

# Joint Master in EU Trade and Climate Diplomacy

*For the People and the Planet:  
Social Sustainability,  
Environmental Security and  
Peacebuilding in Post-Conflict  
Cambodia and Colombia*

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# ***Thesis Pitch***

[Thesis Pitch Video](#)

## ***Statutory Declaration***

*I hereby declare that I have composed the present thesis autonomously and without use of any other than the cited sources or means. I have indicated parts that were taken out of published or unpublished work correctly and in a verifiable manner through a quotation. I further assure that I have not presented this thesis to any other institute or university for evaluation and that it has not been published before.*

*26/07/2025 McDonnell Kira*

## *Acknowledgements*

My thesis title punch line of **'For the People and the Planet'** is a representation of who I am and what I hope to contribute to the world. All my interests, passions and choices aim to facilitate a better future for everyone, in every part of the planet. Therefore, I hope this thesis illustrates the importance of both the people and the planet and their interdependence.

I would like to thank the incredible people I had the privilege of sharing this Master's journey with. Working alongside classmates from 23 different countries has enriched my passion for people and understanding of all corners of the planet. My classmates are now lifelong friends, and I will cherish this past year forever.

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I would also like to thank all my amazing friends and family for simply existing, you know who you are.

May this be a reminder to put the well-being of people and the planet at the forefront of your mind.

## ***Abstract***

This thesis explores the interlinked roles of social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. Cambodia and Colombia offer a comparative case study which investigates the interdependency between social factors such as community resilience and equality, and environmental factors such as natural resource governance. This thesis analyses historical trajectories of Cambodia and Colombia to then offer distinct insight on international, institutional and community-based responses. It is revealed that social cohesion, institutional trust and environmental governance are crucial components to sustaining peace. This thesis also highlights the interdependency of social and environmental initiatives in fragile states and how vital this integration is for the peacebuilding process. This thesis uses inductive content analysis to allow themes to emerge organically from a variety of international and national documents and to identify convergences and divergences between Cambodia and Colombia's responses to conflict. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of social and environmental peacebuilding.

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# ***1. Introduction***

The world is currently struck with conflict and post-conflict countries are facing a complicated process of recovery that demands more than just the cessation of violence. To determine long term peace and resilience for countries that have faced such atrocities, strong efforts must be made to restore social cohesion, rebuild institutions and manage natural resources. This thesis explores the interconnection between social sustainability, environmental security and their contribution to peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. Social sustainability and environmental security are often examined in isolation (Doyle and Sambanis, 2000); therefore, this thesis demonstrates how the integration of these practices can result in peacebuilding strategies.

Social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding are frequently researched in academic and policy literature, but there is still a gap in understanding how and why they can be integrated. Social sustainability has been defined as the human dimension of sustainability which encompasses social values such as inclusion, social cohesion, equity, community wellbeing, access to basic services and civic trust (Vallance, Perkins and Dixon, 2011). In the past social sustainability has often been grouped with environmental or economic sustainability but is indeed its own entity. This is because social sustainability encompasses the human dimensions of sustainability such as, equality, diversity, community well-being and inclusivity (Colantonio, 2009).

Environmental security has been discussed in literature regarding natural resource governance, environmental degradation and combatting climate change (Krampe, 2017) but fails to integrate the social consequences when environmental security becomes fragile. Environmental security is inherently multidimensional as it encompasses water, land and ecological restoration but is often related to geopolitics for natural resource governance and fails to implement the community based social implications (Barnett and Dovers, 2001).

This thesis will highlight that social and environmental factors are the most threatened during conflict and are also the main drivers of conflict, therefore understanding both factors are essential for peacebuilding in post conflict countries. Peacebuilding has been developing since the end of World War 2 and the concept has attracted more attention through the United Nations. Peacebuilding has developed to incorporate social cohesion and governance reform, rather than just the decline in violence (Barakat and Zyck, 2009). However, peacebuilding still fails to adequately connect social sustainability and environmental security (Swain and Öjendal, 2018). Fragile post-conflict countries often result in further conflict, which is why it is so important to strengthen peacebuilding efforts to maintain long term peace.

Therefore, this thesis aims to fill the gap in research of the lack of integration between social sustainability and environmental security and the impact on peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. New themes of social sustainability are emerging from the traditional ones; basic needs, education, human rights are emerging into inclusion, wellbeing, community resilience, equity and participation

(Colantonio, 2009). However, these components are infrequently discussed with relation to how environmental factors impact communities or the impact of natural resource conflict on equality. In addition, these concepts and frameworks are rarely evaluated in parallel to peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

To explore this intersection, this thesis uses a comparative case study using Cambodia and Colombia. These countries demonstrate distinct conflicts with differing deep-rooted causes, which resulted in diverse post-conflict experiences, while still sharing common peacebuilding strategies. Cambodia faced one of the worst genocides and conflicts in history with the Khmer Rouge Regime between 1975 and 1979, led by the barbaric dictator, Pol Pot and resulted in millions of deaths. The collapse of Pol Pot's regime in 1979 led to the invasion of Vietnam which developed into a civil war which lasted until 1991 when the Peace Agreement was signed. The main driver of this conflict was communist beliefs of Pol Pot which led complete institutional collapse and social trauma (Clayton, 1998). Conversely, Colombia's conflict was driven by inequality, particularly land inequality, which led to marginalised groups which progressed into over 5 decades of civil war between the FARC and the Colombian government. This long civil war formally ended in 2016 with the Peace Accord being signed, but resulted in a desperate need for land reform, transitional justice and inclusive governance in Colombia (García-Sánchez and Plata-Caviedes, 2020).

Despite Cambodia and Colombia's conflicts having differences, both countries in their post-conflict period have implemented environmental and social practices to contribute to peacebuilding. Cambodia focused on community resilience, natural resource governance, education reform and rebuilding institutions. Meanwhile Colombia focused on transitional justice, rural land reform and equality. These cases present a strong analysis of the integration of social and environmental practices, despite differences in conflict history, to achieve peacebuilding strategies.

The methodological approach used in this thesis is qualitative inductive content analysis, using secondary data such as peace agreements, NGO reports, government policy documents and academic literature. Inductive content analysis is the most appropriate for this thesis as it enables themes to emerge organically.

This thesis begins with a literature review to offer a theoretical framework and conceptual understanding of how social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding have been approached in academic and policy literature. The main observation of the literature review is that there is a lack of integrated approaches to these concepts. Chapter 3 reveals the methodology which is followed by chapter 4 which provides a contextual background for Cambodia and Colombia's conflicts to grasp the depth of these conflicts. Then, Chapter 5 provides a thematic analysis, identifying key themes of social sustainability and environmental security and how they contribute to peacebuilding in Cambodia and Colombia. Chapter 6 delivers a comparative discussion by synthesising insights and reflecting empirical findings back to the literature review while acknowledging cross case patterns and

implications. Finally, this thesis closes with a conclusion of key findings and recommendations for more research intersecting social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding.

The main findings include the importance of the interdependence of social and environmental strategies in promoting peacebuilding. A key part of their interplay is that obtaining social factors such as inclusion and civic trust cannot fully succeed in isolation from environmental strategies as environmental factors such as natural resource governance, restoration and conservation help build community resilience and influence a reduction in inequalities. Conversely, environmental programmes that lack decentralised governance or aren't inclusive aren't as successful and risk deepening existing inequalities and fuelling more conflict.

This thesis contributes to a more holistic understanding of post-conflict peacebuilding by integrating social sustainability and environmental security. This thesis highlights the multi-dimensional process of achieving peace. Amid the current uncertainties of the world and the mass devastation of people and the planet, this thesis emphasises the importance of local, inclusive and environmentally focused responses to conflict.

## ***2. Literature Review***

### ***2.1 Introduction***

This literature review will discuss literature regarding social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding. These three concepts intersect frequently in post conflict societies, but current research has failed to address them adequately as an interdisciplinary study. Social sustainability encompasses multiple definitions but overall can be defined as the human element of sustainable development, encompassing social cohesion, equity, and participation. Environmental security is also broadly defined between natural resources, an individual's environment and climate change. Peacebuilding concerns rebuilding societies to prevent relapses in conflict and has been found to encompass multiple factors to succeed.

### ***2.2 Social Sustainability***

#### ***2.21 Background***

Social sustainability is a multi-dimensional concept. Sustainable development up until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century failed to acknowledge the human dimension as it has focused on environmental and economic factors (Vallance, Perkins and Dixon, 2011). There have been empirical studies identifying different aspects of social sustainability and establishing an overall link to sustainable development (Woodcraft, 2015). Sachs (1999) highlights the importance of both cultural sustainability and political sustainability, with reference to balancing development, democracy and human rights.

Social sustainability ranges from access to basic services, home/land rights, social equity, identity and community resilience, and this thesis focuses on how these dimensions of social sustainability contribute to peacebuilding (Vallance, Perkins and Dixon, 2011). Economic sustainability concerns market stability and growth, while environmental sustainability concerns resource conservation, meanwhile social sustainability centres around governance, community relationships, inclusion and human dignity (Littig and Griessler, 2005). Environmental sustainability concepts intersect greatly with social sustainability, for example, land governance for indigenous communities encompasses both social sustainability and environmental security. Analysing how social sustainability practices or initiatives, such as education, inclusion programmes, restoring justice, are re-built in post-conflict countries is essential to understanding peacebuilding. Strengthening these mechanisms through social sustainability practices increase reconciliation and reduces resurgences in conflict.

Similarly, Chiu (2003) evaluated social sustainability based on social limits, ecological limits and equality. Meanwhile, Godschalk (2004) created an opposing view of social sustainability, suggesting that it fails to generate desirable outcomes for all, and instead often leads to only certain groups reaching social wellbeing. As a more generalised definition; social sustainability has been defined as the

interrelationship between society, the environment and economic development (Hutchins and Sutherland, 2008). This thesis is going to establish how determining the differing aspects of social sustainability can lead to benefits in post conflict societies. This corresponds with the idea that social sustainability has recently been considered the additional pillar associated with the social dimension of sustainability and is a less defined topic (Hutchins and Sutherland, 2008). This is important because economic and environmental sustainability are no longer the only important factors of sustainability, now social sustainability is a crucial component and the three act interdependently.

Likewise, social wellbeing has been suggested as a measurement that goes beyond wealth and consumer spending in a community, and considers social, environmental, cultural and political concerns (Wiseman and Brasher, 2008). Furthermore, an adequate understanding of societal and industrial actions and their effect on social sustainability need to be assessed to make informed decisions to benefit future generations (Hutchins and Sutherland, 2008). Therefore, this thesis aims to develop a greater understanding of social sustainability to provide insight into the role of social sustainability in post-conflict countries.

Similarly, community resilience and the strength of institutions are also key dimensions of social sustainability (Magis, 2010). Community resilience is important for groups of people to adapt and recover from unprecedented situations. Strong and inclusive institutions are also crucial to fostering resilience and facilitating civic trust and participation (Leal Filho et al., 2022). These two factors are also important to promote environmental security as natural resource governance relies on strong and trusted institutions, as well as resilient communities, to adapt to environmental threats.

However, Littig and Griessler (2005) highlight poverty and inequality to be a severe barrier to access social sustainability mechanisms. Similarly, Chiu (2003) raised the argument of the order of priorities in attaining social sustainability and advocates for secure and healthy housing as a vital contributor to social sustainability and community wellbeing. A study by the same author discussed social sustainability in Hong Kong and the vertical and horizontal inequality that materialises from poor housing conditions (Chiu, 2002). Therefore, it is important to address the varying factors that lead to social sustainability and their importance. These definitions and ideas provide a strong basis for this thesis to conceptualise social sustainability and to establish the correlation between social sustainability and conflict prevention in post conflict societies.

## ***2.22 Developments in Social Sustainability and Literature Gaps***

There is a nuanced approach to social sustainability as previous studies defined the term to be addressing the basic needs of humans, while more recent definitions concern stronger environmental ethics and human behaviours (Vallance, Perkins and Dixon, 2011). Similarly, another study conducted a chronological analysis of social sustainability themes and found traditional themes to include basic needs, education, human rights, poverty, social justice, equity and employment (Colantonio, 2009).

Meanwhile the same study (Colantonio, 2009) discussed emerging themes of social sustainability, which included demographic change, social mixing, identity, culture, empowerment, health and safety, social capital, happiness, well-being and quality of life. The traditional themes are slowly being replaced by these less tangible themes. Therefore, measuring these concepts has proven difficult and implementing them in society is even more complexed. This is why the intersection of social sustainability and peacebuilding has underdeveloped literature and policy formulation, which is why this thesis is targeting this gap in the literature. Consequently, this thesis specifically addresses the gap by investigating how social themes can be operationalised in peacebuilding strategies and how social sustainability intersects with environmental security.

The idea of traditional and emerging concepts within social sustainability has led to a debate on how governments and policy makers should implement emerging themes as measures. Ormerod and Johns (2007) argue against governments and policy makers' ability to make policies based on happiness. Conversely, Layard (2007) suggests that governments should have a higher interest in their societies happiness and implement policies or measures accordingly.

Littig and Griessler (2005) views research on social sustainability as extremely fragmented which is why it is such a challenge to generate positive solutions regarding social sustainability in post conflict zones. Similarly, Sachs (1999) highlights the broad range of discussions around sustainable development but addresses that the social element is not discussed as thoroughly. Therefore, this thesis focuses on the social dimension of sustainability to contribute to research on peacebuilding and to reduce the fragmentation between social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding in literature.

Studies have argued that there are limitations in literature surrounding the importance of social sustainability in post conflict regions (Brewer and Hayes, 2011, Fiedler and Rohles, 2021). Similarly, another study investigated the role of institutions in social sustainability and identified a significant research gap (Baptiste et al., 2022). Overall, there has been a lack of research on specifically the social element of sustainability. In addition, there is a huge lack of literature analysing social sustainability in post conflict regions, which is why this thesis is going to explore this interdependent relationship.

### ***2.3 Environmental Security***

The first studies of environmental peacebuilding emerged in the late 1990s (Dresse et al., 2018). Literature has concluded that environmental factors such as weak natural resource governance expose post conflict regions to potential further risks which exacerbates the risk of conflict returning (Barnett and Adger, 2007, Eklöw and Krampe, 2019).

Environmental and natural resource governance has been discussed as to having the potential to influence peacebuilding, but there is limited research that provides a cohesive relationship between environmental security and peacebuilding (Krampe, 2017). However, this thesis will highlight

environmental factors that expose post-conflict communities and the threat of weak natural resource governance. Similarly, environmental security has poor policy formulation due to the debate over what ‘security’ issues entail (Barnett and Dovers, 2001). Therefore, it is important to discuss the literature of environmental security to help frame the research question of the relationship between social sustainability and peacebuilding.

Health and wellbeing gained from an individual’s natural environment are huge contributors to sustaining peace in post conflict regions (Ghobarah, Huth and Russet, 2003). This explains the relationship between social sustainability and environmental security, because if communities have resilient and equitable environments, their inclusion, health and social interactions should increase, which contributes to peacebuilding. Poor sanitation and inadequate access to drinking water are major indicators of low health and well-being levels (Ohlsson, 2000), which increase the risk of conflict resurgences. Studies have concluded that these insecurities in environmental infrastructure are the result of conflict and violence (Sowers, Weinthal and Zawahri, 2017, Weinthal and Sowers, 2019). This coincides with a study that found environmentally focused projects to be a catalyst for maintaining peace (Conca, 2018), however, there is limited research that provides a specific understanding of this causation (Krampe, 2017). This is why this thesis aims to develop on the understanding of the interdependency between social sustainability and environmental security.

Okoi (2019) explores natural resources and peacebuilding in Sierra Leone and Liberia and highlights the importance of natural resources being transformed into peace resources. However, the study also addresses the need for stabilising solutions based on local contexts and complex realities of communities, which is also a gap in the literature. This study highlights the importance and power of strong natural resource governance and how it can be a solution, but also a weapon for conflict. Similarly, Lee (2019) advocates for integrating environmental factors into strategies for peacebuilding, such as land equality and forest management. Swain and Joakim Öjendal (2018) focus on resource scarcity as a key contributor to conflict and international intervention to address the environmental difficulties. This study addresses the lack of methodology towards using current research to adapt effective peacebuilding strategies. Evidently, environmental peacebuilding requires sustainable management and environmental governance in post conflict societies, but this discipline is under researched as many studies fail to intersect social sustainability with environmental security.

Furthermore, studies have identified environmental security to be multidimensional. One perspective of environmental security is shared natural resources, such as water, between regions (Ide, 2018, Swatuk, 2015, Zeitoun and Mirumachi, 2008). Other examples take on a neo-colonialist aspect with developed countries extracting high value resources, or conflict within one country regarding the resources (Beevers, 2015, Young, 2012, Johnson, 2021, Okoi, 2019, Päivi Lujala and Siri Aas Rustad, 2012). Finally, climate change adaptation and mitigation also play vital role in environmental security and peacebuilding (Eklöw and Krampe, 2019, Winters, 2017, Krampe, 2016, Swatuk et al., 2020).

Therefore, environmental security is multidimensional and is clearly a complicated field of study. However, environmental security requires strategies to influence long lasting peace, because putting a stop to the physical violence is not adequate.

The impact of conflict and lack of environmental security leaves societies with much lower levels of social sustainability (Gates et al., 2012), which highlights the need for integration between social sustainability and environmental security in post conflict regions. This is because environmental degradation, resource scarcity and unequal access to resources (environmental security components) often exacerbate social inequalities which further damages social sustainability in communities e.g trust, social cohesion, social reconciliation (Pomponi et al., 2019). Reversibly, if social sustainability components are weak, for example weak institutions, exclusion of marginalised groups and limited public participation, then there becomes a much lower capacity to manage environmental security. Therefore, environmental security cannot be reached without social sustainability practices and vice versa.

Therefore, addressing both concepts simultaneously in post-conflict societies is essential as environmental projects must consider social cohesion, justice and inclusion and social sustainability practices must promote environmental threats and issues such as illicit businesses of natural resources e.g. illegal logging. This is why this thesis will explore this interdependency.

## ***2.4 Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention***

The term peacebuilding began circulating the international stage in 1992 after the United Nation's General Secretary defined the term in *An Agenda for Peace* as "action to identify and support structures which tend to strengthen and solidify peace to avoid a relapse in conflict" (Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 1995). Since then, peacebuilding has evolved to encompass multiple dimensions and perspectives (Tschirgi and Coning, 2015). Despite the term peacebuilding being relatively new, coined in the 90s, the concept of post conflict rebuilding dates to the end of World War 2 in Europe and Japan (Swain and Joakim Öjendal, 2018). Peacebuilding efforts have transitioned from previous imperialist or colonialist ideas to international policies and cooperation amidst the Cold War. The United Nations moved from a linear view of post war societies to a multi-dimensional view of conflict prevention and integration (Doyle and Sambanis, 2000).

Peacebuilding is most effective when it is used to facilitate multidimensional strategies, rather than only consulting singular factors (Doyle and Sambanis, 2000), suggesting that economic, political, social and environmental factors should all be considered together. Doyle and Sambanis (2000) conclude the need for the intersection of climate security, social resilience and economic stability. Similarly, Kelman (1998) argues that countries attempting to obtain peace need to have mutual acceptance within communities, cooperation, security, dignity and reconciliation. These factors entail emerging themes of

social sustainability that were discussed earlier, further enhancing the importance of these emerging themes.

Peacebuilding has developed to incorporate social cohesion and governance reform, rather than just the decline in violence (Barakat and Zyck, 2009). This is because to prevent resurgences in conflict, deep rooted issues need to be addressed and reformed. This thesis is going to explore the progressional changes in peacebuilding in post conflict regions and the direct link to social sustainability and environmental security. Majority of recent incidents of civil war occur in countries previously affected by war (Institute, 2016), such as Palestine, South Sudan and Afghanistan, to name a few. This highlights the challenge of sustaining peace in vulnerable societies.

Religion plays a major role in peacebuilding (Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2014). A study conducted in Nigeria, Cambodia and Mozambique found the creation of religious institutions and groups to promote social cohesion and religious leaders mediated peace negotiations (Haynes, 2009). Literature has also argued against religion as a contributor to peace due to the challenges it poses (Sandal, 2019). Critics argue that religion is the main cause of war (Strathern, 2022). Meanwhile a study argued that many other factors such as inequality are the main drivers of conflict (Swain and Joakim Öjendal, 2018). Therefore, this highlights how multidimensional peacebuilding is due to the wide variety of conflict drivers.

Furthermore, religion has been discussed in literature regarding conflict prevention in fragile states, however several scholars argue that it is often intertwined with other deep-rooted issues such as exclusion, poverty, marginalisation and inequality (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015, Schliesser, Kadayifci-Orellana and Kollontai, 2020). Therefore, this thesis will investigate the need for inclusive governance structures as a foundation for social sustainability to contribute towards peacebuilding.

Similarly, for decades there has been an assumption that poverty leads to ethnic conflict (Okunlola and Okafor, 2020), however, other studies argue against this and claim it is a large generalisation (Braithwaite, Dasandi and Hudson, 2014, Le, Bui and Uddin, 2022, John Thompson Okpa et al., 2023). These studies share the common approach of poverty being intertwined with other factors such as political instability, low social cohesion, economic disparities and weak environmental governance. These perspectives highlight the necessity to address both social sustainability and environmental security to prevent further conflict from arising in fragile states. Therefore, this thesis explores how the inclusion of marginalised and indigenous communities and groups impact positive peacebuilding outcomes.

Empirical evidence has highlighted that peacebuilding and conflict prevention are both multifaceted. Scholars have argued that poverty and religion alone are not the key contributors to resurgences in conflict. Conversely, social, political and environmental factors are large instigators in post conflict

societies. Therefore, this adheres to this thesis' research question as social sustainability and environmental security both play a major role in peacebuilding and conflict prevention.

## ***2.5 Synthesis of the Three Concepts Discussed***

The literature presented on social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding highlight the importance of each concept in post-conflict recovery, despite research remaining fragmented and discipline specific. Each concept offers valuable insight, however their combined relevance to securing long term peace is under researched. Social sustainability encompasses social cohesion, equity, strong governance, education, inclusion and resilience of marginalised groups. These social concepts are impacted by environmental security conditions such as infrastructure, land rights and natural resources. These factors then impact social components such as civic trust, participation, reconciliation and restoration.

Environmental insecurity exacerbates conflict risks and lowers social well-being. There is insufficient research connecting environmental security with long term peace. Peacebuilding has also evolved to encompass social and environmental factors and studies discussed have highlighted that economic aid on its own is not a plausible solution. Historic examples of peacebuilding have called attention to the intersection of social, environmental and economic factors in post conflict regions such as the Marshall Plan and more recently, Nepal's post-conflict transition.

Majority of literature assesses these three concepts individually. Social sustainability is discussed as an overarching goal; environmental security is mainly geo-political and based on climate change and natural resource governance and peacebuilding lacks a multidimensional approach by failing to address the social and environmental factors.

A clear gap in the literature is the lack of intersection between social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding in post conflict regions. Individually, social sustainability literature lacks a general consensus since there are so many perspectives of this concept. In general, there is also a lack of research of specifically social sustainability in post conflict regions, as most of the literature is based on social sustainability as a concept rather than its implications.

Furthermore, environmental security fails to address the impact of environmental insecurity on social cohesion in post conflict regions. Finally, while literature on peacebuilding addresses social and environmental factors, it fails to intersect the three concepts to conclude causations in post conflict societies. Therefore, this research paper aims to intersect social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding in post-conflict countries.

This research is needed to highlight that an integration of social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding are needed to create durable long-lasting peace in post-conflict countries. This thesis will contribute to research of the interdependency of these concepts. Furthermore, this thesis

also provides empirical evidence by examining these concepts in practice, using Cambodia and Colombia as case studies, where both countries offer differing conflict histories but common practices of education, inclusivity, natural resource governance, social reconciliation and strengthening institutions to achieve peace. The two case studies will highlight divergent approaches, while still integrating social sustainability and environmental security to contribute to peacebuilding.

### ***3. Methodology***

#### ***3.1 Research Design***

This research uses a qualitative methodological framework for exploring the complex dynamic of social sustainability, environmental security and their contribution to peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. These dynamics are a phenomenon which involve subjective interpretations, social and cultural practices and institutional responses, qualitative methods are better suited to effectively analyse the nuance and profundity of the contents (Hammarberg, Kirkman and De Lacey, 2016).

The assessment of social sustainability in post conflict regions is multifaceted so requires systemic collection, organisation, description and interpretation of texts. This is due to the large scope of indicators assessed in post-conflict countries such as social reconciliation, inclusion, institutional reconstruction and environmental restoration. As discussed in the literature review, social sustainability is challenging to quantify, due to its multidimensional components such as trust, equity, cultural resilience and wellbeing (Colantonio, 2009; Vallance et al., 2011). Thus, using a qualitative approach enables an interconnected assessment of themes in two different countries, Cambodia and Colombia. Therefore, a comparative case study will support the research of whether social and environmental factors positively contribute to peacebuilding in post-conflict societies.

To investigate how social and environmental sustainability are conceptualised and used as tools for peacebuilding, this study uses inductive content analysis. Inductive content analysis allows patterns, themes and categories to emerge from data itself. As there is limited research on this topic, inductive content analysis is most suitable as Elo and Kyngäs (2008) argue that it is best for exploring under-researched topics, specifically in the realm of politically and socially sensitive topics. In addition, “the most different systems” logic (Anckar, 2008) was also used for this research design as Cambodia and Colombia have distinct conflict histories but share the common goal of peacebuilding.

Open codes are first identified, then grouped based on thematic similarity to form sub-categories and wider sub themes (Kyngäs, 2020). The coding process entails labelling all documents to split them into similar categories (Vears and Gillam, 2022). Inductive content analysis is an appropriate methodological approach for the research question as the aim is to discover new insights rather than test existing theories. This research designs allow themes to organically emerge (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). Elo and Kyngas (2008) also discuss that inductive content analysis is well suited to analysing data that has multifaceted and sensitive characteristics, which is why it is appropriate for this thesis.

There are three key stages of inductive content analysis: preparation, organising and reporting (Elo and Kyngas, 2008). Preparation includes the selection of analysis and exploring data, organising enables open coding of documents/text into categories and reporting refers to presenting themes with illustrative examples. In addition, as inductive analysis is most suitable when little is known about the research

topic, it is suitable for this research question as there is little research discussing the direct relationship between social and environmental factors and peacebuilding in post conflict societies. In addition, there is even less research on this relationship with case studies on Cambodia and Colombia.

### ***3.2 Case Study Selection***

The research adopts a comparative case study approach, focusing on Cambodia and Colombia. Case study analysis is appropriate for complex social phenomena and is particularly suitable when there are vague nuances (Hollweck, 2016), namely, forming connections between initiatives and tangible peacebuilding results. As the role of social sustainability and environmental security in post conflict countries is ambiguous and multidimensional, case study research is effective.

Colombia and Cambodia offer a compelling comparative analysis due to their differing geographical, cultural and conflict driven backgrounds, while sharing a common experience of enduring internal conflict, which was then followed by international support and peacebuilding initiatives, therefore, offering similarities in cases. Conversely, the case studies also offer different cases as they exhibit differing time periods, which enables a deeper analysis of social sustainability and environmental practices used during different time periods. In addition, Cambodia and Colombia's conflicts originated from different reasons and therefore, the environmental and social practices required afterwards are divergent. This provides an insightful analysis of the importance of specific practices in post conflict settings to prevent resurgences.

The comparative logic of this research design and case study selection is based on most different systems design (Anckar, 2008). This approach analyses case studies that differ regarding culture, structure and history but illustrate comparable outcomes and emerging themes (Curini and Franzese, 2020).

Cambodia represents a longer post conflict setting, as the Paris Peace Agreements were signed in 1991, formally ending decades of civil war and genocide under the Khmer Rouge Regime. Since then, Cambodia has experienced a prolonged process of rebuilding institutions, regaining cultural heritage, re-integrating groups and re-claiming justice. Conversely, Colombia offers a more recent peacebuilding case, after the Peace Accord was signed in 2016 between the Colombian government and the FARC. This post conflict setting offers insights into environmental protection and social inclusion.

The comparative logic behind these case studies is that it assesses temporal evolution and diverse approaches to social and environmental sustainability in post conflict settings, in the short and long term. Similarly, the use of differing case studies is valuable for identifying how diverse conflicts and the subsequent different social and environmental practices can still lead to peacebuilding outcomes.

### ***3.3 Data Collection***

This analysis is based on secondary data, namely, publicly available materials that are relevant to post-conflict peacebuilding in Cambodia and Colombia. The use of these documents is to assess how practices related to social sustainability and conflict prevention are articulated in official agreements, policy frameworks and civil society publications. The main documents utilised formulate 4 main categories: peace agreements, governmental and intergovernmental policy documents, NGO and civil society reports, and general academic studies on Cambodia and Colombia. Table 1 illustrates which documents were used for each case study and a source example.

The documents were selected through purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of the central topics of this study: social sustainability, environmental security, conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Similarly, purposive sampling meant documents were prioritised based on their policy significance and institutional credibility, for example the United Nations, government bodies and recognised NGOs. This approach was important to ensure that the sample represented a diverse collection of perspectives and studies to aid in uncovering emerging themes. Documents selected were all in the post conflict time period and were predominantly from recognised institutions, NGOs and journals to ensure credibility. Similar types of documents were selected for both the Cambodia and Colombia case study to enable comparative thematic analysis. Finally, a snowball sampling approach was also used to identify further relevant documents.

Table 1: Documents Used

Case Study	Document Type	Source Example
Cambodia	Peace Agreement	1991 Paris Peace Accords
Cambodia	Government Strategy	Ministry of Education 2022
Cambodia	NGO Report	GIZ Cambodia Project
Cambodia	Academic Research	Young and Goldman (2015)
Colombia	Peace Agreement	2016 Peace Accord
Colombia	Government Policy	Ministry of Environment (2025)
Colombia	NGO Report	WWF
Colombia	Academic Literature	Venegas (2022)

**3.4 Data Analysis Procedure**

The analytical procedure involved firstly developing a contextual understanding from reading the texts in full, then open coding was conducted to capture the importance of parts of the text to make crucial connections to the research question. This approach was chosen to allow patterns and themes to emerge organically rather than imposing pre-determined ideas. Documents were selected from chosen categories: peace Agreements, governmental and intergovernmental policy documents, NGO and civil society reports, and general academic studies on Cambodia and Colombia.

Open codes were identified and then were placed in sub-categories, for example, inclusive transitional justice in Colombia was derived from the open codes of “victim participation”, “re-integration”, “ethnic inclusion” which then developed into the theme of transitional justice and ethnic inclusion. This then developed constant comparison of themes between Colombia and Cambodia. Finally, patterns were analysed and contrasted for comparative interpretation which identified both convergences and divergences in social sustainability and environmental security efforts to prevent further conflict. Table 2 highlights the open codes that were identified and what subsequent sub-categories and themes were formed for both Cambodia and Colombia.

Table 2: Analytical Process: Codes, Sub-categories and Themes

Case Study	Theme	Sub-category	Open Codes
Cambodia	Social Reconciliation Through Education	Post-conflict identity and education	Youth engagement, peace education, curriculum reform, teacher training, history integration, transitional justice through schools
Cambodia	Institutional and Community Rehabilitation	Trust building through institutional reform	Civil society empowerment, local governance training, ECCC legacy, rule of law, decentralisation, capacity building
Cambodia	Environmental Rehabilitation and Resilience	Environmental cooperation for peace	Community forestry, decentralised forest management, indigenous land rights, REDD+, Angkor Wat water systems, eco-tourism, UNESCO heritage, disaster resilience
Colombia	Rural Reform	Territorial equity and civic trust	Land redistribution, PDET, participatory planning,

			infrastructure, peasants' rights, rural inclusion
Colombia	Transitional Justice and Ethnic Inclusion	Inclusive transitional justice	SJP, victim participation, truth commission, reintegration, ethnic chapter, reparations, guarantees of non- repetition
Colombia	Environmental Peacebuilding and Land Governance	Sustainable post- conflict land governance	Environmental zoning, indigenous management, deforestation monitoring, eco- governance, community resource use

**3.5 Ethical Considerations**

This research uses only secondary and tertiary data, no primary data is used, therefore there are no concerns regarding consent or direct harm to participants. However, ethical considerations do include sensitivity towards topics of violence, marginalisation and traumatic events. Special attention was taken to engage with materials that respectfully represent affected communities and to avoid underrepresentation for marginalised groups. In addition, correct citations of all sources and accurate credit to the work of communities and organisations was crucial to consider ethical implications.

## ***4. History and Background of Conflicts***

### ***4.1 Introduction***

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an understanding of Cambodia and Colombia's conflicts, what caused the conflicts and their repercussions. Historical and socio-economic background is also necessary to understand the social sustainability practices and environmental security methods that were implemented to prevent further conflict. The Cambodian post-conflict period begins after the Peace Accords were signed in 1991, following the Khmer Rouge Regime (led by the CPK) from 1975-1979 and the civil war from 1979-1989. The Colombian post-conflict period is more recent, as the Peace Agreement was signed in 2016, ending the almost 60-year civil war.

### ***4.2 Cambodia***

The Khmer Rouge Regime occurred between 1975 and 1979 and resulted in between 2.2 million and 2.8 million deaths (Heuveline, 1998). The regime began on 17<sup>th</sup> of April with the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK) storming the capital, Phnom Penh, and was led by the oppressive dictator, Pol Pot. The regime is known globally as one of the worst radical uprisings in human history (Clayton, 1998) causing widespread mass destruction. The revolution was so vast, scholars have named the beginning of the regime "Year Zero" (Duncanson, 1979, Kiernan, 1996) as the regime drastically attempted to delete all history of Cambodia and start again. The main driver of the conflict was Pol Pot's Maoist Communist aspirations for Cambodia which resulted in one of the bloodiest revolutions in history (Lacouture, 2020) with deaths from disease, starvation, exposure and execution inflicted by the CPK.

The educational system was radically transformed by the regime as the Communist Party of Kampuchea attempted to create a completely agrarian, classless society (Clayton, 1998). The education system was purposely dismantled and restructured to align with the regimes ideological goals. In April 1975, the Khmer Rouge closed all schools, universities and educational institutions, the regime specifically targeted teachers and intellectuals as enemies of the regime (Ayres, 1999). Education was reconceived as a method to indoctrinate citizens. Books, libraries and records were destroyed as an attempt to completely erase the past, hence "Year Zero". In addition, methods reached such brutal heights that many teachers and intellectuals were sent to labour camps or executed. Children were specifically targeted by indoctrination as new schools were established that mainly focused on propaganda and loyalty to the regime (Tyner, 2017).

The excess mortality of the 1970s significantly impacted the socio-demographics of Cambodia. Marriage rates, birth rates, educational attainments and morbidity decreased dramatically in this period (Heuveline, 1998). Fortunately, fertility and marriage rates increased rapidly after the regime ended, but the population structure faced major effects and educational attainment suffered for decades afterwards

(de Walque, 2006). It is important to understand the population structure in Cambodia to be able to conceptualise the importance of social sustainability practices in the post conflict period, to appreciate the need for population structure recovery.

The regime dismantled institutions, abolished currency, banned religion, displaced hundreds of thousands of people and was ruled as a genocide on Cambodian's citizens, all as an oppressing method to achieve a communist state (Kiernan, 1996). This harsh regime ended when Vietnam invaded Cambodia between December 1978 and January 1979 and forced the remainder of Pol Pot's armed forces to flee to the Thai border (Pribbenow, 2006). While Vietnam's invasion collapsed the Khmer Rouge Regime, it also unfortunately materialised into a long civil war between the newly formed Peoples Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), resistance groups and the Kingdom of Cambodia. This continued the instabilities and weaknesses in Cambodia.

The Paris Peace Agreements were successfully signed in 1991, after a decade of negotiations, by Cambodia, 18 other countries and 4 Cambodian parties which led to a ceasefire (UNTC, 2025). The main priorities of the Peace Agreement were to establish a democratic state, rebuild institutions, restore education and promote social reconciliation (United Nations, 2003). This was a turning point for Cambodia, as it ended decades of conflict and established the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) which supported free elections, disarming groups, rebuilding institutions and repatriating refugees (United Nations, 2003).

The devastation constrained on Cambodia and the atrocities burdened required immediate attention for social reconciliation and political reconstruction. The conflict and civil war also resulted in environmental degradation which has had long lasting consequences on rural and indigenous communities (Tyner et al., 2018). Elections were held in 1993 which led to Cambodia adopting a new constitution and economic growth has been slowly increasing (Osborne and Roberts, 2001). However, governance remains authoritarian and there is a substantial amount of corruption, but despite this, there have been no internal resurgences in conflict. Therefore, the following chapter will discuss further social sustainability practices used and environmental security measures taken since 1991 that prevented further conflict from arising.

### ***4.3 Colombia***

Colombia's civil war spanned over 5 decades, beginning in May 1964 and ending in 2016 with the Peace Accords. This internal conflict comprised of several key actors: guerilla groups, right wing paramilitary groups, drug cartels and the Colombian government. The conflict resulted in 450,000 deaths (Fleck, 2022) which left Colombia with many consequences such as mass displacement, with more than 7 million people displaced (UNHCR, 2025). The most notable guerilla group was the FARC-

EP, a Marxist-Leninist group, who emerged in the 1960s as a response to social, political and economic inequalities, particularly in rural areas. The main origins of the Colombian civil war are rooted in a complexed history of land disputes, fragility in the political system and state neglect (José Antonio Fortou, Sandra Lillian Johansson and Juan Carlos Muñoz-Mora, 2023).

The conflict's main driver was land inequality and rural marginalisation. A small collection of wealthy farmers owned vast amounts of arable land, leaving rural communities and indigenous communities to own little or no land, which further exacerbated poverty and inequalities within Colombia (Navarrete-Cruz, Birkenberg and Birner, 2023). More precisely, 14% of landowners control 80% of the land, ranking Colombia 11<sup>th</sup> globally for land inequality (Parra, 2024). The FARC was originally formed as a peasant self-defence militia which was connected to the Communist Party. The FARC then declared itself as a Marxist-Leninist guerilla group, with the aim to overthrow the government to implement agrarian reform, economic justice and social equality (García-Sánchez and Plata-Caviedes, 2020). Unfortunately, the FARC caused the conflict to escalate rapidly as they financed their operations through kidnapping, extortion and drug trade. This led to the rise of paramilitary groups and the Colombian state responding with strong militarisation, which was supported by the US through Plan Colombia (Marcella et al., 2001).

After years of failed negotiations and conclusions, the Peace Accord was signed in 2016 between the Colombian Government and the FARC (Betancur-Restrepo, 2016). The main priorities of the agreement were to end the conflict, provide justice for victims, facilitate rural equality, re-integrate ex-combatants and establish a truth commission (Justice for Colombia, 2025). However, this multifaceted conflict left Colombia with many consequences such as mass displacement with more than 7 million people displaced (UNHCR, 2025) which led to further rural poverty and disproportionate impacts on indigenous communities. In addition, the conflict exacerbated institutional fragmentation which left weaknesses in governance as well as mistrust (Sanabria-Pulido and Velasquez-Ospina, 2021). Socioeconomic inequality with relation to rural underdevelopment is a main consequence of the conflict which has generated poor access to healthcare, education and infrastructure, further perpetuating inequalities (Berry, 2017).

Much like Cambodia, Colombia's post conflict time period also called for immediate attention and support. The peace agreement included a section on the vulnerabilities of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and multilateral assistance for supporting the re-integration of ex-combatants to prevent further marginalisation (Kroc Institute, 2025). In addition, environmental security is a significant part of Colombia's post conflict period, regarding deforestation and land justice for rural communities (José Antonio Fortou, Sandra Lillian Johansson and Juan Carlos Muñoz-Mora, 2023).

#### ***4.4 Conclusion***

Overall, Cambodia and Colombia offer differing historical conflicts. Cambodia endured a genocide which was driven by communist values under the oppressive dictator Pol Pot who attempted to completely deconstruct Cambodia, whereas the Colombian civil war was between the government and the FARC and was driven mainly by land inequality and gave rise to paramilitary groups. Cambodia's conflict was predominantly ideology based and was rooted in cultural and political transformation, whereas Colombia's conflict was fuelled by structural inequalities. These distinctions highlight the peacebuilding needs of each country as Cambodia required institutional reconstruction and social reconciliation, while Colombia required attention towards tackling inequalities and armed actors.

Both countries implemented social sustainability practices and environmental security methods. Cambodia's post Khmer Rouge transition involved mass devastation and trauma and international intervention but has now had three decades to implement social justice and environmental procedures. Meanwhile, Cambodia's peace agreement is much more recent and has faced challenges with implementation due to political polarisation and the continued arisings of drug cartels and violence. Understanding these histories is essential to analyse how concepts like social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding are reflected in policy reports, NGO documents and government narratives. This chapter has set the foundation for the thematic document analysis presented in the next chapter.

## ***5. Case Study Analysis***

### ***5.1 Introduction***

The atrocities of conflict in Cambodia and Colombia produced severe disruptions in institutions, natural resources, education and community well-being. Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Regime devastated people, institutions, education and infrastructure. In Colombia, the civil war lasted over 5 decades which exacerbated inequalities, particularly in rural and indigenous communities. Therefore, these circumstances have led Cambodia and Colombia to implement social and environmental practices to foster social reconciliation, reconstruction, trust and inclusion to attain peace. This chapter presents a thematic analysis of the practices implemented and their impact, demonstrating how the presence of social sustainability and environmental security can contribute to peacebuilding.

### ***5.2 Case Study 1: Cambodia***

Through inductive content analysis, three key themes were identified for Cambodia: social reconciliation through education, institutional and community rehabilitation, environmental restoration and protection.

#### ***5.2.1 Theme 1: Social Reconciliation Through Education***

This theme was identified by highlighting codes in literature such as reconstructing education, healing through education, youth engagement and transitional justice.

The end of Pol Pot's regime saw Cambodia left with no currency, no financial markets, no institutions, no public transport, almost no electricity, no sanitation and no education (Ayres, Kavanaugh and Knafl, 2003). Without education there was no hope for any other sector of the economy to improve. Therefore, during the Vietnamese invasion and civil war, the PRK's main objective was to restore education as rapidly as possible (International Institute for Educational Planning, 2011). The state implemented authorised institutions and bodies of teachers and attempted to remove French influence, after France's 90-year colonial rule over Cambodia. The PRK's actions resulted in primary school enrolment increasing from 0.2 million to 1.6 million (Nicolai, International Institute for Educational Planning and UNESCO, 2009) between the end of the Khmer Rouge Regime and the Peace Accords being signed, namely, between 1979 and 1991.

Challenges remained due to the lack of infrastructure, leaving rural communities unable to access schools or educational institutions (Cameron, 2014). In addition, Pol Pot's mass executions of teachers and academics resulted in a generational gap of citizens with the abilities and knowledge to teach (Ayres, 1999). Despite these challenges, the newly named State of Cambodia, after Vietnam withdrew in 1989, implemented a new constitution, free elections, a multi-party system and tried to steer the education system away from socialist or Vietnamese influence and to continue rapidly expanding education

(Clayton, 1998). Many scholars find education to be an important role in post-conflict settings as education is a key attribute to preventing conflict through influencing social cohesion, peacebuilding, equality and inclusiveness (Buckland, 2006, Bush and Saltarelli, 2000, Davies, 2005, Smith, 2010). Therefore, the theme of social reconciliation through education is essential to illustrate the impact of social sustainability practices on peacebuilding.

1998 marked the last year of violent internal conflict in Cambodia, despite the Peace Accords being signed in 1991, and another election was held. Since then, Cambodia's education reform has had ambitious targets such as the National Education Plan for 2003-2015 (UNESCO, 2015), and the Education 2030 Roadmap for Sustainable Development. Cambodia's education efforts also included the Child Friendly School Policy and the Education Strategic Plan from 2019-2023 (Ministry of Education, 2022). Focusing on education for social reconciliation as a peacebuilding method has been successful as the number of primary school teachers with above secondary education increased from 14.1% to 79% between 1999 and 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2022).

In addition, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) is an NGO from Germany and their work was also analysed. The GIZ project aims to empower governmental and non-governmental partners by integrating Khmer Rouge history into education and supporting peace education (GIZ, 2025). A study found storytelling through education to be a crucial component of the peace process (Lloyd Kornelsen, 2013).

Since 1998 there hasn't been any conflict regarding this civil war in Cambodia, and during this time, the significant tool was the education plans, and as different scholars highlighted, education is an essential part of peacebuilding.

### ***5.2.2 Theme 2: Institutional and Community Rehabilitation***

From inductive content analysis, the codes local governance training, rule of law, anti-corruption and civil society empowerment were derived which then developed into the category of trust building through post conflict institutional reconstruction.

As discussed in theme 1, institutions were destroyed by the Khmer Rouge Regime, which also resulted in a drastic fall in employment rates. The international labour organisation generated employment in post conflict Cambodia by providing millions of days of paid employment by creating a micro-credit institution and by supporting the re-structuring of roads and bridges (Wenk, 2002).

The document "Evaluation of the Cambodia Country Programme" by the United Nations Human Rights programme (United Nations Human Rights, 2020) was also analysed to understand further institutional and community rehabilitation. The document uncovered progress made between the end of the conflict and 2017 which involved facilitation of government and civil society organisations communication on shared priorities and concerns.

Institutional and community rehabilitation has been successful as The World Bank's worldwide governance indicators highlight "political stability and absence of violence/terrorism" for Cambodia to increase dramatically in the last three decades (World Bank Group, 2024). In 1998 (the last year of any internal armed conflict in Cambodia) the percentile rank was 11.70 and in 2023 it was 47.87 (World Bank Group, 2024). Similarly, as the government plays a large role in institutional rehabilitation, it is also important to assess the government effectiveness indicator, also provided by the World Bank. In 1998 the percentile rank was 20.22 and it increased to 38.21 in 2023 (World Bank Group, 2024).

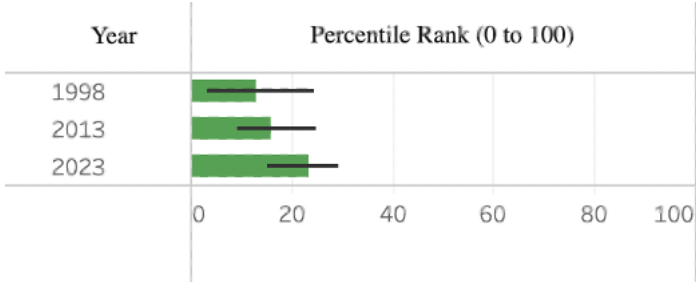
The GIZ NGO has already been discussed in theme 1, however it also aligns with theme 2 as their project is also transforming the former Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) hybrid court into an institution to be a long-lasting legacy for Cambodia. The ECCC was established in 2001 following negotiations between the United Nations and Cambodia (ECCC, 2018). Then, between 2006 and 2022 investigations and court proceedings took place to expose the horrendous acts during the Khmer Rouge Regime. This was extremely important for Cambodia as it led to victim empowerment, social reconciliation and recognition of Cambodian people's suffering (ECCC, 2018). Part of their project was to empower institutions to achieve stronger institutions to foster a prosperous future while remembering the harsh history of Cambodia (GIZ, 2025). Therefore, this is a valuable example of institutional rehabilitation to facilitate dialogue between organisations to provide lasting peace for Cambodia.

As discussed, after the Khmer Rouge Regime, institutions had crumbled and there was a rise of insurgent groups and criminal organisations, and then there was the intervention of Vietnam in 1979. Therefore, rebuilding an effective government was a challenge. However, the Our World in Data index for percentage of territory effectively controlled by government, indicates that in 1980 (just after the end of the Khmer Rouge Regime and the beginning of the Vietnamese invasion) the percentage was 72.8, and this figure increased to 95.0% in 2015 (Our World In Data, 2025). This percentage considers to what extent the government is recognised as the main authority, or rejected by others, such as insurgent groups, criminal organisations or other countries. Therefore, it is evident that the re-building of institutions, specifically the government, influenced a more transparent view of the government, without interceptions from other groups.

Similarly, Figure 1 below is from The World Bank and provides an indicator on Rule of Law; Cambodia in 1998 was ranked 13.00%, while in 2023 ranked 23.58% (World Bank Group, 2024). While this isn't a large increase, it still highlights the improvement of Rule of Law, which is a central aspect of conflict resilience. In addition, The United Nations report in Cambodia for Strengthening Democracy document was also assessed. This report was commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and was created post UNTAC to focus efforts on democratic development. The key points of this progress report are the decentralisation of governance through Sangkat Council and civic engagement activities specifically tailored to the Cambodian political environment to create more

equality. In addition, there was a focus on capacity building for Cambodian ministries and local government bodies.

Figure 1: Rule of Law Indicator in Cambodia



Source: (World Bank Group, 2024)

This aligns with this thesis’ argument of social sustainability and strong governance contributing to peacebuilding as there are clear institutional rebuilding efforts, civic inclusion of marginalised groups e.g indigenous communities and trust restoration through local democratic mechanisms. The United Nations human development index of Cambodia increased from 0.387 in 1990 to 0.606 in 2023 (United Nations, 2025). Therefore, the theme of institutional and community rehabilitation is clearly highlighted through social practices that were implemented in Cambodia, post conflict.

**5.2.3 Theme 3: Environmental Rehabilitation and Community Resilience**

This theme was developed by identifying the codes: ecological restoration, community forest protection and disaster resilience which developed into the category of environmental cooperation as a local peacebuilding tool.

Cambodia’s post-conflict recovery also involved environmental interventions that aimed to reduce conflicts surrounding natural resources and a focus on enhancing resilience against the impact of climate change (United Nations, 2003). The UNTAC and the interim government between 1991 and 1993 faced many challenges regarding peacebuilding in Cambodia in this time period. However, Young and Goldman (2015) discuss the UNTAC’s role in generating economic activity from Cambodia’s valuable forestry. This was a defying factor of Cambodia’s peacebuilding as the study found the forest resources generated revenue for an extremely suffering economy and led to the collaboration of communities to preserve and restore their valuable shared resources.

The Cambodia Development Resource Institute document (2018) on the evaluation of the Food and Agriculture Organisation’s (FAO) contribution to Cambodia was also analysed. This document illustrated that Cambodia’s forest programmes decentralised forest management to local communities and improved environmental outcomes and governance. A study also concluded that increased community engagement in Cambodia improves both economic viability and sustainability of

Cambodian forests (Padilla et al., 2024). In addition, the FAO in Cambodia is successfully progressing towards their national target of attaining middle income status by 2030.

Furthermore, RECOFTC, an international nonprofit organisation, illustrated in their community forestry adaption roadmap to 2020 for Cambodia, the importance of community resilience (RECOFTC, 2014). The document highlights community alignment on forestry in Cambodia as an inter-group dialogue for environmental rehabilitation and economic cooperation in rural areas, specifically amongst post-conflict communities. Scholars also conceptualise environmental peacebuilding, emphasising how ecological restoration can build community trust and cooperation because it facilitates a community space for collaboration among groups with different beliefs or cultural identity which supports the rebuilding of civic trust (Aleksandra Balinskaia, 2024, Dresse et al., 2018, Krampe, Hegazi and VanDeveer, 2021).

These forestry initiatives have been successful as the World Bank describes Cambodia as a global leader in reducing emissions from deforestation and preventing forest degradation amongst developing countries (REDD+). Furthermore, Cambodia is positioned to receive \$40 million in funding to support their national REDD+ programme (Seangly, 2025). Therefore, this highlights the importance of environmental and community resilience and rehabilitation.

Moreover, another key aspect of environmental rehabilitation in Cambodia was identified by the United Nations Human Rights agency who recorded the progress of advancing land rights of indigenous people (Clarke and Ferreira, 2020). This was achieved by simplifying the process of acquiring land rights and creating more mediation services, which further boosted employment. Therefore, since this example illustrates the intersection of environmental and social reconciliation, it is a strong argument for the importance of both social and environmental practices influencing peacebuilding.

Finally, this theme concludes with water security because of Angkor Wat. After the Peace Agreements were signed in 1991, there was increased international attention on collaboration with Cambodia from researchers, engineers and archaeologists who wanted to investigate the historic site of Angkor Wat. Studies (Fletcher et al., 2008, Evans et al., 2013) identified large canals, reservoirs and embankments below and surrounding the Angkor region that were designed for water regulation, urban resilience and flood prevention. The international attraction also supported the use of new technologies to identify these water systems such as LiDAR scanning (Evans et al., 2013), which further supported environmental security in the Siam Reap province and supported community resilience.

Simultaneously, as Angkor Wat was being secured, it was also honoured a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992 (Centre, 2013). This was a pivotal moment for Cambodia as it contributed to community resilience as communities were able to re-claim their national pride and cultural heritage after so many years of conflict. Furthermore, due to the continued protection and understanding of Angkor Wat, the heritage site attracts on average, 2.6 million tourists per year (Horng, 2024). This

shared pride and social cohesion assists in continued peacebuilding for Cambodia and prevents resurgences in conflict, highlighting further the importance of environmental rehabilitation and community resilience in peacebuilding.

### 5.3 Case Study 2: Colombia

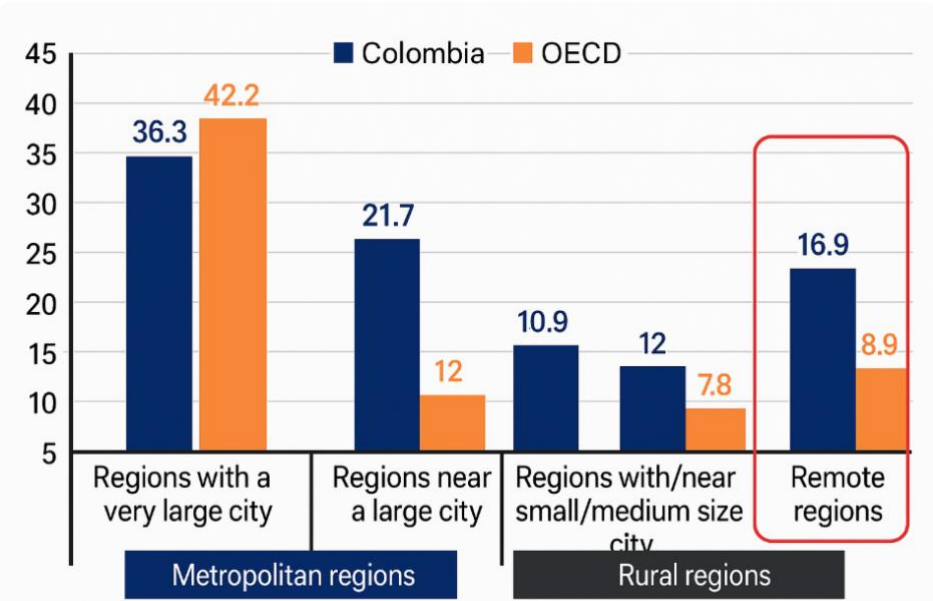
The same procedure of inductive content analysis was also used for Colombia and three themes were developed: rural reform, transitional justice and ethnic inclusion, environmental peacebuilding and land governance.

#### 5.3.1 Theme 1: Rural Reform

This theme was identified by highlighting codes in literature such as rural development, land redistribution, participatory planning and equity, which translated to the category of territorial equity and civic trust.

Colombia’s 2016 Peace Accord illustrates the commitment of rural reform and the reduction of geographic inequality in point 1 of the Accord (Kroc Institute, 2025). The Colombian civil war was driven by land disputes, displacements and marginalisation, as discussed in the previous chapter. Therefore, land reform was an essential part of the peace agreement. The translated Peace Agreement was analysed for this inductive content analysis and illustrated objectives to address these root causes of conflict by improving land access, rural infrastructure and providing basic services in neglected areas. Rural areas are vital to Colombia as their share of population living in non-metropolitan areas is higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2022) (see Figure 2). Figure 2 also highlights that most of the rural population in Colombia locates within remote rural regions.

Figure 2: Populations per Region in Colombia: Metropolitan and Rural



Documents by the Kroc Institute (Web, 2021) and the United Nations (United Nations Human Rights, 2020) highlight the Development Programmes with a Territorial Focus that were created in 2016 with the Peace Accords and demonstrate a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding. The focus is empowering rural populations to restore territorial peace with the cooperation of local governments. The United Nations report of the mission in Colombia highlight that during the administration, 726,673 hectares of land have benefitted 67% indigenous people, 26% peasants and 6% Afro-Colombian communities and more than 1/3 of the beneficiaries are women (United Nations, 2023).

Moreover, a more recent article (Progressive International, 2025) uncovers the progress of agrarian reform, under President Gustavo Petro, by distributing 570,000 hectares of land to peasants. This is a significant advancement for Colombia as rural conflict was the main provocatory in the conflict as 80% of the land is owned by 14% of landowners (Parra, 2024). In addition, other successes noted in this article includes the government reclaiming illegally occupied land, notably from paramilitary groups (Progressive International, 2025). This is significant as these policies foster inclusion, equality and social reconciliation, which are all central aspects of social sustainability contributing to peacebuilding.

However, The International Office for Human Rights Action of Colombia is a Brussels based advocacy network and unfortunately revealed that the implementation of rural reform is lacking progress (Oidhac, 2025). Therefore, despite advancements displayed by the UN Verification Mission, there are still improvements needed. In addition, Colombia still faces inequality which has led to resurgences of internal conflict. Therefore, social sustainability through land redistribution has been successful by benefiting marginalised groups and contributing to peacebuilding, but the slow implementation is preventing a complete end to armed conflict in Colombia.

### ***5.3.2 Theme 2: Transitional Justice and Ethnic Inclusion***

This theme was developed by identifying codes such as truth commissions, ethnic rights, victim participation and reparations which produced the category inclusive transitional justice and therefore, the theme of transitional justice and ethnic inclusion.

After decades of conflict with multiple different groups, the Peace Accord included a transitional justice framework which included the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP), the Commission for the Clarification of Truth and the Search Unit for Disappeared Persons and Reparations and Guarantees of Non-repetition (Kroc Institute, 2025). The SJP recognises victim participation, collective reparations and rights of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities (Special Jurisdiction for Peace, 2021). Therefore, the SJP's work encompasses both transitional justice and inclusion, which supports peacebuilding and trust in post-conflict societies. Transitional justice has been successful as over

343,000 victims have been accredited according to the UN Verification Mission (2023) in Colombia and over 13,900 people are under the authority of the SJP.

The Truth Commission Final Report (Venegas, 2022) contributes to meaningful work on what happened during the Colombian conflict and why it was so complicated, with the focal idea of truth being at the core of peace. The Truth Commission's final report collected testimonies from victims from marginalised groups: women, ethnic minorities and ex-combatants. Several volumes of the final report were analysed from the Truth Commission: "My body is the truth", "Suffering the war and rebuilding life" and "Even war has limits". These volumes illustrate extremely personal truths, with traumatic stories with the aim of enabling collective healing, national dialogue and a greater understanding of the widespread impacts on multiple different groups in Colombia (Venegas, 2022). This shared understanding promotes social and emotional reconciliation, which strongly influences the Truth Commission's aim of non-repetition guarantees. Scholars have identified truth-telling and storytelling to be a large contributor to peacebuilding as it facilitates shared trauma for communities which builds trust and understanding (Mendeloff, 2004, Lloyd Kornelsen, 2013, Vethuizen, 2014). These practices are central to the importance of social sustainability in post-conflict societies.

A large part of transitional justice is also ethnic inclusion; therefore, the Peace Agreement includes an ethnic chapter that focuses on the participation of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. Reports by the UN Verification Mission (2023) illustrate the importance of ethnic voices remaining at the centre of peacebuilding initiatives to ensure cultural pluralism and acceptance to foster social sustainability and conflict prevention. 556 indigenous and Afro-Colombian families benefited from land restitution in 2023, highlighting the benefits of the ethnic chapter (United Nations, 2023). Similarly, the Agency for Reintegration and Normalisation concluded a programme with ethnic organisations with the aim of producing a harmonious community for all members who were involved in the conflict (United Nations, 2023).

In addition, a key part of transitional justice was re-integrating the FARC, to prevent further insurgencies. The UN's study (United Nations Development Programme, 2022) also discussed their findings which revealed that 92% of people in the study agreed with the re-integration process for ex-combatants and 76% agreed with ex-combatants receiving benefits from the State. Therefore, the process of re-integration has been relatively successful, however, other insurgent groups have formed after the demobilisation of the FARC, as a result of the spillover after the peace agreement was signed and due to continued inequalities (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

### ***5.3.3 Theme 3: Environmental Peacebuilding and Land Governance***

From inductive content analysis the codes deforestation monitoring, eco-governance and indigenous management were uncovered which developed into the category sustainable post-conflict land governance, which has produced the theme environmental peacebuilding and land governance.

A report by the WWF, *Conservation in times of peace* (WWF, 2024), discusses their initiative to help rural communities become forest guardians to reduce deforestation. This area, Bajo Caguan, was previously occupied by the FARC; therefore, this is significant progress. This initiative not only connects environmental conservation with post-conflict stability but also supports environmental security for Colombia amid the current climate crisis, when preventing deforestation is more crucial than ever before (Lobos Alva and Cárdenas Vélez, 2024).

A document from the Ministry of Environment (Colombian Government, 2025) illustrates environmental zoning and planning for PDET regions. This relates to theme 1 of rural reform as the development programmes with a territorial focus also exhibits eco-governance and natural resource regulation. This document discusses the implementation of the zoning plan that provides equitable development of the PEDT territories and focuses on local land governance. This is important as scholars (Cusato, 2016, Suarez, Árias-Arévalo and Martínez-Mera, 2017) have also identified the importance of natural resource regulation, as resources are frequently the source of conflict. Therefore, environmental peacebuilding and land governance are a crucial component of the environmental security of Colombia post-conflict.

The United Nations Development Programme article (2025) on building peace in Colombia was also analysed as the work of the UNDP has involved strengthening the rule of law, improving access to gaining justice and solidifying Colombia's response to crises from natural disasters, migration influxes or any further conflict. This report highlights the intersection of peacebuilding, collective action against climate change and natural resource management to achieve cooperation and stability.

However, unfortunately it must also be noted that despite the agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government, further rival armed groups began to form in 2017, which has led to illicit businesses such as drug cartels, coca plantations and deforestation (International Crisis Group, 2017). Therefore, these groups are disrupting environmental peacebuilding, so despite the large progress of environmental peacebuilding and land governance in Colombia, conflict surrounding natural resources remain.

#### ***5.4 Synthesis of Themes***

The case studies presented reveal a few overlapping themes that illustrate the interconnected role of social sustainability and environmental security that contribute to peacebuilding in post-conflict settings. Both countries focused on re-building trust in institutions, utilising education and environmental restoration as a facilitator of community resilience. Despite differing strategic approaches and differing drivers behind these tools, both countries implemented overlapping themes of social and environmental initiatives.

A significant area of overlap was the use of education in social reconciliation. Cambodia focused on state led educational rebuilding which was an essential component of Cambodia's peacebuilding process as the Khmer Rouge Regime tore apart all educational institutions. Similarly, Colombia utilised education through the creation of the truth commission, thus a contrasting approach but remained central to the theme of education. This process involved storytelling and shared trauma for victims of the civil war. These examples provide formal and informal examples of education, but both still highlight the importance of education knowledge systems for social reconciliation in peacebuilding processes.

In addition, community resilience, inclusion and institutional reconstruction also overlapped. Cambodia prioritised rebuilding institutions and restoring rule of law while also decentralising governance which promoted community resilience and inclusion. Similarly, Colombia established the special jurisdiction for peace to facilitate transitional justice which supported the restoration of trust through reparations, victim participation and legal accountability which transpired to support community resilience. Therefore, despite Cambodia and Colombia using different strategies, both countries constructed institutions that led to promoting community resilience and trust.

Furthermore, environmental security is another overlapping theme as both countries implemented natural resource governance, which much like the other themes, also contributed to community resilience and collaboration. Cambodia achieved this through decentralised forestry management, gaining funding for REDD+ and cultural restoration after collaborative research of the ecological area of Angkor. Similarly, Colombia focused efforts on rural reform to promote land equality, however, this has faced implementation challenges due to continued armed conflict and the rise of illegal groups. Therefore, Cambodia's environmental security highlights a more successful case whereas Colombia's fragile state has prevented the development of environmental security.

The main divergences are due to the differing historical conflict contexts which each fuelled diverging responses. Cambodia's post-conflict period required immediate attention for educational and institutional reconstruction whereas Colombia's required rural equality and land reforms. Despite these divergences, both cases highlight the interdependence of social and environmental strategies that contribute to peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. A range of different strategies can be used such as education, land reform, social reconciliation or ecological restoration, and social and environmental factors are best utilised together rather than in isolation. In addition, these cases highlight that peace is not achieved through economic or political agreements and instead require long term development of social cohesion, institutional trust, environmental restoration and community resilience.

## ***5.5 Conclusion***

As Cambodia and Colombia's conflicts were driven by differing issues, both countries have offered an insight into the impact of social and environmental practices in post-conflict countries. Cambodia's implementation of civil education, institutional reconstruction and community based environmental

projects, after facing a genocide and civil war, highlight that even devastated countries can move towards peace. Colombia illustrates a more recent example with a focus on inclusion, transitional justice and equality, despite implementation challenges and continued eruptions of conflict. The next chapter will synthesis these findings and discuss cross country comparisons.

## ***6. Comparative Discussion***

### ***6.1 Introduction***

This chapter presents a comparative analysis of the findings explored in Chapter 5. The rationale behind this comparative chapter is to provide an understanding of the use of distinct social and environmental strategies that contribute to peacebuilding. In addition, highlighting convergences and divergences between Cambodia and Colombia supports a deeper critical analysis of the range of social sustainability and environmental security measures that can support peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. The chapter reveals similarities and differences within the themes of education, institutional trust, environmental governance and the inclusion of marginalised groups. The chapter highlights that despite both countries exhibiting distinct conflict histories, responses to conflict can be adaptive to facilitate peacebuilding in post-conflict countries.

### ***6.2 Comparative Analysis***

#### ***6.2.1 Education and Knowledge Systems for Social Reconciliation***

The restoration of education was a key priority of Cambodia following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge Regime. As entailed in Chapter 5, educational reconstruction, led by the government significantly contributed to social reconciliation and the rebuilding of Cambodia after so much devastation. The PRK education reform (Nicolai et al., 2009) increased primary school enrolment from 0.2 million to 1.6 million between 1979 and 1991. The education reform also included storytelling of Cambodia's history, the education strategic plan 2019-2023 and gained international support from international institutions such as GIZ.

Conversely, Colombia's post conflict initiatives did not prioritise formal education, instead Colombia focused on storytelling and knowledge transmission, through the work of the Truth Commission (Venegas, 2022). This process enabled Colombian's, especially marginalised groups, to provide testimonies and story-tell about their experiences in relation to the conflict, which served as a platform for reconciliation, truth-telling and collective memory.

Therefore, Cambodia pursued a more formal and institutional based process to achieve social reconciliation through education, whereas Colombia focused on storytelling and a narrative based approach of post-conflict knowledge. Despite divergences, both approaches facilitated social reconciliation by providing shared social spaces for communities and common awareness of the trauma inflicted on both countries. This reflects the adaptive nature of social sustainability practices to achieve peacebuilding.

#### ***6.2.2 Institutional and Civic Trust***

Institutional rehabilitation appeared as a crucial theme in both cases but was fragmented in implementation. Cambodia's main approach entailed rebuilding destroyed institutions and encouraging civic trust through decentralised governance. Chapter 5 illustrated the governance indicators that have significantly improved since 1998 and the World Bank's data on political stability index also highlighted an increase between 1998 and 2023 (World Bank Group, 2024). Therefore, institutional improvements are evident and are a crucial component for social sustainability and peacebuilding. In addition, Chapter 5 also emphasises the power of implementing judicial systems as tools of historical accountability and institutional resilience, further increasing civic trust.

Alternatively, institutional reconstruction and civic trust in Colombia was redefined through the creation of a transitional justice framework. The SJP and the Truth Commission influenced victim participation and legal recognition of historical injustice, with specific attention towards indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Chapter 5 highlighted that over 343,000 victims have been accredited under the SJP (UN Verification Mission, 2023). In addition, re-integration programmes were also implemented by the state which also supported an increase in civic trust. However, there are still challenges with implementation in Colombia and still ongoing conflict in some areas.

Overall, Cambodia focused on rebuilding institutions and decentralised governance as much as was feasible, meanwhile, Colombia focused on restorative justice methods to rebuild trust, which also supported re-integration of marginalised groups. Both strategies have the same central idea of social reconciliation through institutions and accountability and transparency through civic trust. Therefore, this reinforced the central argument of social sustainability practices as an essential factor of peacebuilding in post-conflict countries.

### ***6.2.3 Environmental Rehabilitation and Natural Resource Governance***

Environmental rehabilitation played a crucial role in the environmental security practices that were strategically used to attempt to attain peace in Cambodia and Colombia, but with important differences. In Cambodia, forest management was an important part of environmental rehabilitation which Cambodia decentralised through community-based initiatives. Forest management in Cambodia attracted attention of international actors such as the FAO and RECOFTC who supported local management of natural resources. In addition, the forestry programmes contributed to economic stability and community resilience against the effects of climate change. Cambodia's current status of leader in REDD+ implementation (Seangly, 2025) and their anticipated \$40 million for funding their forest protection, further highlights the success of this environmental and natural resource protection strategy.

In contrast, Colombia illustrated a more complicated intersection of environmental security and peacebuilding due to continued armed conflict and illicit businesses. WWF implemented a forest guardian programme in the region Bajo Caguan, as an attempt to replace conflicting groups with conservation efforts. The PDET regions implemented zoning plans to integrate environmental objectives

into territorial reform. Despite these reforms, there has still been a resurgence of conflict due to the rise of armed groups after the FARC collapsed as a result of the peace agreement. The rise in illicit activities, surrounding natural resources and drugs, has weakened environmental peacebuilding, however, the main reason of this is due to fragmentation in implementation rather than issues with the conceptual idea of environmental security contributing to peacebuilding.

Consequently, Cambodia has been rather successful in environmental security and natural resource governance, whereas Colombia is still facing challenges. Colombia's peace agreement was only signed 9 years ago, whereas Cambodia's was signed 34 years ago, therefore, Cambodia has had significantly more time to implement and monitor initiatives. Therefore, this contrast highlights the importance of implementation in post-conflict trajectories to support environmental rehabilitation and natural resource governance.

#### ***6.2.4 Role of International Actors***

International actors were a shared pattern for both countries as they played a crucial role in Cambodia and Colombia's peacebuilding strategies. Cambodia benefited from international intervention from the UNTAC, UNESCO, FAO and international NGOs such as GIZ. These organisations were key contributors to stabilising Cambodia and facilitating capacity building after the country faced such atrocities.

The UN Verification Mission and the Kroc Institute monitored the implementation of the Peace Accord and influenced transitional justice mechanisms for Colombia. In addition, the OECD produced policy reports on the importance of rural areas in Colombia and provided recommendations for rural reform and more successful implementation. These actors were vital as they also supplied tangible resources and financial resources.

Therefore, Cambodia and Colombia both highlight the effectiveness of international engagement to strengthen national capacities. Cambodia's international intervention mainly focused on stabilisation, whereas Colombia's focused on reformative processes. Despite the significance it is also important to note the drawback of international intervention which is lower representation of local voices and lack of groundwork. Regardless of this, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia had a strong focus on indigenous people and local communities, so international actors do still consider this, but is still a challenge to fully encompass all local voices in decision making.

#### ***6.2.5 Implementation and Time Elapsed***

The time elapsed between the formal terminations of the conflicts in Cambodia and Colombia differ dramatically: the Cambodian Peace Agreement was signed in 1991, and the Colombian Peace Agreement was signed in 2016. Therefore, Cambodia has had over 3 decades to develop and implement initiatives, as well as almost 5 decades since the collapse of the Khmer Rouge Regime. This is

highlighted through the increased education results between 1979 and 1991 and the long process of rebuilding institutions, spanning over several decades. This illustrates the importance of long-term strategies and how time-consuming successful peacebuilding can be.

On the contrary, Colombia's peace accord was only signed in 2016, and implementation is currently incomplete and has not been fully successful as there is still ongoing conflict. Land reform has been relatively successful with land benefitting marginalised groups, however there is still much inequality regarding land, and political instability is exacerbating these perpetuating inequalities. There has been positive progression regarding inclusion and re-integration of ex-combatants, monitored by the UN Verification Mission. However, ongoing conflict by insurgency groups post peace agreement have undermined these initiatives' full potential. Therefore, Cambodia's longer rebuilding and recovery timeline is longer than Colombia's which has enabled Cambodia to make greater progress.

### ***6.2.6 Inclusion of Marginalised Groups***

Another pattern identified in both Cambodia and Colombia is the strategies for deeper inclusion of marginalised groups. Cambodia's inclusion was a result of rebuilding institutions and democracy as these processes influenced civic engagement activities, specifically for indigenous communities to rebuild trust. In addition, the inclusion of post conflict communities in forestry adaptation and the simplification of acquiring land rights have also contributed to reducing inequality and influencing peacebuilding.

Similarly, Colombia focused on inclusion as well but through a deeper transitional justice framework. The Peace Accords' ethnic chapter ensured that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities were central to reconciliation and reparation, and this was illustrated by the UN Verification Mission as they monitored the 556 families from marginalised groups who benefitted from land restitution.

Accordingly, these different approaches of inclusion of marginalised groups reveal how multidimensional social sustainability is and how varied responses to conflict can contribute to peacebuilding, based on specific needs.

## ***6.3 Relevance to Conceptual Framework***

This comparative analysis is essential to support the research question of social sustainability and environmental security's impact on peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. The case studies of Cambodia and Colombia offer diverging strategies of attaining social sustainability and environmental security which underlines that diversified practices still lead towards developments of peace.

In terms of social sustainability, Cambodia's central strategies highlight the multidimensional nature of social sustainability as it encompasses education, institutional reconstruction and environmental

rehabilitation which support community resilience and restoration. These findings align with social sustainability studies that illustrate the importance of inclusive, adaptive and stable institutions (Silvestri and Mayall, 2015, Schliesser, Kadayifci-Orellana and Kollontai, 2020), as discussed in the literature review. Similarly, the Colombian case study offers insight on different dimensions of social sustainability, transitional justice and ethnic inclusion and the impact on peacebuilding from reparative measures. These practices implemented by Colombia's SJP reflect the emerging social sustainability themes of empowerment, reconciliation and identity, as highlighted in the literature review by Colantonio (2009). Both countries demonstrate how social sustainability is a multifaceted concept as it exhibits distinct strategies that are all focused on bettering the lives of people. These cases have distinct conflict drivers, adhering to the notion that social sustainability can be adapted to reflect specific needs for differing post-conflict settings.

In addition, environmental security is illustrated in the case studies to operationalise Krampe's (2016) theory of environmental peacebuilding which highlights that environmental governance influences post-conflict trust, community resilience and conflict prevention. Cambodia's community-based forestry programmes, REDD+ leaderships and institutional guidance for natural resource governance highlights how environmental restoration and perseverance can promote peace at local levels through trust building and community resilience. This also illustrates how post-conflict infrastructure development, institutional reconstruction and decentralised natural resource governance can put into motion the traditional themes of social sustainability: education, employment and inclusion as discussed in the literature review (Colantonio, 2009). This also therefore reinforces the central idea of this thesis, the interdependence of social sustainability and environmental security as a contributor to peacebuilding.

Similarly, Colombia's forestry programme, environmental zoning and rural reform strategies to minimise the main driver of their civil war, inequality, resonates with a study discussed in the literature review by Swain and Öjendal (2018) who find inequality to be a main driver of conflict. Similarly, Colombia's environmental strategies, despite their challenges, attempt to integrate rural development and environmental governance with are key attributes of studies discussed in the literature review (Cusato, 2016, Krampe, 2017). Despite progress from these initiatives, Colombia has faced implementation issues due to ongoing conflict and political instability remaining.

Both cases validate this thesis' central argument of social sustainability and environmental security's impact on peacebuilding in post-conflict settings. These findings support the argument that peace is more sustainable when peacebuilding strategies consider both social cohesion and environmental governance, which aligns with Gates et al. (2012) who found the intersection of governance, natural resources and social well-being to be vital in post-conflict development. Therefore, both cases validate the theory that peacebuilding is most effective when social sustainability and environmental security are interdependent in post-conflict recovery.

The comparative insights highlight the practical application of the conceptual framework as well as contribute to the gap in the literature regarding the interdependency of social sustainability and environmental security in post-conflict countries. The insights highlight that despite differing strategies based on differing needs; the integration of social and environmental factors contributes to the same end goal of sustained peace.

## ***6.4 Implications***

This cross-case comparison highlights relevant policy insights. Firstly, education and collective memory both contributed to Cambodia and Colombia's path towards reconciliation. Despite Colombia still facing conflict and ongoing challenges, the truth commission enabled victim testimonies and shared trauma within communities. Secondly, institutional legitimacy is increased when civic trust and participation are a key part of decentralised governance structures in both Cambodia and Colombia. Thirdly, decentralised natural resource governance plays a crucial role in facilitating peacebuilding. Fourthly, inclusion for marginalised groups and communities is essential for reducing inequality and thus progressing towards peace. Finally, sustained peace requires long term strategies and investments with adaptive implementation, particularly in countries like Colombia where post-conflict fragility persists.

These implications reinforced the importance of social sustainability and environmental security to be recognised in their interdependence and that multidimensional approaches should be implemented in post-conflict countries. These implications also reflect the literature review which highlighted the gap in the literature of the intersection of social and environmental dimensions in peacebuilding contexts.

## ***6.5 Limitations***

As this study focuses on complex and sensitive topics there were limitations. One of the main limitations was assessing document bias as some materials used were published by governments or large institutions, therefore, there was a concern of prejudice. Similarly, another limitation was the concern of local perspectives being underrepresented due to majority of documents used were produced at a higher level. In addition, the absence of primary fieldwork reduced the insight of on the ground experiences of social sustainability and environmental security in post conflict settings.

## ***6.6 Conclusion***

Both Cambodia and Colombia display diverging yet complementary cases of social sustainability and environmental security contributing to peacebuilding. For example, education was a diverging strategy as Cambodia focused on formal education reconstruction, whereas Colombia's approach was more informal with storytelling, but also complementary as these strategies both promoted peacebuilding. Cambodia's approach focuses on long term educational reform, rebuilding of institutions and environmental projects, all illustrating state-led and government supported approaches and

community resilience. While Colombia followed similar practices, the focus highlighted a powerful strategy of justice, inclusion and rights, despite implementation challenges. These different methods reflect each case's distinct historical background and social dimensions, Cambodia had faced a genocide and complete collapse so required complete reconstruction, whereas Colombia had to focus on tackling inequalities as the Colombian civil war was deep rooted in land inequality and exclusion.

In terms of overlap, both Cambodia and Colombia strategically implemented social initiatives that would influence civic trust, inclusion and community resilience, to address the social fractures caused by each conflict. Likewise, environmental security was utilised in both countries. Cambodia and Colombia both integrated environmental considerations into their responses to conflict, which also supported social sustainability as initiatives such as the forestry programme in Cambodia facilitated community trust and development.

In addition, there are other complementary indicators such as the use of international actors to support projects such as the GIZ NGO influencing peace education in Cambodia and the creation of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia to supervise peacekeeping. Similarly, the role of the United Nations Verification Mission was to monitor the progress of Colombia after the 2016 peace agreement was signed. Furthermore, inclusion and participations were overlapping themes as Cambodia implemented decentralised governance projects to increase civic engagement. Likewise, Colombia's peace agreement included an ethnic chapter to ensure the integration of marginalised groups regarding land reform, and Colombia also focused on re-integrating ex-combatants. While Colombia still faces challenges, the difference in time elapsed between conflicts ending and the present, highlights the need for long term strategies.

Therefore, this comparative chapter provided evidence that long term peace in post-conflict countries requires the integration of social and environmental practices. This chapter has also highlighted the need for context specific diverging strategies while still identifying core complementarities in the shared aim of peacebuilding through social and environmental initiatives.

## ***7. Conclusion and Recommendations***

The comparative analysis of Cambodia and Colombia provides critical insights for peacebuilding, which is especially important as the world faces devastating conflicts currently. This thesis has also addressed the research question of: *The impact of social sustainability and environmental security practices on peacebuilding in post-conflict countries: Cambodia and Colombia.*

This thesis has displayed the integration of social sustainability and environmental security practices in post conflict countries, with case studies from Cambodia and Colombia. Cambodia faced atrocities from the Khmer Rouge Regime genocide, which was then followed by a civil war, these conflicts left Cambodia with mass devastation. Peacebuilding was slowly and steadily achieved from education reform, institutional reconstruction and community based environmental restoration and management. The key themes that emerged from inductive content analysis for Cambodia were social reconciliation through education, institutional and community rehabilitation, and environmental rehabilitation and community resilience.

Colombia's peace process has been much shorter as the peace agreement was only signed in 2016, therefore Colombia is still tackling conflict and inequalities. However, Colombia did still implement practices focusing on transitional justice, truth-telling and inclusive reform of land to decrease inequalities as the Colombian civil war was deep rooted in land inequalities. The themes that emerged from inductive content analysis were rural reform, transitional justice and ethnic inclusion, and environmental peacebuilding and land governance.

### ***7.1 Contribution to Literature***

This thesis contributes to addressing the gap in literature which fails to integrate social sustainability and environmental security's contribution to peacebuilding. Most studies explore these concepts independently, rather than exploring the intersection of social practices and environmental practices. However, this thesis has highlighted the importance of researching the interdependency of these factors in post-conflict settings to influence peace. This thesis filled this gap by making conclusions between the two concepts: weak institutions will not be able to effectively manage natural resources, degraded environmental conditions exacerbate social inequality and marginalised communities don't participate in initiatives that promote community resilience or peace. This thesis aligns with conceptual claims by Colantonio (2009), Vallance et al. (2011) and Krampe (2016) regarding the multidimensional, complex and interdependency of social sustainability, environmental security and peacebuilding. However, there still needs to be much deeper research into this intersection.

### ***7.2 Peacebuilding Initiative Implications***

This thesis has displayed several insights for post conflict peacebuilding strategies. Firstly, both Cambodia and Colombia utilised formal and informal education and knowledge systems to facilitate

social reconciliation. Therefore, peacebuilding initiatives should focus on educating the population on their troubled pasts and facilitate spaces for discussing shared trauma and shared narratives. This promotes inclusivity and community resilience.

Secondly, institutional trust is a key policy insight to strengthen institutions and decentralise governance as well as increase legal accountability to gain institutional trust. Without strength and trust, natural resource management suffers, and resurgences of conflict continue. Thirdly, environmental governance and land equity need to be prioritised as in both countries, inequality was a large driver of conflict, especially in Colombia. In addition, poor environmental governance exacerbates inequalities and climate risks. Therefore, focusing on decentralised and inclusive environmental governance with particular focus on rural and indigenous communities, will transpire to supporting peace processes.

Fourthly, inclusiveness of post-conflict initiatives is essential to successfully contribute to peacebuilding. Both countries focused on the inclusion of marginalised communities: Cambodia utilised a community-based forestry programme and Colombia's peace accord includes an ethnic chapter. Therefore, inclusion should be at the core of peacebuilding processes to ensure long term, sustainable peace. Fifthly, the correct balance of international support and local anchoring is important. The intervention of the United Nations and support from global NGOs was imperative to both Cambodia and Colombia, such as the UNTAC in Cambodia and the UN Verification Mission in Colombia. However, the most successful contributions were decentralised, on the ground and locally led to ensure full understanding of marginalised voices. Therefore, it is important in post-conflict settings to allow international actors to support countries in crisis but also empower local capacities and respect communities.

Finally, time and implementation are a post-conflict countries' greatest enemy. Cambodia illustrates a much more successful post-conflict trajectory compared to Colombia. Cambodia has observed a much longer timeline of recovery as the Peace Agreement was signed in 1991, whereas the Colombian Peace Accord was signed in 2016. Unfortunately, Colombia is still suffering from ongoing conflict and challenges regarding implementation. Therefore, peace requires sustained investments, monitoring and adaptation.

### ***7.3 Recommendations for Future Research***

Despite this thesis contributing to the interdisciplinary gap of social sustainability and environmental security in peacebuilding in post-conflict countries, there are still more gaps to consider for future research.

This thesis exclusively used secondary data, however future research could benefit from primary field work to conduct interviews or focus groups to amplify local voices. This would be particularly insightful as a large part of post-conflict recovery is understanding marginalised and indigenous

communities to then shape social and environmental initiatives accordingly. Similarly, this thesis also exclusively used qualitative analysis, however future research could adopt mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis. This would enable statistical correlation between specific factors such as environmental governance and inequality; to explore how interdependent the relationship is between social sustainability and environmental security. In addition, a comparative case study analysis of countries whose conflicts both ended decades ago could be impactful to analyse and track the long term effectiveness of peacebuilding. This could be insightful as it would enable longer time periods of implementation to reveal how peace is maintained.

Furthermore, further intersectionality could be applied in future research. Firstly, with consideration of gender. This thesis discussed ethnic inclusion, but more attention is needed on the gender dimensions of social sustainability and environmental security. Future research should incorporate feminist and intersectional approaches to peacebuilding and discuss gender's role in post-conflict settings. Secondly, the intersection of climate change and migration could be researched further. Due to the rapid rate of climate change, there is a growing role of climate induced displacement and environmental migration. Therefore, future peacebuilding research should discuss how global climate risks interact with post-conflict recovery and therefore, further insight into the impact of population displacement. A broader understanding of the impact of climate change on fragile countries could contribute towards more adaptive and anticipatory responses to conflict.

#### ***7.4 Closing Remark***

Overall, this thesis has displayed the central argument of social sustainability and environmental security's impact on peacebuilding processes in post-conflict countries and the importance of their interdependence. The comparative case studies of Cambodia and Colombia demonstrated that despite different historical trajectories, similar strategies incorporating social and environmental factors can still achieve the same outcome of peace.

In a world currently facing mass devastation and crisis, it is more vital than ever to reflect on past conflicts to ensure peace can be upheld in countries. Peace is not just the absence of conflict, peace can only be sustained through equality, justice, community resilience, empowerment of local communities, environmental governance and civic trust. The people and the planet must be addressed together, if we hope for a world with sustained peace.

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