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Abstract

Scarcity, abundance and conflict: a complex new world?

Ravi Bhavnani

Michigan State University, USA

Voicing a concern about impending scarcity, the UK government's Chief Scientific Adviser John Beddington warns that "a 'perfect storm' of food shortages, scarce water and insufficient energy resources threatens to unleash public unrest, cross-border conflicts and mass migration as people flee from the worst-affected regions..." (2009).

But scarcity theorists like Homer-Dixon, forecasted an equally bleak scenario almost a decade ago: rapid economic growth would trigger an increase in the demand for renewable resources like cropland, fresh water, and forests, leading to their degradation, depletion, and unequal distribution. In turn, resource scarcity would serve to increase poverty and migration, stretch institutional capacity to its limits, and deepen social cleavages, all of which would increase the likelihood of violent conflict. Even earlier, Robert Kaplan's piece in *The Atlantic Monthly* warned of "demographic, environmental, and societal stress, in which criminal anarchy emerges as the real strategic danger."

Most political scientists, however, have been altogether more focused on the ills associated with resource windfalls or abundance, not scarcity, and their implication for violent conflict—most of it internal. Oil, diamonds, gold, gems, and timber—precious commodities, all of which should have promoted economic growth and development, lifting standards of living for the masses—led instead to economic deterioration; to unprecedented corruption, mismanagement, and even conflict over their control.

Does abundance then constitute a more significant cause of conflict, or should we be more concerned about a rise in conflict induced by scarcity, being mindful of the warnings by Beddington, Homer-Dixon, and Kaplan? This paper provides a brief survey of academic scholarship on the resource-conflict relationship distinguishes between arguments that focus on abundance versus scarcity as the primary driver of conflict. The mixed findings from this body of research lead the author to question whether the relationship between abundance and scarcity should be examined more closely, focusing instead on how the two may interact: abundance breeding scarcity; scarcity breeding abundance; and how, in a complex new world in which abundance and scarcity coexist, we should craft policies that take these interdependencies into account. From this, five proposals for managing scarce and abundant resources, in an effort to mitigate conflict and promote cooperation are outlined.