

HUMAN-CENTRED ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY IN AFRICA

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The people of Africa entered the 21st century facing a security and development crisis of immense proportions. It is the continent hardest hit by growing poverty and inequity: average life expectancy has declined from 50 years to 46 since 1990, and in most of sub-Saharan Africa one in 10 children dies before it reaches age five. Africans are threatened by their lack of access to resources and the growing pressure on the natural resource base. The loss of arable land, water scarcity, over-fishing, deforestation and loss of biodiversity presents enormous challenges for sustainable development. The capacity of governments to cope with these changes is small and it will require significant changes in policies, institutions, governance and practices to mitigate these growing pressures. War and violent conflict have resulted in massive displacements of people, diverted financial resources away from vital sectors, and posed a significant barrier to development. This new period of violence (fundamentally internal but with internationalised elements, and highly destructive) is increasingly violent and protracted. It is particularly threatening, not only for the countries involved, but also more broadly for regional and international security. Currently, some half-dozen African countries are suffering directly or indirectly from serious armed conflicts, among them the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, and the Sudan. The conflicts in these countries have affected many other countries and have often drawn in neighbouring states. More importantly, peace is

often fragile, making it difficult to apply the term 'post-conflict' to many countries.

A changing world: Expanding concepts of security

For many of Africa's peoples, the State has long since ceased to be the provider of security: physical or social. In fact, weak governmental institutions appear to be an important cause on the pathway to conflict. The global environment has also been reconfigured in a number of ways in the past 20 years, and the whole landscape in which politics plays out has changed radically. With globalisation, the concentration and centralisation of power has grown, and with it the geographic spread and degree of insecurity.¹ It must not be forgotten that globalisation implies exclusion as much as it does inclusion.

The world is facing a global environmental crisis, and, inseparable from this, a crisis of growing global inequality and poverty. These unprecedented environmental and social changes pose huge challenges, and all the signs indicate a need for society's cross-sectoral attention to the environment as an underlying security issue.

What makes people in Africa secure?

We have to adjust our thinking if we are to recognise and come to terms with the new challenges, to recognise that insecurity takes many forms. Approaches must be diverse, multi-dimensional

and located at many levels – local through to international. This calls for a critical view of structures, institutions, and processes, where these are seen to threaten or undermine people's security, as well as a more holistic concept of human security. Recognition that security threats cover a far broader spectrum – among them resource scarcity, diseases, global warming, or religious fundamentalism – has increasingly gained credibility. Traditional security institutions have begun to respond to the validity of this shift in security thinking, a paradigm shift that requires answers to these central questions: *whose security? security from what? and security how?*

Environmental security

As security researchers have moved away from narrowly defined military understanding of threat, vulnerability, and response mechanisms, 'environmental security' has become one of the critical areas on the security agenda, reflecting a common concern for the implications of environmental change. However, while the environmental movement has succeeded in providing the world with a new lens through which to look as it seeks to define the requirements for security and development, the term 'environmental security' has generated considerable confusion and contentious debate about how the environment and security are linked. Research on 'the environment and security' has failed to produce a commonly agreed definition or a common policy agenda, with both the traditional security community and the environmental community resisting the use of the term, each for quite different reasons.

Exploring the links between the environment and security were first articulated (albeit implicitly) in the 1960s in connection with the problem of human-generated environmental degradation. Giving priority to nature is seen in the 'security of the environment' concept. This interpretation emphasises securing the integrity of the environment as both primary referent and the security goal and is reflected in the early research. In the 1970s, analyses of effect of war, violent conflict, and conflict refugees on the environment emerged. Over the past two decades, debates have been largely conceptual, with the development of different schools of thought. A predominant theme has been that of

the significance of environmental stress as a contributor to, or aggravating factor in, conflict in many parts of the developing world. Case studies focused mainly on environmental scarcity: the relationship between environmental degradation, depletion of renewable resources (water, land, forests) and violent conflict.

Research responded to the realisation that a great deal of environmental change is directly and indirectly affected by human activities and conflicts, and shifted to examining how environmental stress contributes to conflict in combination with other relevant factors – ways in which environmental stress inter-relates with other conflict drivers. More recent research has highlighted the importance of conflict arising from access to/control over non-renewable resources (gold, oil, diamonds) for strategic purposes. The term 'new wars' has been used to capture the changing nature of war, the gradual shift in the causes of conflicts, their duration and the increase in the incidence of regional conflicts. Ostensibly based on identity politics, statehood (control or secession), or the control of natural and other resources, these conflicts are largely devoid of the geo-political or ideological goals that characterised earlier wars. Implicit in these 'greed or grievance' debates are that environmental factors can and should be integrated into traditional security affairs in so far as they threaten the national interest. The issue is not seen to be environmental degradation or scarcity *per se*, but the fact that it poses a security concern because of the potential for violence or conflict.

This '*environment-and-security*' debate offers only a partial broadening of the security agenda. 'What is to be secured' remains predominantly the survival of the State. Thus, environmental insecurity becomes synonymous with environmental threats to the State.² Such an approach is consistent with conventional notions of national security, which do not necessarily guarantee the security of individuals and communities.

In contrast to the statist approach, the argument for a more interdisciplinary and integrative approach sees environmental security as a crucial component of the broader concept of 'human security'. Human security identifies the individual and, by extension, the collective, as the referent object of security. This has not necessarily brought clarity, precisely because of the

elasticity arising from a broader concept of environmental security. The relationship between the environment and security is a complex one in which many factors play a role. The cause and effect of tensions and vulnerabilities are multi-dimensional, and the links between the various components may be direct or indirect. Vibrant debate also reflects different concepts of nature and environment and what gets counted as environmental. The danger of many approaches is that they risk dichotomising humans and nature. On the one hand, environmentalism is often seen as just another special interest, a 'supposed thing' out there which requires protection and for which technical fixes are promoted. On the other hand is the pre-eminence of human interests, which presumes the environment does not matter. If one understands the notion of the environment as including humans, then the way we define problems alters and we arise at a reformulation of environmental security in terms of human security, and one which draws on the insights of ecological security. Jane Lubchenco appositely sums it up:

'As the magnitude of human impacts on the ecological systems of the planet becomes apparent, there is increased realisation of the intimate connections between these systems and human health, the economy, social justice and national security. The concept of what constitutes 'the environment' is changing rapidly.'³

Examining ways in which the environment is connected to human security is an approach that focuses on three premises.

Social framing

What becomes an environmental issue cannot be assumed to be simply the extension of scientific understandings. Scarcity, for example, is determined by more than the mere physical limitations of a natural resource; it is often determined by specific political, socio-economic and cultural contexts. This calls for is an understanding of how social and political framings are woven into both the formulation of scientific explanations of environmental problems, and the solutions proposed to reduce them.

People have always used nature to further their goals and this manipulation has resulted in a series

of environmental problems. Our fate is bound up with risks that are deliberately taken – for the sake of benefits conceived in advance by means of technological mastery over nature. It is in exploring the significance of the social, political, economic and cultural factors in the production of hazards and risks that we reach an understanding of the structural causes of hazards and risks.

Responses to, and engagement with, nature are highly diverse, ambivalent and embedded in daily life. One culture may perceive nature as robust, another as fragile – and it is on these images of reality that we act. It is a question of interpretation. It is those perceptions that dominate; how they are constructed, and how political decision-making takes place in this context that informs and explains why certain actions are taken, and who (or what) determines whether action is taken.

Two of the key factors that contribute to tension and insecurity throughout the world are **poverty and inequity**. There are close and complex interconnections between people, the environment and livelihood opportunities in terms of access to natural resources, and vulnerabilities to environmental threats which are expressed in their overall impact on human survival, well-being and productivity. Environmental change has direct and often immediate effects on peoples' well-being and livelihoods. Insecurity often arises from conditions of inequality and impoverishment, such as is seen when political and economic power relations affect society-nature interconnections as evidenced by 'resource capture' and 'ecological marginalisation'.

Scales. The third premise is that environmental security problems must focus on the ecosystem level, not simply within political boundaries. Creative solutions are called for: there is no place for traditional security responses where states can take unilateral action to attain and maintain the security of their own environment. Furthermore, while the challenges of the environment and of security are principally at the domestic level, they are common to a region, as well as for advanced industrialised countries who carry much of the responsibility for global environmental change.

Conclusion

The field of environmental security studies is still largely an emerging one. There are ambiguities,

but this does not mean that we should not pay more attention to understanding environmental change and its relationship with human security. This is not an argument for a redefinition of international or national security, but for a greater appreciation of the nature of certain threats and of a more comprehensive approach to the politics of security. **The emphasis also needs to shift away from focusing on conflict as an outcome of resource scarcity. The focus should be on the prevention of resource scarcity, and being more concerned about social disruptions than about violent conflict as the principal sources of insecurity.** This calls for the urgent need for mitigation against the causes, and management of, environmental insecurities arising from threats such as degradation and climate change. Implicit in this is security of the environment, valuable in its own right (not merely as a set of risks), *and* as a crucial component of human security. Implicit in the term 'human security' is that it prioritises achieving freedom from fear and freedom from want *urgently*. It also implies moving beyond a needs-based focus, to a rights-based focus.

What we currently have is environmental insecurity. It is arguably impossible to achieve environmental security as an absolute condition, not least because security is a highly relative concept. But what we need to work towards is the goal of **sustainable security**, which integrates human, state and environmental security – in other words, making security more human and more sustainable. This is a process of ongoing monitoring and adaptation.

Implicit in a concept of environmental security which does not prioritise national security and the issue of conflict above the needs of those who are most environmentally insecure, is recognising the importance of environmental cooperation.

We should not overlook the potential for trust, harmony and cooperation arising from the nexus of security and environmental issues. Focussing only on threats, we should not overlook the environmentally related opportunities available to improve human security.⁴ Insights gained from this debate have important implications for practical action agendas, such as the role that the protection and responsible management of natural resources could play in preventing unequal patterns of resource distribution, of exploring mechanisms of governance, building institutional capacity and empowering local populations. We need to 'seize upon the opportunities presented by the environment, in recognition of its inherent value, and its deep connections to human beings, societies and economies.'⁵

The future imperative of coping with uncertainty, complexity and change is all we can be sure of. Without substantial changes in institutions and governance, economic policies, technology, knowledge and behaviour, the prospects for reducing poverty remain bleak.

Notes

- 1 J Barnett, *The Meaning of Environmental Security: Ecological Politics and Policy in the New Security Era*, Zed Books, 2001, p 122.
- 2 L Elliot, *The Global Politics of the Environment*, Macmillan Press Ltd, London, 1998, p 231.
- 3 J Lubchenco, *Entering the Century of the Environment: A New Social Contract for Science* in *Science*, Vol 279, 23 January 1998, p 491.
- 4 S Khagram, W C Clark, and D F Raad, 'From the Environment and Human Security to Sustainable Security and Development', *Journal of Human Development*, vol 4, No 2, July 2003.
- 5 S Khagram, W C Clark, and D F Raad, 'From the Environment and Human Security to Sustainable Security and Development', *Journal of Human Development*, vol 4, No 2, July 2003.