areas of regional cooperation have the potential of bringing together people from across conflict divides, can address shared problems for mutual benefit and be used as an entry-point for sustained dialogue processes. This cluster in particular looked at environmental, natural resources and trade cooperation, i.e. the issues specified below. The case study reports accompanying this synthesis report further elaborate on each in different regional contexts.

### WATER

In the case of the Middle East, water is an important issue that brings together people from different parties to the conflict and has been the subject of previous peace negotiations. Water cooperation initiatives in that region struggle with the political contentiousness of the topic. Nevertheless, unilateral approaches to water management are inefficient considering the interconnectedness of river basins, and potentially do harm as they may further feed animosities if seen as a zero sum game. Therefore, regional cooperation efforts that seek improvement of water supply must be continued to alleviate the severe scarcity, and can serve as an element of confidence-building to keep cooperation going at least in limited areas.

### ENERGY

Joint energy cooperation has a history in the Great Lakes Region and presents clear incentives for future cooperation. During recent conflicts, technical cooperation was possible despite wars, but has not led to political cooperation or trust-building. While the electricity produced by the joint Burundian, Congolese and Rwandan hydropower dam is crucial for local populations and economies, the technical cooperation is hampered by political dynamics rather than supporting political change and rapprochement. As a consequence, the peacebuilding potential of energy cooperation is not yet properly addressed in these cooperative efforts.

### ENVIRONMENT

In the South Caucasus, there are many regional cooperation efforts on nature protection, biodiversity conservation and water monitoring, as the region is considered a biodiversity hotspot. By supporting such issues of low politics, many donor agencies assume future broader objectives in regard to peacebuilding. However, as these initiatives deal with low-priority topics in a region affected by a protracted conflict, with recent escalation into large-scale violence, such initiatives often remain limited, only involving a specific, small circle of people from the government and civil society.

### NON-RENEWABLE NATURAL RESOURCES (MINERALS, OIL AND GAS)

The countries of the Andean Region grapple with the problem of exploiting their non-renewable natural resources in a way that would contribute to sustainable development without further disadvantaging already marginalised communities or sparking conflict between local communities and multinational companies (among them European ones). Although all three countries (Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) share similar and occasionally identical problems *vis-à-vis* non-renewable natural resources and all are part of the Community of Andean Nations, their regional cooperation efforts and the EU's support to that effort are not directed towards this issue. In the current environment of political polarisation of Latin America, shrinking of non-renewable natural resources, and food shortages expected due to the world financial crisis, conflicts between communities defending their rights and companies/governments exploiting natural resources will most likely be exacerbated.

## CROSS-BORDER TRADE

“Peace through commerce” is not a new idea. In the South Caucasus, the Caucasus Business and Development Network (CBDN) initiative has been using regional economic cooperation to support its efforts in building peace. In the Great Lakes Region, regional organisations such as the Economic Community of Great Lakes Countries (CEPGL) and East African Community (EAC) develop broad schemes for economic cooperation. At the same time, the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), the UK Department for International Development (DfID) and others aim at improving livelihoods and transboundary trade among small traders. They each state peacebuilding aims: on the one hand by promoting equitable and interdependent macro-economic regional development to prevent countries from fighting; on the other hand by improving the economic situation of populations, in particular living in the border/boundary area, with the aim of creating additional stakeholders with vested interests in peace. Using this issue as a basis for a regional cooperation initiative can have the added value of reducing poverty and of demonstrating a tangible peace dividend to all involved.

## OBSTACLES TO PEACEBUILDING CONTRIBUTIONS BY REGIONAL COOPERATION INITIATIVES

The case studies on regional environmental, natural resource and economic cooperation in conflict-affected regions reveal some commonalities and challenges, which are summarised here and grouped into six major challenges:

- Lack of symmetry between participants (in power relations, benefits, communication and information);
- Lack of trust;
- Lack of ownership;
- Lack of strategy for effecting change;
- Lack of broad inclusiveness; and
- Lack of explicit and systematic conflict-sensitivity and peacebuilding components.

These clusters of challenges are interrelated; for example, asymmetric access to information can both be a result and cause of lack of trust and ownership.

### LACK OF SYMMETRY AMONG PARTICIPANTS

The regional cooperation initiatives analysed in the case studies usually involve asymmetric stakeholder relationships, concerning the input (power relations), output (benefits) and throughput (information and communication).

#### **Asymmetric Power Relations**

The effectiveness of regional cooperation initiatives to promote peace or their stated goals (if otherwise) is severely hindered by asymmetries between the parties: in most case studies of this cluster, asymmetric power relations present an evident obstacle. The asymmetry results from different capacities of the parties, ranging from different levels of development, strength of governance structures, political will, resources or legitimacy. Domination of one party can hinder the opportunities of the other to reap the benefits of the cooperation, through the exertion of influence and reduction of participatory opportunities for the weaker party. If donor-supported initiatives do not address asymmetry explicitly, they risk reinforcing the existing power relations, hindering a chance for sustainable peace or in fact, meaningful and effective achievement of the stated goal (such as improving the environmental situation). This might also complicate future activities and projects of the donors and have an important impact on their credibility.

#### **Example from the Middle East case study:**

The Regional Water Data Banks Project (RWDBP), which aims to facilitate exchange of water data between Palestinians, Jordanians and Israelis, was affected by asymmetry in access to resources, human and financial capacity and power structure. For instance, occasionally the Palestinian participants could not partake in project activities, whether meetings or training, because travel permits were not issued by the Israeli administration.

Power asymmetries include knowledge and competences. Weaker actors with limited knowledge and competences are not equally able to participate in or benefit from regional cooperation initiatives, which ultimately threatens the goal of the entire initiative. Furthermore, some regional cooperation initiatives do not sufficiently recognise the knowledge and competence gaps of involved parties, in particular when initiatives have high political prestige. As a result, parties to cooperation initiatives may struggle to fulfil their obligations, which can lead to disruptions of the cooperation, penalties and disillusionment among stakeholders.

**Example from the Great Lakes study:**

Burundi and Rwanda joined the EAC in 2007. The Burundian government in particular faces difficult challenges in its accession into the EAC: within its own administration it faces basic problems of infrastructure (insufficient computers available to ministry staff) and language barriers (insufficient English skills among ministry middle management expected to process all EAC documentation). Additionally, the government also has to deal with the consequences of EAC accession for traders and farmers in the country who will be faced with a vastly different market altogether.

**Asymmetric Benefits**

Another dimension of asymmetry in regional cooperation initiatives concerns benefit-sharing. Regional cooperation usually aims to achieve benefits for the countries and populations with a stake in the cooperation, for example through improved livelihood opportunities, better access to natural resources and energy, or a peaceful environment. Not considering diverging needs and unequal power relations, whether at the design phase of the initiative or during its implementation, holds a high risk of benefit-sharing that is considered unequal or unfair by those participating, by the governments and/or respective communities or populations.

The design might fail to incorporate different circumstances and needs. In addition, if regional cooperation fails to deliver benefits to the disadvantaged party, they will eventually lose the interest in the project itself, perhaps continuing participation only for the immediate financial benefits, which will not yield the expected results.

**Example from the Andean case study:**

Paradoxically, the overwhelming majority of large footprint projects and industries in the Andean Region operate in the poorest areas and despite the generation of taxes, royalties and social investment by companies, they usually remain poor. Frequently, companies' desire to expedite project development and win over communities leads to poorly thought-out social investment projects that tend to undermine state functions in health, education and infrastructure, and create a culture of dependency on the company. When resources are depleted or market conditions no longer justify their exploitation, it is the surrounding communities that suffer. These processes tend to polarise communities among those in favour of projects and those against, further undermining social cohesion required in times of crisis, leaving entire populations vulnerable to illicit economic actors and armed groups.

**Asymmetric Communication And Information**

Regional cooperation initiatives rarely include all concerned parties in a needs-and-interests assessment at the onset of projects. Yet, this could ensure that all partners are informed and that they have established open communication channels to enable proper participation and reduce rumours and mistrust. Within national or group boundaries, both lateral and bottom-up communication are equally important. The case studies show that communication and exchange of information across different stakeholders, including civil society and business, are not on the agenda of most political actors engaged in regional cooperation efforts. Finally, lack of cross-sectoral communication and exchange of information can also have a detrimental effect on the collaboration between peacebuilding and environment/economy specialists, resulting in incoherent setting of objectives or failing to achieve the aim of contributing to peace.

**Example from the Middle East case study:**

The Palestinian Water Authority possesses limited data and information on water resources in their territories and are restricted from taking samples. Within the RWDBP, the Palestinian side had expected that a joint data bank would be created, while the Israeli and Jordanian sides were reluctant to share relevant data. This missing political will to share the relevant data and information resulted in additional mistrust which jeopardised the overall ability of the project to contribute to peacebuilding.

**LACK OF TRUST BETWEEN PARTICIPANTS**

Although, the aim of many regional cooperation initiatives is to build or rebuild trust, one of the main challenges in practice is the lack of trust of the involved parties towards the regional cooperation effort itself.

The case studies of this cluster deal with protracted and fluctuating levels of violence. The partners in regional cooperation projects face difficult issues, such as animosity from other partners, open hostility from one's own society, and sometimes even open violence among the initiative's parties. The regional cooperation initiatives analysed in the case studies reflect that protracted conflicts can hinder cooperation efforts and their successes.

The intention of donors supporting regional cooperation is that common environmental and economic challenges shall provide areas of common interest, so that parties find it important enough to overcome their resentments in order to cooperate. A common interest does not, however, automatically or even easily lead to a trustful partnership among parties to the cooperation initiative. Trust-building presents a challenge that can only be dealt with in a longer-term perspective, fostered by systematic donor engagement to this aim.

**Example from the Great Lakes case study:**

SOCIGAZ, a joint venture between the DRC and Rwanda, is tasked with overseeing the exploitation of methane gas under the transboundary Lake Kivu. So far, only Rwanda has invested in extracting methane gas and has built a pilot platform in the lake. While Rwanda's energy needs and the common benefits of extracting the gas (to reduce the risk of mass air poisoning or catastrophic explosion) are widely accepted, the perception that Rwanda is taking advantage of a shared resource is already very present on the Congolese side of the border and feeds into existing resentments and mistrust.

**LACK OF OWNERSHIP**

Frequently, the launch of a regional cooperation initiative is an outside effort by international organisations/donors, such as the EC or other international institutions. Although external support for regional cooperation is a necessity, it also poses the risk of insufficient or superficial ownership by participants. Local ownership is necessary due to the difficulty of the task at hand as well as the necessity of long-term commitment. Addressing conflicts or building peace can be at best encouraged by external actors, but its success depends on the primacy of local actors in these endeavours. Only people engaged in and affected by a conflict can transform it into sustainable peace.

However, the role of external actors in the initiatives analysed for this cluster is frequently undermining local ownership. Financial support in a developing region is highly welcomed by the beneficiaries, posing a risk of misguided motivation of the stakeholder to be part of the cooperation effort, potentially turning the initiative into lip service. In addition, not involving all stakeholders in meaningful consultations in particular at the development phase can also reduce the scrutiny and drive of those involved, putting at risk the entire cooperative initiative.

**Example from the Great Lakes case study:**

CEPGL is perceived by the international community as supportive in helping the region recover from violent conflicts, as a confidence-building programme for its members and not least as a regional development programme. CEPGL suffers, however, from a lack of financial and human resources and foremost from a lack of political support by all its member states. The initiative is perceived to be primarily of interest to Burundi and particularly Rwanda, as the nominal engagement of the DRC indicates. The lack of ownership is related to mistrust and reduced expectations regarding benefits.

**LACK OF STRATEGY FOR EFFECTING CHANGE**

For regional cooperation initiatives to contribute to peacebuilding in a meaningful way, individual regional cooperation initiatives must not remain isolated, but must impact on political levels. The case studies in this cluster cannot satisfactorily demonstrate peacebuilding impacts, as most of the analysed cooperation initiatives lack clear articulation objectives and mechanisms concerning how they may contribute to peacebuilding. These initiatives sometimes fail to develop a strategy on how they will ensure environmental improvements and economic development, but almost always fail to articulate and achieve clear peacebuilding impacts and conflict-sensitive perspectives.

Only when cooperation initiatives in one area (such as environment/economy) lead to and coincide with a change in structures, attitudes and behaviour causing the conflict, do they genuinely contribute to sustainable peacebuilding. All case studies highlight limitations to cooperation due to a lack of resources and/or political will to bring people together and achieve (or even define) joint regional aims. In this respect, the potential contribution of civil society is often underutilised.

**Example from the South Caucasus case study:**

In 2006, forest fires affected the areas surrounding Nagorny Karabakh. The fires were serious enough to provoke a resolution by the UN General Assembly (A/RES/60/285). Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to a joint, OSCE-led environmental assessment mission under the umbrella of the Environment and Security Initiative, which has the aim of fostering cooperation and mutual confidence. In this noteworthy mission, experts from Armenia and Azerbaijan were involved and worked together on both sides of the border. It also marked the only event in recent years in which Azerbaijani experts officially traveled to Nagorny Karabakh.

One of the key recommendations of the joint mission was to establish a joint, technical monitoring system and regional cooperation for fire management and research. However, the mission remained a singular event among technical experts without (political) follow-up, shutting a window of opportunity for more significant cooperation.

**LACK OF BROAD INCLUSIVENESS**

When considering an initiative supporting *regional* cooperation, the very definition of *regional* is politically laden, and the choice of parties to a project has an impact on the future success/failure of the project. This includes official representatives, such as governments, as well as those (under)represented but affected within a country, whether they are women, indigenous communities, or subsistence farmers. The genuine inclusion of all stakeholders (addressing differences in power and capacities) is a prerequisite for sustainable outcomes and contributions to peacebuilding of a regional cooperation initiative. This includes foresight and strategies to deal with spoilers and those with vested interests in a failure of regional cooperation or in peacebuilding outcomes of regional cooperation on environment, natural resources and the economy. Such strategies can, for example, pursue a multi-step approach by laying the foundation for cooperation amongst the willing and including other stakeholders at different stages. This requires a thorough assessment of who the stakeholders are and what their incentives and disincentives for cooperation may be, as well as taking into consideration the democratic deficits that may exist in some participating countries.

**Example from the South Caucasus case study:**

The Caucasus Initiative was initiated by Germany to foster regional cooperation in the South Caucasus in a variety of the areas with the overarching aim to foster peace, prosperity and stability in the region. In contrast to other donors, a conscious decision was made not to include any of the non-recognised entities (NREs: Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh) at any level (*de facto* authorities or civil society).

This results in an asymmetric approach towards the region, which excludes several main relevant parties – from an economic, environmental and certainly a peace perspective. Thus, while a web of regional cooperation activities brings the states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia closer together and encourages cooperation amongst them, the NREs as actors are largely left out. This approach reinforces the diverging development trajectories and asymmetry between the states and the NREs.

## LACK OF EXPLICIT AND SYSTEMATIC CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY AND PEACEBUILDING COMPONENTS

Even though not all areas of cooperation offer opportunities for peacebuilding and one has to be realistic in putting multiple pressures on a single initiative, most of the initiatives studied have not even demonstrated their ability to function in a conflict-sensitive manner or have missed opportunities to incorporate elements of peacebuilding where it was possible. Developing and applying appropriate peace and conflict analysis frameworks and conflict-sensitive processes is particularly crucial in the settings of the cases studied for this cluster.

## CONCLUSION

Regional cooperation efforts that address the challenges laid out in the findings of this synthesis report and have context-sensitive, inclusive and systematic approaches to peacebuilding can be important peacebuilding mechanisms. Conversely, by developing regional cooperation efforts that are blind to many or most of these obstacles, the donor community at best misses out on crucial peacebuilding opportunities of regional cooperation and at worst reinforces existing cleavages, distrust and conflicts.

The European Commission is active politically and financially in promoting regional cooperation as a tool for peacebuilding. However, there is no common understanding and approach towards the issue of regional cooperation among its members. This risks expensive regional cooperation efforts cementing existing structures and having little peacebuilding effect. This is not to state that all regional cooperation should or must have an explicit peacebuilding aim. It is clearly legitimate for a regional economic cooperation initiative to concentrate on economic aims, and therefore help to alleviate poverty and improve human security. However, in regions affected by violent and/or latent conflict, such cooperation must be designed in a conflict-sensitive way. The complexities revealed by each of the four case studies have clearly shown that there is no template and each region, topic and initiative must be assessed as to its peacebuilding potential.

Furthermore, those regional cooperation efforts that pursue a peacebuilding aim must be evaluated accordingly, not just in respect to their thematic objectives. Finally, if an evaluation reveals that the peacebuilding objective is an add-on to increase the political profile of an effort or simply turns out to be an unsubstantiated assertion, the claim that the initiative also pursues peacebuilding aims must be dropped to avoid the potential negative impact from parties' disillusionment, and resources and capacities freed for other channels of peacebuilding.

While regional cooperation may play an important role in developing constructive relations between countries, in pooling resources to provide public goods to populations and creating platforms for dialogue regarding shared interests, these benefits cannot be assumed as an automatic outcome of regional cooperation initiatives. To maximise these and peacebuilding potentials of regional cooperation, it is crucial to analyse the power relations of the cooperation and regional institutions, and take into account the other challenges discussed in the findings of this report. Whether regional cooperation initiatives will yield peacebuilding benefits depends on the capacities and willingness of those involved, as well as the objectives, issues, design and processes of the cooperation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations are particularly addressed to the European Commission and other multi- and bilateral donors. They are cross-cutting parameters extracted from the regional case studies. More recommendations on specific issues, regions and institutions are proposed in the case study reports.

To enhance the peacebuilding potential of regional cooperation on environment, economy and natural resources, the European Commission, multi- and bilateral donors should:

**1. Have a clear *strategy* on how the cooperation initiative aims to contribute to peacebuilding and effect change.**

- Do not proclaim such an objective if there is no real intent, supported by a mechanism and strategy in place to achieve it;
- Measure impact of regional cooperation interventions on peacebuilding. Articulate that impact where possible, in order to maximise the effect and promote multiplier effects; and
- Make a long-term commitment with clear interim milestones. Where impact is not achieved, redesign the initiative and if necessary, revise the objectives or even the goal.

**2. Support cooperation around *themes* with the maximum potential to contribute to peacebuilding, dependent on the given conflict context.**

- Choose themes that offer joint incentives and result in benefits to all parties, based on a thorough analysis of the political economy; and
- Draw on and if required establish cross-sectoral cooperation between environmental, natural resource, security and peacebuilding experts, within donor organisations, regional cooperation institutions, host state governments as well as civil society.

**3. Develop *designs* and processes of initiatives that support peacebuilding.**

- Mainstream conflict sensitivity throughout the initiative, from the design phase (for instance by choice of parties) to the evaluation phase (impact of project on peace, by applying peace and conflict impact assessments and monitoring). Develop targeted peace and conflict analysis frameworks and adapt conflict-sensitive processes to specialised issues and contexts;
- Elevate mutual trust-building between adversarial governments and societies, as well as establishing sustainable relationships to a strategic goal in regional cooperation initiatives;
- Actively promote local ownership, both governmental and non-governmental;
- Ensure that regional cooperation initiatives aimed at peacebuilding include all parties to the conflict and stakeholders of the cooperation effort, across and within national borders. Identify potential leaders and spoilers, and engage with them early on in the process;
- Address asymmetries by fostering symmetry – on a strategic, symbolic and project level. Take account of the strengths and weaknesses of members: consider, measure and if required support the existing capacities of parties to be engaged; and
- Consider the dynamics of regional cooperation. Build on opportunities of new appointments or political commitments; use interlocutors or mediators to overcome stalemates.

## REGIONAL REPORTS

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