Conflict from Environmental Stress:

The New Leading Cause of Human Conflict

Introduction

Throughout history, humanity has treaded an endless and dangerous string of conflict. Wars have been fought over religion and over ideology. There have been territorial wars, colonial wars, wars of supremacy and more recently the War against Terror. Because of their instantaneous display of grave human loss and wastage such wars have been known to lead to great human suffering, deaths and millions of refugees. However, more recently war as the primary cause of conflict and catastrophic human suffering has been overtaken by a new cause, environmental stress.

Environmental stress results from a gradual decline of the capacity of natural resources to continuously meet the ever-expanding human needs and aspirations of a given society. Consequently the natural resource backstop suddenly but more often gradually collapses leading to tragic human conflict. Tragedy from environment stress describes the remorseless working of new disease vector ranges, droughts, floods, climate change, tsunamis, and hurricanes (such as Katrina) and the complementary resource wars that derail human progress and ultimate happiness. Environmental stress alone rarely leads directly to conflict. It usually contributes indirectly to conditions – political, social or economic – in society, which result in or exacerbate conflict (DFID, 2000)

However, environmental stress can easily escalate into violence. Darfur is a generally dry area with a few moist valleys where certain arable Sudanese communities stay. Historically, the majority of the population was generally nomadic. However, recently climate change meant that total rainfall receipts were less and more unpredictable, this threw the centuries-long tradition of transhumance into chaos. The nomads chose to settle in the moist valleys alongside arable communities, but the land would not accommodate them all, more so with their high-prized large stocks of livestock, conflict broke out and now in less than 10 years, 300,000 human lives have been lost directly due to this conflict.

Another compelling example is in Madagascar, an island nation off the cost of East Africa, with its natural resources in ruin, it is too broke to purchase the essentials from elsewhere. In Antananrivo, the capital city, tourists are told if they go out at night, they will be mugged and are likely to be killed. The streets at night are owned not by bad people, but simply by hungry ones fighting Darwin's age old war; survival for the fittest (Torne, 2004).

In its annual report, the Red Cross estimates that 1998 was the first year in which the number of refugees from natural disasters exceeded those displaced by war (DFID, 2000). The situation has deteriorated further that today, as Badawi (2006) notes; there are twice as many refugees from environmental stress as from war around the world. She adds that the United Nations estimates 65 million people escaping from Africa to Europe annually due to environmental destruction. Famines have tripled in Africa since 1980 and extreme drought will reduce agricultural production by one third (⅓) below what the world needs. By 2025, two out of every three persons on earth will live in places or countries without adequate water (DFID, 2000). Evidence that environmental stress leads to more conflict than war is overwhelming.

Ever wondered why most conflict is in Africa? Poor people are more vulnerable to the effects of environmental stress leading to conflict. The number of natural catastrophes has tripled when compared with the 1960s, while the rate of economic losses associated with them has increased by a factor of nine during the same period (DFID, 2000)

A World Bank study of linkages between rapid population growth, agricultural stagnation and environmental stress in sub-Saharan Africa shows that these phenomena are mutually reinforcing. Rapid population growth is the principle exogenous factor, which has stimulated increase in environmental stress contributing to agricultural stagnation relative to population size (Jeffrey, et., al, 1992). Uganda for example is expected to have 56 million people by 2025, up from the current 28 million (UBoS, 2002)1; this population will be the same as today's British population, a country with similar landmass. But will Uganda have achieved the equivalent level of prosperity in the next 18 years? The obvious outcome of such population outbursts is conflict of catastrophic proportions as millions scramble for the finite yet diminishing natural resources.

This prediction is supported by factual evidence of historical population data. For instance in only 56 years (between 1948 and 2002) Uganda's population grew from a mere 5 million persons to 24.4 people. Midway this century (2050) Uganda's population is predicted to be 130 million persons. This is bound to happen because in Uganda, like in all other African countries, population growth has been such that Africans have been unable to adapt their traditional agricultural land-use, wood use and other livelihood practices fast enough to respond to the pressure of more people (Jeffery et., al, 1992) on the fixed stock of natural resources. For instance by 2025, Uganda is predicted to have lost 70% of its current woody biomass, which provides for over 90% of all current national energy needs (Pomeroy, 2004). In short, 56 million persons in Uganda by 2025 will share or conflict over only 30% of the current wood biomass. There is bound to be tragic conflict.

What then can we do to avert this looming human catastrophic tragedy caused by environmental stress? First we should acknowledge that corrective action now is much cheaper than action 10 –15 years away. It is urgent that we adopt a three pronged approach: enhancing livelihoods; reducing environmental risk and reducing human vulnerability to environmental stress.

Enhancing livelihoods

Poor people often depend heavily on the productivity and environmental services of ecosystems and natural resources for as much as 30% – 50% of their total income (World Bank, 2004). As availability and quality of these resources decline, these livelihoods are threatened – poverty reduction efforts need to support communities to sustainably manage lands, water and forests to prevent conflict from environmental stress.

Reducing environmental risks

Environmental factors are responsible for almost a quarter of all diseases in developing nations. Achieving the millennium development goal on health will not be possible without attending to the underlying environmental causes of disease burden in poor communities

Reducing poor peoples' vulnerability to environmental stress

Millions of poor people are vulnerable to natural disasters and environmental hazards. Responsible growth requires that nations work towards establishing systems such as early warning, monitoring systems and contingency evacuation plans for the most vulnerable communities displaced in marginal areas by socioeconomic circumstances.

The above three pronged approach can be supplemented with national efforts. These include putting people at the center, especially poor people, securing high level political commitment and an influential lead institution, orienting the environment strategy to focus on process and

outcome, building country/local ownership, building on existing environmental strategies and processes, adopting an integrated approach of economic, social and environmental dimensions, ensuring effective monitoring, learning and improvement, setting targets and priorities as well as strengthening capacity.

Conclusion

Environmental stress is a jigsaw puzzle; as population increases and human aspirations, needs and wants indefinitely expand, new wars will be fought and catastrophic conflict is bound to occur as the increasing billions of people war over the finite water, land, forests and clear air. We must act now to avert the looming human tragedy from environmental stress through enhancing livelihoods, reducing environmental risks and alleviating peoples' vulnerability. Billions of poor people are on the frontlines of conflict from environmental stress and they should be the first beneficiaries of corrective action. This approach is in line with the global efforts of Millennium Development Goals.

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