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# A Decolonial Perspective on Environmental Peacebuilding:

## a systematic literature review


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# Abstract

Environmental peacebuilding [EPB] is an emerging research stream within environmental peace and conflict studies. EPB sees the environment as an opportunity for peacebuilding, constituting a neutral area for building trust and cooperation (Ide et al. 2021, p.1-2), however, it has been criticised by decolonial scholars for failing to address underlying power relations in environmental issues (Rodìguez & Liz Inturias 2018, p.92). In this systematic literature review, we analysed eleven peer-reviewed studies on environmental peacebuilding in relation to indigenous peoples, with a decolonial perspective. The aim of this study was to identify major themes, as well as tensions and unexplored issues, in the existing literature. A central finding in this study is that all analysed articles problematised underlying power relations in environmental peacebuilding, concurring with decolonial theory. When EPB initiatives fail to take these power relations into consideration, the initiatives risk reproducing the same unequal power relations. The consistency of this critique across the literature, suggests that when EPB is studied in relation to marginalised groups, such as indigenous peoples, unequal power relations become difficult to ignore. Furthermore, community-based EPB initiatives showed potential to empower indigenous communities and strengthen collective identity, however, they often lack recognition and engagement from the state, which limits the initiatives' potential. We identified this as an unexplored tension in the literature and encourage further empirical investigation into whether more state interaction with community-based EPB initiatives can produce effective and just outcomes.

*Key words:* Environmental peacebuilding, Decolonialism, Indigenous, Bottom-up, Systematic literature review
Words: 7415

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Since the early 1990s, there has been a growing interest in how environmental issues interact with intra- and international peace and conflict. This new research field began with an interest in how scarcity or an abundance of natural resources can drive conflict, a debate that has become ever more relevant in the face of the changing climate (Ide et al. 2023, p.1077-78 & Ide et al. 2021, p.4-5). From this field a new stream of research developed, that instead of seeing environmental issues as a cause of conflicts, saw it as an opportunity for peacebuilding. *Environmental Peacebuilding* [EPB] theorizes that collaboration in natural resource management can build trust and cooperation amongst groups, promoting peace (Ide et al. 2021, p.1-2).

Environmental peacebuilding is based on the idea that environmental issues, such as the conservation of rivers or forests, can be seen as neutral and technical, and to some extent free from political tension, thereby constituting an area where mutual trust and norms of cooperation can be developed (Ide et al. 2021, p.4, Ide et al. 2023, p.1079 & Johnson et al. 2021, p.5). This view on the environment is, however, highly criticised by adherents of other perspectives for failing to address underlying power relations. From a decolonial perspective, portraying the environment as neutral devalues other forms of knowledge, such as indigenous and local knowledge, leading to the marginalisation of indigenous and local communities (Rodìguez & Liz Inturias 2018, p.92). It can be argued that this critique of EPB is especially relevant since a clear majority of EPB studies are situated in the Global South while researchers often originate from other countries than those in which the studies take place (Johnson et al. 2021, p.7).

In line with this critique, there has been a shift within EPB research from *top-down* approaches, where national elites and international actors implement projects on the local level, to *bottom-up* approaches, where initiatives are driven by local individuals and communities (Ide et al. 2021, p.8 & Johnson et al. 2021, p.3). A leading scholar in EPB, Florian Krampe (in Ide et al. 2023), for example, encourages future research to focus on the

*local-level dynamics, not least with an eye towards marginalized groups to critically reflect on the nature of environmental peacebuilding approaches* (p.1088).

## 1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to get an overview of the literature written on environmental peacebuilding as related to the interests and experiences of indigenous peoples. In doing so, we will apply a decolonial perspective, in order to analyse if and how the researchers take into consideration the underlying power relations that marginalise indigenous peoples. This is with the motivation to make a small contribution in understanding how environmental peacebuilding can be transformed in order to be more sensitive to marginalised peoples and the local contexts in which the initiatives are situated. Thus, the aim of this study is not to develop a new theory, but rather to identify major trends in the existing literature.

## 1.3 Research question

*How is Environmental Peacebuilding problematised and reconceptualised in the academic literature when analysed through a decolonial perspective?*

# 2. Theoretical framework and State of the Art

## 2.1 Defining Peace and Conflict

Many of the conflicts addressed in the environmental peacebuilding literature do not meet the thresholds for civil war (1000 annual deaths) or armed conflict (25 annual deaths involving the government and at least one organized actor) (Mildner et al. 2011, p.159), and are instead discussed as environmental conflicts (Le Billion & Duffy 2018, p.241). Le Billion & Duffy (2018) define environmental conflict as a contested incompatibility in which ecological systems or natural resources constitute the core issue of disagreement (p.241-242). While this definition captures the environmental dimension of these conflicts, Le Billion & Duffy (2018) highlight several limitations. First, it does not clearly distinguish between conflicts driven by environmental change and those arising from the exploitation of governance of natural resources. Second, it risks portraying conflict as a static condition rather than a dynamic process shaped by power relations. Finally, it provides limited insight into why such incompatibilities emerge in the first place (Le billion & Duffy 2018, p.242).

Due to the disadvantages mentioned above, some scholars have argued that a more accurate description of environmental conflict can be reached with the concept of *slow violence*. Vélez-Torres & Lugo-Vivas (2021) describe slow violence as a gradual, often invisible, harm, for example "soil degradation, and the consequent inability to produce food and sustain one's family, may be an expression of a form of indirect, subtle and prolonged environmental violence" (Vélez-Torres & Lugo-Vivas 2021, p.63).

Given that many of the conflicts examined in this study are characterised by structural violence, rather than direct physical violence, this study adopts the concept of *positive peace*. According to Galtung (1969), positive peace entails not only the absence of direct violence, but also the absence of structural violence and the presence of social justice (p.183-184). A limitation of the concept of positive peace, is its reliance on *perceptions* of injustice, rather than objectively measurable conditions, which makes it difficult to apply in practice (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall 2016, p.14). However, we consider it necessary to use a wider definition of peace in this study, in order to fully address environmental peacebuilding

from a decolonial perspective that often emphasises structural violence rather than direct violence.

Accordingly, we will use a broad understanding of conflict and violence. Galtung (1969) defines violence as "the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is" (p.168). This definition allows for the inclusion of multiple forms of structural violence and can take social, political and economic aspects into consideration, making it an optimal starting point for this decolonial study, and the wide range of conflicts that will be discussed in the following sections.

## 2.2 Environmental Peacebuilding

The theory and practice of Environmental Peacebuilding [EPB] focus on how resource management can foster peace (Ide et al. 2023, p.1079). Instead of focusing on how environmental issues drive or exacerbate conflict, EPB brings to the fore how cooperation on environmental issues can foster peace (Ide et al. 2023, p.1078-79 & Ide et al. 2021, p.1). The environment is often understood as *neutral* containing technical rather than political issues. This makes environmental issues an ideal place for cooperation and building trust (Ide et al. 2023, p.1079 & Ide et al. 2021, p.4). The leading scholar Tobias Ide (et al. 2021), defines EPB as "the multiple approaches and pathways by which the management of environmental issues is integrated in and can support conflict prevention, mitigation, resolution and recovery" (p.2-3). We have chosen to use this definition, since it is commonly accepted within EPB research, and is broad enough to cover the wide range of studies that we are analysing (Ide et al. 2021, p.2-3).

The research field of EPB has faced criticism for lacking empirical evidence as well as a cohesive theoretical framework for the causal mechanism linking Environmental Peacebuilding to peace (Ide et al. 2021, p.6). In response to this, in recent years a number of articles have been published compiling large amounts of studies on Environmental Peacebuilding, in order to identify causal mechanisms (see Ide 2019, Krampe et al. 2021 & Johnson et al. 2021). Building on Ide (2019), Johnson et al. (2021) suggest five mechanisms in EPB initiatives that promotes peace: 1) Economic development, 2) Building institutions, 3) Building trust and cooperation, 4) Resource sustainability (i.e reduce environmental pressures

and livelihood vulnerabilities that can otherwise fuel renewed conflict), and 5) Enhancing knowledge (for example through empowering communities to manage conflicts more constructively) (Johnson et al. 2021, p.5). Furthermore, Johnson et al. (2021) find *substantial integration* to be particularly important for EPB. This refers to whether the initiatives strengthen the state's legitimacy and build a stronger link between the individual, community and the state. The study shows that EPB initiatives that weaken substantial integration are more likely to contribute negatively to peace (Johnson et al. 2021, p.3 & p.9). This points to the importance that initiatives do not undermine the state, which we will later problematise when applying a decolonial perspective on EPB.

In recent years, EPB research has increasingly focused on bottom-up approaches, referring to EPB initiatives driven by local actors. This is a response to critique against top-down initiatives, where national elites and international actors build and implement projects on the local level (Ide et al. 2021, p.8 & Johnson et al. 2021, p.3). This shift has been driven by an interest in EPB's effect on local and marginalised communities, since studies have shown that bottom-up initiatives can empower such communities (Ide et al. 2021, p.8). Additionally, Johnson et al. (2021) found bottom-up initiatives to be more successful in promoting peace (p.3).

## 2.3 Decolonialism: A critical approach to Environmental Peacebuilding

The decolonial perspective introduces the term *coloniality*, referring to "the persistence of colonial values" (Rodriguez & Inturias 2018, p.91). In contrast to colonialism, which ended when countries gained political independence, coloniality has continued into modern times (Rodriguez & Inturias 2018, p.92). Through institutions and scientific discourses, colonial values are portrayed as the natural and objective way of understanding the world, systematically devaluing knowledge and worldviews that differ from western norms, thus marginalizing indigenous peoples and knowledge (Rodriguez & Inturias 2018, p.91-92). Decolonial scholars aim to uncover this structural form of oppression by confronting the underlying power relations, for example by questioning current understandings of the environment that are portrayed as indisputable (Ide et al. 2023, p.1094). EPB's view of the environment as neutral (Ide et al. 2023, p.1079 & Ide et al. 2021, p.4) thus becomes problematique, failing to address the unequal power dynamics which allow this type of

portrayal. This approach has been criticised for creating technocratic solutions that risk serving the interest of the state or large corporations, rather than the local communities (Ide et al. 2021, p.6).

According to Vélez-Torres and Johnson (in Ide et al. 2023) the critique of extractivist models of development is one of the most important insights that the decolonial perspective has contributed with. Through the extractivist model of development, people in positions of power are able to accumulate more wealth by exploiting nature and humans, in the name of development. The harm made by these extractivist practices are concentrated on the already oppressed (Ide et al. 2023, p.1095). Environmental peacebuilding that focuses on economic development are therefore problematic within a decolonial perspective. Furthermore, the decolonial perspective often sees the state as an upholder and reproducer of colonial values, which problematises the state's involvement in environmental peacebuilding initiatives (Ide et al. 2023, p.1097). Environmental peacebuilding research that shows the importance of initiatives increasing the state's legitimacy and creating stronger links between the individual, groups and the state (for example, Johnson et al. 2021, p.3 & p.9) is, therefore, called into question by a decolonial perspective.

In a literary overview written by leading scholars in environmental peace and conflict studies, they argue that the decolonial approach "reveals the marginalisation of people and knowledge from the Global South in environmental peacebuilding practices" (Ide et al. 2023, p.1099). Decolonial scholars would argue that failing to recognise this oppression, leads to its reproduction (Ide et al. 2023, p.1095). This process of decentering western knowledge, is both a process of uncovering underlying power relations, but also acknowledges alternative forms of knowledge, such as indigenous knowledge and practices (Ide et al. 2023, p.1096 & Rodriguez & Inturias 2018, p.102). The marginalisation of indigenous peoples and knowledge, through colonialism and coloniality, have created fragility within these communities, making it even harder to confront and dissolve these unequal power relations (Rodriguez & Inturias 2018, p.91-92). Strengthening the local identity is, therefore, also seen as an important step in the process of decolonising (Rodriguez & Inturias 2018, p.100).

## 2.4 Indigenous Peoples

There is no official definition of indigenous people under international law. Instead, according to Rombouts (2023) there are a number of characteristics by which indigenous peoples can be identified: they are culturally distinct from the majority population; second, they are distinguished by a commitment to preserve their own governance structures; and third, they have a special spiritual relation to the ancestral lands and environments belonging to them (Romsbouts, 2023, p.404).

The United Nations defines indigenous peoples as “those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing on those territories, or parts of them” (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs [UNDESA]). It therefore has a subjective dimension, taking into consideration how they “consider themselves”. We have chosen to use this definition in our study because it is internationally accepted, and allows us to develop a relatively broad understanding of indigenous people.

Indigenous peoples’ relationship to environmental projects have been turbulent. During the 20th century, indigenous peoples were often viewed as an obstacle for environmental conservation projects, despite indigenous territories often having more biological diversity (Etchart 2022, p.71). In the climate crisis, indigenous peoples are often viewed as victims, which devalues their knowledge and takes away their agency (Etchart 2022, p.88). Because of the history of oppression with environmental projects, we find it relevant and important to investigate indigenous peoples in relation to environmental peacebuilding, and also applying a decolonial perspective.

# 3. Methods

## 3.1 Choice of Method

In order to address our research question, we have chosen to conduct a systematic literature review [SLR]. A Systematic literature review begins with a clearly defined review question, followed by the identification of all relevant articles, and concludes with the synthesis of the results using scientific methodology (O'Brien & Mc Guckin 2022, p.4). Our research question is how environmental peacebuilding is problematised and reconceptualised in the academic literature when analysed through a decolonial perspective, with a focus on indigenous peoples. We will answer this research question by making a qualitative analysis on all scientific articles on environmental peacebuilding and indigenous peoples, informed by a decolonial theoretical framework.

## 3.2 Systematic Literature Review

Scientific literature review has several advantages as a means to answering our research question: firstly, it is an effective way to organise large amounts of information within a specific field (O'Brien & Mc Guckin 2022, p.3-4). Secondly, it results in clear and replicable protocols. Furthermore, the SLR makes it possible to explore if findings and phenomena in a study can be generalized (O'Brien and Mc Guckin, 2022 p.4). Thirdly, SLR can be an effective tool for identifying gaps in the literature and acquiring in-depth understanding of the chosen field (Leite-Junior et al. 2025, p.6541). O'Brien & McGuckin (2022) emphasise the value of SLR as a tool for mapping out underresearched areas (p.4 & 6). To our knowledge, there exists no prior systematic literature reviews on the subject of environmental peacebuilding in relation to indigenous people, thus this study carries exploratory value to its research field. Moreover, environmental peacebuilding is a relatively new research field, especially with the recent shift towards more local approaches to EPB. This is illustrated by the fact that nearly all articles included in this study were published in the past five years. The earliest study in our data set was published in 2017, which underscores the contemporary nature of this topic. A systematic literature review can therefore provide an overview of this emerging research field and identify directions for future research.

### 3.2.1 Search String

A fundamental step in a systematic literature review is to create a search string. The main purpose of a search string is to ensure that it is specifically designed to maximize sensitivity in database searches, allowing for the identification of as many relevant studies as possible (O'Brien & Mc Guckin 2022, p.7). The search string, in this study, is based on the Cochrane collaboration checklist (Naumann 2007, p.2), but with small modifications to fit our research focus.

**Edited checklist for developing a search strategy based on Naumann (2007, p.2)**

| | |
|---|---|
| Step 1 | Define Text words |
| Step 2 | Determine synonyms for the text words |
| Step 3 | Control for different spellings or using appropriate truncations |
| Step 4 | Identify relevant databases |
| Step 5 | Perform test search |
| Step 6 | Decide whether to perform an ‘exploded’ or a ‘focussed’ search for keywords |
| Step 7 | Check if all words are spelled correctly |
| Step 8 | Perform test search again |
| Step 9 | Customise the syntax of your search strategy to the specific databases |

**[Table 1]**

**Step 1 : Define Text Words**

Before defining the text words, it is important to identify the area which the study aims to investigate (O'Brien & Mc Gucky, 2022, p.8). In our case, we took environmental peacebuilding as a specific area and combined it with an interest in a particular phenomenon: Indigenous Peoples. Through this process we identified which words should be the departing point for this study.

**Step 2: Determine synonyms for the text words**

In step two, we found all applicable terms that could work as synonyms to our chosen words. When developing the theoretical framework and state of the art for this study, we did an extensive reading within the literature of environmental peacebuilding. Through this process, we also developed an understanding of the terminology used to describe EPB. For example, we identified the term “Environmental peacemaking” in the literature. By incorporating synonyms in the search string, we were able to identify more relevant studies.

**Step 3: Control for different spellings or using appropriate truncations**

By examining the spelling and the truncations of our chosen words, we could increase the reliability of the results from the database search. After this, the most appropriate terms like “environmental peacebuilding” and “Indigenous” can, in line with O'Brien & Mc Gucky (2022, p.9), we created a first search string.

**Step 4: Identify relevant databases**

In order to identify a relevant database for our study, we consulted a librarian at Lunds university to gain knowledge on how to conduct an advanced search in the database FINN. FINN includes metadata aggregated from several different databases and sources to which Lund university has access. We explored other databases, for example ones that are focused on particular research fields, however, since EPB is a cross-disciplinary field we got most search results with the FINN database.

**Step 5: Perform test search**

Before implementing the search strategy it is essential to conduct a test search in the database to be sure that relevant articles can be retrieved (O'Brien & Mc Guckin, 2022, p.7). By doing preliminary searches in the Finn database we were able to familiarize ourselves with the concepts and relevant articles. In this process we, for example, concluded that the abbreviation “EPB” to not be a useful search word, since “EPB” is also used as an acronym for other concepts. Additionally, we realised that several relevant articles were excluded when using our initial search string. As a result, our search string needed to be modified, which leads us to step six.

**Step 6: Decide whether to do an "exploded" or “focussed” search for keywords**

In order to make our search string capture more relevant data, we decided to manipulate the search parameters in the Finn database until we were satisfied with the outcome. For example we realized that the term “indigenous” was many times excluded from the abstract, even when being a central part of the study. We therefore decided to modify our search string so that “Indigenous” had to be mentioned somewhere in the full text (and not specifically in the abstract).

**Step 7: Check if all words are spelled correctly**

We then confirmed the spelling of the words by carefully, through the support of one another, examining each word separately to ensure the reliability of this study.

**Step 8: Perform Test search again**

During this stage, a new test search was conducted, this time using the finalized search strategy, which in our case provided us with a more robust set of data.

**Step 9: Customise the syntax of your search strategy to the specific database**

One should, when the search string is implemented, take into account that the individual database has its own syntax and provisions (O'Brien & McGuckin, 2022, p.11). In our case, the FINN database is quite flexible which made it possible to simplify our search string. For example, using the search word “native” automatically includes the word “nativeness”. The finalised search string is presented bellow:

| |
|---|
| **“Enviromental Peacebuilding" OR “ Environmental Peacemaking” (In abstract) AND “Indigenous” OR “Native” (In all text)** |

**[Table 2]**

### 3.2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Through our search string, an extensive number of relevant articles were identified. In order to identify the most relevant studies in a replicable and reliable way, additional exclusion and inclusion criteria were constructed (O'Brien & Mc Guckin 2022, p.13). According to O'Brien & McGuckin (2022), the criteria need to be carefully balanced, meaning that they should

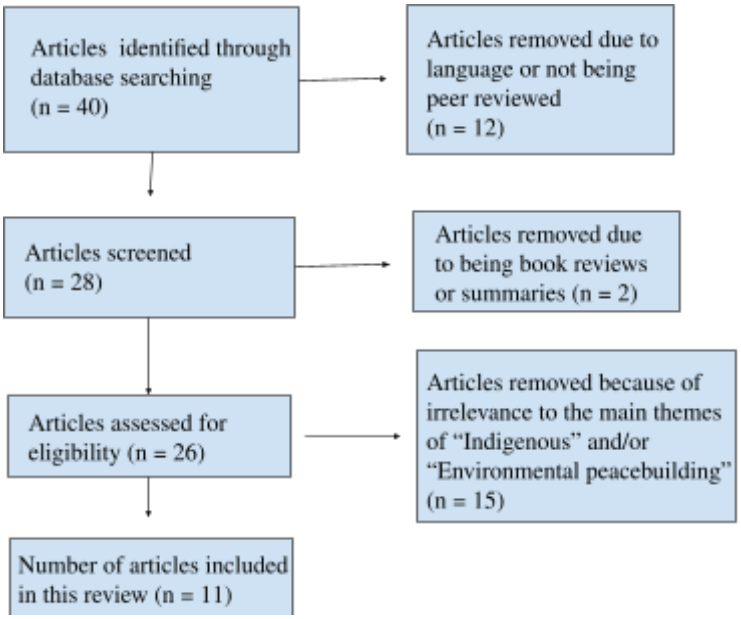
neither be too broad or too narrowly defined. This is because overly broad criteria may hinder meaningful comparisons and synthesis of articles, while narrow criteria risk excluding relevant studies and thereby reducing generalizability (O'Brien & McGuckin 2022, p.13). While reflecting upon this, we constructed the following five criteria (see table 3). Applying these criteria brings certain limitations, which will be discussed in the method discussion (see page 13-14).

**Inclusion/exclusion criteria**

| **Criteria** | **Inclusion Criteria** |
|---|---|
| **Criterion 1** | All Articles must be published in the English language |
| **Criterion 2** | All articles must be scientific studies |
| **Criterion 3** | All articles need to be peer reviewed |
| **Criterion 4** | Environmental peacebuilding must be a central theme in the article |
| **Criterion 5** | Indigenous people must be a central theme in the article |

**[Table 3]**

We applied these criteria to the search results, and by reading abstracts and introductions (in skimming through the studies) we were able to create our data set. In order to increase our study's reliability, we did this independently for all articles, to ensure that we both made the same assessment of its relevancy. This process is illustrated below (see table 4).




**[Table 4]**

## 3.3 Analytical Tool

On our final dataset, we conducted a qualitative analysis grounded in decolonial theory. According to Esaiasson et al. (2024), it is fundamental that analysis of qualitative studies is grounded in a theoretical framework. This is, firstly, to ensure an active and theoretically informed reading, that can identify interpretations that are not evident at first glance. Secondly, scientific legitimacy is obtained through systematising the analysis (Esaiasson et. al 2024, p.79). We started with an open and (to our best attempt) unbiased reading in order to familiarise ourselves with the material and identify key themes. Informed by our theoretical framework, based on decolonial theory, we then developed the following questions:

- What is the threat or the source of conflict identified in each study?
- How are the authors dealing with epistemic injustices and indigenous peoples' knowledge?
- What role is given to indigenous peoples? Are they victims, bearers of important knowledge etc?

Since the material was relatively small, we were able to code all articles together to strengthen the intracodability. We created shared PDF-files of all the material, and wrote our interpretations in these shared documents. We also frequently discussed the articles thoroughly, with each other, to ensure that our interpretations were consistent and interpretable according to the theoretical framework. Through drawing on each other's insights, we were able to systematically map the material and gain a comprehensive overview, which allowed us to identify interpretations already existing in the literature, as well as issues still unexplored.

## 3.4 Method discussion

The objective of a systematic literature review is to provide a clear and focused answer to a formulated research question while ensuring replicability and minimizing the risk of bias (O'Brien & McGuckin 2022, p.4). Having well defined inclusion and exclusion criteria is essential for ensuring the replicability of the study (Leite-Junior et al. 2025, p.6542). Our criteria include, for example, the exclusion of all data not written in english. This is,

according to O'Brien & McGuckin (2022) an example of language bias, since relevant articles may be excluded (p.6). In our study, this may be particularly relevant, since we focus on indigenous peoples, a topic that is well researched in Spanish speaking South and Central America.

Additionally, we decided to exclude all articles that have not been peer-reviewed, which was the criterion that excluded the largest amount of articles. This was to ensure the scientific quality and reduce the risk of bias (Leite-Junior et al. p.6558). However, this may, once again, be particularly problematic for our study, since we focus on indigenous people and their relationship to decolonialism. Much of the decolonial perspective builds on the critique that western knowledge is granted superiority over knowledge in non-western countries. An exclusive focus on peer-reviewed articles could therefore risk marginalizing forms of knowledge that are not published within western academic institutions. As a result, one can argue that the study is reinforcing existing forms of epistemic discrimination.

Finally, we would like to address the criterion that Indigenous peoples must be a central theme in the articles in the dataset. By focusing exclusively on studies where indigenous peoples are a central theme, the literature reviewed is likely skewed towards more critical perspectives on EPB.

# 4. Analysis

This analysis is based on a systematic literature review of eleven scientific studies on Environmental peacebuilding, analysed through a decolonial theoretical lens. Through a thematic coding process, recurring patterns and tensions were identified across the material. As described in the methods section, we perused the material in search of significant themes which resulted in two overarching themes of particular importance, informed by our theoretical framework: (1) structural violence and extractive practices, and (2) the relationship between the state and local actors. We realise that the material contains other possible themes, but chose to concentrate on two of these which we found particularly important with the theoretical lens we had chosen. The following sections analyse these themes by synthesising findings across the literature.

## 4.1 Structural violence and extractive practices

### 4.1.1 Structural violence

All 11 articles we analysed highlighted unequal power relations in relation to the environment, challenging the notion of nature being a neutral ground for cooperation that much of Environmental Peacebuilding theory is built upon. However, this does not mean that EPB is rendered useless, rather it is a call for transformation. Tirrell et al. (2021), in line with several other authors, urge EPB scholars to adopt a structural approach. They mean that "the narrow framing of conflict in terms of violent conflict and climate security obscures the other conflicts and violent acts against peasant and indigenous communities, and all other species using common resources" (Tirell et al. 2021, p.372). This shows that having a broader definition of what conflict is, can open new doors for Environmental Peacebuilding. With a decolonial perspective, the structural approach is particularly important for indigenous peoples, as they are often victims of structural oppression.

Broadening the definition of conflict, and taking greater consideration of structural violence, can also promote more sustainable peace. One study shows that "without addressing power at these different levels, peacebuilding processes may reinforce conflict by reproducing

conditions of domination" (Magalhães Teixeira & Nicoson 2024, p.4). This conclusion was echoed by a majority of the studies, emphasising unequal power relations as a root cause for conflict. To achieve sustainable peace, and not only adopt short-term solutions, EPB initiatives need to have a structural approach to conflict.

### 4.1.2 Extractivism - a threat and a mobiliser

In seven of the 11 articles we analysed, extractivism was seen as a threat, driving both conflict and environmental degradation. In decolonial theory, extractivist development models are criticised for benefitting the already privileged, while harm of the extractive practices are concentrated on the already vulnerable (Ide et al. 2023, s.1095). This could be found in Johnson's (2021) study where extractivist models were seen limiting the access of natural resources for certain parts of the population, to the benefit of large corporations (p.87). Johnson (2021) investigates the state-led EPB in Sierra Leone. The project aimed to strengthen resource management by reinforcing the rule of law in the extraction of natural resources. However, Johnson (2021) found in his study, that it ended up benefitting big corporations, rather than the local population, explaining that "multinational corporations possessed better resources, knowledge and capacity to comply with new standards of conduct" (p.89). This challenges the idea that peacebuilding initiatives should focus on economic growth and once again highlights underlying power relations, disproportionately affecting indigenous and local populations in the Global South.

While extractive industries and global forces were seen as a threat to local and indigenous communities, as well as a root cause of conflict, four of the studies also found it to be a source mobilising resistance and bringing together marginalised local actors (Hachmann et al. 2023; Johnson 2021; Gegeo et al. 2024; & Magalhães Teixeira & Nicoson 2024). This pattern is particularly evident in Hachmann et al.'s (2023) study, as seen in the following citation:

> *The dynamics of EPB in northern Cesar show that what unites community actors is the deeply political process of defending territory and natural resources against external actors rather than the creation of 'neutral' spaces for interaction and technical cooperation.*
> (Hachmann et al. 2023, p.231).

This, once again, challenges the notion of the environment being a neutral ground for cooperating. However, this does not mean that it cannot spark cooperation. The four studies all focused on community-based initiatives and show how the political tensions in environmental issues can actually be a source of motivation and inspiration to collaborate with other marginalised actors.

## 4.2 The Relationship Between the State and Local Actors

### 4.2.1 The state as a problem rather than a solution

We found that eight out of the 11 articles are problematising the role of the state, portraying it as an upholder of colonial structures and reproducer of unequal power relations. In peacebuilding processes, the state and international actors were in these cases seen as an obstacle for local solutions, as seen in the following citation:

> *Liberal peace is constructed under the assumption of a well functioning state, the rule of law, economic growth, and democratic accountability between state and civil society. However, this approach has been criticized on the grounds that the process of state-building are typically carried out by external actors, thus diminishing local ownership and the very values of liberal peace.*
> Morales-Muñoz et al. (2021, p.179)

As exemplified in the quote above, five of the articles criticised the liberal approach to peacebuilding and its focus on building a strong state. This was partly because it tended to be pushed by international actors, rather than local ones, but also because its lack of sensitivity to the local contexts when "taking a blueprint approach" (Peters 2025, p.12) to initiatives. This makes top-down approaches to EPB, where initiatives are driven by national elites and international actors, problematic, especially with a decolonial understanding of the state as an upholder of colonial values.

### 4.2.2 Incorporating local and indigenous knowledge

As shown in the interpretations of the previous sub-theme, we found critique of the "one-size fits all" approach to Environmental Peacebuilding. Instead, all of the articles in the study considered it important to incorporate local and indigenous knowledge in EPB initiatives. When the local context is disregarded, several studies show that environmental peacebuilding can have the opposite effect and instead become a source of conflict. One example of this can be found in the article "Slow violence and corporate greening in the war on drugs in Colombia" in which Vélez-Torres & Lugo-Vivas (2021, s 57-58) investigate an EPB initiative in Colombia. The Initiative aims to help small-scale farmers to stop planting coca (the plant which cocaine is made from) through both economic and technical support (Vélez-Torres & Lugo Vivas, 2021, s 57-58). The case study reveals that the top-down approach lacked sensitivity to the farmers' needs, for example by ignoring their preference for small-scale and diversified farming and instead promoting one-crop farming (p.78). The international actors that led the project, also promoted the use of crops that are not indigenous to the land, leaving farmers worried about becoming dependent on imported seeds (p.73). The lack of sensitivity, and poor implementation of the project, ended up exacerbating inequalities and worsening the livelihoods of the small-scale farmers that joined the program (p.58-60).

At the same time, Krampe et al. (2024) highlights that when the research seeks to incorporate local perspectives into Environmental peacebuilding, it is essential to acknowledge and actively address existing power asymmetries. Failing to do so, by for example overlooking the dominance of western norms/knowledge, risks reproducing the very power relations that such research aims to challenge (Krampe et al, 2024, p.1127). Examples of this oversight can be found in other studies we analysed. Peters (2024) analysed the international framework for disaster risk reduction and found that although it emphasises the importance of incorporating indigenous and local knowledge, there is a trend to devalue this knowledge; at best, it was seen as a complement to western knowledge. Furthermore, indigenous peoples were often seen as aid recipients, rather than actors of agency (Peters 2024, p.10 & p.14). Gegeo's et al. (2024) case study of indigenous peoples in the Solomon Islands, shows how the idea that environmental sustainability and peace are interconnected, is found in many indigenous traditions, yet often framed as originating from international organizations and western science (p.130-133). This, once more, shows how indigenous knowledge is devalued, and indigenous peoples are depicted as aid recipients, rather than agents of change. It emphasises

the importance of reflecting upon and actively working against unequal power relations, especially the dominance of western norms and knowledge, when incorporating local knowledge in EPB-initiatives.

### 4.2.3 Bottom-up approaches

In all of the articles we analyzed, we found a leaning towards bottom-up approaches, motivated by the critique against EPB practices that we have presented above. Bottom-up approaches were often seen as more sensitive to the local context. In the four articles that studied cases of community-based initiatives, EPB was found to strengthen the collective identity in indigenous and local communities (Hachmann et al. 2023; Johnson 2021; Gegeo et al. 2024; & Magalhães Teixeira & Nicoson 2024). The articles found this particularly important for indigenous peoples, emphasising that structural violence has led to fragmentation in indigenous communities. In these studies, we find a clear connection to the decolonial perspective. However, while community-based initiatives were found to create social cohesion at the community level, the same effect was not found for the relationship between the community and the state:

> *The cases of environmental cooperation in Northern Cesar show that a major factor limiting the impact of environmental cooperation is the lack of the presence of the state as the most important actor, but also the private sector and the majority of (formerly) armed actors.*
> Hachmann et al. (2023, p.231)

This was echoed by Peters (2025), showing that local initiatives often have opportunities to collaborate with Non-Governmental Organisations [NGOs], but limited opportunities to collaborate with the state (p.16). Although the literature shows that bottom-up approaches in Environmental Peacebuilding have great promise, it also shows that their impact is constrained by the absence of formal recognition and engagement by the state.

# 5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate how Environmental Peacebuilding [EPB] is problematised and reconceptualised when analysed through a decolonial perspective, with a specific focus on indigenous peoples. Based on a systematic literature review of eleven peer-reviewed articles on EPB and indigenous peoples, we identified two overarching themes: (1) structural violence and extractive practices, and (2) the relationship between the state and local actors.

A central finding of this study is that all analysed articles, to varying degrees, problematised underlying power relations in Environmental Peacebuilding. This supports decolonial theory's core claim that environmental governance and peacebuilding initiatives are embedded in structures of coloniality, leading to the marginalising of indigenous and local populations (Rodríguez & Inturias 2018, p.91-92). Decolonial scholars argue that when "failing to critically examine the colonial legacy inherent to environmental security [it] risks reinforcing worldviews that produce socio-ecological injustice" (Ide et al. 2023, p.1095). Our systematic literature review corroborates this theory, showing that when environmental peacebuilding initiatives fail to take underlying power relations into consideration, the initiatives risk reproducing the same unequal power relations. The consistency of this critique across the literature we analysed, suggests that when EPB is studied in relation to marginalised groups, such as indigenous peoples, unequal power relations become difficult to ignore.

The frequency of structural violence in the analysed articles emphasises the need for a broad understanding of conflict in EPB theory. Several of the studies highlight how indigenous peoples are more frequently subjected to slow and structural forms of violence. This resonates with Galtung's (1969) positive definition of peace, that incorporates the absence of structural violence (p.168), but also decolonial perspectives that emphasise how peace cannot be achieved without addressing systematic inequalities. From this perspective, EPB initiatives that focus on short-term conflict risk reinforcing the very structures that produce conflict in the first place. This study brings to the fore the need for a structural approach to environmental peacebuilding.

Extractivism emerged as a particularly important dimension of structural violence. In a majority of the articles we analysed, extractive practices were identified as a key driver of conflict and environmental degradation. As argued by decolonial scholars (Ide et al. 2023, s.1095), this disproportionately affects indigenous communities. This finding challenges EPB approaches that emphasise economic development as a mechanism for peace (see Krampe et al. 2021, p.7-8 & Johnson et al. 2021, p.5). From a decolonial perspective, extractivist development models are problematic because they prioritise capital accumulation for the already wealthy, while social and ecological costs are concentrated to the marginalised populations (Ide et al. 2023, p.1095). The case of the state-led resource governance project in Sierra Leone (Johnson 2021) illustrates how EPB initiatives aimed at strengthening institutions and rule of law can, in practice, benefit multinational corporations rather than local communities. This suggests that EPB mechanisms such as institutions-building and economic development cannot be assumed to be peace-promoting without careful attention to existing power asymmetries.

At the same time, the literature complicates a purely negative understanding of extractivism by showing how resistance to extractive practices can become a source of mobilisation and cooperation among marginalised actors. Several studies on community-based EPB initiatives showed that the political contestation within environmental issues, rather than being neutralised, can spark cooperation. This challenges the assumption within EPB that environmental cooperation must be depoliticised in order to promote peace. Instead, the findings suggest that politicised struggles over land and resources may, under certain conditions, mobilise indigenous and local communities in bottom-up Environmental Peacebuilding initiatives.

The second major theme we identified, concerns the relationship between the state and local actors in Environmental Peacebuilding. In contrast to EPB literature that highlights the importance of strengthening state-society relations and state legitimacy (see for example Krampe et al. 2021 p.7-8 & Johnson et al. 2021, p.5), the majority of the articles we analysed portrayed the state as an upholder of colonial structures and a driver of conflict. This is in line with the decolonial critique of the state and illustrates a tension between EPB theory and decolonial theory: while EPB emphasises the risks of undermining the state, decolonial scholars question whether strengthening the state necessarily leads to more just or peaceful outcomes for indigenous peoples.

This tension between the state and local actors is particularly evident in the discussion of bottom-up approaches. All analysed articles express support for community-based and locally driven initiatives, highlighting their potential to empower indigenous communities and strengthen collective identity. These findings align with recent shifts in EPB research that emphasise local ownership and bottom-up peacebuilding (Ide et al. 2021). However, the literature also points to a key limitation: community-based initiatives often lack formal recognition and engagement from the state. As a result, their broader peacebuilding impact may be constrained.

Taken together, the findings of this study suggest that Environmental Peacebuilding, when applied to indigenous contexts, requires significant transformation rather than abandonment. A decolonial perspective highlights the need for EPB initiatives to adopt a structural approach that actively addresses unequal power relations, questions extractivist development models, and recognises indigenous peoples as political actors rather than passive aid recipients. Incorporating local and indigenous knowledge is important but not sufficient in itself: it is essential to actively address unequal power relations, especially the dominance of western norms and knowledge, and a decolonial perspective can be a useful tool in this process. While bottom-up approaches show considerable promise, their relationship to the state remains an underexplored and unresolved issue in the literature. Decolonial theory sees the state as an upholder and reproducer of colonial values, thereby problematising their involvement in EPB initiatives. At the same time, multiple studies on community-driven initiatives show that a lack of engagement from the state limits their potential. Vélez-Torres and Johnson (in Ide et al. 2023) call for more research on whether EPB initiatives that formally interact with the state can still "generate decolonial, emancipatory, or just outcomes" (p.1097). We concur with Vélez-Torres and Johnson in encouraging further empirical investigation into whether more state interaction with community-based EPB initiatives can produce effective and just outcomes. In view of the methodological variety applied in EPB studies, we would also encourage a broad literature review to be made on community-based initiatives specifically, which, as far as we are aware, does not exist.

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