

## **Conflict, Peace, and Natural Resources**

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Your special issue on “Human Conflict” (18 May) largely ignores a central dimension of violent conflict: the role of natural resources in the onset and conduct of conflict, peacemaking, and recovery from conflict.

While the precise role of natural resources as a cause of conflict is debated (1,2), it is indisputable that grievances over access to land were central to wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nepal, and elsewhere (3), and inequitable distribution of oil and gas revenues drove secessionist conflicts in Aceh, Southern Sudan, and elsewhere (3A). Indeed, over the last 60 years, in any particular year, between 40 and 60 percent of ongoing internal armed conflicts were linked to natural resources (4).

Since the end of the Cold War and the attendant financing of proxy wars, there has been a rapid growth of conflict resources, with armed groups exploiting, “taxing”, or otherwise benefitting from the trade in natural resources. During this period, armed groups in at least 18 conflicts have relied on revenues from diamonds, timber, coltan, yarsa gumba, and a range of agricultural crops from cacao to coca, from oil palm to opium poppy (5). For centuries, the environment and natural resources have been targeted to deprive enemies of cover, food, and support (6), and the rise of conflict resources has also enhanced their role as a military objective (7).

The good news is that there is growing recognition of the role of natural resources in making and building peace. A four-year research project coordinated by the Environmental Law Institute, the United Nations Environment Programme, the University of Tokyo, and McGill University has engaged more than 225 researchers and practitioners in examining experiences and lessons in managing natural resources to support post-conflict peacebuilding (8-14). Here are a few of our findings:

Between 1989 and 2004, 51 of 94 peace agreements (54%) had provisions relating to natural resources; all major peace agreements since then have included natural resources, often in a range of contexts from establishing processes to undertake land reform to remediating environmental damage from the conflict to providing agricultural livelihoods for reintegrating former combatants (15).

Experiences across more than 60 conflict-affected countries show that natural resource management is a critical, yet often-underappreciated factor in successful peacebuilding, including livelihoods and macroeconomic recovery; the provision of basic services, including water, sanitation, and electricity; governance and rule of law; and cooperation. For example, natural resources often play a predominate role in livelihoods and national economies of countries emerging from conflict. Approximately 80% of rural livelihoods depend directly on land, forests, and other natural resources; over 50% of a post-conflict country’s gross domestic product usually comes from agriculture and extractive industries; and 50-80% of exports (and sometimes more than 95%) comes from natural resources (15).

Further attention to the role of natural resources in post-conflict peacebuilding is urgently needed.

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