

The Logs of War – Environment, Conflict and People-centred Security

Comments to “The Green Peace Prize – New Perspectives for the Future”,
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I own a forest. It's a small forest, only about 50 acres, or 20 hectares. My forest sits on a ridge just above a wetland forest called the Alfred Bog, near the Ottawa river, in Canada. Ecologically, my small patch of forest is a part of the wetland, we share many species of plants and animals, and we are both surrounded by farmland.

My forest has been in my family for a bit more than 35 years now. We don't really think of it as our forest, because we hope the forest will outlast us. Long before we assumed responsibility for it, it too had been turned into farmland, cleared and worked by Irish immigrants, in a community of mixed Scottish, Irish and French settlers from Europe. Then, about one hundred years ago, the forest was allowed to return to our 50 acres. We care for it as best we can, because we know it could disappear and that in reality “our forest” is really a common heritage.

Two hundred years ago, the ancestors of the farmers from our area arrived to cut down the white pine tree that dominated the forests of the Ottawa valley. The white pine were felled, the logs were squared, floated down river and shipped to England, where they were used to build the English navy. You see, wars in Europe had denied England access to Norwegian and other forests with which to build the ships that secured the British Empire, so they were forced to look elsewhere. The white pine – one of the tallest trees in eastern North America – were perfect for shipbuilding. We have white pine in our forest, but they are third generation growth. The original white pine trees were long ago logged out of existence in the Ottawa valley, and the wars and genocide which accompanied the logging made sure that, along with the original white pine of the area, went the original people of the area – the indigenous peoples known to the white settlers as Algonquin (Anishinaabe) and the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee). It is a deeply bitter irony that the white pine had been known amongst the Iroquois as the Great Tree of Peace.

For, the connection between timber and conflict is an old one. To the colonial empires, forests once represented the strategic resources that we think of today as oil and gas or basic metals for high-tech components. Today, in many developing countries, control of the natural capital represented by tropical forests is control of power. Allocation of timber concessions or drilling rights is often a highly political issue and can become a mechanism for rewarding supporters and mobilising wealth to prop up the existing government.

That can be said of industrialised countries like Canada and Norway, just as it can for developing countries. But developing countries with tropical forests are particularly vulnerable to a industry that operates what amounts to a destructive business model.¹ Tropical timber firms often target countries with large forest resources and weak institutions, a combination guaranteed to ensure minimum regulation and maximum profit. The result can be massive corruption and loss of

revenue to the state. As corrupt officials put the rights of companies before those of the population they are supposed to represent, democracy is eroded and rulers must increasingly rely on repression to remain in power.

And logging companies always side with whoever controls forest territory by force of arms. This has often included illegal timber operations, which buy weapons and hire armed militias. This military capability can lead to skirmishes between the company and the local community, or between the militias of different companies. Protected by powerful allies – both military and political - timber companies, whether operating legally or not, become the *de facto* owners of the forest, and state forestry institutions become the clients of the logging extractors rather than *vice versa*.

This model of doing business suits warlord economies very well. Warlords are, of course, in the business of making war, but increasingly they are also in the business of making vast amounts of money at making war. In some cases, military intervention in another country has been based in part on the attempt to control that country's timber resource. Today, a warring faction in control of forest land possesses one of the quickest routes to obtain funding to finance the conflict or line pockets. Compared to most forms of resource extraction, logging is a relatively easy activity, requiring low investment for quick return. In conflicts in Asia and Africa, a few soldiers with chainsaws and trucks have generated hundreds of thousand of dollars in days; a well resourced company can generate hundreds of millions in a matter of months.

Timber is by no means unique in its connection to armed conflict.

In the context of largely unregulated global markets, economic opportunity - in the form of access to natural resources or other forms of wealth - intersects with conflicts over inequalities between groups, conflicts over power and identity, resulting in a downward spiral of informalization of the state, and criminalization of the economy. Commodities that would otherwise provide the basis for economic and social development instead become illicit or conflict commodities, the life-blood of warlord business networks.

These are the linkages between the environment and conflict. In its economic form, these linkages are called conflict trade - the integration of coercion, or the use of force, to the economic activities in conflict zones, and the illegal ways these economies are integrated to global trading system. Conflict trade represents one of the dynamics through which unsustainable environmental exploitation, underdevelopment and human rights abuse reinforce each other, and at the same reinforce impunity for this behaviour. Both legal and illicit exploitation can contribute to the loss of sovereign control over natural resources, the undermining of social and economic development, and support crippling levels of corruption and repression, or the continuation of war.

In parts of Central and West Africa, the Andean region of South America, the Balkans, and Central and South East Asia, the economic interests of combatants and their political-military allies have sustained some of the most brutal wars in recent memory. During the civil war in Cambodia, conflict timber helped sustain both the Khmer Rouge and government factions well into the 1990's. Illicit drugs have sustained factions in Afghanistan and Colombia, and in the Balkans criminal gangs connected to belligerent factions traffic in narcotics, consumer goods, arms and human beings. For most of the past decade, diamonds and oil revenues fuelled the two

sides at war in Angola, which reduced that country to one of the lowest ranking in the UN's Human Development Index. Timber and diamonds helped sustain the war in Sierra Leone, pushing that country to the bottom of the same Index, with a population whose average life expectancy is under 30 years.

Finally, and perhaps most appallingly, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, an estimated three million people died in the four years between 1998 and 2002 as a result of food and health effects of a war sustained largely by the illicit exploitation of the country's vast natural resources. (Today the invasions of the DRC continue, and humanitarian organisations this week reported that 1000 people are dying every day in eastern DRC alone).

In each case, factional military power has been deployed to take advantage of natural resources and other forms of wealth. Even in places where peace processes have since appeared to take hold—for example, in Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Sierra Leone, or Liberia —peacemakers must confront the fact that the conflict trade which helped prolong the wars continues uninterrupted by the apparent peace.ⁱⁱ Transitions to democracy will have to confront these realities. Development will be impossible as long as they are not addressed.

The fact that there is economic activity in a war zone does not mean that the informal economies which people need to survive are somehow illicit. These are their livelihoods in situations of extreme vulnerability. Nor, does the fact of economic activity in these situations mean that the harvesting or extraction of natural resources will automatically cause or prolong conflict. But these economies do help to decide how the impacts of environmental stress are managed, or the ways in which environmental riches are exploited. That exploitation - combined with the relative strength of national or local governance, and historical and social inequalities - can determine whether the environment is a source of stability and peace, or instability and violence.

In 2002, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's report on the Protection of Civilians summed up the apparent link between commerce and armed conflict: "Individuals and companies take advantage of, maintain and have even initiated armed conflicts in order to plunder destabilized countries to enrich themselves, with devastating consequences for civilian populations."ⁱⁱⁱ

Companies and governments are not moral entities. They need rules to tell them what they cannot do. Yet, there is no law against conflict trade, or in helping to sustain a war economy. Nor are the definitions of corporate complicity in genocide and war crimes properly understood. These are things that must change.

When she received the Nobel Peace Prize on Friday, Wangari Maathai told the audience:

"Industry and global institutions must appreciate that ensuring economic justice, equity and ecological integrity are of greater value than profits at any cost. The extreme global inequities and prevailing consumption patterns continue at the expense of the environment and peaceful co-existence. The choice is ours."

Thank You.

ⁱ For a detailed description of the tropical timber industry *modus operandi* see *Logs of War: The Timber Trade and Armed Conflict*, Global Witness, Fafo Report 379 (2002); available from www.newsecurity.info.

ⁱⁱ Indeed, according to an unpublished – but widely circulated - appendix filed by the UN Experts Panel (in December 2003) to its recent report on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the elite networks that have plundered the DRC since 1998 continue to do so with impunity, despite the fact that their activities have been the subject of numerous UN reports.

ⁱⁱⁱ “The Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,” S/2002/1300, *Report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council*, 26 November 2002, para 58.