

THE HUMAN DIMENSIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL INSECURITY: SOME INSIGHTS FROM SOUTH ASIA

By *Adil Najam*

Abstract

This article presents the key insights that emerge from a regional research project that explored environment and security links in the context of South Asia. The project resulted in the recently published volume *Environment, Development and Human Security: Perspectives from South Asia* (Najam, 2003). This article focuses on what the South Asian experience can contribute to the larger literature on environment and security and, more particularly, to the literature on human security and sustainable development. It argues that chronic and structural impoverishment—rather than resource scarcity alone—forges the connection between environmental degradation and conflict. It also suggests that poverty and weak institutions of governance are the more immediate triggers of environmental insecurity. As such, analyses of environment and security need to focus more at societal levels and on evidence of social disruption, even where that disruption might not entail violent conflict.

In focusing on South Asia as a region, the article reaches five general conclusions. First, for developing countries in general and South Asia in particular, environment and security are best conceptualized within the context of sustainable development. Second, the challenge of environment and security in South Asia is principally a challenge at the domestic level; but it is a challenge common to the region. Third, the challenge of environment and security in South Asia is, at its core, not only a problem of resource endowments or geography but also a problem of institutions and governance. Fourth, while the prospects of interstate violence in South Asia over environmental issues are slim, the region's history of distrust and dispute suggests that environmental differences can add to existing tensions and apprehensions and perpetuate the general sense of insecurity that pervades interstate relations in the region. Fifth, there is a small potential for a new generation of security relations in the region—relations emerging around the nexus of environment and security and based on the principles of mutual trust, harmony, and cooperation rather than on legacies of distrust and dispute.

In the last half-century, the term “security” was primarily a matter of states and their military alliances and was principally applied to the “security” of borders and institutions from outside threats. The bipolar nature of world dynamics that prevailed during the period intensified the emphasis on external threats. Although this definition of security is considered minimalist by some analysts, many others accept it as valid: military threats to security are easily identifiable and carry clear and often extreme consequences.

In contrast, non-military threats within nations—such as poverty, social vulnerability, or ecological resiliency—are generally not perceived as concrete and tangible. Yet one

could argue that the wrong end of a smoke-stack can be as much of a security concern to humans as the barrel of a gun. A key conceptual difference between the two approaches is that the traditional definition of security presupposes that threats arising from outside the state are more dangerous to the state than threats that arise within it.

Recent debates on whether and how the concept of security might be expanded beyond issues of geo-polity, international power-balance, military strategy, and statecraft have been both intense and rich (Galtung, 1982; Ullman, 1983; Mathews, 1989; Walt, 1991; Dalby, 1992; and Buzan, 1991). One strand of this debate on non-traditional security issues focuses on connections between

environment and security. Scholarly discourse in this area has been prolific, though not always conclusive (Westing, 1988; Gleick, 1991; Libiszewski, 1992; Myers, 1993; Levy, 1995; Homer-Dixon, 1999; Deudney & Matthew, 1999; Dabelko, Loneragan & Matthew, 2000; and Diehl & Gleditsch, 2001).

This article presents the key insights that emerge from a regional research project that explored environment and security links in the context of South Asia (Najam, 2003).¹ The article has neither the space nor the mandate to present the detailed arguments, methodological modalities, or analytical particularities of the various cases; the goal here is merely to highlight the key lessons at a conceptual level. Before presenting conclusions specific to South Asia, however, the article will introduce a conceptual framework for organizing environment-security discussions, a framework that emerged from the project.

This conceptual framework will be followed by a discussion of the nexus between environment, development, and human security in South Asia. South Asia and the nations that comprise it have already been the subject of earlier research on environment and security (Myers, 1989, 1993; Hassan, 1991, 1992; Islam, 1994; Gizewski & Homer-Dixon, 1998). Our focus here is on what the South Asian experience can contribute to the larger literature on environment and security; or, to be more precise, on sustainable development and human security. What are some of the key regional lessons that can be drawn for South Asia as a whole? The article will focus particularly on the currently emerging interest in looking at environment and security issues from the perspective of human security and embedding those issues within the concept of sustainable development.

Broadening the Base: Focusing on Human Security

The literature on environment and security has evolved over the years: from an early focus on incorporating environmental and related concerns into the definition of “security” to a new focus on how environmental change can be a cause or amplifier of violent conflict. An emerging trend within this evolution has been a move toward greater emphasis on the concept of *human security* (Dabelko, Loneragan, & Matthew, 2000; Elliott, 2001).

Human security is not in opposition to the earlier trends of redefining security or of mapping the environmental roots of violent conflict. In fact, it is an outgrowth of these trends. Indeed, many early attempts to broaden the definition of “security” used language very similar to that found in today’s discussions on “human security.” For example, consider the following definition from Norman Myers’ *Ultimate Security*:

... security applies most at the level of the individual citizen. It amounts to human well-being: not only protection from harm and injury but access to water, food, shelter, health, employment, and other basic requisites that are the due of every person on Earth. It is the collectivity of these citizen needs—overall safety and quality of life—that should figure prominently in the nation’s view of security (Myers, 1993, page 31).

Those analysts who have focused on explicating the environmental causes of violent conflict have also brought the debate closer to the notion of human security—most noticeably by focusing on intrastate (and often

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local) insecurities. In sum, they have each pushed the debate towards

the concept of “human security” [which] offers a third perspective that allows us to move beyond conventional security thinking, appreciates both the local and global dimensions of the many insecurities experienced by real individuals and groups, and identifies useful ways of linking security and development policies (Dabelko, Lonergan, & Matthew, 2000, page 48).

While the concept of human security has earlier roots, its recent prominence comes from the 1994 *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 1994) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Suhrke (1999, page 269) points out that, “while offering an imprecise and controversial definition, [UNDP’s starting point was] poverty rather than war—but ‘security’ suggested an escape from both.” The currency of the human security concept was further advanced by the importance given to it in the report of the Commission on Global Governance (CGG, 1995). Both reports tried to shift the direction of the security discussion by focusing on issues of human life and human dignity rather than on weapons and territory.

Lorraine Elliott points out two dimensions of the human security paradigm that are of particular relevance:

The first is that the concept of “human security” provides an antidote to the more conventional focus on states, borders and territorial integrity. The answer to the question “security for whom” is not the state but the individual and communities, which suggests that even when a state is secure from external threats or internal instabilities, security for its people is not guaranteed. Protecting individuals and communities from the consequences of environmental decline (in this case) is therefore a security issue. The second dimension is that human insecurity (which includes equity, gender, human rights and identity concerns) is a central factor in social tensions and political instabilities

and conflicts that can...become a feature of state insecurity....If peoples and communities are insecure (economically, socially, politically, environmentally), state security can be fragile or uncertain. Environmental scarcity becomes a distributive equity problem rather than one simply of market failure, externalities or zero-sum calculations about access to resources and environmental services (Elliott, 2001, page 449).

The primacy of state security is very

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closely associated with the notion of sovereignty. In its historic meaning, sovereignty implied the security of the sovereign, or the “Prince.” The emergence of the democratic polity and the transfer of primacy from the “Prince” to the “Citizen” have implied a rather interesting twist for our understanding of state security. With sovereignty now residing with the Citizenry rather than just the Prince, the notion of security must also be broadened to include the security not only of the apparatus of the Prince (i.e., the state), but the everyday survival of the Citizen.

Such a conceptual schema does not deny the importance of state security, but it does highlight the need to broaden the concept. It is no longer sufficient to define the security of the state in terms of territoriality (i.e., the purview of the Prince), because the state is no longer defined simply by the Prince or his territoriality. Rather, state security must now also secure the well-being and livelihoods of the Citizen, who is the ultimate custodian of sovereignty in the modern state.²

Indeed, as Elliott (2001, page 449) recognizes, the human security paradigm “turns the conventional security aphorism—secure states means secure people—on its head.” Dabelko, Lonergan, and Matthew (2000, pages 48–49) add that the concept also “helps [us to] understand the complex interactions that determine the relative

Figure 1. Organizing the Environment and Security Discussion

		Source of Insecurity	
		<i>Violent Conflict</i>	<i>Social Disruptions</i>
Unit of Analysis	<i>State-Centered</i>	Focus on Interstate War	Focus on Institutional Failure
	<i>Society-Centered</i>	Focus on Civil Strife	Focus on Human Security

distribution of security and insecurity.” They point out that, “under certain conditions, such as war, the distribution and composition of force may be the most important determinant of security and insecurity.” However, “in many other situations, security and insecurity will be most closely related to poverty or resource scarcity or social discrimination.” Importantly, this formulation leads to the conclusion that, “in these cases, traditional security institutions may have only a minor contribution to make, or none at all.” Indeed, most of the chapters in Najam (2003) validate this finding.

While Dabelko, Lonergan, and Matthew also point out the similarity between the goals of enhancing human security and sustainable development, they are likely to agree with Astri Suhrke (1999) that a key relationship exists between the concepts of “human security” and “human development.” For the *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 1994, page 23) itself, “human development is a broader concept, defined as a process of widening the range of people’s choices. Human security means that people can exercise these choices safely and freely.” Suhrke also argues that this relationship is more important to understanding the concept of human security:

There are two possible starting points for exploring the substantive core of “human security.” One is in relation to the security of states, the other in relation to human development....The major contribution of the 1994 UNDP report was its attempt to define human security

and human development, and sort out their relationship. The result, however, was confusingly circular. “Human security” was presented both as an end-state of affairs—“safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression”—and a process in the sense of “protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life”....Human security was seen as essential for human development; without minimal stability and security in daily life, there could be no development—human or otherwise. But the obverse was true as well. Long-term development that improves social and economic life would produce human security, the UNDP report concluded. In this reasoning, there is no difference between development and human security, or between process and end-state (Suhrke, 1999, pages 270-271).

In trying to place this emerging interest in human security within the context of the evolution of the environment and security debate, one might propose a simple heuristic. Simplifying for the purpose of exposition, Figure 1 conceives of an environment and security “space” that is defined on one axis by the unit of analysis (ranging from state-centered to society-centered) and on the other by sources of insecurity (ranging from violent conflict to social disruptions).

As we have already discussed, the early literature on the subject was concerned predominantly with state-centered discussions. While that literature did flirt with expanding

the traditional discussion of insecurity to also include social disruptions, it was mostly focused on interstate conflict (since its audience was mostly restricted to the traditional security community). Hence, the emphasis of the environment and security analysis very often turned to discussions of whether or not *interstate war* was a likely outcome (e.g., Westing, 1988). The “second wave” of the literature also emphasized the environment’s possible role in violent conflict, but made its focus of analysis more society-centered. Emphasis thus moved to whether and to what extent environmental change was a trigger for *civil strife* (e.g., Homer-Dixon, 1999).

The new focus on *human insecurity* is also society-centered, but is more concerned with social disruptions than with violent conflict as the principal source of insecurity (e.g., Suhrke, 1999). One of the key benefits of using such a heuristic is that it begins to point us towards other formalizations of the environment–security problematique that are not yet dominant in the available literature. For example, Figure 1 points out the insecurity that emerges from social disruptions at the level of the state rather than the level of society. Based on the conclusions reached by our chapter authors from South Asia (Najam, 2003), one posits that such insecurity is most likely to manifest itself as *institutional failure* and to be best understood through a focus on the mechanisms of societal governance.

While Figure 1 does not imply that any one kind of insecurity is any more or any less important, it clearly conveys that the environment–security problematique is composed of *multiple* forms of insecurity. Although the heuristic illustrated in Figure 1 is exploratory and demands further empirical validation, it provides us with one way to organize and understand the discussion. Interestingly (but not surprisingly), the conclusions emerging from country-focused as well as issue-focused studies from South Asia (Najam, 2003) lie very much in the right-hand half of Figure 1, and predominantly in the bottom-right quarter. These conclusions very much emphasize environment-related insecurities as manifest in social disruption rather than in outright conflict. The categories of Figure 1 are of

course very broad, with hazy (although recognizable) lines between them. The purpose here is not to pigeonhole scholarship, but to suggest that the space within which

South Asian countries are not only significantly behind the world as a whole, but also well behind developing countries as a group.

environmental insecurity manifests itself is rather wide and broad and needs to be recognized in its entirety.

In order to begin understanding how and why issues of institutional failure and human insecurity are more immediate to the concerns of South Asians, let us quickly review what this region looks like.

South Asia in Context: Poverty as the Key Link Between Environment and Insecurity

Home to nearly a fourth of all humanity, the South Asian subcontinent is a region where histories, geographies, and politics are truly intertwined. Although we define the region by membership in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC)—which was formed in 1987 and includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—the roots of the region’s distinct identity predate the histories of any of the countries that now constitute it. The region has been home to great indigenous empires as well as prey to outside empires. It is a region that has been familiar with insecurities of all kinds throughout its rich and tortured history—a familiarity that still holds true today. The 1997 *Human Development in South Asia* report (ul Haq, 1997) described South Asia as “the most deprived region” in the world. Certain elements of the rather depressing picture of the region that the report painted are worth repeating here:³

- South Asia is **the world’s poorest region**, with a per capita GNP below even that of sub-Saharan Africa (which is home to 40 percent of the world’s poor and to over 500 million people below the absolute poverty

line).

- South Asia is **the world's most illiterate region** and home to nearly half of all the illiterates in the world. There are more children out of school in this region than in the rest of the world combined. Two-thirds of this wasted generation is female.
- South Asia is **the region with the highest levels of human deprivation**: 260 million people lack access to basic health facilities, 337 million are without safe drinking water, 830 million are without rudimentary

The critical difference is not resource endowment but resource management, which is directly related to institutions for resource governance.

sanitation, and 400 million people go hungry every day.

South Asia may also be among the most militarized regions in the world. India and Pakistan have both declared themselves nuclear powers. They have fought three full-scale wars and continue to have near-constant skirmishes on their borders, especially over the disputed region of Kashmir. Given their monumental development challenges, neither India (\$15 billion annually) nor Pakistan (\$3.5 billion annually) can afford its massive military expenditures. The other countries of the region, while nowhere near as committed to large militaries, are also burdened by military expenditures greater than they can afford, often because of internal threats.

Table 1 presents a brief profile of the five largest countries of the region. It is clear from the table that, for all the variables presented (except population and area), South Asian countries are not only significantly behind the world as a whole but also well behind developing countries as a group (measured here as the average of all low- and medium-income countries). These variables are the roots of human insecurity in the region and end up having significant implications for the environment. Table 1 also highlights that, although there are important differences within the region (for example, in terms of education), the development profiles of the

region's countries are uniform.

Table 1 helps us make three important points about South Asia. First, this is very much a region that *can* be studied as a region—not only in terms of its historical legacy, but also in terms of its current developmental predicament. Second, this is a region that *should* be studied: the region's acute developmental deprivations point towards the potential for equally acute and even violent human insecurity in the future. Third, given this context, it is not surprising that the predominant South Asian concerns about environment and security are really about human security.

This last point—stressing the connections among environment, development, and human security—deserves more elaboration and becomes clear by reviewing the key conclusions from various chapters in Najam (2003).⁴ The new research from South Asia validates and advances new nuances to two key findings from the larger literature:

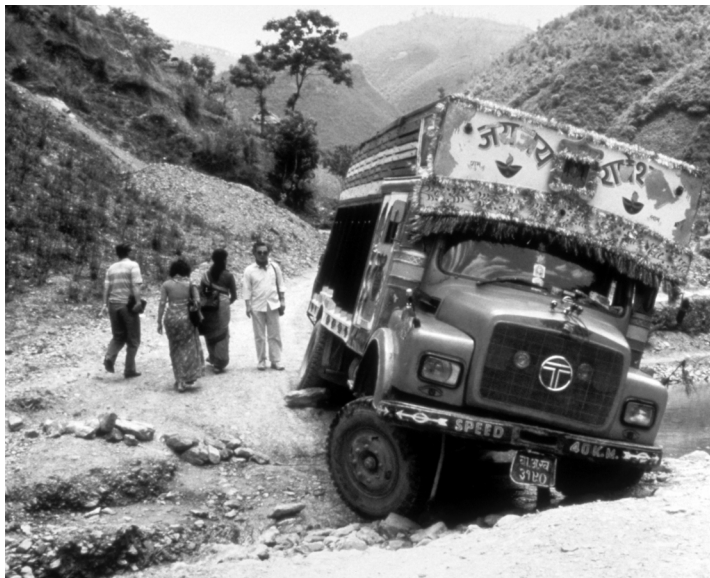
First, the research substantiates one of the conclusions that Dabelko, Lonergan, and Matthew (2000, page 56) reach in their major environment-and-security literature review: “research on environment and security often strengthens the conclusion that poverty is a key factor in causing tension, unrest and, eventually, conflict.” All across South Asia, poverty emerges as the key variable—both for defining environmental degradation and outlining human insecurity. Importantly, poverty is both the causal motivator of environmental stress as well as the most important manifestation of human insecurity. Not only is poverty one of the key elements exacerbating the causal chain that can lead from environmental degradation to violence and insecurity—but research from South Asia suggests that poverty can play a more central role in this chain of causality than much of the literature seems to acknowledge. Poverty, not scarcity, is driving environmental insecurity.

Contrary to the thrust of the mainstream literature—which struggles (and often unconvincingly) to express the environmental problematique in the language of state-centric “national” security (e.g. Mathews, 1989; Deudney, 1990; Homer-Dixon, 1991; Myers, 1993; and Gleditsch, 1998)—this discourse

Table 1. South Asia's Many Roots of Insecurity

	Bangladesh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka	Developing Countries	World
Area '000 square km (1999)	144	3,288	147	796	66	101,487	133,572
Population Millions (1999)	128	998	23	135	19	5,084	5,975
Population Growth Rate Annual (1990-99)	1.6	1.8	2.4	2.5	1.2	1.9	1.7
GNP Per Capita US Dollars (1999)	370	450	220	470	820	1,240	4,890
GNP Per Capita PPP ⁵ Dollars (1999)	1475	2,144	1,219	7,757	3,056	3,410	6,490
Under-5 Mortality Per 1,000 (1998)	96	83	107	120	18	79	75
Life Expectancy M/F (1998)	58/59	62/64	58/58	61/63	71/76	63/67	65/69
Adult Literacy % of the Population 15 and above M/F (1998)	49/71	35/57	43/78	42/71	6/12	18/33	18/32
Urban Sanitation % with access (1990-96)	77	46	34	53	33	-	-
Children 10-14 in Labor Force % of age group (1999)	29	13	43	16	2	13	12
GINI Index ⁶ (1995-97)	33.6	37.8	36.7	31.2	34.4	-	-
Public Spending on Education % of GNP (1997)	2.2	3.2	3.2	2.7	3.4	4.1	4.8
Public Spending on Health % of GDP (1990-98)	1.6	0.6	1.3	0.9	1.4	1.9	2.5
External Debt % of GNP (1998)	22	20	31	41	41	-	-

Source: World Bank (2000).



Truck stalled in a creek, Nepal.

“South Asia is the region with the highest levels of human deprivation.”

Credit: Ricardo Wray/CCP.

from South Asia is predominantly in the language of society-centric “human” security. In addition, the chapters on Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan all stress the importance of livelihoods insecurity as the source of pressure on natural resources. The local case studies from these countries highlight how poverty manifested in livelihoods insecurity—not resource insecurity in and of itself—leads to pressures on resources such as fisheries (Bangladesh), forests (Pakistan), biodiversity (Sri Lanka), and land (India) and hence on to security. Poverty exacerbates resource degradation, which in turn exacerbates poverty in a vicious cycle.

The research in Najam (2003) that draws from Northern Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India also shows that restrictive resource conservation policies such as forest enclosures can aggravate insecurity rather than relieving it *unless* these policies are rooted in the larger goal of poverty alleviation. The “human-elephant” conflict in Sri Lanka highlights another aspect of this point. Policies made to restrict the use of certain areas in order to provide passage to elephants precipitated conflicts, because the expansion of elephant

habitat served to restrict the human habitat.

Second, the new South Asia research also provides fresh insights on the environmental security models proposed by Thomas Homer-Dixon and his colleagues (see Homer-Dixon, 1991, 1999; Homer-Dixon, Boutwell, & Rathjens, 1993; Homer-Dixon & Blitt, 1998). An abridged version of the argument of this body of literature is presented in the introduction to the Homer-Dixon’s book *Ecoviolence*:

...[S]evere environmental scarcities often contribute to major civil violence. Poor countries are more vulnerable to this violence, because large fractions of their populations depend for their day-to-day livelihoods on local renewable resources....Moreover, poor countries are often unable to adapt effectively to environmental scarcity because their states are weak, markets inefficient and corrupt, and human capital inadequate (Homer-Dixon & Blitt, 1998, page 15).

As already discussed, the findings of our study emphasize the importance of livelihoods insecurity to the causal chain leading to conflict. In other cases, however, the most important factor is not poverty but *institutional failure* in the form of resource capture. This conclusion seems to be the lesson from the water sector as well as parts of the forestry sector in Pakistan. The capture of precious forest resources by the so-called “forest mafia” in Pakistan has resulted not only in resource scarcity but also in the exclusion of communities that were traditionally dependent on this resource—thus placing even greater pressure on the resource. Ultimate responsibility, however, lies with the institutional and governance structure that originally enabled the resource capture and eventually failed to check the violence by not providing civil means of dispute resolution.

As illustrated in our research, various irrigation projects in Nepal strikingly illustrate the critical role of weak institutions of governance as the precursor (and sometimes trigger) of conflict over environmental resources. While the importance of resource scarcity in Nepal cannot be denied, the weakness of state institutions there and their inability to accommodate community

institutions led to a near permanent conflict among these community institutions—which, in turn, spilled into occasional conflicts among stakeholders. All three sector papers in Najam (2003)—on energy, land, and water—strongly suggest that institutions are viable only when all stakeholders consider them legitimate. Such institutional legitimacy may well be a necessary condition for good resource management, and thus for the avoidance of conflict.

Regional studies of energy and land institutions across South Asia emphasized that resource security in both these areas is more often a case of institutional stability than of simple resource scarcity. For example, a surprising finding of our chapter on energy is that, by all measures available, both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have been more energy resilient than Pakistan (methodologically, this analysis maps the trends in energy efficiency, energy dependence, and environmental impacts of energy use in each country of the region). This finding is surprising because Pakistan has relatively more abundant energy resources than either Bangladesh or Sri Lanka. Our analysis demonstrates that the critical difference here is not resource *endowment* but resource *management*, which is directly related to institutions for resource governance. This dynamic, of course, has a direct bearing on environmental insecurity as well as conflict over resources. The evidence suggests that robust institutions of governance can limit (even if they might not eliminate) the likelihood of such conflict. For instance, regional institutions for water management—particularly the Indus Water Accord between India and Pakistan—have remained remarkably stable even in the face of persistent and frequently spiking regional tensions.

Linking the two insights described immediately above, our research strongly suggests that chronic and structural impoverishment forges the connection between environmental degradation and violent conflict. Such a conception itself leads to a focus on: (a) social disruptions at the level of society, not the state; and (b) conceptualizations related to human insecurity. Indeed, others who have also looked at the myriad security threats faced by South Asians have come to similar conclusions—most notably, Dr. Mahbub ul

Haq in launching the *Human Development in South Asia* reports:

Security is increasingly interpreted as: security of people, not just of territory; security of individuals, not just of nations; security through development, not through arms; security of all people everywhere—in their homes, on their jobs, in their streets, in their communities, and in the environment (ul Haq, 1997, page 84).

While environmental degradation is *more likely* to lead to violent conflict in poor countries, poverty—in terms of economic, social, or political disenfranchisement and

Democracy counts, transparency counts, culture counts, decentralization counts, and (most importantly) participation counts.

vulnerability—may be a *required* condition for this connection to be made. The poverty connection requires more empirical research, but it might have the potential to untie many of the convoluted knots of environmental security debates. And shifting the focus of the discussion from resource scarcity to the motors that cause such scarcity—including poverty and the institutions of governance—provides us with defined areas of policy intervention. Unlike resource conservation, both poverty and governance are areas of high policy salience in most developing countries and certainly in all South Asian countries. Environmental security flows best out of policies that target poverty and governance; it also is more synergistic when built on existing priorities instead of on resource conservation, which competes with other policy demands.

Five Key Lessons

The new research from South Asia under discussion also highlights a handful of broad lessons that are more specific to the region and its constituent countries. The following five broad lessons are of particular importance because they have the potential to add to our understanding of environment and security

at the regional level. These lessons, of course, should be understood in light of the need to focus on poverty as a primary but not sole motor of human insecurity.

Lesson 1: For South Asia in particular and developing countries in general, environment and security are best conceptualized within the context of sustainable development. Not only does it make sense to broaden the notion of “security” into one of “human security,” it makes sense to understand the human–security framework within a sustainable–development

Poverty, not scarcity, is driving environmental and human security in South Asia.

context. Indeed, human security can be viewed as a fundamental requirement for the achievement of sustainable development. This connection is not entirely a surprise: the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987) had itself made that connection explicit sixteen years ago. However, so much of the literature on environment and security tends not to highlight the importance of sustainable development.

Placing the environment and human–security problematique within the sustainable–development complex has at least two important implications. First, such a conceptualization allows us to articulate issues related to environment and security at the level and in the language of policy and practice. Second, it contributes towards a better understanding of what sustainable development means in practice. Such a conceptual focus broadens the scope of the enquiry: from a focus on how environmental degradation might lead to societal and state insecurities to a broader focus that includes how human insecurities influence (or are influenced by) accelerated environmental degradation.

Imperfect as it might be, sustainable–development policy becomes a potential means of addressing the twin challenges of environmental degradation and human insecurity; it works best, however, when both challenges are taken as serious and neither is deemed subservient to the other. Security is

intricately related to the issue of livelihood and cannot be delinked from concerns about the content and context of the development experiment. Indeed, debates regarding human and environmental security are in themselves attempts to better understand and operationalize the concept of sustainable development.

The South Asian research being reported here tends to ignore—if not resist and reject—arguments about whether environmental degradation should be an element of “traditional” military- and state-related security concerns.⁷ This elision departs from the norm of the broader environment and security literature. Clearly, the region’s scholars seem more comfortable defining environmental security as one more component of sustainable development rather than as a dimension of “traditional” national security.

Lesson 2: The challenge of environment and security in South Asia is both principally a challenge at the domestic level as well as a challenge common to the region. Dabelko, Lonergan, and Matthew (2000, page 56) have concluded that “the most severe challenges for individual well-being in many parts of the world may not be external (to the country of residence), but internal; although internal problems are likely to be affected in some way by external forces.” The experience from South Asia echoes this finding. Indeed, the new research in Najam (2003) often brings the problem *down* to ground level rather than raising it *up* to national—let alone regional—levels. Regional dimensions are not unimportant, but local challenges are more numerous as well as more profound.

The primacy of local challenges in South Asia indicated by this research is a surprise, given the intensity of the region’s tensions. But that very intensity makes environmental issues unlikely to become significant international security concerns in the region. Countries in the region have so many other and more pressing disputes that environmental issues slip down the list of potential flare-up points. At the same time, such issues can easily become embroiled in existing and unrelated disputes within the region—a possibility explored further below.

Taking a regional perspective is also valid

for another reason. Local environmental and human-security stresses in South Asia are so pressing and so similar that shared knowledge is essential for their solution.

Lesson 3: The challenge of environment and security in South Asia is at its core not just a problem of resource endowments or geography, but quite distinctly a problem of institutions and governance. Institutions and governance are central to the understanding in Najam (2003) of how environment and security are linked in the South Asian context. At one level, the conclusions are not particularly surprising; environmental crises in many developing regions are not just crises of resource scarcity or degradation but are fundamentally tied to fragile environmental governance institutions. However, so much of the literature on environment and security tends to underplay if not ignore the importance of governance in favor of a concentration on resource scarcity and environmental degradation.

The new research from South Asia shows that, in many cases, a lack of appropriate institutions and governance can help explain not only the levels of human insecurity but also the scarcity and degradation of environmental resources. And institutional and governance weaknesses can lead to significant human insecurity even in the absence of severe environmental scarcity or degradation. In addition, solutions to environment and security issues will not come from techno-fixes and mega projects that might somehow “override” the forces of geography and nature; the solutions are more likely to come from institutional and governance reform. The lesson from South Asia seems to be that democracy counts, transparency counts, culture counts, decentralization counts, and (most importantly) participation counts: all can become the basis of social justice and are ultimately tools for managing and even avoiding conflict. Resource scarcity does not simply turn into conflict—it turns into conflict when there is an institutional failure because democratic, transparent, culturally appropriate, localized, and participatory means of managing resources and dealing with disputes are either not available or are systematically sidelined.

By broadening the focus beyond resource



A mother's group meeting in Nepal discussing community sanitation.

“Eight hundred-thirty million people in South Asia are without rudimentary sanitation.”

Credit: Ricardo Wray/CCP.

scarcity and degradation, we raise some conceptual issues for the environment and security literature. An earlier generation of scholars had been preoccupied with the effects of security issues (particularly war and preparation for war) on the environment, or more precisely on natural resources (Galtung, 1982; Westing, 1984, 1988; and Renner, 1991). Current interest in environment and security has moved in the opposite direction and tends to focus on how environmental degradation can lead to insecurity and violence (Deudney & Matthew, 1999; Homer-Dixon, 1999; Diehl & Gleditsch, 2001). But both arguments have environmental conservation—not human security—as their core interest. In focusing on sustainable development as the metric of analysis and placing human security more centrally in the discussion, we highlight the importance of looking at both linkages together. How does insecurity at *any* level impact the environment? And how does environmental scarcity and degradation impact insecurity at any level?

Such a formulation also allows us to move away from the more restrictive notion of “acute violence” to the more encompassing concept of insecurity, particularly human insecurity. The finding from across South Asia

is that even where environmental variables do not directly cause conflict, they can increase insecurity by accentuating the variables that can precipitate conflict.⁸ Other

The broader sense of insecurity that defines the region's interstate relations could be exacerbated by environmental concerns.

forms of insecurity can also accentuate the conditions conducive to environmental degradation, thereby increasing eventual environmental insecurity. The key to understanding the link between environment and security in any given context may not lie in variables directly related to either (such as scarcity or war). It may lie, instead, in issues that impact but are not directly related to either—such as failure of institutions and governance.

Lesson 4: The prospect of interstate violence in South Asia over environmental issues is slim. However, given the region's history of distrust and dispute, environmental differences could add to existing tensions and apprehensions and perpetuate the general sense of insecurity that pervades interstate relations in the region. Unlike others who have studied environment and security in South Asia and who tend to consider the region as a prime “action theatre” for environmental conflicts (Myers, 1989, 1993; Hassan, 1991, 1992), the set of studies from all over South Asia in Najam (2003) is far more careful about painting doomsday scenarios. Indeed, our authors are unanimous that the prospects of outright war in South Asia over these issues are not high. Arguably, there are far more immediate causes of interstate tension in the region. And despite fractious relations, even India and Pakistan (for example) have demonstrated a remarkable degree of cooperation and even occasional goodwill in the shared management of a precious resource such as water: the Indus Water Treaty remains one of the few areas of sustained cooperation between the two countries. This cooperation has been severely tested in recent months; but fragile as it is and despite much saber rattling, it remains intact.

But the authors also suggest that, given

existing regional security tensions and apprehensions, the broader sense of insecurity that defines the region's interstate relations could be exacerbated by environmental concerns. In his study of environment and security in South Asia, Norman Myers (1993, page 117) posits a fundamental question: “How can we realistically suppose that environmental problems will not exert a substantial and adverse influence over the prospects for the region's security throughout the foreseeable future?” It is also quite clear that the ultimate effect of human insecurity and environmental degradation tends to be political instability. As Shaukat Hassan (1991, page 65) puts it, “in South Asia environmental deterioration has a very direct and immediate impact on the economy of the states, which in turn affects social relations in ways detrimental to political stability.”

Lesson 5: There is the potential—albeit small—for a new generation of security relations in the region emerging around the nexus of environment and security. These relations would be based on principles of mutual trust, harmony, and cooperation rather than on legacies of distrust and dispute. Even though security (in the international context) is generally seen as an adversarial concept, the environment demands a politics of consensus and cooperation. A new approach to security would stress the need for cooperative management of shared environments rather than adversarial contests over scarce resources.

We should be cautious, however, about the potential for moving to a new generation of security relations that start from the necessity of cooperation rather than from a history of confrontations. Given the “traditional” security profile of the region, it is unlikely that such cooperation would naturally evolve. Even where the need for such cooperation is self-evident, the hurdles to its establishment are profound. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), for instance, has made only minimal efforts to foster regional environmental cooperation. Given the persistent regional tensions in South Asia, establishing meaningful cooperation on the environment will require more than declaratory intent.

Yet some initial steps could begin creating

an atmosphere of cooperation. An important first step could be institutionalizing some level of region-wide information sharing and joint planning for common concerns such as water, climate change, and biodiversity. The sharing of best practices, particularly in the areas of technological and institutional innovations for environmental enhancement, is another obvious step. Expert dialogue needs to be strengthened and deepened at the regional level. Finally, the increasing prominence of global environmental politics and its North-South dimension argues for developing countries as a whole as well as regions such as South Asia to think in terms of coalitional rather than individual environmental politics (Najam, 1995, 2000; Agarwal et al., 1999). The SAARC is well placed to take such steps and should be urged to continue its efforts in

this direction.

The environment has the potential to become an “entry point” for wider regional cooperation. The very nature of the environmental problematique points towards the urgency of adopting a cooperative mindset. And the language of human security at least allows for the potential of focusing on regional security without necessarily regurgitating stylized debates about traditional hurdles to cooperation. Meaningful regional cooperation for improved environmental and human security in South Asia—home to a billion and a half people, including some of the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the world—may well be too much to hope for. But hope we must. **W**

Notes

¹ The more detailed analysis and discussion of the study (which was conducted with Ford Foundation Funding for the Regional Centre for Security Studies (RCSS), Colombo, Sri Lanka) are available in the recently published edited volume *Environment, Development and Human Security: Perspectives from South Asia* (Najam, 2003). The ten chapters of the book—all written by authors from South Asia (three authors each from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and two each from Nepal and Sri Lanka)—explored environment and security links in specific countries of the region (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) and also looked at cross-country trends on key policy areas (land and agriculture, energy, and water). This essay builds on the insights from the introductory and conclusion chapters of the book.

² For related discussion, see Najam (1996).

³ Since South Asia is a very large region, it of course has pockets of prosperity. Indeed, in each of the countries of the region, these islands of prosperity (such as, for example, the booming informational technology sector in India) often serve to highlight the human deprivation and misery that surrounds them. For the purpose of this article we will focus on aggregate regional and national pictures rather than the more varied sub-national mosaic. This focus does imply a certain loss of local detail, but it also assists us in getting a composite picture of the region as a whole, which is the point of the article.

⁴ The following discussion builds on the findings of various chapters in the book (Najam, 2003), which will not be individually cited here. The various chapters (and authors) are as follows: Introduction (Adil Najam); India (Vandana Asthana & Ashok Shukla); Pakistan (Shaheen Rafi Khan); Bangladesh (Atiq Rahman, Zahid Chowdhury, & Ahsan Ahmad); Nepal (Ajaya Dixit & Dipak Gyawali); Sri Lanka (Sarath Kotagama); Energy (Kumudu Gunasekera & Adil Najam); Land (Khalid Saeed); Water (Ramaswamy Iyer); and Conclusion (Adil Najam).

⁵ PPP=Purchasing Power Parity.

⁶ The GINI Index measures the extent to which the distribution of income (or consumption) among individuals or households within a country deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A value of 0 represents perfect equality; a value of 100 percent perfect inequality.

⁷ For examples of these debates, see Mathews (1989); Homer-Dixon (1991); Myers (1993); Levy (1995); and Deudney & Matthew (1999).

⁸ Also see Gurr (1993); Libiszewski (1992); and Dabelko, Lonergan, & Matthew (2000).

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