Cultivating Peace

From Conflict to Collaboration in Natural Resource Management
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Conflict over natural resources, such as land, water, and forests, occurs everywhere today, as it has for centuries. Whether it be a local dispute between neighbouring farmers or an international debate over shared resources such as a waterway, people compete for the natural resources they need to ensure or enhance their quality of life. Conflict can even be seen as “a normal feature of natural resource management,” says Jacqueline Ashby, Director of Research at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture. The conflict may unfold as a simple war of words or it may escalate to armed confrontation with loss of life.

While the dimensions, levels, and intensity of conflict can vary greatly, so too can the opportunities for conflict resolution. In many instances where a natural resource lies at the centre of a dispute, solutions are increasingly being found in the form of a new and growing field of research and practice: community-based natural resource management (CBNRM).

CBNRM can be loosely described as a creative process that relies on adaptive learning and action involving people and organizations who share and use a natural resource. It differs from traditional policies and research in that it works with the local men and women most directly involved with natural resource management. These are often the poorest of the rural poor, or ethnic minorities who are politically and economically isolated. CBNRM recognizes that these men and women have an intimate knowledge of the local resource base and are motivated to ensure it remains productive if they can be assured of benefiting.

“The main results of such a process are not just to attain the appropriate sustainability of natural resources, but to make their use and access more equitable to the communities that benefit from them,” says Jacqueline Chenier, National Coordinator of Pastoral de la Tierra y del Medio Ambiente for Caritas in Honduras.

What Causes Conflict?
Conflict arises over natural resources for many reasons, alone or in combination. At its most basic is the fact that natural resources are embedded in the environment where the actions of one group can have unforeseen effects elsewhere or on another resource. Whether deliberately or not, resources may be used by some in ways that undermine the livelihoods of others. In Nicaragua, for instance, conflict arose because use of the Calico River for irrigation upstream deprived downstream communities of drinking water. In the Philippines, the uncontrolled growth of fish farming in the C aqui putan Channel led to such severe water pollution that the fisheries suffered. Moreover, the cages reduced the navigable waters for subsistence fishers, increasing inequality.

Political factors are often involved in conflicts over natural resources. As in other spheres, those with the greatest access to power can best control or influence natural resource decisions in their favour. That was the case in Copán, Honduras, where the Chorti people were deprived of traditional lands by wealthy landowners (see box: “The Cycle of Conflict”). In Sudan, absentee Jellaba landlords (many of them merchants, government officials, and retired generals) made use of their connections to the State Agricultural Bank to channel international credit for mechanized farming into their operations in the Nuba Mountains. The ruling government also helped divert attention and consolidate the Jellaba hold on the best lands in the area by inflaming historical tensions between Arab Baggara and Nuba peoples. Political factors also may prevail where the state has a keen interest in a public good such as conservation or in maintaining a political alliance it needs to remain in power.
Conflicts can have many negative impacts, but they can also be catalysts for positive social change.

A conflict can have class dimensions, pitting those who own the resource against those who own nothing but whose work makes the resource productive. Resource scarcity — caused by rapid environmental change, increased demand, or unequal distribution — can also spark hostilities.

Social and cultural factors are often involved in conflict. "Perceptions, access, and use of natural resources vary according to class, gender, ethnicity, age, and other factors," explains Chenier. "For example, poor people in Honduras use forests as a source of fuel, medicine, water production, construction materials, and so on. Business people see the forests as an important source of cash that should be invested in other commodities." Gender, age, and ethnicity — factors that are often ignored — can also play a role.

Just as causes vary, so can the intensity of conflict. It can range from confusion and frustration among members of a community over poorly communicated development policies to violent clashes between groups that lead to chaotic and wasteful deployment of human capacities and the depletion of the very natural resources on which livelihoods, economies, and societies depend.

Conflict as a Positive Force

For most people, conflict — particularly violent conflict — is to be avoided. Those who study conflict, however, recognize the positive role it can play. In fact, write Kenneth Bush and Robert Opp in *Cultivating Peace: Conflict and Collaboration in Natural Resource Management*, published by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the World Bank, development itself "is inevitably conflictual, destabilizing, and subversive because it challenges established economic, social, or political power structures, which inhibit individuals and groups from pursuing their full potential."

"Conflicts can have many negative impacts, but they can also be catalysts for positive social change," says Daniel Buckles, a senior program specialist at IDRC and editor of *Cultivating Peace* (see box: "Myths and Reality"). In nonviolent settings, conflict can be a visible demonstration of a society adapting to a new political, economic, and physical environment. For marginalized groups seeking to redress injustices or inequities in resource distribution, conflict is an inherent feature of their struggle for change and can provide the leverage needed to assert their claims. In the Copan Valley of Honduras, for example, conflict provided the nudge needed to start negotiations between the Chorti, the government, and large landowners. Likewise, in the Galapagos Islands, threats by island fishers to kidnap foreign tourists made international headlines and forced the Ecuadorian government to recognize local groups and grant them power to set their own goals for sustainable resource use in the national park area.

From Conflict to Collaboration

Although confrontation can lead to violence, avoiding and shunning conflict can be equally dangerous because unresolved problems may flare up again, often with renewed vigour. The key, says Buckles, is not necessarily to resolve conflict, since that may not be possible, but to manage conflict so that it achieves change instead of leading to violence." Conflict management may, in fact, offer a better chance at achieving a more lasting and meaningful peace.

The field of conflict management draws many of its principles from North American experiences with alternative dispute resolution (ADR), which relies on a variety of collaborative approaches including conciliation, negotiation, and mediation. Through ADR, multiparty "win-win" options are sought by focusing on the problem (not the person) and by creating awareness of dependence among stakeholders.

However, ADR techniques depend on both cultural and legal conditions that are not present in all settings, such as a willingness to publicly acknowledge a conflict, and administrative and financial support for negotiated solutions. They also depend on the voluntary participation of all sides, not an easy condition to meet in heavily disputed conflicts with extreme power imbalances.

Although there is no one formula for dealing with a conflict, there are several "rules" that CBNRM practitioners employ. "You have to examine the context within which a conflict takes place, so you can take a holistic response to it, so you're not just looking at problems of the resource but the context within which those problems manifest themselves," says Tara Goetz, a McMaster University PhD candidate studying the link between CBNRM and development policies in Latin America and the Caribbean. "A lot of times, that includes having an understanding of the multiple layers of factors affecting the management of a particular resource."

Other key practices for managing conflict are to:

- Identify and recognize, through a process of stakeholder analysis, all groups with legitimate interests in the contested resources;
Who is involved in the negotiating process and to what extent are other important considerations. "It is particularly important that the stakeholders relevant to the on- and off-site effects [of resource use] are participating in the development of solutions," says Dr Ashby. In some situations, however, power imbalances or fundamental interests may be so great that not all differences can be reconciled. During the dispute over fishing and park boundaries in the Galapagos Islands, for example, the independent mediator excluded commercial mainland fishers from negotiations, largely because their activities were seen as incompatible with conservation objectives.

Local Solutions to Global Problems

Although community-based natural resource management is not a panacea, it has gained ground around the world in recent years among donors, governments, and nongovernmental organizations who have turned to CBNRM to achieve numerous goals, including promoting peace-building, reducing poverty, and conserving biodiversity.

The Cycle of Conflict: The Case of Copán

Poverty and social disparity are rampant in Copán, Honduras. The seeds of conflict were sown in the 1950s when a small group of landowners bought thousands of hectares of land throughout the Copán Valley. The indigenous Chorti were displaced from their homes and forced to work as farm labourers. Government land reforms of the 1970s offered only a piecemeal solution, as the redistribution affected few and the land they were granted was largely infertile.

The 1990s brought renewed calls by the Chorti for better access to land, economic opportunities, and self-governance. Landowners, however, were reluctant to cede control over the land or their source of cheap labour. Violence ensued, with the assassination of more than a dozen farm union members, including Chorti leader Candidó Amador. In May 1997, a mass hunger strike by 1 000 Chorti in the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, captured national and international attention. Public pressure forced the government to award the Chorti 2 000 hectares of productive land.

But the settlement further stoked discord. The government’s National Agricultural Institute gave the Chorti only 350 hectares of largely nonarable land, and only 5 of 16 communities benefited. New frictions emerged as part of the land given to the Chorti belonged to the local government. The Chorti were also upset that the government had made no provision for financial or technical support to enable them to become productive farmers.

This was the environment the nongovernmental organization Caritas and the Network for Collaborative Natural Resource Management (COLABORA) faced when they offered organizational and technical support to the National Chorti Indian Council of Honduras (CONICHH) in 1997.

The most pressing issue was to prevent further violence and create an environment conducive to dialogue. CONICHH also needed to strengthen its negotiating abilities. With financial assistance from IDRC and the Canadian International Development Agency, COLABORA organized visits, field research, and workshops to exchange and develop conflict-management methods and strategies with other groups. It was thus able to help diffuse threats of violence and achieve commitment to a long-term process of community-based natural resource management.

The Chorti’s battle for economic, social, and political parity is far from over, but collective analysis and a collaborative approach to problem-solving proved instrumental in reducing threats of violence and improving relations among communities. The Chorti are increasingly able to promote their own interests and are better prepared to enter negotiations.
CBNRM is not only applicable in the developing world. In British Columbia, Canada, for instance, the Nuu-chah-nulth First Nations mounted a successful campaign of civil disobedience, which included calls for international boycotts of BC lumber products. Their goal was to obtain a greater say over the management of their traditional lands and natural resources. Despite their initial reluctance, the government and the logging industry came to the negotiating table. The result was a precedent-setting agreement with the provincial government and the logging industry to comanage the lucrative cedar stands of Clayoquot Sound. The Canadian experience with comanagement provided guidance to a similar comanagement deal in Cahuita National Park in Costa Rica.

This experience shows that progress in conflict management depends on developing the capacity of local populations to assess the interests of various stakeholders and to creatively implement solutions locally—in short, strengthening national support for governance at the local level.

What Is IDRC Doing?

IDRC supports many initiatives around the world that assist women and men living in vulnerable ecosystems to manage and use their natural resources sustainably. As part of these efforts, it has sponsored a number of studies on the causes of conflict around natural resources and their resolution, notably in Costa Rica, Honduras, Laos, Nicaragua, the Philippines, Sudan, and Uruguay. These were presented at an international workshop, jointly organized by IDRC, the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in May 1998, and documented in Cultivating Peace: Conflict and Collaboration in Natural Resource Management, published by IDRC and the World Bank.

For example, IDRC supported a study of the vast Nam Ngum watershed in Laos. The research revealed a variety of problems, including land degradation and water shortages, and showed how many factors contributed to conflict between new and old settlers in the region. These were exacerbated by vague and sometimes contradictory government-allocation directives. In addition to recommending ways of dealing with the issues identified, the project introduced such innovations as a "buffalo bank" for villagers. Perhaps more important, the study created greater awareness among villagers and officials of the need for natural resource management and fostered greater accountability.

Community and government cooperation also proved to be the key to effective resource management in Cahuita National Park in Costa Rica. Hostilities in Cahuita erupted after the government unilaterally declared the coastal site a national park in 1978, forcing subsistence farmers and fishers to earn their living from tourism. It later jeopardized the tourism industry by levying exorbitant park entrance fees. Over a few years, a local committee set up to handle a dispute over services to visitors evolved into a management committee made up of local people and government officials. As a result, conflict was reduced and resource-management decisions were made to the satisfaction of government officials. This success has opened the way to the development of a national model of park comanagement.

A case study sponsored by IDRC in Sudan’s Nuba Mountains also documented how competition over scarce resources and environmental degradation can exacerbate ethnic tensions. In this case, conflict was caused by government-sponsored land expropriations and led to violent warfare between the Nuba and the Baggara. As the warring parties recognize that conflict is being diverted by vested interests from issues of land rights to ethnicity, and that both sides are losing everything of importance to them, a fragile peace is being forged.

These projects and others have played a significant role in the establishment of a research program on conflict and collaboration in natural resource management administered by the University for Peace with an initial focus on Latin America. Nine leading researchers and activists from Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Venezuela guide the program and provide support to community-based research by dozens of organizations in the region. Cutting-edge research and networking are generating lessons on what works locally and what policies are needed nationally. Similar programs are being considered for Africa and Asia. For more information see: www.upeace.org/opa/cyc
Myth and Reality

MYTH: Conflict is bad and must be resolved.
REALITY: Conflict can be a catalyst for positive social change. In some cases, a show of force may be the best way to get attention and real action. However, while threats of violence may lead to new development opportunities and ways of working, they are also prone to generating consequences that are unanticipated, unintended, and uncontrollable.

MYTH: Most conflicts arise over environmental degradation and resource scarcity.
REALITY: While competition for resources is at the root of many conflicts, natural resource conflicts usually have multiple causes. Poorly conceived land tenure policies or symbolic elements such as ethnic origin come into play. Conflicts also have class, political, social, and cultural dimensions.

MYTH: Peace must be forged at all costs.
REALITY: When peace is the key objective, an agreement may be struck that does not address the real source of dispute. A rush for resolution can result in legitimate claims of injustice being papered over, opening the door to future renewal of conflict.

MYTH: Conflicts over natural resources can be solved by central government action.
REALITY: All stakeholders must participate in the development of solutions, from community-based organizations, to large commercial resource extractors, to government officials. Research has shown that local organizations are key to managing conflicts over natural resources, but they need outside support to provide information, carry out research, conduct training, and grant legitimacy to local decisions.

Resources

Cultivating Peace: Conflict and Collaboration in Natural Resource Management
Edited by Daniel Buckles and published in 1999 by the International Development Research Centre (Ottawa) and the World Bank, this book is also available in Spanish (Cultivar la paz: Conflicto y colaboración en el manejo de los recursos naturales) and in French (Cultiver la paix: Conflits et collaboration dans la gestion des ressources naturelles). www.idrc.ca/booktitle/

Conflict Over Natural Resources website: www.idrc.ca/conflict/
This thematic site, part of the larger IDRC website, gives readers access to a wealth of online material on conflict and natural resource management. The site includes sections on:

- The Issues: A primer on why conflict over natural resources, such as land, water, and forests, occurs both in Canada and in the developing world.
- Research in Action: Concept papers and articles on IDRC-supported initiatives showcase valuable lessons and diagnostic tools for those working in the areas of natural resource management and conflict resolution.
- View from the Ground: Focus articles and case studies highlight various attempts to reduce natural resource conflicts in the Galapagos Islands, Honduras, India, Laos, the Middle East and elsewhere.
- Additional Information: Links to full-text articles, related websites, and books.

Essential Information

What is IDRC?
IDRC works with researchers in developing countries to help them find practical, long-term solutions to the social, economic and environmental problems facing them. In particular, support is directed towards developing the local research capacity necessary to sustain policies and technologies that will build healthier, more equitable, more prosperous societies.

The International Development Research Centre was established in 1970 by an Act of the Parliament of Canada.

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