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Preparedness for and Recovery from Disasters and Conflicts: Environmental and Social Considerations of Sectoral Reform

Among other things, poor environmental management contributes to the overuse of natural resources and degradation of ecosystems. In turn, this undermines livelihoods and human well being, and creates or exacerbates instability, potentially leading to violent conflict. Although this phenomenon is widely recognized, formulating and properly executing policies that help prevent environmental degradation, and associated conflicts and disasters, and that mitigate their effects when they do occur, has proved to be challenging.

The complex interaction of multiple factors, including environmental degradation, competition for scarce resources, persistent poverty, population growth, and disease can put communities under severe stress. Over-farming and deforestation, for example, can lead to a vicious circle of resource depletion, leading to population movements, leading to further undermining of resources, and so forth. People living in the developing world are often most vulnerable to the effects of such cycles, as many are directly dependent upon resource-based activities such as agriculture, forestry, and fishing for their well-being and survival. Left unaddressed, environmental problems and the poor management of resources undermine development, erode social structures, and at worst can directly result in violent conflict.

To be effective, environmental policy must account for the broad spectrum of issues that determine how resources are used and how their management will impact lives. Decision makers must carefully consider the political and social context in which policy is expected to function, addressing not only national level imperatives, but also local concerns and realities. Moreover, policy must promote equitable access and set out feasible mechanisms for enforcement. The need for multi-faceted, integrated cross sectoral approaches to policy, and to policy assistance, is reflected in the US government's recently issued *Fragile States Strategy*, and in the Africa Bureau publication *Nature, Wealth, and Power: Emerging Best Practice for Revitalizing Rural Africa*.

Lets look at some specific examples of how environmental issues feed into conflict, how policy has promoted peaceful progress, and some general policy guidelines for donors.

Environment degradation and resource competition as conflict triggers:

As "commodities", natural resources are subject to contamination and depletion. And because they are available in limited supply, and are valuable, there is keen competition for access to them, competition which, if not subject to accepted and equitably applied rules, can destabilize communities.

Scarcity: When natural resources that are used as production inputs are consumed more rapidly than they can be renewed, or are non-renewable, populations must diversify what they produce, find more resources, substitute resources that are more readily available for those that are

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becoming scarce (where that is possible), or compete for the scarce ones. Increased competition for high value resources can strain community relations, increasing the likelihood of violent conflict.

Wealth: High value natural resources, such as minerals, gemstones, fossil fuels and timber, can feed into or be a source of conflict. In countries such as The Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, and Burma, the mining of diamonds and coltan, and logging have been used to fund armed inter-state and intra-state conflict. Greed and the drive by elites to retain and amass power have led to the control of high value resources as an end in itself.

Tenure Policy: Many developing countries have tenure systems for land and other resources that reflect historical inequities in wealth and political power. Insecure, conflicting, and limited tenure, or tenure rights that are perceived to be unfair, can limit a community's motivation to utilize land and other resources sustainably for grazing or farming, and can act as disincentives to investing in making improvements to the resource, thus affecting livelihoods and fomenting resentments.

Policies that recognize and protect rights to use resources in a fair way are particularly important in many developing countries where large segments of the population have a symbiotic relationship with the environment and access to fresh water, arable land, and forests can mean the difference between life and death.

Population movements: Depletion of or inability to access resources can result in movements of populations from relatively crowded areas to agricultural frontiers as people search for alternative livelihoods. Governments and donors sometimes respond by promulgating policies and developing major projects and programs that support such migration and resettlement. This can cause stress both to the environment and to the indigenous communities that live on the frontier as they are confronted with newcomers who compete with them for resources, and who bring with them unfamiliar social norms.

Disasters: Environmental deterioration attributable to human activities, e.g. climate change, erosion, pollution, deforestation, and dense settlement in areas susceptible to natural catastrophes such as floods and droughts, and the poorly conceived policies that encourage such activities, can exacerbate the damage wrought by natural disasters and prolong the time needed to recover from them. As vulnerable populations under the greatest stress are most often hardest hit, physical calamity can very rapidly devolve into civil strife.

Environmental policy as a tool to promote peace:

Carefully designed environmental policy that recognizes legitimate economic aspirations, as well as local institutional capacities and cultural preferences, can limit the adverse impacts of disasters and reduce chances of conflict. Sound environmental policy and management can also be used as a vehicle for building trust and cooperation, and for strengthening local communities and civil society organizations, thereby serving as an effective catalyst for reducing tensions and promoting peace. For example:

Reforestation: In Central America's Lempa River Basin, which includes parts of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, the Trifinio Plan addresses cross-border environmental problems, in particular deforestation, while respecting national boundaries, thereby reducing political tensions. Arising from efforts to end Central America's epidemic of civil war, the Plan sought to create a generation of peace by addressing root causes of conflict: social and economic isolation. The Plan

has played an important role in building confidence between countries as it provided a platform for high-level, post-conflict dialogue and strengthened cooperation among border communities.

Mineral rights: In May 2000, responding to a growing grassroots movement to deal with the problem of “blood diamonds,” governments and the diamond industry came together in the South African town of Kimberley to combat the trade in diamonds from conflict zones. The result of these negotiations was the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, setting up an internationally recognized certification system for rough diamonds and establishing national import/export standards. In November 2002, 52 governments ratified and adopted the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme, which was fully implemented in August 2003. The Kimberley Process is a joint government, international diamond industry and civil society initiative to stem the flow of conflict diamonds – rough diamonds that are used by rebel movements to finance wars against legitimate governments. The trade in these illicit stones has contributed to devastating conflicts in countries such as Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone. The Kimberley Process Certification Scheme is an innovative, voluntary system that imposes extensive requirements on participants to certify that shipments of rough diamonds are free from conflict diamonds. Kimberley Process Participants account for virtually all (approximately 99.8%) of the global production of rough diamonds.

Water access: Work in the Aral Sea Basin provides a prominent example of how inter-state collaboration to develop environmental policy can be instrumental in stemming conflict and promoting rational resource use. A top down, centralized Soviet management structure left a problematic heritage in the region, including enclaves of different nationalities separated from their ethnic compatriots. Such ethnic and religious divisions overlying competition for water between agricultural, rural, urban, industrial and environmental users in the region combined to create the potential for major conflicts. However, the water authorities of five countries – Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan – committed themselves to set their differences aside and come together to address their resource issues. Facilitated under the umbrella of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination, Central Asia has established conditions for independent development on the basis of mutual respect, mutual cooperation, and the clear political will of the presidents and governments concerned to strengthen joint water management. Cooperation continues in spite of differences among the different states and their different levels of development.

Early Warning: The goal of the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) is to strengthen the abilities of African countries and regional organizations to manage risk of food insecurity through the provision of timely and analytical early warning and vulnerability information. FEWS NET is a USAID-funded activity that collaborates with international, national, and regional partners. FEWS NET professionals in the U.S. and Africa monitor remotely sensed data and ground-based meteorological, crop and rangeland conditions to discern potential threats to food security. FEWS NET also focuses on strengthening African early warning and response networks through capacity development, network building, developing policy useful information, and dialogue to develop consensus about food security problems and solutions.

Policy types to be considered:

To be truly effective, donor support programs need to ensure that policy not only encourages environmentally sound practices, but also balances national level interests with local realities.

Understanding local customs and power dynamics, respecting people's needs to pursue their livelihoods, and including local communities in the decision making process, are critical for developing effective policy. Additionally, approaching policy development in this way promotes sustainability, and encourages the habit of collaborative and constructive problem solving.

Policy dimensions to be considered include:

- *Addressing land and resource tenure*: Unresolved tenure issues lie at the root of many local conflicts. Moreover, rights over and access to land and other resources ultimately determine how they are used.
- *Strengthening disaster preparation*: Developing countries are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of natural disasters, which can have enormous social and economic repercussions, derailing the development process. Disaster management that focuses on national level planning and incorporates local level training and response components can go far to mitigate the impact of natural or man-made disasters.
- *Improving early warning systems*: Climate change and naturally occurring processes can lead to catastrophic outcomes. Although some occur with very little warning, there are often indicators that if heeded in a timely manner can lessen the human and environmental toll appreciably. Systems that track climate change and provide timely, readily accessible information to potentially affected populations, can inform policy and preventive actions, and enable citizens and communities to better prepare and respond to events.
- *Strengthening local government and civil society*: Empowering communities and governments to take responsibility and action at the local level strengthens their ability to mobilize resources and take collective action in preparing and responding to disasters and conflict.
- *Incorporating local level perspectives*: National level policies must be formulated to incorporate the realities of local level conditions and potential economic ramifications. Policies that affect access to scarce resources or primary sources of income must be formulated to address potential conflict and look for opportunities to strengthen local capacity.
- *Understanding social dynamics*: Local customs and social practices are often closely associated with use of natural resources. Perceived misuse/ abuse can quickly increase tensions and foment resentment towards migrant populations and the state.
- *Increasing transparency and participation*: Lack of knowledge about policy decisions and their impacts often leads to misunderstandings, perceived injustices, and poor environmental practices. On the other hand, expanding dialogue and including the broad range of stakeholders in decision making leads to sounder policies, increases buy-in, and promotes trust in state institutions.
- *Creating sustainable livelihoods for small scale initiatives*: National level policies often support the interests of international companies and national elites at the expense of small scale miners, artisans, other entrepreneurs, and communities. On the other hand, encouraging small scale operators (including expanding access to financial and natural resources on favorable terms), and promoting diversification of economic opportunities advances sustainable development and reduces conflict potential.

- *Strengthening governance of international trade:* Most resource access conflicts arise within particular countries. But international trade arrangements can also have significant impacts. This is a very complex subject with many dimensions. For present purposes, and just by way of illustration, we note that policies that provide reasonable protection against price shocks, and that prevent illegal trade in resources also promote safe environmental practices.
- *Incorporating environmental security perspectives into urban development and planning:* Environmental degradation and consequent loss of livelihoods and resource competition is a factor contributing to disruptive population migration from rural to urban areas (and to agricultural frontiers). Policy and programs that mitigate degradation and plan for expansion reduce the potential for conflict and strengthen economic development.