Land, Forests, Insecurity and Conflict

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SUMMARY

In natural resource-dependent economies such as those in Africa, land, forests, and water are the primary environmental goods and sources of livelihoods. This paper focuses on land and forests, and examines how, where, and under what conditions the absolute and relative lack of access to and/or misuse of these resources can trigger, cause, and amplify conflict. The paper underlines the importance of increased investment in sustainable land and forest management and the value of integrating environmental security into the national development policy agenda as key strategies that will facilitate progress towards the attainment of enduring peace and sustainable development.

Keywords: competition, environmental insecurity, governance, property rights, conflict

INTRODUCTION

Land[1] is a fundamental resource for African societies. It occupies a central place in the cultural, political, social organization and economics of many nations. For a large majority of the population in Africa, land is the principal source of livelihood (cultivation, grazing, household energy, and settlement). Beyond the economic benefits, the cultural and social values of land are enormous too. Local people and communities, who are generally descendants of the original inhabitants, have greater historic relationships to their land. Popular expressions like 'the mother land' and 'the father land' are rooted in these strong cultural and social sentiments. Land provides for forests[2], which in turn perform the ecological and hydrological functions needed to ensure the survival of biological life. Forests are also direct sources of income for many individuals, communities and states. According to the World Bank, (2002) forest resources directly contribute to the livelihoods of 90 percent of the 1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty and indirectly support the natural environment that nourishes agriculture and the food supplies of nearly half the population of the developing world.

Because land and forests have such a critical place in human society, the access to and management of them define relationships between individuals and communities; individuals and the state; and the state and communities, as well as between human society and nature. Today, agricultural land and forest resources have become extremely scarce due to both rapid population increases and governance (policy and institutional) failures. The evidence is overwhelming that armed conflicts (often referred to as ethnic or religious) that afflicted Africa result from competition over scarce renewable natural resources (farm land, pasture and forest) (Diamond 2005, Renner 2002).

Indeed, throughout Africa there are many cases of conflicts over natural resources across wide-ranging ecological zones. For example, the conflict in Somalia that has torn apart the country and left it stateless is the continuation of a 100-year-old movement of major Somali clans southward into agricultural areas from nomadic grazing areas that have become overpopulated (Hutchison 1991). The Rwandan genocide that claimed the lives of close to one million people is attributed to the severe competition between Hutus and Tutsis over declining farm holdings. In Rwanda, the average farm size has declined from 2 to 0.7 hectare per family over the past four decades. This resource scarcity coupled with the then political leadership zeal to exploit land scarcity for political advantages is widely believed to be the primary factor behind the armed conflict between the two groups, and the genocide (Bachler 1996).

In Zimbabwe at the time of independence in 1980, 45 percent of mostly fertile soils of agricultural land was in the

[1] UNCCD defines 'Land' as 'the terrestrial bio-productive system that comprises soil, vegetation, other biota, and the ecological and hydrological processes that operate within the system'

[2] FAO in its 2005 Global Forest Resources Assessment defines forest as 'land spanning more than 0.5 hectares with trees higher than 5 metres and a canopy cover of more than 10 percent, or trees able to reach these thresholds in situ.

hands of white farmers, who represented only one per cent of the country's population. This left a huge segment of the indigenous population to cultivate the remaining largely infertile land. Faced with intense domestic political pressure, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe instituted the Land Reform Policy that led the natives to illegally confiscate the whites' farms (Mudenda 2002). These measures, taken by the government ostensibly to help black farmers, sparked state-community and community-community conflicts in the country. It also brought the imposition of international economic sanctions on the country, from which the country is still suffering.

In the late 1980s, the construction of the Manantali Dam on the Bafing River tributary in Mali and the Diama salt-intrusion barrage near the mouth of the Senegal River sparked a war between Senegal and Mauritania. Anticipation of the new dam sharply increased land values along the river in areas where high-intensity agriculture would become feasible. The elites in Mauritania, mainly white Moors, re-wrote legislation governing land ownership, effectively abrogating the rights of black Africans to continue farming, herding, and fishing along the Mauritanian riverbank (Homer-Dixon 1994).

Uganda's daily newspaper, *The Monitor* featured an editorial opinion in November 2005 entitled 'Shall we degazette all our forests?' The paper wrote about Mehta of Lugazi Sugar Works, which insisted on possessing a 'part of the Mabira Forest reserve in order to increase sugar production.' The paper, rightly so, argues that Mabira Forest reserve, one of the richest in biodiversity, should not be destroyed for sugar plantation. The same paper further wrote that one of the Ssesse islands in Lake Victoria, i.e., Bugala forest on Kalangala islands is also under threat of being degazetted after a palm oil company investing in Uganda said that 'land outside the forest reserves was not suitable for their palm crop'. Several questions come to mind. Is land so scarce in Uganda to drive the destruction of a pristine and biodiversity rich forest for the sake of increasing sugar production? Have the authorities considered the ecological, hydrological, educational, medicinal, etc. values of the forest and the impact of its destruction on the global and micro climate and its potential to trigger, amplify or cause conflicts among natural resource users, and eventually precipitate political instability?

One of the key developments of the 1990s is the rethinking of security in environmental terms. At the same time, environmental organizations have put in place programs and projects that help them rethink the environment in security terms. With such convergence of opinion, security has been increasingly recognized as a cyclical process of competition over scarce resource, deprivation, migration, and conflict. Reinforcing this thesis, McNeely (2000), Myers (1996) and Renner (2001), in their historical reviews of wars, concluded that the nature of recent wars has actually shifted from inter- to intra-state and from external to internal with greater frequency and instability. In fact, Timberlake (1988) came up with the conclusion that 'every civil war in Africa has had 'drought' or 'famine' as a cause and triggering factor,' which is rather debatable.

Yet many scholars and policy analysts place issues of security and armed conflict resolution at the level of the nation state. Global debates and negotiations on peace making and peace keeping addressed issues of security in terms of disarmament and reduction of nuclear proliferation. Consequently, the state was perceived as the principal provider of security. Conflict management processes were kept hanging at the level of the nation state, and indeed, without tackling the root causes of conflict.

Insecurity: land and forest conflicts

Implicit in the title of this paper, *'land, forests, insecurity, and conflict,'* is the vital role played by 'insecurity' as a bridge between 'land and forests' on the one side and 'conflict' on the other. Resource scarcity, absolute or relative lack of access to land and forest resources and increased vulnerability breed insecurity that could eventually result in migration and conflict. Conflict, in turn, damages the environment, displaces a population and results in environmental insecurity. A caveat is in order here. Although we often come across the terms, 'land conflicts' and 'forest conflicts,' it is important to note that there is no direct relationship between land and forest degradation and conflict. Neither the abundance, nor the lack of access to, nor the misuse of these two resources would, *ipso facto*, result in societal conflict. It is rather the perceived or actual feeling of threat, insecurity, and hopelessness arising from deprivation that could trigger and cause conflict. Even where this is the case, individuals and communities adopt complex strategies to cope with the land use or environmental changes. Conflict erupts after all available coping strategies are exhausted and when public policy and institutions fail to make a timely intervention.

When we talk about security or insecurity, our primary concern is the security of human beings[3] as individuals and within communities. Individuals and communities are said to be secure when they are free from threats, conflict, hunger, disease, deprivation, and poverty. The attainment of security, or the lack of it, is a product of the interactions of many factors that affect us, the biophysical situation, economic policies and conditions, population and settlement, political system and institutions, and culture. Sound economic, social, and environmental policies and a well functioning governance structure have the potential to guarantee our security.

It is widely recognized that land and forest degradation is a result of individual and/or collective decisions made in response to changes in public policy, markets conditions, and population growth. Responses at the individual level may take the form of changes in land use, management practices, and

[3] The 1994 *Human Development Report* issued by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) listed seven main threats to human security: economic, health, personal, community, political, food, and environmental security.

investment. At the community level, responses may include changing the size of commons, the rules governing uses and transfer of common resources, or the distribution of benefits. These changes in resource conditions affect productivity and livelihoods. Individuals, among other things, may respond by migrating either in search of cultivable land to other rural areas (rural–rural migration) or in search of income (rural–urban migration). These migrations, often under conditions of weak governance, could lead to violent conflict (Homer Dixon 1994, Homer Dixon and Percival 1996, Dabelko and Dabelko 1999, Ejigu 2004). A good public policy has the potential to avert impending conflicts by creating incentives to invest in land, promoting and enforcing sustainable use of forest resources, strengthening institutions to innovate, supplying new technologies, and creating conditions for dialogue and participatory development. On the other hand, wrong policies create conditions for land and forest conflicts to erupt and can subject a country to a period of political and socioeconomic instability.

Socioeconomic instability and conflict, in turn, damage land and forest resources, which leads to insecurity. There is, thus, a two way relationship between insecurity arising from the severe competition over scarce land and forest, and conflict and instability. But this relationship is never simple and automatic. It is rather a complex and non-linear relationship that is influenced by a host of policy, institutional, cultural, and economic factors. Lake and Rothchild (1996) argue that when the state loses its capacity to arbitrate between groups or provide credible guarantees of protection for groups, fears of physical insecurity arise. Under this condition, groups become fearful for their survival and, in turn, tend to rely upon their own capabilities. They invest in and prepare for violence, and thereby make actual violence possible. Kahl and Butts (2000) argue that while many environment-conflict linkage scholars have largely ignored the role of state exploitation and violence, which generate several first- and second-tier effects that can lead to conflict when combined with particular political institutions and forms of social organizations.

Thus, the likelihood of land and forest insecurity to trigger, cause or amplify conflict increases where governance is weak and the state fails to deliver basic goods, services, as well as law and order needed by society.

Types and characteristics of land and forest conflicts

Land and forest resources have intrinsic differences, which influence the type, frequency, and magnitude of the conflict. The following sections first present the types and characteristics of land scarcity induced conflicts followed by a brief discussion of types of forest conflicts.

a. Types of land conflicts

A four-country (Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda) study by the Partnership for African Environmental Sustainability (PAES) with the support of the European Union, found that in Ethiopia, 'as many as 97 percent of households interviewed linked conflicts to land shortages, while in Uganda farmers ranked conflict as the second most important cause of land degradation (poverty was ranked first)'. The study, based on historical evidence and current experience, identified several types of environment insecurity induced conflict:

(i) *Cultivator–cultivator conflict:* associated with pressure on farmland and common property resources (grazing land, community forests, and water points). Most cultivator–cultivator conflicts are over allocation of parental land; sharing common resources (i.e., common grazing and water resources); migrants encroaching on indigenous land, and returnees claiming ancestral land.; and shrinkage of natural resources thus means less resource availability for livelihood and survival and/or less land availability for intergenerational transfer.

(ii) *Cultivator–herder conflict:* associated with clashes between pastoralists and cultivators over access to pasture and water resources.

(iii) *Herder–herder conflict:* associated with inter-community conflicts between different pastoralist societies living adjacent to each other.

(iv) *State–cultivator conflict:* associated with conflicts between state and farmers over access to and use of agricultural land and forests.

(v) *State– herder conflicts:* over access to and use of land for pasture and water (state sponsored development projects notably irrigation projects).

(vi) *State–state conflict:* over access to and use of scarce transboundary resource.

Today, many African countries experience these conflicts in one form on another.

b. Types of forest conflicts

Forest conflicts have several characteristics, some similar to and others different from land conflicts:

(i) *State–state forest conflicts*. Many forest resources in Africa are transboundary. As a result, their use has the potential to trigger or cause conflict between two or more countries. The tension that arose between Uganda and the Congo Democratic Republic in 2003 is a good example.

(ii) *State-community conflicts*. These are conflicts over the use of forest resources and where a state evicts a community from forest area either to protect the forest or give logging rights to investors. A good example of the latter is the Liberian case, where 'timber companies used private militias to gain control over local populations, discourage protests, and encroach

on communal lands. Timber militias, along with the military and the police, intimidate local communities, destroy and steal goods, and seize farms and forest land for companies.' (Price 2003, Jarvie *et al*. 2003).

(iii) *Community–community conflicts*. Conflicts over access to and sharing of benefits among competing groups.

(iv) *Community-wildlife conflicts*. With high human and livestock population growth around forest areas, community wild life conflict has become common in many African countries. Innovative sustainable use programs, e.g., the Camp Fire program in Southern Africa have been developed to resolve such conflicts.

(v) *Timber induced conflicts*. Timber is a unique resource that is easily extracted to generate revenue. Illegal logging is widely practiced in many African countries as a source of supplemental income to bureaucrats and also of revenue for antigovernment rebel groups and insurgents. Because forests are easily accessible and also communal or large scale owned, they are vulnerable to illegal logging. Indeed, many buyers and sellers of timber make it difficult to track extraction activities. Further, timber trade does not require a large amount of capital or processing, and yet generates high returns to investment. Forests are amiable to greater state involvement.

(vi) *Forests provide safe haven for armed groups and refugees*. Forests are used as safe haven for groups organizing armed resistance against the government. In Northern Uganda, for example, the clearing of forests by the Ugandan armed forces in order to track Lord Resistance Army (LRA) rebels is widely reported. Forests also provide safe haven to refugees. For example, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled into Congolese forests to escape fighting in Rwanda, which increased demands for firewood, bush meat, and housing materials, resulting in localized forest degradation.

Forest conflicts could have wider ecosystem impact. Because of the wide variety of roles that forests play, such as providing a source of livelihood and energy and performing ecosystem and climatology functions, the impact of conflicts on forests is widely felt throughout the national economy and at all societal group levels.

Winners and losers in land and forest conflicts

In conflict situation, there are no winners. All armed conflicts result in the destruction of life and property and the loss of financial resources. But some societal groups tend to lose more than others. In the African context it is women are most vulnerable and the biggest losers at times of conflicts. In rural Africa, women have the primary responsibilities for feeding the family, providing household energy, and in general for natural resource management. For example, the PAES Study found out that women account for over 80 percent of the food production and agriculture labour force in Uganda. However, the custom of male inheritance results in 93 percent of women being locked out of ownership. Customarily, in several African societies, women do not own land and are rarely allowed to inherit what belonged to their late fathers or husbands. Indeed, customary land tenure breeds gender conflicts because it favors the male child to inherit land as opposed to the female child and/or the wife. Very often, widows are dispossessed of their late husbands' land without any form of compensation. Women are thus the main victims of land and forest degradation, and of conflict.

Factors that influence the nature and timing of land and forest conflicts

Competition over scarce land and forest resources is only one factor enabling conflict to occur. Governance, economic and social policies, property rights, and cultural factors determine the nature, timing and characteristics of conflicts, and thus create a suitable condition for conflict to erupt. For example, sound governance helps to avert conflicts, while weak governance creates the conditions for the eruption of conflicts. In addition to governance weaknesses, as discussed below, economic deprivation, vulnerability, and deficient property rights make a significant contribution to creating conditions for land and forest insecurity which can then evolve into conflict.

(a) Failed State and governance: Governance refers to the ensemble of policies, institutions, legislations, procedures, and the human capacity needed to implement them across sectors and territories. Key indicators of governance include political legitimacy, rule of law, state of corruption, state capacity to enforce policies, regulatory framework of the financial sector, and mechanisms for dealing with societal grievances and conflicts (at state, local and community levels). Weak governance manifests itself in a variety of ways, such as the absence of central authority to enforce law and order, control by interest groups and biased policy, absence of transparent rules of law and enforcement, inadequate institutional and legal framework, and deficiency in capacity (i.e., manpower, finance, etc.), and lack of broad-based political support. As experience showed in the early 1990s in Ethiopia and Rwanda, environmental conflicts have a tendency to escalate during times of political or authority vacuum. Recent election-related crises in Ethiopia and Uganda are also likely to create conditions for the misuse or mismanagement of land and forest resources. Land degradation and deforestation are results of individual and/or collective decisions made by users in response to changes in public policy, among others. Responses at the individual level may take the form of changes in land use, management practices, and investment. At the community level, responses may include changing the size of commons, the rules governing uses and transfer of common resources, as well as the distribution of benefits.

Political uncertainties and perceived undesirable public policies would discourage investment in land and forests and force natural resource users to focus on short term gains. Such development would worsen competition over scarce resources and increase the probability of environment-induced conflicts.

(b) Economic deprivation and vulnerability to conflict. Economic policies, poverty conditions, and levels of technological development also influence the nature and timing of conflicts. For example, poverty is widespread in many African countries. The four-country PAES study found that there is strong correlation between incidence of poverty, land and forest degradation, and conflict. Farming and pastoral communities in degraded and drought areas tend to be poorer than those in high rainfall areas. Poorer communities are prone to manipulation by warlords or conflict entrepreneurs and be drawn into conflicts that do not serve their interests.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that it is not the general level of poverty that causes conflict. Rather it is the consequence of inadequate control over scarce resources that results in increased economic deprivation, which pushes the poor onto marginal areas and heightens social despair and uncertainty toward the future. In explaining the poverty, land and forest degradation, and conflict link, a critical factor is the perception of the poor regarding their future. Therefore, threats to their livelihoods, feeling of insecurity, and growing poverty are important factors in the poverty, land/forest degradation and conflict nexus.

(c) Deficient property rights. Conflict is bound to occur where property rights are not responsive to the scarcity of resources in a way that allows equitable access and tenure security. Inequitable distribution of resources where powerful groups marginalize the weak could, in particular, be a source of grievance and conflict. The cases of Rwanda and Burundi demonstrate that persistent inequality in land ownership, increased marginalization of the poor, resettlement of returnee refugees, and allocation of land for subsistence are factors that could aggravate conflicts.

Institutions for conflict prevention and management

In many African countries, there are established indigenous institutional arrangements for managing conflicts. These institutions have evolved over many generations, although remain largely unchanged. Conflict resolution mechanisms sometimes involve, at the most rudimentary level, the intervention of elders or leaders of community-based networks and organisations, religious leaders, or prominent personalities. Decisions handed down by such peacemakers carry the force of tradition and community sanction. While they may not have the force of law, these decisions are no less binding than formal legal decisions. However, traditional authorities, often perceived as adversaries to government policies and political structures, have been replaced by cadres of ruling political parties. As a result, traditional institutions have been weakened and, in some cases, destroyed. The demise of traditional conflict resolution functions may have contributed to the increase in land / forest induced conflicts (Ejigu 2004).

At the multinational level, because most forest resources in Africa are transboundary in nature, and because forests contribute to mitigating global climate change, multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, play a significant role in regulating the use of forest resources and in the prevention and management of conflicts. Since the 1992 Rio Summit on Environment and Development, many issues related to land and forests have been addressed through global environment conventions. Indeed, multilateral institutions are increasingly called upon to solve problems, diffuse tension, and resolve conflicts related to: economic and financial volatility; legal and illegal migration; competition over shrinking natural resources; humanitarian, refugee, and environmental crises; and terrorism and weapons proliferation.

CONCLUSION

Given the dependence of a large majority of the African population on land and forests, and given their role in triggering and causing conflicts, sustainable land and forest management must be taken up as a development imperative. There is a need to make national development strategies and policies, both macro and sectoral, sensitive to land and forest induced violent conflicts. For example, national poverty reduction strategies need to take into account the causes and consequences of land and forest degradation and have as their primary goal the reversal of such degradation. Towards this end, a good starting point would be the development of a set of land and forest indicators, to be incorporated into the larger set of development indicators used for economic and social policy formulation and management.

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