

INTRODUCTION

The understandings gained by investigation into the causes and consequences of the Cold War and other inter-state conflicts seem ill-equipped to explain and manage the violence that dominates international relations today. Conflicts are increasingly being waged by non-state actors, and states face more threats domestically from their constituents than internationally from other states. Different explanatory tools have to be developed to understand the violence in the world today.

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1999
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In an effort to explain contemporary forms of violence, analysts have intensified their research into the environmental basis of civil strife. Investigations into the relationship between environmental scarcity -- the scarcity of renewable resources -- and violence have attracted attention among academics, non-governmental organizations, and policy making communities. However, much of this research has been overly simplistic. While not denying the importance of environmental factors in some instances of conflict, it is equally important to avoid the pitfalls of apocalyptic determinism and fully understand the factors that influence the relationship between the scarcity of renewable resources and social instability.

Environmental stress is not the sole cause or even the most important cause of certain conflicts in the world today. Environmental scarcity interacts with political, economic, and social factors; within this complex, interactive system one factor cannot be isolated as the cause of conflict. Therefore, to understand the contribution of environmental scarcity to violence, researchers must disentangle the various factors at play in any one particular conflict, and trace out the role of environmental scarcity amid these other factors.

To facilitate an understanding of the link between environmental stress and violence, the Project on Environment, Population and Security, under the direction of Thomas Homer-Dixon brought together a team of researchers at the University of Toronto¹. I begin this paper with an outline of the conceptual framework developed by Homer-Dixon and utilized by the project to guide investigation into the relationship between environment and conflict. To illustrate the relationship between environmental factors and conflict, I apply this framework to the case of South Africa. I conclude with a summary of the project's key findings on environment-conflict links.

¹ Under the direction of Thomas Homer-Dixon, the Project on Environment, Population and Security Links began in July 1994 with a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts. The goal of the project is to gather, evaluate, integrate and disseminate information on causal linkages among population growth, renewable resource scarcities, migration and violent conflict. The case studies of the project include Chiapas, Mexico; Gaza; Pakistan; Rwanda; and South Africa. The thematic reports include a study on Urban Growth and Violence and a paper on Social Adaptation. The project also is producing a Briefing Book summarizing the findings of the project for policy makers. The research team includes the following members: Thomas Homer-Dixon (Principal Investigator, Social Adaptation); Peter Gizewski (Urban Growth, Pakistan); Philip Howard (Chiapas); Kim Kelly (Gaza); and Val Percival (Rwanda, South Africa, Briefing Book).

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