Understanding the causes and dynamics of resource-based conflicts

Presenter: Chris Huggins

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

February 2011

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

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
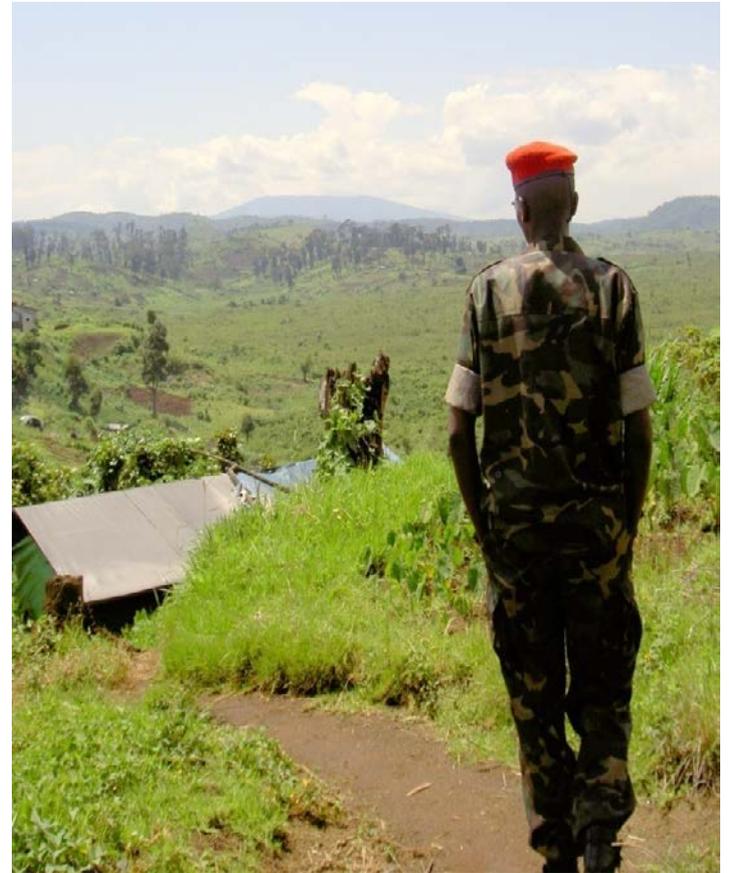
Multiple linkages with conflict

- 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)

Photo credit: Neils photography. Accessed through Flickr . Creative Commons License

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 m*eans* 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