

COMMENTS FROM THE PARTICIPANTS:

Incorporating environmental considerations into conflict management strategies is somewhat complex. It is too simplistic to say that environmental degradation leads to conflict. People wish to gain access to a wide range of things, such as social, economic, and political rights, and not only a clean environment. At the seminar, there was consensus on the fact that we need to know what are the crucial factors that come into play.

The work which was undertaken by the team of researchers supervised by Thomas Homer-Dixon, from the University of Toronto, has attracted the attention of high-level policy-makers in North America and has been heavily publicised. It looks at the circumstances under which environmental scarcity plays a critical role in the development of conflicts, how it affects groups, segments them according to ethnic lines, and brings these tensions to the state level. Some had concerns as to the impact that this coverage may have had on the public. They argued that the team of researchers of Toronto may not have made clear that environmental scarcity is not always the cause of conflicts, and that consequently, this might have led to the public perception that environmental degradation is an imminent threat, an idea which the media has picked up and, they claim, projected as doom.

The examples given by Valerie Percival from the case studies illustrated the importance of considering the broad context in which many factors interact. For instance, during the period of increasing violence in South Africa, problems were driven by other sources than environment such as income distribution, government pensions, lack of access to cultural events, etc. (Empirical research has proven that 40% of the income of homeland based people came from government subsidies). Participants agreed that it is crucial to understand the impoverishment process in order to understand the fundamental problems.

In the case of Rwanda, the research of the University of Toronto concludes that the perpetrators of conflict were not the people who were suffering from environmental scarcity. The researchers found that environmental factors were only aggravating the crisis. As for Kenya, problems were rooted in poor institutional relationships and support. Interestingly, the research shows that population growth in this country has had the positive impact of stimulating food production to the extent that the country is now exporting food.
