

Conflicts and Natural Resources

Proposal for fast track research projects on understanding and mitigating urgent conflicts

Introduction

Fast track initiatives on Conflict and Natural Resources should add knowledge to the thematic and regional choices made in the CoCooN programme, and should play useful roles in connecting science, policy making and practice. CoCooN¹ is a knowledge, research and innovation programme on Conflict and Cooperation over Natural Resources in Developing Countries that aims to contribute to evidence-based policy development and practice in the field of conflict over natural resources. By funding knowledge, research and innovation projects, CoCooN supports local actors in developing countries to partner with international scientists and other relevant stakeholders for conflict transformation and cooperation regarding natural resources, in the fields of:

- conflicts, land rights and land-use change;
- water resources, conflict and cooperation;
- resource exploitation, global trade and conflict.

Three fast track topics

Three conflict topics have been selected for fast track initiatives. These can be expected to be among the most challenging future conflicts, and in the next few years major outbursts of violence connected to these conflicts can be expected. Fast track initiatives in these fields should also increase insights into possibilities for the de-escalation of conflicts and/or turning conflicts into productive negotiations. Such negotiations should address non-violent solutions to problems of injustice and inequality centred on issues regarding access to and the use of natural resources. The three topics are:

1. conflicts resulting from the implementation of the climate change mitigation and adaptation agenda;
2. conflicts resulting from attempts to change natural resource governance arrangements;
3. conflicts resulting from differences of interpretation regarding certification for fair and ecologically sustainable production and trade.

1: conflicts resulting from the implementation of the climate change mitigation and adaptation agenda

Partly as a result of ‘Copenhagen December 2009’, major implementation initiatives can soon be expected of various agencies to ‘show the world’ that the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions and adaptation to the likely impacts of climate change are to be addressed. Many of these initiatives will result in the space-intensive expansion of alternative energy production and an increase in competing land use. This will push

¹ The CoCooN programme is managed by WOTRO and funded jointly by the Department for Climate, Energy, Environment and Water of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research.

existing land users out of their current access to land and water and out of their current livelihood activities, under the banner of ‘more important goals’.

The sheer size of necessary changes (biofuels, solar energy and wind energy) may easily marginalise large numbers of land users through governance arrangements that go against existing negotiation and decision-making practices. The macro effects of biofuel initiatives may result in side effects that jeopardise food production, increase food prices and undermine food security for millions of poor people. The macro effects of the increase in wind and solar energy may result in a hunt for ‘rare earth’ minerals, with major geopolitical consequences². Nascent and hidden conflicts may erupt into open violence, as both the biofuel expansion and the space needed for solar and wind energy, as well as the materials needed for its massive growth, will most probably be found in undeveloped areas. This threatens the existence of already marginal people as well as the few remaining natural areas that exist under various forms of protection and conservation regimes. The massive acquisition of African space for the future expansion of ‘new energy’ by Asian and Arab states and firms is already sparking elements of violent and non-violent resistance.

A second major expected consequence of the post-Copenhagen global agreement is the expansion of forests under the REDD programme (The United Nations Collaborative Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries) and their potentially massive funding under new finance arrangements. This expansion will also change existing local power arrangements in the ownership, management and use of forest and semi-forested areas. Perceived threats by local inhabitants can easily result in resistance and identity politics may then be mobilised to channel opposition into violent resistance and ‘criminal’ or ‘terrorist’ behaviour.

In both cases, fast track initiatives will not only describe the actual (and often urgent) conflicts resulting from implementation of these agendas and the discourses and practices of the various participants in these conflicts, but will also deal with attempts to de-escalate the conflicts and avoid violence.

The major research question of this theme would be: *how do contested implementations of the climate change agenda (clean energy projects, REDD fuel intra- and inter-societal conflict and how can actual or potential violent confrontations result in initiatives to de-escalate these conflicts?*

2: conflicts resulting from attempts to change existing natural resource governance arrangements

During the 1990s and 2000s, formal arrangements of national states as ‘owners’ of natural resources have given way to public-private partnership arrangements, a more prominent role for supranational agencies (UN agencies, global NGOs) and various forms of decentralisation. Many states have started to experiment with decentralised forms of governance over land and water resources and over wildlife, fish and flora, but often in complex new arrangements involving higher-order agencies and private

² In a recent article about ‘a path to sustainable energy by 2030’ Mark Jacobson and Mark Delucchi deal with these consequences in a section about the ‘materials hurdle’ (Scientific American, November 2009, 38-45).

parties, both commercial and as NGOs and CBOs. The lack of clarity often allows greedy or power-hungry local leaders to violate human rights and to undermine the rights and livelihoods of marginal population groups.

There are various signs of processes of formal decentralisation that have actually resulted in the marginalisation or eviction of minority groups that were previously tolerated or defended by national governments. Well-known examples are the pastoralists in Africa (e.g. the Peulh in West Africa or the Masai in East Africa), who are losing control over their age-old grazing lands and water sources because the new governance arrangements support the expansion of demographically and politically dominant agriculturalists. Identity politics also play a role, and both the majority and minority groups often use an identity focus to mobilise violent or non-violent support. Moves towards local 'democracy' and 'democratisation' (often well intended) may then turn into violent exclusion and even genocide. On the other hand, minority groups and their, sometimes global, supporters make use of conflicts to mobilise support for their situation, using a variety of violent and non-violent means of contestation. It is particularly important to investigate the effects of local democratisation, experiences and successes regarding non-violent approaches and attempts to use conflicts to create chances for innovative ways of creating both cooperation and sharing arrangements regarding natural resources.

The main research question of this theme would be: *how do recent/current attempts to change the governance of natural resources exclude minority groups, and how do minority groups (and their supporters) negotiate innovative and non-violent solutions to these potentially threatening developments?*

3: conflicts resulting from differences of interpretation regarding certification for fair and ecologically sustainable production and trade

Consumer preferences for fair and/or ecologically sustainable products and services, both in the global North and among middle classes in emerging economies in the Global South, have given rise to a multitude of labelling and certification arrangements. A whole industry of certification agencies is currently developing. Such agencies compete with each other and are involved in marketing struggles concerning green and fair images.

The further expansion of slightly different and hence confusing labels can be expected, as well as legal and marketing fights concerning their interpretation. At a local level, fraudulent practices in the manipulation of images of production and trade practices are to be expected, which may erupt into fierce conflicts involving agencies responsible for monitoring and evaluation and agencies that organise product chains. The global tendency to exchange tariff barriers for non-tariff barriers (partly as a result of the WTO) also plays a role and impacts on the arrangements of this expanding (but still marginal) 'fair and/or sustainable' element in world trade. Despite fierce and sometimes destructive competition and differences in opinion, attempts to create more productive collaboration, based on trustworthy monitoring and evaluation, can also be seen.

The main research question of this theme would be: *what role do actor power and conflict play in either destabilising or promoting fair and ecological production and trade, and what solutions for more productive cooperation are being offered?*

Finally

Special attention is asked for zones of the most severe geopolitical conflicts which are less well covered by the CoCooN programme. These concern the Middle East and particularly Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq on the one hand and Palestine/Israel on the other, as well as Central Asia and the Caucasus. Fast track research about the linkages between the current conflicts there and natural resources will be encouraged within and beyond the fast track themes mentioned above.