

# An ecological response to ethno-nationalistic populism: grassroots environmental peacebuilding in south Asia

MIRZA SADAQAT HUDA\*

South Asia is beset by extremely high levels of conflict and climate risk, and low levels of regional cooperation. It is currently one of the least peaceful regions in the world, second only to the Middle East and North Africa on global indexes of political violence.<sup>1</sup> Peace and conflict in south Asia have traditionally been underpinned by three regional realities: (1) internal issues of civil war, ethno-religious violence and separatism; (2) military conflict between India and Pakistan; and (3) political conflicts between India and the smaller states of Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup> These political tensions have been exacerbated by the contemporary rise of ethno-nationalistic populism. Compounding south Asia's political conflicts is the region's acute vulnerability to anthropogenic global warming. South Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to extreme weather events, and faces high levels of water scarcity and air pollution, in addition to having low capacities for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction.<sup>3</sup> Critical challenges such as the melting of glaciers that sustain the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna (GBM) and Indus river basins, rising sea levels in coastal areas on the Indian Ocean, and environmental disasters such as floods and cyclones highlight the need to address ecological integrity in a deeply disputative region. However, current levels of regional cooperation are inadequate to address environmental challenges on the scale of those facing south Asia.<sup>4</sup> The region's policy-makers are faced with the difficult task of reducing conflict and facilitating ecological collaboration in an era of nativist politics.

Since the 1990s, the emerging body of literature on environmental peacebuilding has informed broader discourses on conflict resolution and ecological conservation. Proponents of environmental peacebuilding argue that coopera-

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, *Global Peace Index 2019: measuring peace in a complex world* (Sydney, 2019); Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'Evasive balancing: India's unviable Indo-Pacific strategy', *International Affairs* 96: 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 75–94; Harsh V. Pant and Kartik Bommakanti, 'India's national security: challenges and dilemmas', *International Affairs* 95: 4, July 2019, pp. 835–58.

<sup>2</sup> Mirza Sadaqat Huda, *Energy cooperation in south Asia: utilizing natural resources for peace and sustainable development* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> David Eckstein, Vera Künzel, Laura Schäfer and Maik Wings, *The Global Climate Risk Index* (Berlin: Germanwatch, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> Zahid Shahab Ahmed, *Regionalism and regional security in south Asia: the role of SAARC* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

tion on common environmental issues can increase trust and interdependence, and encourage peaceful dispute resolution between states.<sup>5</sup> According to this perspective, transboundary cooperation in the realms of peace parks, international river basin management and environmental monitoring programmes can be an 'effective catalyst for reducing tensions, broadening cooperation, fostering demilitarization and promoting peace'.<sup>6</sup> A small body of literature has contextualized the theories of environmental peacebuilding within the conflictual geopolitical landscape of south Asia.<sup>7</sup> A majority of these studies have focused on interstate relations, despite the existence of a plethora of contemporary as well as recently concluded regional insurgencies.

Notwithstanding its relevance to the two critical challenges of conflict and ecological change, literature on environmental peacebuilding in general and regional studies on south Asia in particular suffers from a critical limitation. While environmental peacebuilding resonates with the constructivist view of world affairs,<sup>8</sup> the constitutive elements of conflicts that this body of literature aims to address have not been the subject of detailed academic enquiry. The main focus of existing literature has been on examining the constitutive elements of peace,<sup>9</sup> the end goal of environmental peacebuilding processes. This gap is more apparent in studies that examine the 'cooperation perspective' of environmental peacebuilding that focuses on interstate issues than in those that address the 'resource risk perspective' of intrastate conflicts.<sup>10</sup>

Within studies that focus on south Asia, analysts have addressed the symptoms of conflicts, such as the Kashmir impasse or Indian hegemony, but have broadly ignored history, religion, caste, class and other endogenic factors, which Ide and Fröhlich call the 'drivers' of international disputes.<sup>11</sup> The global rise of ethno-

<sup>5</sup> Carl Bruch, Marion Boulicault, Shuchi Talati and David Jensen, 'International law, natural resources and post-conflict peacebuilding: from Rio to Rio+20 and beyond', *Review of European Community and International Environmental Law* 21: 1, 2012, pp. 44–62; Alexander Carius, *Environmental peacebuilding: conditions for success* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2011); Tobias Ide, 'Space, discourse and environmental peacebuilding', *Third World Quarterly* 38: 3, 2017, pp. 544–62; Erika Weinthal and McKenzie Johnson, 'Post-war environmental peacebuilding', in Ashok Swain and Joakim Öjendal, eds, *Routledge handbook of environmental conflict and peacebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 85–96.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Conca, 'Environmental cooperation and international peace', in Paul F. Diehl and Nils Petter Gleditsch, eds, *Environmental conflict* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), p. 226. See also Ken Conca and Geoffrey Dabelko, eds, *Environmental peacemaking* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Ashok Swain and Joakim Öjendal, eds, *Routledge handbook of environmental conflict and peacebuilding* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Jan Bachmann and Peer Schouten, 'Concrete approaches to peace: infrastructure as peacebuilding', *International Affairs* 94: 2, March 2018, pp. 381–98; Saleem Ali, ed., *Peace parks: conservation and conflict resolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Conca and Dabelko, eds, *Environmental peacemaking*.

<sup>9</sup> Tobias Ide, 'The impact of environmental cooperation on peacemaking: definitions, mechanisms, and empirical evidence', *International Studies Review* 12: 3, 2019, pp. 327–46; Cedric de Coning, 'Adaptive peacebuilding', *International Affairs*, 94: 2, March 2018, pp. 301–18; Finn Stepputat, 'Pragmatic peace in emerging landscapes', *International Affairs* 94: 2, March 2018, pp. 399–416.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview of these two broad perspectives on environmental peacebuilding, see Florian Krampe, 'Toward sustainable peace: a new research agenda for post-conflict natural resource management', *Global Environmental Politics* 17: 4, 2017, pp. 1–8.

<sup>11</sup> Tobias Ide and Christiane Fröhlich, 'Socio-environmental cooperation and conflict? A discursive understanding and its application to the case of Israel/Palestine', *Earth System Dynamics Discussions* 6: 1, 2015, p. 668; Amrita Narlikar, 'India's role in global governance: a Modi-fication?', *International Affairs* 93: 1, Jan. 2017, pp. 93–112.

nationalistic populism in the past decade has increased the impact of ideational issues in international conflicts, with south Asia serving as a particularly clear example of how nativist politics can exacerbate religious and ethnic tensions across borders. It is therefore of importance to policy and literature to connect the pathways to environmental peacebuilding conceptualized by Ken Conca and Geoffrey Dabelko and developed further by Tobias Ide to the ideational drivers of conflict in various regions of the world.

This article has two broad goals. First, it aims to connect ideational conflicts and populism to mainstream literature on environmental peacebuilding. Second, it examines whether grassroots environmental programmes focused on the Sundarbans forest between India and Bangladesh and the Thar desert between India and Pakistan can alleviate the contemporary rise in nativist politics. To this end, the article undertakes comparative analyses of grassroots environmental peacebuilding programmes initiated by EcoPeace Middle East and the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies.

This is one of the first studies to examine the use of environmental peacebuilding to address ideational sources of conflict and ethno-nationalist populism in south Asia. It is also one of the few studies to systematically evaluate the implementation of educational programmes within environmental peacebuilding processes in south Asia.

The analysis is divided into five parts. First, the article presents a review of existing literature on environmental peacebuilding, with a particular focus on south Asian case-studies. Second, it describes the research methodology. Using data collected through interviews with policy-makers and subject-matter experts, the article then assesses the ideational sources of conflicts in south Asia. In the fourth section, the article tests empirical data on conflicts in south Asia against existing literature on pathways to environmental peacebuilding. Finally, the article evaluates how grassroots programmes focused on the Sundarbans forest and Thar desert can facilitate environmental peacebuilding in south Asia.

## **Environmental peacebuilding: an overview**

One of the earliest studies that recognized environmental issues as a potential cause of violent conflict was the 1987 UN report *Our common future*.<sup>12</sup> Since then, the links between scarcity of and competition for natural resources and violent conflict has attracted considerable scholarly attention.<sup>13</sup> In the 1990s, an alternative theoretical field began to emerge that criticized the deterministic discourse of literature on environmental conflict. These studies argued that environmental problems are common challenges that are well suited to serve as entry points for joint problem solving, conflict resolution, trust building and, eventually, peace-

<sup>12</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our common future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Anaïs Dresse, Itay Fischhendler, Jonas Østergaard Nielsen and Zikos Dimitrios, 'Environmental peacebuilding: towards a theoretical framework', *Cooperation and Conflict* 54: 1, 2018, pp. 99–119.

<sup>13</sup> Marwa Daoudy, 'Water weaponization in the Syrian conflict: strategies of domination and cooperation', *International Affairs* 96: 5, Sept. 2020, pp. 1347–66.

making. The conceptual and empirical roots of environmental peacebuilding can be traced to Ken Conca and Geoffrey Dabelko's seminal study *Environmental peacemaking*, which assessed 'whether environmental cooperation can trigger broader forms of peace'.<sup>14</sup>

Conca and Dabelko's argument rests on the conceptualization of environmental cooperation as an independent variable that can affect several dependent variables associated with peace. Peace as a consequence of environmental cooperation is not envisioned solely as the absence of violence but also includes issues such as trust, certainty and confidence and the creation of a 'collective identity'.<sup>15</sup> Conca and Dabelko identify two pathways to environmental peacebuilding. The first is 'changing the strategic climate', which aims to diminish the trust deficit between governments; the second is 'strengthening post-Westphalian governance', which is based on the notion that non-state actors such as advocacy networks can transcend the limitations of interstate cooperation by creating interdependence, fostering new norms and building transnational civil societies.

From its initial roots, literature on environmental peacebuilding has developed into a dispersed and fragmented body of knowledge. Literature on conflict prevention at the interstate level includes case-studies on bilateral environmental cooperation between erstwhile adversaries such as Israel and the Palestinians, or Armenia and Azerbaijan.<sup>16</sup> Intrastate studies of environmental peacebuilding have examined the role of natural resources in the rejuvenation of societies and economies devastated by civil wars, such as Afghanistan and Sudan.<sup>17</sup> Although still developing, the extant literature has informed the evolution of policy and processes of environmental peacebuilding. For instance, Tobias Ide draws on a wide range of literature and case-studies to suggest four pathways to environmental peacebuilding: improving the environmental situation (pathway 1); building understanding and trust (pathway 2); cultivating interdependence (pathway 3); and building institutions (pathway 4).<sup>18</sup>

Environmental peacebuilding is a relatively new concept in International Relations, and while literature focusing on south Asia is still emerging, several important case-studies have been undertaken on the region's transnational river basins, wetlands and glaciers.<sup>19</sup> Although interstate studies are dominant, there have been significant contributions to an understanding of the link between

<sup>14</sup> Conca and Dabelko, eds, *Environmental peacemaking*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Conca, 'Environmental cooperation and international peace', pp. 227–8.

<sup>16</sup> Dresse et al., 'Environmental peacebuilding'.

<sup>17</sup> Bruch et al. 'International law, natural resources and post-conflict peacebuilding'; Peter A. Castro, 'Promoting natural resource conflict management in an illiberal setting: experiences from central Darfur, Sudan', *World Development*, vol. 109, 2018, pp. 163–71.

<sup>18</sup> Ide, 'The impact of environmental cooperation on peacemaking'.

<sup>19</sup> On river basins, see Saleem Ali, 'Water politics in south Asia: technocratic cooperation and lasting security in the Indus basin and beyond', *Journal of International Affairs* 61: 2, 2008, pp. 167–82; Mirza Sadaqat Huda, 'Envisioning the future of cooperation on common rivers in south Asia: a cooperative security approach by Bangladesh and India to the Tipaimukh dam', *Water International* 42: 1, 2017, pp. 54–72. On wetlands, see Saleem Ali, 'Use environmental diplomacy to resolve the Sir creek dispute', in Michael Krepon, Travis Wheeler and Liv Dowling, eds, *Off ramps from confrontation in southern Asia* (Washington DC: Stimson Center, 2019), pp. 85–92. On glaciers, see Ashok Swain, 'The Indus II and Siachen Peace Park: pushing the India–Pakistan peace process forward', *Round Table* 98: 404, 2009, pp. 569–82.

environment and peace in south Asia through the use of diverse theoretical and empirical frameworks. In a study on the Indus basin, Ali suggests that a focus on common environmental aversions as opposed to common benefits may lead to greater technical cooperation and peacebuilding between India and Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> Swain's comparative analysis of cooperation between Bangladesh and India on the Ganges basin and between India and Pakistan on the Indus basin finds that the strength of democratic institutions is vital to the success of environmental peacebuilding initiatives.<sup>21</sup> Huda and Ali argue that an environmental peacebuilding framework can address ecological and political conflicts associated with hydroelectric projects in the GBM basin.<sup>22</sup>

Existing case-studies on south Asia have certain limitations which are indicative of gaps within the broader literature on environmental peacebuilding. The conflicts that analysts aim to resolve through ecological cooperation are broadly conceptualized within a vacuum, with little examination of the constitutive elements that create, sustain and drive these disputes. In their analysis of the Kashmir conflict or Indian hegemony, scholars do not delve into the way in which history, identity, ethnicity and other ideational factors influence and are influenced by such conflicts. As a result, the environmental peacebuilding processes suggested in these studies have addressed the symptoms of conflicts in south Asia and not the root causes of regional disputes. A notable exception is provided by Swain,<sup>23</sup> who argues that religion-based confrontation between Hindus and Muslims 'has been a long-standing source of tension and periodic hostilities between India, Pakistan and Bangladesh'. Swain describes how these ideational issues influence the outcomes of environmental cooperation in offering the following insight about negotiation of the Ganges Treaty of 1996: 'Any agreement concerning the sacred Ganges that gave a perceived advantage to predominantly Muslim Bangladesh would have infuriated the opposition party, the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party.'<sup>24</sup> However, Swain does not explain how ideational issues that drive conflicts can be addressed through environmental peacebuilding pathways.

The gaps in south Asian studies indicate that the broader literature on interstate studies of environmental peacebuilding, while examining the constitutive elements of peace,<sup>25</sup> has not attended to the deconstruction of conflicts beyond the theoretical realms of 'structural' and 'direct' violence.<sup>26</sup> While exclusionary identities have been pinpointed by scholars of environmental peacebuilding as major drivers of interstate conflicts,<sup>27</sup> only a few analysts have tried to deconstruct

<sup>20</sup> Ali, 'Water politics in south Asia'.

<sup>21</sup> Ashok Swain, 'Environmental cooperation in south Asia', in Conca and Dabelko, eds, *Environmental peacemaking*, pp. 61–85.

<sup>22</sup> Mirza Sadaqat Huda and Saleem Ali, 'Environmental peacebuilding in south Asia: establishing consensus on hydroelectric projects in the Ganges–Brahmaputra–Meghna (GBM) basin', *Geoforum*, vol. 96, 2018, pp. 160–71.

<sup>23</sup> Swain, 'Environmental cooperation in south Asia', p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Swain, 'Environmental cooperation in south Asia', p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Ide, 'The impact of environmental cooperation on peacemaking'.

<sup>26</sup> Dresse et al., 'Environmental peacebuilding'.

<sup>27</sup> Mark Zeitoun, *Power and water in the Middle East: the hidden politics of the Palestinian–Israeli water conflict* (London: Tauris, 2009).

these issues and address them from an ecological perspective.<sup>28</sup> Intrastate studies have demonstrated that environmental peacebuilding processes that do not address ideational sources of conflicts are not successful in developing sustainable peace.<sup>29</sup> This finding has great relevance for south Asia, where religious, ethnic and historical issues dominate interstate conflict dynamics. The conflation of post-colonial borders with the contemporary rise in ethno-nationalism in multiple regions of the world makes the deconstruction of interstate conflicts particularly relevant.

An important counter-argument to the criticism of environmental peacebuilding literature outlined above is that such processes, particularly those that fall into the 'cooperation perspective' category, have a more limited goal of reducing political tensions through spillover effects. Some may argue that expecting ecological cooperation to resolve the ideational roots of interstate conflicts is unrealistic. Yet two contemporary trends support a broader and more ambitious agenda for environmental peacebuilding. First, the rise of ethno-nationalistic populism in south Asia, Europe, North America and other regions has increased the salience of ideational issues in international conflicts, calling for an urgent response from environmental peacebuilding scholars. Second, some important studies of interstate conflicts have demonstrated that grassroots activities that engage young people in environmental conservation can negate racial and religious stereotypes and build resilience to xenophobic rhetoric.<sup>30</sup>

Another gap in the literature on environmental peacebuilding in south Asia is the lack of studies on cross-border resources that are less subject to political conflict than the highly contested GBM and Indus basins and the Siachen glacier. Despite the apparent emphasis of environmental peacebuilding theories on the 'low politics' of international cooperation, only a few studies have examined the 'low-hanging fruits' of environmental peacebuilding, such as the Sundarbans forest between India and Bangladesh and the Rann of Kutch, a wetland in the Thar desert between India and Pakistan.<sup>31</sup>

## Methodology

The methodology of this article is grounded in the constructivist approach to social science research, particularly Given's understanding of knowledge as not formed of irrefutable facts, but co-constructed through mutual interaction by researchers and participants.<sup>32</sup> The methodology thus takes account of bias, which is important in the context of undertaking research on heavily contested issues. In addition to academic literature, this article uses data from 54 interviews under-

<sup>28</sup> Marina Djernaes, Teis Jorgensen and Elizabeth Koch-Ya'ari, 'Evaluation of environmental peacemaking intervention strategies in Jordan–Palestine–Israel', *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* 10: 2, 2015, pp. 74–80.

<sup>29</sup> Emel Akcali and Marco Antonisch, "'Nature knows no boundaries": a critical reading of UNDP environmental peacemaking in Cyprus', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99: 5, 2009, pp. 940–47; Castro, 'Promoting natural resource conflict management in an illiberal setting'.

<sup>30</sup> Tobias Ide and Amit Tubi, 'Education and environmental peacebuilding: insights from three projects in Israel and Palestine', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 110: 1, 2020, pp. 1–17.

<sup>31</sup> Ali, 'Use environmental diplomacy to resolve the Sir creek dispute'.

<sup>32</sup> Lisa Given, *The Sage encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 2008).

taken between 2014 and 2018. Data collected in different periods allowed for an analysis of changes in regional politics over time. The interviews were undertaken with policy-makers and experts based in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and Singapore. Of the total interviews, 47 were undertaken in person, five through Skype and two via email. The respondents were chosen on the basis of their expertise on geopolitics in south Asia, natural resource governance, and peace and conflict. Respondents were drawn from three categories: public servants of south Asian countries; members of academia and non-governmental organizations; and media correspondents.

## **Ethno-nationalistic populism and conflict in south Asia**

The territorial, religious and ethnic disputes in south Asia are rooted in the tumultuous years before and after the end of almost three centuries of British colonization. At the end of the colonial period in 1947, the subcontinent was divided along religious lines into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority East and West Pakistan. The Partition was one of the largest mass migrations in history and resulted in the death of almost one million people from religious violence. The hasty retreat by colonial forces led to the enduring conflict over Kashmir, which has been the focus of three wars between India and Pakistan. In 1971, supported by India, East Pakistan seceded to become Bangladesh after a six-month war, during which a large number of Bangladeshis were killed by the Pakistani army.<sup>33</sup>

Since the formation of nation-states in south Asia, the religious and ethnic dynamics of the tragedies of 1947 and 1971 have been exploited by ultra-nationalistic politicians, some media outlets and extremist groups to undermine regional cooperation. However, for the majority of the subcontinent's post-colonial history, hate speech and nationalistic propaganda have been the language of fringe elements, and such rhetoric has been countered by an active and independent civil society.

In the past decade, the rise of ethno-nationalistic populism in south Asia has changed the region's geopolitical landscape in two ways. First, not just fringe elements but mainstream political parties and broader social movements have propagated nativist and populist agendas. Second, the region's civil society, long a vanguard of democratic principles, has either been neutralized by authoritarian governments or willingly participated in the amplification of ultra-nationalistic and xenophobic rhetoric. Interview respondents attributed the rise of populist politics to the weakening of democratic institutions and increasing regional instability. Ali Riaz has argued that the contemporary rise in ethno-nationalistic populism has fostered an 'age of intolerance' in south Asia.<sup>34</sup>

Bart Bonikowski's study on the contemporary rise of ethno-nationalism examines the interaction of three interrelated phenomena: populism, ethno-

<sup>33</sup> Adil Najam and Moeed Yusuf, *South Asia 2060: envisioning regional futures* (London: Anthem, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Ali Riaz, 'The age of intolerance in south Asia: contextualizing extremism in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan', keynote speech, South Asia Conference of the Pacific Northwest (SACPAN), Portland, Oregon, 5 Feb. 2016.

nationalism and authoritarianism.<sup>35</sup> While Bonikowski's study focuses on the West, his conclusions resonate with the existing political realities in south Asia. In India, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which won consecutive elections in 2014 and 2018, has pursued exclusionist and majoritarian policies, leading to the denigration of India's secular and inclusive culture. The demonization of Muslims by Indian politicians for short-term political gain has led to lynchings, the normalization of hate speech and religious riots.<sup>36</sup> Politicians in New Delhi have attributed religious connotations to the India–Pakistan conflict, as well as the issue of informal migration from Bangladesh, further undermining regional cohesion.<sup>37</sup> In 2019, the BJP linked Indian citizenship to religious identity by introducing the Citizenship Amendment Act. This Act gives citizenship to non-Muslim migrants from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan but not to Muslims, who may effectively become stateless.<sup>38</sup> Given India's size and power, nativist agendas here have severe repercussions for religious harmony in neighbouring states, as demonstrated by riots in Bangladesh following the demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu extremists in 1992.

In Pakistan, religious extremists have pursued the creation of a homogeneous Sunni Muslim identity with little or no resistance from the government. Between 2012 and 2015, 1,304 members of the Shi'a community were killed by terrorist attacks, and Hindus, Sikhs and Christians face societal as well as political discrimination.<sup>39</sup> Since coming to power in 2018 the governing party, Tehreek-e-Insaf, has done little to change regressive laws such as the Blasphemy Act that discriminate against religious minorities. Farahnaz Ispahani has argued that the Pakistani government's policies and institutions have become deeply sectarianized, and 'non-Muslim representation at the cabinet-level is limited to mere symbolic appointments'.<sup>40</sup> In India and Pakistan alike, think-tanks, educational institutions and the media have been co-opted by majoritarian governments to the extent that many of these non-state actors have 'furnished the principal element of constructing the exclusionary nationalism' that perpetuates ideational sources of conflicts in south Asia.<sup>41</sup>

In Bangladesh, the Awami League has come under increasing criticism for authoritarian measures and undemocratic practices. In 2018 the government introduced the Digital Security Act, which criminalizes many forms of free expression and imposes heavy fines and prison sentences for legitimate forms of dissent. Such laws have been used to imprison and harass members of opposition political

<sup>35</sup> Bart Bonikowski, 'Ethno-nationalist populism and the mobilization of collective resentment', *British Journal of Sociology* 68: 51, 2017, pp. 181–213.

<sup>36</sup> Monamie Bhadra Haines and Sreela Sarkar, 'Sticks, stones, and the secular bones of Indian democracy', *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*, vol. 6, 2020, pp. 133–41.

<sup>37</sup> Priya Chacko, 'The right turn in India: authoritarianism, populism and neoliberalisation', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48: 4, 2018, pp. 541–65.

<sup>38</sup> Haines and Sarkar, 'Sticks, stones and the secular bones'.

<sup>39</sup> Jinnah Institute, *Violence against the Shia community in Pakistan: 2012–2015* (Islamabad, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Farahnaz Ispahani, *Purifying the land of the pure: a history of Pakistan's religious minorities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> Riaz, 'The age of intolerance in south Asia', p. 8.



parties and critics of the government.<sup>42</sup> Religious extremists have also been active, carrying out deadly attacks between 2013 and 2016 on minorities and proponents of secular ideologies, indicating broader tensions at the societal level.

The rise of ethno-nationalistic populism in south Asia has exacerbated the deep divisions of the Partition. Currently, relations between India and Pakistan are particularly volatile. In early 2019, a suicide car bombing in Indian-administered Kashmir by militants allegedly supported by Pakistan resulted in the two nuclear-armed rivals undertaking air strikes on each other's territory. In the weeks leading up to these actions, nationalistic fervour whipped up by mainstream politicians and media undermined any chance of detente between the two states. In August 2020, the Indian government revoked article 370 of the constitution, which guaranteed special political rights to Jammu and Kashmir, leading to further deterioration in the bilateral relationship.

While India has a very strong relationship with the ruling elites in Dhaka, the BJP does not share the same affinity with the people of Muslim-majority Bangladesh: one senior party leader referred to Bangladeshi migrants in India as 'termites'.<sup>43</sup> The dichotomy between the relationships of political elites and of wider populations is manifested most violently at the borders, where Bangladeshi migrants who attempt to cross over to India through informal channels for economic and social reasons are often shot by the Border Security Forces (BSF) of India. Between 2014 and 2019, a period during which the relationship between political elites in Dhaka and India reached an unprecedented level of bonhomie, 185 Bangladeshi citizens were killed by the BSF and 267 were injured.<sup>44</sup> The collaboration between the ruling elites in Dhaka and New Delhi, despite the BJP's rhetoric against Muslims and Bangladeshis, can be explained by a convergence of elite interests. On the one hand, the Awami League received unequivocal support from the BJP after winning elections widely considered controversial in 2014 and 2018;<sup>45</sup> on the other hand, the BJP has sought closer ties with elites in Dhaka to counter both Islamist radicalization and growing Chinese influence in south Asia. By supporting the political interests of elites in Dhaka, the BJP has attempted to ensure that its rhetoric against Bangladeshis and Muslims does not undermine bilateral relations. However, state-sponsored Islamophobia in India has undermined regional cohesion in south Asia through the perpetuation of xenophobic caricatures of religious and ethnic groups.

Ethno-nationalistic populism has exacerbated underlying societal tensions and ingrained the perception of the 'Other' whose identity is incompatible with that of the 'Self' and whose intentions are perpetually open to suspicion. In consequence, as highlighted in the literature review above, environmental peacebuilding initiatives involving only state-level actors and scientists may not address ethnic and religious tensions at the grassroots level. To address the contemporary rise in

<sup>42</sup> Ali Riaz, *Voting in a hybrid regime: explaining the 2018 Bangladeshi election* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Staff reporter, 'Bangladeshi migrants are like termites: Amit Shah', *The Hindu*, 22 Sept. 2018.

<sup>44</sup> Odhikar, *Human rights violation by Indian Border Security Force (BSF) against Bangladeshi citizens 2000–2019* (Dhaka, 2020).

<sup>45</sup> Riaz, *Voting in a hybrid regime*.

ethno-nationalistic populism, a broader societal approach to ecological cooperation is required. To this end, the next section sets existing literature on pathways to environmental peacebuilding within the region's current geopolitical context to identify appropriate policy responses.

## Pathways to environmental peacebuilding in south Asia: a grassroots approach

The analysis of primary and secondary data from south Asia in light of the broader literature on pathways to environmental peacebuilding has both confirmed and challenged existing theories. Interview respondents stressed that trust and confidence are among the key prerequisites of peace in south Asia. This finding resonates with the conclusions of Tobias Ide, who argued that of the four pathways to environmental peacebuilding, one of the most consequential is building understanding and trust (pathway 2).<sup>46</sup> The importance of trust was highlighted by both state and non-state actors, which speaks to Conca and Dabelko's dual approach of building confidence between governments and developing transnational civil societies. Interview data also revealed that effective leadership and organizations were perceived as fundamental drivers of peacebuilding in south Asia. This finding conforms to the arguments put forward by Carius as well as Ide, who emphasize the importance of involvement by high-ranking policy-makers and effective institutions to the success of environmental peacebuilding.<sup>47</sup>

On a broader level, however, the regional politics of south Asia create certain challenges for Conca and Dabelko's perception of peace as a 'continuum ranging from the absence of violent conflict to the unimaginability of violent conflict'.<sup>48</sup> Using this framework along with seminal studies by Johan Galtung,<sup>49</sup> scholars have examined how ecological cooperation can facilitate negative peace between India and Pakistan and positive peace between India and Bangladesh.<sup>50</sup> Ostensibly, this conceptual approach is validated by the fact that nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have fought four wars, while India and Bangladesh have never engaged in military conflict and are unlikely to do so, owing to the power disparities between them. However, as described in the preceding section, the conflation of ideational issues and ethno-nationalist rhetoric has made south Asia's borders epicentres of conflict, a situation that calls for a broader appreciation of violence going beyond military clashes. Between 2000 and 2019, 1,185 Bangladeshi civilians were killed by the Indian BSF at the bilateral border, 1,118 were injured and 1,401 were abducted.<sup>51</sup> Applying Conca and Dabelko's conceptualization of peace, it can be argued that while violence towards Bangladeshi civilians by Indian security forces is neither absent nor unimaginable, the discounting of this issue by politicians owing to

<sup>46</sup> Tobias Ide, *Environmental peacemaking and environmental peacebuilding in international politics*, Research Group Climate Change and Security paper no. CLISEC-35 (Hamburg: University of Hamburg, 2019).

<sup>47</sup> Carius, *Environmental peacebuilding*; Ide, *Environmental peacemaking and environmental peacebuilding*.

<sup>48</sup> Conca and Dabelko, eds, *Environmental peacemaking*, p. 220.

<sup>49</sup> Johan Galtung, 'Violence, peace, and peace research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6: 3, 1969, pp. 167–91.

<sup>50</sup> Swain, 'Environmental cooperation in south Asia'.

<sup>51</sup> Odhikar, *Human rights violation*.

power disparities and the prioritization of elite interests represents a skewed view of regional politics. Elite appropriation of discourses on violence means that the existence of peace in south Asia is contingent on where one sits in the socio-political hierarchy, an issue that the environmental peacebuilding literature has not comprehensively addressed. The contemporary rise in ethno-nationalistic populism has added to the fluidity of geopolitics in south Asia, which renders static categorizations of ‘negative’ and ‘positive’ peace problematic. Rather than focusing on the end goal of peace, environmental peacebuilding processes in south Asia will have greater policy relevance if they are geared towards addressing the drivers of conflict identified in the previous section of this article. One of the ways this can be achieved is through grassroots mechanisms such as education and people-to-people contacts centred on environmental issues.

Drawing from the literature on ‘everyday peace’,<sup>52</sup> a small group of environmental peacebuilding scholars have examined how grassroots activities that facilitate encounters between members of hostile groups ‘can undermine polarizing narratives and hence pave the way for a locally grounded and sustainable peace’.<sup>53</sup> Grassroots mechanisms of environmental peacebuilding are not confined to theoretical studies, and have been used by non-state actors to address underlying ideational causes of conflicts in several regions of the world, thereby providing important policy narratives on both best practices and shortcomings.

This study argues that grassroots mechanisms are particularly relevant to south Asia for four reasons. First, south Asia is home to the largest number of young people of any global region, with almost half of its population of 1.9 billion below the age of 24.<sup>54</sup> Young people in south Asia are particularly susceptible to populist and xenophobic rhetoric,<sup>55</sup> and grassroots movements provide a more effective means of reaching out to this particular demography than track 1 or 2 initiatives.<sup>56</sup> Second, as demonstrated by Djernaes and colleagues,<sup>57</sup> grassroots mechanisms of environmental peacebuilding are particularly well suited to addressing underlying cultural and religious roots of conflicts, and can also counter xenophobic populism. Third, bottom-up approaches may result in the replication of the affinity between political elites in Dhaka and New Delhi among their countries’ broader populations and thereby generate regional forms of identity. Finally, grassroots initiatives can create local constituencies that support an ecological intervention in the increasingly volatile conflict between India and Pakistan.

Grassroots initiatives are not disconnected from existing approaches to environmental peacebuilding. Broadly, the aim of such activities is to strengthen ‘post-Westphalian governance’ through the creation of a common identity that supports

<sup>52</sup> Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Everyday peace: bottom-up and local agency in conflict-affected societies’, *Security Dialogue* 45: 6, 2014, pp. 548–64.

<sup>53</sup> Ide and Tubi, ‘Education and environmental peacebuilding’, p. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Global Business Coalition for Education, *2030 skills scorecard* (New York, 2018).

<sup>55</sup> Edward Anderson and Arkotong Longkumer, ‘“Neo-Hindutva”: evolving forms, spaces, and expressions of Hindu nationalism’, *Contemporary South Asia* 26: 4, 2018, pp. 371–7.

<sup>56</sup> Track 1 refers to diplomatic interactions between formal representatives of governments. Track 2 takes place on an informal level, often between members of civil society.

<sup>57</sup> Djernaes et al., ‘Evaluation of environmental peacemaking’.

a people-centric, as opposed to a regime-centric, relationship between India and Bangladesh. In time, by building resilience to ultra-nationalistic rhetoric, grassroots initiatives can change the 'strategic climate' in south Asia through facilitating detente between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir conflict.

In the next section of the article, the potential contribution of grassroots initiatives is demonstrated through case-studies on the Sundarbans forest and the Thar desert. Comparative analyses are undertaken, examining best practices of grassroots environmental peacebuilding programmes in the Middle East. These particular studies were based on two factors that scholars have identified as important to the success of environmental peacebuilding initiatives and one contextual factor. First, the Sundarbans and the Thar desert do not face levels of political and territorial conflict as high as those prevailing in the GBM basin or the Siachen glacier. Existing literature suggests that environmental peacebuilding processes have greater chances of success when the level of conflict is less intense. Second, cooperation in these areas can be supported by existing institutions, which is important to the success of environmental peacebuilding. Finally, empirical studies have demonstrated that Hindu-Muslim relations in the Sundarbans and the Thar desert are far more harmonious than in other parts of south Asia, and that the environment plays a critical role in the sustenance of interreligious harmony in these two areas.<sup>58</sup> As such, undertaking grassroots activities in the Sundarbans and the Thar can provide important lessons on ecological pathways to peacebuilding.

### Youth engagement in the Sundarbans forest

The ecologies of Bangladesh and India are connected by the GBM basin, which sustains the 54 rivers shared by the two countries and the transnational Sundarbans mangrove forest, which covers an area of 10,000 square kilometres. Three-fifths of the Sundarbans is in the Khulna division of Bangladesh and the rest in the Indian state of West Bengal. The Sundarbans are the world's largest estuarine mangrove forest and the only mangrove tiger habitat in the world. The forest is a source of ecological services such as carbon sequestration, sustainable livelihoods and protection against natural calamities, and is home to a wide range of flora and fauna, including some that are gravely endangered. Environmental scientists have highlighted the critical need for greater ecological cooperation on the Sundarbans between Bangladesh and India.<sup>59</sup>

The Sundarbans forest is home to both Hindus and Muslims, a majority of whom are socio-economically challenged. Dependence on the forest has fostered a syncretic, harmonious culture between the two religious groups. *Sufia M. Uddin*

<sup>58</sup> Muhammad Makki, Saleem Ali and Kitty Van Vuuren, 'Religious identity and coal development in Pakistan: ecology, land rights and the politics of exclusion', *Extractive Industries and Society* 2: 2, 2015, pp. 276–86; Leonard Ortolano, Ernesto Sánchez-Triana, Paul Tapas and Shakil Ferdousi, 'Managing the Sundarbans region: opportunities for mutual gain by India and Bangladesh', *International Journal of Environment and Sustainable Development* 15: 1, 2016, pp. 16–31.

<sup>59</sup> Anamitra Anurag Danda, Nilanjan Ghosh, Jayanta Bandyopadhyay and Sugata Hazra, 'Managed retreat: adaptation to climate change in the Sundarbans ecoregion in the Bengal Delta', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region* 15: 3, 2019, pp. 317–35.

argues that ‘the inhospitable yet rich environment of the forest serves as a shared sacred site for both Hindus and Muslims’.<sup>60</sup> In both the Indian and the Bangladeshi parts of the Sundarbans, survey results indicate that in times of environmental emergency, religion does not influence the great majority of households’ willingness to assist neighbours in need.<sup>61</sup> The forest and its ecosystem face critical challenges, including extreme weather events, rising sea levels, saline intrusion, land conversion and, recently, the construction of a coal-fired power plant.

Currently, buoyed by strong political relationships, Bangladesh and India are undertaking both track 1 and track 2 initiatives to collaborate on the Sundarbans. In 2011 the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on ‘Conservation of the Sundarbans’, which aimed to synchronize cooperation on monitoring, management and conservation of resources, as well as to support eco-tourism and sustainable socio-economic development. A joint working group (JWG) of officials from relevant ministries of the two countries was created to oversee the implementation of the MoU. However, in the absence of a robust cooperation mechanism, the two countries have made very little progress towards implementing the MoU. Particular shortcomings of the track 1 process include infrequent meetings of the JWG, non-systematic mapping, differences in bureaucratic regimes and lack of capacity and training of staff.<sup>62</sup>

Since 2015, civil society participation on the mangrove forest has been facilitated by the Bangladesh–India Sundarbans Region Cooperation Initiative (BI-SRCI).<sup>63</sup> Participants in this World Bank initiative include the International Water Association (IWA) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), along with three think-tanks from India and one from Bangladesh. The broad goal of the BI-SRCI is to support the implementation of the 2011 MoU. It envisions an institutional framework that facilitates interactions between the government officials of the JWG and an advisory group consisting of experts from NGOs, educational institutions and grassroots organizations. The BI-SRCI explicitly acknowledges the importance of the political impacts of environmental cooperation, envisioning ‘diplomacy related to environmental issues’ as following a distinct path from conventional diplomacy.<sup>64</sup> However, the grassroots elements in the BI-SRCI’s proposed framework are envisioned as part of a broader epistemic community that can facilitate and advocate bilateral cooperation on the Sundarbans and does not focus explicitly on building cross-cultural ties at the societal level. The BI-SRCI has made important contributions towards engaging civil society in environmental cooperation, but its grassroots programmes may not foster an ecological pathway to ‘everyday peace’ owing to the lack of community participation.<sup>65</sup> It is in this context that grassroots environmental activities on the Sundarbans have the potential to yield

<sup>60</sup> Sufia M. Uddin, ‘Religion, nature, and life in the Sundarbans’, *Asian Ethnology* 78: 2, 2019, pp. 289–310.

<sup>61</sup> Ortolano et al., ‘Managing the Sundarbans region’.

<sup>62</sup> Anamitra Danda, *Environmental security in the Sundarban in the current climate change era: strengthening India–Bangladesh cooperation*, occasional paper no. 220 (New Delhi: The Observer Research Foundation (ORF), 2019).

<sup>63</sup> ORF and Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), *Bangladesh–India Sundarban region cooperation initiative* (New Delhi, 2018).

<sup>64</sup> ORF and IDSA, *Bangladesh–India Sundarban region*, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Danda, *Environmental security in the Sundarban*.

certain peace dividends. Such processes can be informed by best practices of similar initiatives in other conflict-prone regions.

The Good Water Neighbors (GWN) project by EcoPeace Middle East is one of the earlier attempts at engaging young people in environmental peacebuilding activities. The project aimed to break down ethnic and religious stereotypes and create cross-cultural linkages between young Israelis, Jordanians and Palestinians through training, transboundary visits, youth camps and other activities that focused on shared water and environmental concerns. The project also facilitated the incorporation of a water and peace curriculum into national teacher training programmes in Israel and the Palestinian territories. This article does not aim to delve into the specific details of the GWN project, which are available in various project-related reports.<sup>66</sup> However, I wish to highlight two key mechanisms used by the GWN project that have policy relevance in encouraging the young people of Bangladesh and India towards embracing inclusive forms of identity: namely, youth engagement and training of teachers.

The GWN project organized youth interactions on several different platforms, facilitating cross-border visits of 384 young people from Israel and the Palestinian territories. By organizing camps on environmental issues, the project encouraged young people to learn from and live with each other. The completion report of the project stated that cross-border visits 'broke down the stereotypical image of an enemy, creating the basic foundations for lasting peace through individual friendships'.<sup>67</sup> Scholars of environmental peacebuilding who studied the GWN project also concluded that such activities resulted in the young people involved building mutual understanding and questioning stereotypes.<sup>68</sup> Replicating such programmes in south Asia with the Sundarbans as a focus could be a viable policy option. Cross-border visits and youth camps should put emphasis on bringing together young people from the Sundarbans and also from other regions of Bangladesh and India. Specific emphasis could be placed on attracting young people from areas that have seen recent ethnic and religious conflict, such as Assam, New Delhi and Chittagong. Youth camps may consist of two broad components: educational workshops and classes on the Sundarbans; and service-learning opportunities, where participants learn from and contribute to the local community through providing conservation services. Cross-border youth engagement on the Sundarbans that focuses on environmental education and training will not come up against either political or local resistance, and may address the existing gap in respect of grassroots participation within the 2011 MoU and civil society processes.

The GWN programme trained teachers from the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Israel to help them deliver messages on environmental justice and ecological interdependence. Such activities earned recognition and support from the Israeli education ministry. In south Asia, education has been used by governments to advance ethno-nationalist agendas by endorsing a politically convenient version of

<sup>66</sup> See EcoPeace Middle East, *Community based problem solving on water issues: cross-border 'priority initiatives' of the Good Water Neighbors Project* (Tel Aviv, 2016).

<sup>67</sup> Friends of the Earth Middle East, *Final program report: Good Water Neighbours* (Tel Aviv, 2013), p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> Ide and Tubi, 'Education and environmental peacebuilding'.

history.<sup>69</sup> Training of teachers in pedagogical tools that convey messages of ecological integrity may somewhat alleviate the divisive historical discourses that pervade south Asia's educational systems. Such an approach is more politically feasible than directly addressing textbook discrepancies, which will be met with high levels of political resistance. Training of teachers may be undertaken through the translation of open access online courses and textbooks on environmental peacebuilding into vernacular languages. Teachers in Bangladesh and India can collaborate on the creation of a curriculum that highlights the necessity of cooperation on environmental issues across international borders and between ethnic and religious groups.

Youth engagement and the training of teachers in south Asia will contribute to the creation of what some interview respondents referred to as 'cultures' that sustain and facilitate cooperation in south Asia. A research fellow from Bangladesh argued that 'a greater amount of communication [between people of south Asia] will lead to a greater amount of change in the new generation which will ultimately lead to a change in the culture. The mixing of cultures is a big factor in peacebuilding.' Interview respondents suggested that such a change in culture, buoyed up by greater trust and confidence, can address ideational sources of conflict. A former foreign secretary of Bangladesh stated that closer interactions will allow south Asians to 'see the tangible benefits of working together as distinct from many reasons that may come in the way—whether they are religious or sectarian or security'.

The broader impact of grassroots initiatives on the Sundarbans in countering ethno-nationalistic populism takes shape through the 'multiplier' effect, whereby participants become leaders who go on to actively promote religious and ethnic harmony and environmental conservation in their communities. As in the GWN programme, the training of teachers should facilitate the establishment of a network linking educators in India and Bangladesh that can sustain engagement on conflict-sensitive education. Effective communication and outreach can also ensure that peace overtures based on such grassroots initiatives reach broader audiences in India and Bangladesh. In this context, UNICEF's Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy (PBEA) programme in Liberia is a relevant case-study. The programme provided training to teachers in conflict-sensitive education and publicized its success through a documentary that included testimonies by students, teachers and government officials. Publicizing grassroots initiatives in the Sundarbans through traditional and social media can send important signals to political elites about the unsustainability of populist narratives. Scholars of everyday peace have argued that the success of people-to-people contacts can convince politicians of the need for more inclusive policies.<sup>70</sup>

Grassroots engagement on the Sundarbans is thus relevant to Ide's second pathway to environmental peacebuilding, that of building understanding and trust. The international community and regional civil society should thus provide

<sup>69</sup> Deepa Nair, 'Textbook conflicts in south Asia: politics of memory and national identity', *Journal of Educational Media, Memory and Society* 2: 2, 2010, pp. 29–45.

<sup>70</sup> Mac Ginty, 'Everyday peace'.

the technical and financial support necessary for grassroots interactions on the Sundarbans that can over time and iteration build the societal resilience that can resist nativist narratives.

### Tertiary education on the Thar desert

The ecologies of India and Pakistan are intrinsically linked to the glaciers and transnational rivers sustained by the Hindu Kush Himalaya mountains. In addition to the six rivers of the Indus basin, the two countries share the subtropical Thar desert, which covers an area of 200,000 square kilometres. Approximately 85 per cent of the Thar desert lies in the Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Haryana, while the rest is in the Pakistani provinces of Sindh and Punjab. Like the Sundarbans, the Thar is home to critically endangered species, and six areas within the desert have been reserved for ecological conservation by India and Pakistan.<sup>71</sup> It is one of the most densely populated deserts in the world, home to 1.2 million people, from multiple religious and ethnic backgrounds, who face grave socio-economic challenges. As in the Sundarbans, the environmental challenges of the Thar have played a crucial role in interreligious harmony. Makki and colleagues have commented, of the Pakistani section of the Thar: 'Despite different religious identities, the harsh desert environment has laid the foundation of livelihoods that have fostered positive coexistence between Hindus and Muslims, unlike many other parts of the country that have been scourged by ethno-religious violence.'<sup>72</sup> In recent years the Thar has faced a number of environmental challenges in the form of soil degradation, rapid vegetation loss, unsustainable grazing and farming practices, and the extraction of fossil fuels.

Grassroots engagement in ecological cooperation on the Thar desert faces the enormous task of circumventing the defence and security establishments in India and Pakistan. In this context, the South Asian University (SAU) provides a unique opportunity to use tertiary education to advance ecological cooperation. The SAU, based in New Delhi, was envisioned as a regional centre for excellence by the eight members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and commenced student intake in 2010. The mandate of the university makes an explicit link between education and regional peacebuilding. One of its formal goals is to 'enhance learning in the south Asian community that promotes an understanding of each other's perspectives and strengthens regional consciousness'.<sup>73</sup> To promote integration among students, the university has a policy of having those from different countries share accommodation. In theory, such policies could contribute to acknowledgement of a regional identity that could counter some of the ideational sources of conflicts between India and Pakistan.

While the SAU does not yet provide degrees in environmental sciences, it has organized workshops and short courses with a specifically environmental

<sup>71</sup> Makki et al., 'Religious identity and coal development'.

<sup>72</sup> Makki et al., 'Religious identity and coal development', pp. 278–9.

<sup>73</sup> South Asian University (SAU), *Annual Report 2017* (New Delhi, 2017), p. 1.



focus. For instance, in September 2020 it organized, with international partners, a winter school on 'inclusive water governance' which aimed to bring together water experts from multiple south Asian countries.<sup>74</sup> It also plans to establish an Institute of South Asian Studies, which will run programmes on natural resource conservation, energy studies, study of environmental issues, the search for common ground and peace studies.<sup>75</sup>

In 2017, eleven Pakistani students graduated from the SAU's New Delhi campus, indicating that this regional university can facilitate the easing of stringent visa restrictions between India and Pakistan, if only for a small minority of citizens.<sup>76</sup> In 2015, it was reported that the SAU had received clearance to build a US\$200 million campus on the edge of the Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary, a protected forest rich with wildlife and plants that lies between Delhi and Haryana. The Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife of India has instructed the university authorities to foster a culture of ecological consciousness in and around the campus.<sup>77</sup> The new campus was expected to be opened in 2020, but this is likely to be delayed due to the COVID-19 crisis. Despite the potential, the SAU has suffered several controversies, including allegations that Indian citizens have dominated leadership and faculty positions.<sup>78</sup> In addition, the university is at an early stage of developing its human resources, infrastructures and reputation. Accordingly, to see how environmental education might be developed through the SAU, we can look at similar initiatives in other parts of the world.

The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES) is an academic and research centre on environmental leadership in the Middle East. The broad goal of the AIES is to produce a network of environmentalists who will meet the region's challenges with richer and more innovative peacebuilding solutions.<sup>79</sup> The AIES collaborates with regional universities to offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in environmental studies to young people from Israel, the Palestinian territories and other countries. Four research centres of the institute focus on, respectively, renewable energy, transboundary water management, sustainable agriculture and hyper-arid socio-ecology.

The AIES uses formal education on the environment to inculcate empathy among diverse social groups with the aim of fostering peaceful relations. By getting young people from varied backgrounds to learn and live together, the AIES has been particularly successful in overcoming deeply entrenched social and political prejudices. Environmental peacebuilding scholars who studied the AIES programme have expressed the opinion that the institute's empathy-building strategies facilitate the development of interpersonal ties that endure despite

<sup>74</sup> SAU, *Events 2020*, <http://www.sau.int/index.php>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 30 Sept. 2020.)

<sup>75</sup> South Asian University, *Institute of South Asian Studies*, <http://www.sau.int/academics/centres-institutes.html>.

<sup>76</sup> SAU, *Annual Report 2017*, p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> Mayank Aggarwal and Prashant K. Nanda, 'Nod for SAARC university campus near Asola sanctuary, with riders', *Livemint*, 29 June 2015.

<sup>78</sup> Asif bin Ali, 'In which direction is South Asian University headed?', *Daily Star*, 24 Oct. 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Arava Institute, *History and mission*, <https://arava.org/about-our-community/history-mission/>.

differences in political ideologies.<sup>80</sup> All students are required to participate in the obligatory peacebuilding leadership seminar, which engages students on critical and controversial issues in regional conflict. The institute also maintains an alumni network to facilitate long-term engagement among future environmental leaders of the region.

The educational and empathy-building strategies of the AIES provide important context to the development of environmental courses in the SAU. However, what is of even greater relevance to south Asia is the process by which the AIES has linked educational activities to semi-formal cross-border environmental initiatives. The institute has facilitated cross-border engagement between state and non-state actors in Israel and the Palestinian territories on renewable energy, wastewater treatment and other environmental issues. In south Asia, one potential avenue through which education could be indirectly linked to more formal peace processes is the development of environmental skills among SAU students that are of relevance to Pakistan's and India's water and energy projects in the Thar desert.

To meet ambitious renewable energy targets, India and Pakistan are rapidly developing solar and wind farms in the Thar desert. Currently, the Indian states of Rajasthan and Gujarat, which share borders with Pakistan, have solar and wind energy capacities of 4,046MW and 9,670MW respectively. Indian projects include the Charanka Solar Park, the largest solar park in Asia, located just 50 kilometres from the border with Pakistan. In October 2019 it was reported that desert land close to the international border with Pakistan was being considered for the locations of 30GW and 25GW of solar and wind energy plants in Gujarat and Rajasthan, respectively. In Pakistan, the 100MW Quaid-e-Azam Solar Park in Punjab is located approximately 100 kilometres from the Indian border. Like India, Pakistan is planning to capitalize on its energy and wind resources, and is considering proposals for a 400MW solar plant and a 640MW wind farm in Sindh. In Pakistan, power from solar panels has been used to desalinate ground water, thereby providing critical supplies to drought-stricken populations in Thar.<sup>81</sup> Despite the continuation of hostilities between the two countries, there has been some recognition of the mutual benefits to be achieved from collaboration on renewable energy. In July 2013, a delegation of Pakistani experts visited India to study the use of solar plants in irrigation, a mere six months after one of the worst border skirmishes between the two countries.<sup>82</sup>

The development of water and energy projects in Thar provides an important opportunity for the SAU to engage Pakistani and Indian students on environmental issues that will be of critical relevance to both countries in the near future. The university could consider developing specialized courses focusing on renewable energy development and solar-powered desalination in desert regions. The educational and scientific focus of the proposed grassroots programmes on the Thar and the regional status of the SAU should facilitate political and local acceptance of

<sup>80</sup> Ide and Tubi, 'Education and environmental peacebuilding', p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> Mirza Sadaqat Huda, *Promoting peace in deserts of sun and wind: renewable energy cooperation between India and Pakistan* (Sausalito, CA: Energy Peace Partners, 23 March 2020).

<sup>82</sup> Staff reporter, 'Pakistan seeks India's cooperation in renewable energy sector', *Business Standard*, 16 July 2013.

such initiatives, despite bilateral tensions. Environmental education can also have a strong experiential component, which facilitates extended field visits by Indian and Pakistani students to the Thar desert. In addition to technical education, such field visits should include service-learning opportunities, thereby highlighting commonalities in ecological as well as socio-economic issues across borders. The SAU could consider developing research centres that focus on renewable energy generation and environmental conservation in arid regions. In this context reference can be made to existing research programmes run by the AIES.

Several interview respondents mentioned that cross-border engagements are crucial to the promulgation and spread of liberal norms in south Asia. A former adviser to the government of India stated: 'It is important to change the orthodox, security-oriented thinking in regard to borders in the government and ministries. Borders must be recognized as opportunities.' Yet to date, the lack of cooperation between India and Pakistan and the high level of bilateral conflict have resulted in an intractable status quo. One Indian research fellow described the relationship between cross-border cooperation and peacebuilding as a 'chicken and egg scenario', wherein regional stability and collaboration are mutually constituted. A Nepali academic described the lack of cooperation and existence of violent conflict as a self-reinforcing 'loop'. He stated: 'Somewhere we have to make an intervention on the loop of no collaboration and no peace. Once collaboration happens then we can get the ball rolling towards peace.'

Tertiary education on the Thar can raise awareness about ecological interdependence among Indian and Pakistani students at the SAU. However, countering ultra-nationalistic rhetoric and breaking the 'loop' of discord between India and Pakistan will require engaging a broader group of stakeholders. One 'multiplier' effect of the SAU proposal could be the development of similar courses on environmental cooperation in national universities across India and Pakistan. Effective social media strategies can be used to connect the importance of such educational exchanges with a growing consciousness among south Asian youth about renewable energy and environmental conservation.

The proposed grassroots initiatives on the Thar desert broadly speak to the third and fourth pathways suggested by Ide, those of cultivating interdependence and building institutions. Support from the international community to enhance the capacity of existing institutions will be of critical importance to the success of these grassroots initiatives. In the long run, the link between the everyday peace created through grassroots engagements and more formal peace overtures takes shape through the development of leadership. The SAU's mandate stresses the creation of 'quality leadership',<sup>83</sup> which interview respondents have highlighted as fundamental to the development of peace in south Asia. In the context of environmental education on the Thar desert, the development of leaders who understand the need for cross-border collaboration on water and energy may facilitate ecological pathways to peace between India and Pakistan.

<sup>83</sup> SAU, *Annual Report 2017*, p. 1.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing the underlying ideational sources of conflict in south Asia and the contemporary rise in ethno-nationalistic populism requires multiple efforts towards achieving everyday peace. Existing studies on environmental peacebuilding in south Asia have prioritized technical cooperation on highly contested regional resources. These processes may not address the root causes of political and territorial conflicts. As demonstrated by the case-studies on the Sundarbans forest and Thar desert presented above, environmental education on less contentious regional resources can instil ecological awareness, break down ethnic and religious stereotypes, and build societal resistance to nativist agendas. Such initiatives have the potential to create leaders in south Asia who prioritize environmental interdependence and socio-cultural syncretism above cleavages of religion, ethnicity and nationality.

When designing grassroots programmes, emphasis must be placed on taking account of social, religious, gender, class and ethnic inequalities which, if left unchecked, can determine who can and cannot participate in such initiatives. Practices in everyday peacebuilding in a deeply divided south Asia must look beyond the most obvious problem of the Hindu–Muslim conflict to account for multiple levels of socio-political hierarchy. In countering the exclusionist agenda of ethno-nationalistic populism, grassroots programmes should ensure that they do not replicate existing inequalities, thereby undermining the effectiveness of environmental peacebuilding projects.

While scholars of environmental peacebuilding warn against external interventions driven by neo-liberal frameworks, the grassroots initiatives discussed above can benefit greatly from international collaboration. Research on environmental peacebuilding processes in neglected areas such as the Sundarbans and the Thar can inform the development of innovative policies that address ecological conservation, energy transition and conflict resolution. On a broader level, environmental peacebuilding literature may consider engaging more deeply with the ideational issues that drive violent conflicts around the world.