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Power of Local Natural Resource Governance in Conflict Contexts

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Edited Transcript – David Bray

Thanks very much, and congratulations to the Wilson Center for presenting a forum on these topics. This is actually an effort at an overview of issues having to do with conflict and local natural resource management.

Now, to begin with, this is obviously just an enormous subject. It encompasses possibly all aspects of human activity on the globe when you start talking about conflict and human resources. And when we talk about this issue and community-based conservation contacts, we're usually thinking of forest and water and things like the wildlife and things that are more immediately attainable and controllable, theoretically, by local communities. But minerals, fossil fuels, these are also natural resource conflicts which can have major impacts upon communities, and in the broadest view, usually do have major impacts on communities. And in the broadest view, should be thought of as well.

And so that's part of what I'm doing here. There's also no clear relationship between, focusing a minute on forests, which is my specialty area, there's no clear relationship between violence and forest cover processes in a place like Brazil. We have images there of a couple of forest martyrs in Brazil, Chico Mendez and Dorothy Stang, who fought with local communities in efforts to help them resist destructive deforestation processes. So there is clearly a link between violence, deforestation and very deleterious impacts on local communities in Brazil.

But in a case like Colombia, it's much less clear, where you have, of course, a decades-long guerilla war there, with varied impacts upon the forest of Colombia. In some areas, there's been deforestation linked with the conflict and with the guerilla war. But it seems clear that significant parts of the Colombian Amazon, in particular, have likely been preserved because of the conflict. So again, no necessary relationship there.

This is just a quick listing of other broad sources of natural resource conflicts, guerilla wars, drug cultivation. You can see the arrest in secure property rights, and one which I'll also be



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making reference to a bit later, which is another very common focus in the area of community-based conservation, that is the imposition of public protected areas over pre-existing customary rights.

Looking at some of the broad academic literature on this, it's focused particularly on armed conflicts and corruption in relationship to natural resource management. And again, this literature doesn't particularly focus on communities, but I'm bringing it in because I think links should be made between this literature and community-based management because the links are obviously there. Communities are usually the locusts of victimhood in these conflicts.

And this is from a political geographer named Phillipe Le Billon, at Oxford, who points out that where natural resources were once just a source of funding for conflicts, that -- I think this is especially true in Africa, on which I am not an expert -- arms conflict is increasingly becoming the means to individual commercial ends and getting the access to natural resources and phenomenon like warlordism, which we'll refer to later. And as well, there's the so-called resource curse, countries which the literature suggests there is something to that, that natural resources in the context of very poor countries can lead to instability and violence and resource wars.

Another common theme in this literature is, do wars and conflicts come about because of scarce resources or abundant resources, and La Billon suggests that low levels of violence, 25 to 1000 battle-related deaths per year, have a positive relationship with environmental degradation but not necessarily with low levels of endowment. So scarce resources by themselves do not lead to the worst forms of conflict; war. Although they may lead to things like dissolution of user groups, as Kent suggested.

And so this is just a quick -- this is a typology. I'm certainly not going to go over this. It's from La Billon. But it's just to give a sense of how preliminary scientists and geographers try to classify these issues.

If you look at something like the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and diamonds is not something which is normally -- and gold is not normally thought of in the context of community-based conservation. But I'm going to go out on a limb, not being an expert on Africa, as I said, and suggest that those phenomenon need to be brought in as well in ways which I'll elaborate on.





Corruption, Kent mentioned it, is frequently the elephant in the room on these issues, also not always discussed and not always analyzed. Here, another -- I think it's Political Geographer Robins has looked at corruption analytically and systematically within the context of natural resource management. There's a definition there, which you can read, and as he points out, corruption is also an institutional process, where he's talking about institutions and social capital as being these positive things. But as he very correctly points out, corruption is also a kind of institution. It has rules. It has norms. It also operates through social capital. People use their personal networks in order to carry out corruption. So this is important in trying to combat corruption.

This is just his attempt to graph some of these relationships. On your left there is just the de jur institutions, the legal institutions. And on the right, what happens with corruption, that some people are excluded is, of course, one of the problems with corruption. There's people who are excluded. Rules are bent. Institutions are used in particular ways to go around the de jur institutions. And we won't spend any more time on that.

Now, focusing on conflicts over protected areas. And again, let me emphasize, I am not an expert on Africa, but I bring in Africa here because it has been the site of apparently the worst instances of conflict between protected areas and local communities. Michael Cernea and Schmidt-Soltau, *World Development* in 2006. They have been very responsible in recent years for bringing attention to this, the problem of evictions of poor people who had lived in areas for hundreds of years, in many cases, which was virtually something that was off the screen.

It is now back on the screen, thanks to them and to others. Estimates are that 120-150,000 people were displaced. I'm not sure about the period, but I think over the last couple of decades, anyway, from the Congo basin. And then the ongoing low-level conflicts between local communities and protected areas, so-called soft eviction, denial of customary resource rights and subsequent impoverishment.

So this brings us to the question, I understand, of this panel. Can local governance or community-based conservation mitigate natural resource conflicts? I think the response to that is no if, by "community conservation" you mean only working with local communities.





I think there was a naive view, and all this started way back in the mid-1990s, that, particularly with conservation organizations, well, yes, you were just working with the local community and with some little development projects to try to generate some income, and community-based conservation that you were working with a community. I think that view has now hopefully passed, or is beginning to pass. Communities are just too small, too powerless, with normally too many deficiencies in human and possibly social capital, to be able to be significant actors on their own without many other actors in society.

This image is actually from Mexico, from some of my current work in Oaxaca. It's a community meeting, and the only point I want to make here is from Fikret Berkes in several recent articles, one in particular in conservation biology a couple years ago where he says, listen, community-based conservation should just be taken as shorthand for multi-scale governance, that for community-based conservation to happen, you have to have supporting actors, structures from all levels of national and international society, government, civil society. It's a multi-scale process, and anything other than that, community-based conservation is not going to work.

The other point is from Sum Veller Nerostrum's recent article that there's no panacea. Just as top-down government programs and top-down government policies and actions like protected areas are not the answer, neither is community-based conservation, taken just as that alone, the answer. There are no panaceas. There's no universal remedy. There has to be multiple approaches and multiple actors involved.

And this is just a graph of that from a recent article of Berkes' and the proceedings at the National Academy of Sciences, which just graphs out what multi-scale governance means. And all this is from a project in Guyana.

But you've got the international funding organizations. You've got the government agencies. You've got other NGOs, academics. This here is a NGO that was set up as a multi-stakeholder body. So institutional innovations are very important here, new institutional conventions to help enrich governance process in the communities and the private sector. And this is what community-based conservation is.

I think this, as well, getting back to the diamonds in the Congo. Community-based conservation also includes the sort of civil society, ethical and green business advocacy campaigns, which have been common in recent years, which have really brought very





significant pressure on some of the more intractable natural resource conflicts in the world. Ads like this one on diamonds, "Nothing says I love you like a superficial and overvalued rock clawed from the guts of the earth by African slave labor."

As a result of that, the mineral and mining have been some of the more recalcitrant natural resource actors. But as Mike Conroy in his new book, "Branded," which I recommend to you, points out that these advocacy campaigns have had real impacts. And a company like Tiffany, which has announced a policy of zero tolerance, is very sensitive to these things, because 70 percent of their capitalization is considered to be in their brand value.

Again, out on a limb here, talking about Africa. But I just ran across, as I was looking up some things for this presentation; Democratic Republic of the Congo, of course, has been one of the most violent conflicts anywhere in the world, with millions of people killed, major impacts on nature and wildlife as well, and there is apparently some movement there at multiple levels, at multiple scales, in terms of trying to institute community-based conservation there.

The citation is there from a recent article in ORET, but it suggests that new national legislation, so at the national level, things are happening. There's more community consultations happening now. The Congolese Protected Areas Authority has committed to giving communities 40 percent of revenue from parks and from 3 percent, I am assuming that not many people are visiting parks in the Congo in recent years. So this is all probably currently meaningless. But nonetheless, these commitments put things on paper that can then -- pressure can be built to make them live up to it. So at a multi-scale level, there's some hope even in the Congo.

Then, just very quickly to close. Mexico, I have a vested interest in this, but I think is one of the leading examples in the world of what could broadly be called community-based conservation. But this is because there was a revolution in Mexico, an agrarian revolution in the early part of the 20th century, which did redistribute land to poor communities.

Through a historic struggle, communities gained access to those forests, beginning in the '70s, particular legal struggles, community mobilizations to gain effective control from a concession process. And as a result, many hundreds of communities have very effective community-based conservation. Problems of violence and corruption are common, but in a





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universe of around 2300 community forest enterprises, there's hundreds that are operating well.

And we have done a recent study on violence in community forestry in Mexico. We looked at two neighboring watersheds in the state of Guerrero, one quite violent by Mexican standards; 18 deaths over about 10 years or five years in that case, versus one that had no deaths. And in the one with no deaths, there was effective community forest institutions. Communities were producing. Communities were organized. In the other one, they weren't there. We go into various historical reasons for that.

And so that's my presentation. I do want to call your attention to these last two images. It's just showing further consequences in terms of biodiversity conservation that can come out of these processes. The latest movement in Mexico is towards community-based conservation. For those of you who don't have Spanish, that says "Community protected area and wildlife refuge." And this is a community of Santiago Comaltepec in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca. That's a community meeting going on there. They've been managing their forests for about 25 years now. The Pope will be visiting that area with Rob Taylor here of the International Center for Journalists here in just a few weeks. Eco-tourism is booming in the area, so I invite you to visit Sierra Norte.



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