Understanding the causes and dynamics of resource-based conflicts

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Treasure, Turf and Turmoil: The Dirty Dynamics of Land and Natural Resource Conflict

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Key issues:

- “There is competition over resources... the competition, however, is not just to win but to define the rules, the players, and the extent of the playing field”

- No ‘technical fix’ will succeed unless these fundamental conflicts are managed/transformed
Analyzing conflict

- Conflict has multiple causes
- Conflicts evolve over time, through different phases
- Many countries are in situation of ‘no war, no peace’
- Conflict affects the legitimacy of institutions, including the state.
- This affects how USAID may work in such contexts
Example: “Nested” conflicts

Intra-community tensions
Inter-ethnic tensions
Historical land claims
Customary vs statutory tensions
Failing land registry
Over-Centralised governance systems
International legal frameworks

Periodic political stresses

Protected areas

Political patronage networks
Land and natural resources in developing countries

- ‘Local’ conflicts often have global, & regional aspects
- Often multiple & overlapping uses by different kinds of users of different status
- Mismatch between customary & state land and natural resource tenure systems
- Only 5-10% of land is registered
- Women’s rights to land and resources precarious
Land and natural resources in developing countries

- Ownership of collectively-managed resources is often disputed by the state and communities
- Massive privatization of the commons is underway
- 75% of major conflicts since 1980s were in agrarian states with high influence of custom
- Collective or customary rights can be secured if key actors want to
Resources and conflict: “Scarcity”

- Environmental scarcity leads to political and social pressures that fuel conflict
- ‘Elite capture’ of resources is common
- Scarcity is therefore best understood in relative, not absolute terms
- Exacerbated by climate change
- Who benefits from narrative of ‘crisis’?
- ‘Scarcity’ model is but has been criticized as over-simplistic
Resources and conflict: “Abundance”

- Competition over abundant resources can cause conflict
- War entrepreneurs monopolize markets through violence
- Risk depends on lootability
- Economic focus of ‘greed’ research excludes socio-anthropological data, historical narratives
Resources and conflict: Inequalities

- Vertical inequalities within states provide motives but boundaries *between* groups facilitate mobilization of violence.
- Access to land and natural resources is often based on historical claims through kinship: competition over resources etc, conflict often becomes seen as ‘ethnic’.
- If political/administrative system excludes some groups, and dispute resolution mechanisms are seen as biased or ineffective, violence is more likely.
Multiple linkages with conflict

- Generalized inequality of access causes poverty and discontentment, motives of conflict
- Specific disputes act as opportunities for conflict
- Revenues from land and resources provide means to sustain conflict
- Secondary conflicts over land and property rights (post-conflict situations)
Land and natural resource issues as motives

- Inequality in land/natural resource access is often part of a wider governance problem
- Poverty encourages some to join armed groups
- Population displacement creates a pool of disenfranchised, impoverished youth
- Where underlying causes are not tackled, conflict will persist
Land and natural resources as *opportunities* for violence

- Specific land/resource disputes can become a focus for discontent, polarizing groups
- Risk of politicization, especially by conflict entrepreneurs
- Disputes and demonstrations accelerate the development of tensions or trigger violence
- Example: Rumonge land case in Burundi, 1993
Land and natural resources as the means to sustain violence

- Armed actors capture local economic systems
- Profits from access to resources can sustain warring parties – war economy develops
- Improved access to land and resources for one group (e.g. ethnic cleansing) may act as a disincentive to negotiations
Post-conflict disputes

Conflict changes social relationships

Common issues in secondary (post-conflict) disputes:
- Overlapping rights and claims to land and NR (IDPs, refugees)
- Lack of relevant land/ NRM policies
- A dysfunctional land administration system
- Land grabbing/encroachment on private/protected areas
- Ambiguous, controversial or unenforceable laws.
‘Conflict sensitive’ programming vs. programming for conflict management

Conflict sensitive programming:
• Ensures that programs do not exacerbate violence.
• A ‘do no harm’ approach
• ‘Minimum standard’ for programs working in areas affected by conflict

Programming for Conflict Management
• Key goal is to influence the dynamics of conflict and peace
Learning points from this presentation

• ‘Local’ conflicts are complex and often have national and international dimensions
• Both scarcity and abundance of resources can lead to conflict
• Land and natural resources can be motives, means, and opportunities for conflict
• Overlapping claims over land and natural resources are a common feature in post-conflict countries