Material Attachments: Inequality and Other Explanations for Extractive Resource Conflicts

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Abstract

In communities with exhaustible natural resources, extraction has become synonymous with economic and socio-environmental conflict. This paper examines how understandings of conflict and economic deprivation in extractive communities need to go beyond questions of unequal distributions of power and wealth. Beyond inequality, historical and ethnographic analyses demonstrate how local attachments to land and specific cultural knowledge of resource materials explain the resource conflict. I argue that conflict and livelihood 'dispossession' within local communities must be understood in ways that attend to political relations and cultural knowledge, that determine the causes and effects of socio-environmental conflict.

Keywords: *Extraction, Conflict, Natural Resource, Culture, Inequality*

Introduction

The connection between natural resource wealth and conflict remains a much-debated topic in social, political and economic development. Some scholars have drawn a linkage between resource scarcity and conflict. According to the Neo-Malthusian, dwindling resources imply intensified incentives for conflict. For those opposing this perspective, the abundance of resources invites conflict. The above views expressed shows how natural resource stocks may represent a prize worth fighting for. More to the point, the mismanagement, embezzlement of resource rents and the environmental damages caused by large-scale resource extraction, may all fuel the grievances. However, the relationship between resources and conflict is more complex, varies for different types of resources, institutional and political regimes; and more

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importantly, conditional on many other factors that are subtle to a comprehensive understanding of the conflicts.

For instance, fewer people will doubt that conflicts over oil and diamonds are part and parcel of this kind of resource-conflict bond. However, due to the high economic value that these resources hold, it has always been material for unquestionable inequality of power and wealth. I do not disagree with this assertion, rather I argue that beyond the unequal distribution of power and wealth, historical and ethnographic analyses demonstrate that, local attachments to land and specific cultural knowledge of resource materials also lend credence to extractive resource-related conflicts. My position is that conflict and livelihood 'dispossession' within local communities must be understood in ways that attend to political relations and cultural knowledge, which determine the causes and effects of socio-environmental conflict. Doing so helps to identify the fundamental issues that drive the epistemological misunderstanding, influencing and sustaining the conflict.

In this review paper, I survey the literature on exhaustible extractive resources related to conflicts, to understand the inequalities and also other reasons for extractive resource conflicts in communities where these highly valuable resources, are a key driving force for conflicts. I focused on indigenous and local communities **Material attachment**: that is, the ways through which political relations and cultural knowledge tie individuals and groups to resources, not so much as owners but one of stewardship. As Arturo Escobar (2001), pointed out, peoples' sense of belonging and attachment to place continues to be a critical source of cultural production and mobilization to various ends. For many indigenous communities, the sense of responsibility of the utility of natural resources is greater than the prioritization for

economic value. "Land is not only for material benefit, which compensation payments reduce it to; it encodes their history and identity and is a major source of security" (Kirsch 2014). Since resource-related conflicts have many reasons and occur in different kinds and forms, I will restrict my discussions to the mining industry and community-related conflicts. Because in most cases, it is stakeholders who determine what happens rather than the availability of resources that leads to conflict.

Conflict in Extractive Communities

An incompatibility of interest or ideas between two or more groups of people most often generate conflicts. To some degree, conflict is not solely a negative phenomenon. Non-violent conflict from a Marxist perspective can be an essential component of social change and development, and history has shown that it is a necessary component of human interaction. Max Weber also believed that conflict is not limited to one specific scenario. Rather, there are multiple layers of conflict existing at any given moment and in every society. While in Turner's view, conflict seems to bring fundamental aspects of society, normally overlaid by the customs and habits of daily intercourse, into frightening prominence (Turner 1976).

Conflict becomes problematic when societal mechanisms and institutions for managing and resolving it break down, giving way to violence. Conflicts or disputes are a major concern when it comes to natural resource development, mainly because such resources are seen as common goods. The processes through which conflict begins and how an order is restored are critical because the effect of conflict can be contagious. Anthropologists and historians have examined the social processes through which conflicts have occurred and how they have been handled or order maintained. Their insight shows that disputes or conflicts are embedded in

social relationships that directly affected the way litigants pursued and settled their grievances. Social conflict is, therefore, an inherent attribute of social organization, and as Max Gluckman argued, when disputing parties wished to preserve their relationship with each other, they are more willing to compromise and settle amicably (Gluckman 1974). For anthropologists, understanding the drivers of social conflicts particularly when it comes to non-economic rationales relating to natural resources, shows more than just a fight over wealth and power. But also, the resistance to and contesting of the representation of knowledge and value systems.

When it comes to resource-related conflicts, the focus over the past decade has been on environmental impacts. According to Kirsch (2014, p. 6), "in extreme cases, the environmental impacts from large-scale mining projects can be so pervasive […] mining projects have become the target of unprecedented conflict on almost every continent". The environmental factor is rarely, if ever, the sole cause of violent conflict. Nonetheless, the exploitation of natural resources and related environmental stresses can be implicated in all phases of the conflict cycle, from contributing to the outbreak and perpetuation of violence, to building peace.

Extraction presents particular challenges for both fragile states and developing nations; the exploitation of non-renewable natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and timber has often been cited as a key factor in triggering, escalating or sustaining violent conflicts around the globe (Alex 2012). Most scholars acknowledge that resource-related conflicts are most likely to occur in situations where there is a systematic exclusion of locals from decision-making, economic benefits for a few and a clash with local social, cultural, religious and environmental norms and values. Despite this, as Alex (2012) noted, highly-valuable extractive

resources can have a transformative impact on the development trajectory of a community and the country as a whole. Although, these resources create jobs, generate revenue for basic government services and stimulate further economic growth, harnessing these opportunities present numerous challenges and pitfalls. This is especially the case when we examine the drivers of conflicts related to valuable resources in countries affected by fragility, conflict, and violence.

Drivers of extractive resource-related conflicts

Different types of natural resources generate unique kinds of conflict between stakeholders, often at different spatial and political scales. The potential for a natural resource to generate risks and vulnerabilities that drive conflict includes; *claims to political autonomy, the rights to lands and territories, revenues distribution and benefits, environmental impacts, livelihood security, and cultural survival* (Kirsch 2014). Moises Arce (2016, p. 469), indicate that "in the first decade of the twenty-first century, 337 people died as a consequence of violence in Peru, of which 228 were civilians and 104 were police officers" (as cited in Caballero Martín 2011). He explains that "almost half of these deaths were related particularly to protests over the extraction of natural resources [...]; drawing attention to the adverse impact of mining on livelihoods and the environment, as well as the distributional struggles over mineral wealth, which are the most common type of mobilization in Peru today" (as cited in Defensoría del Pueblo 2012). Other major drivers of extractive resource-related conflicts that have been identified by Alex Grzybowski (2012) include but not limited to the following:

Poor engagement of communities and stakeholders: Where communities and stakeholders are poorly engaged, marginalized or excluded from the dialogue in the resource

development process, they are almost certain to begin to oppose the development. As a result, the use of strategies of violence as a coercive measure against the mining companies, and as a means for addressing old grievances and mounting opposition against the government, are likely to occur. *Inadequate Benefit-Sharing*: If benefits are distributed in a manner that appears unfair as compared to the distribution of the costs, risks, and responsibilities, then those who are disenfranchised or bearing risks and responsibilities without fair compensation are likely to oppose the development, and possibly rebel. *Excessive impact on the economy, society, and the environment*: Notwithstanding the promise of prosperity often associated with the extractive resources, the impacts on the local economy and the macroeconomic conditions of the nation as a whole can be quite negative. And in circumstances where governing institutions are weak or underdeveloped, the consequences of the 'resource curse' are often magnified. *Mismanagement of Funds*: Corruption and diversion of funds to satisfy individual gains at the expense of national and community interests can easily contribute to conflict.

All these drivers and many more are all significant to the wealth and power dynamics of the extractive resources. Yet, significantly suppressed or often missing in the discourse of the extractive related-resources conflict is the role of the local and indigenous attachment to the resource material. Here, I highlight how this perspective can draw attention to the often-vicious cycle of the conflict.

Historical and Ethnographic Analyses of Material attachments

Often the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, as a result of revenues from extraction, exacerbate inequality, poverty, and levels of corruption. But beyond the unequal wealth and power, historical and ethnographic analyses of local attachments to

land and specific cultural knowledge of the resource material, highlight key components of resource-related conflicts, specifically *material attachments'* role in maintaining the conflict or restoring peace. Conde and Le Billon (2017), drew our attention to ethnographic research studies in two locations in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia; and explain how indigenous-placed based identities that are not invented, adopted or imposed but rather are drawn upon historical sedimented practices, landscapes, and repertoires of meaning, emerge through particular patterns of engagement and struggle. Similarly, the case of the Baguazo, in Peru, points at the importance of understanding conflicts from a historical perspective, and decolonizing interpretations to better grasp indigenous political epistemology and ontologies (Acuña 2015). The Dongria Kondh in Orissa, India, is also an example of how cultural and emotional significance of a place is demonstrated when they opposed a bauxite mine in the Niyamgiri Hills. Because the mountain range serves not only as life and livelihoods but is also sacred and for worship, as the "upholders of the Earth and the Universe" (Temper and Martinez-Alier 2013).

What all these revealed according to Conde and Le Billion (2017, p. 686) is that mining projects occur in places and these places are not simply 'material locations' but relational spaces embedded with cultural meanings and emotional significance. For Escobar (2001), an empirical consciousness of place is where culture, nature, and economy continually interact in an ever-evolving place-making process with ontological, epistemic, and experiential dimensions (cited by Conde and Le Billon 2017). In most indigenous communities, "shared identity is based on descent and historical connection to an ancestral state […]; which can be strongly activated in the context of mining, either as a strategy to claim benefits or as a defense of the territory"

(Peterson 2015, p. 495). The need for a deeper engagement with ontological values is important to understanding, economic benefits value vis-à-vis religious or spiritual value. Today, many activists of social movements, advancing the agenda of extraction related impacts has shifted its focus more towards identity and rights-based issues, including civil rights and indigenous rights. These movements are opposing the practice of "accumulation by dispossession" through which resources and rights are appropriated and privatized (Hall 2013; Kirsch 2014).

Conclusion

Whereas mining produces and leaves behind a distinctive landscape often seen as a symbol of economic decline and environmental degradation, the process of place transformation often goes beyond a simple process of environmental disruption and social dislocation. When indigenous value systems are incompatible with industrialized modes of resource extraction, understanding both the dynamics of the natural resource in question and the specifics of how it can contribute to the conflict cycle, can help policymakers and practitioners ensure that conflict prevention and conflict sensitivity are included within all-natural resource management programs. More importantly, Brett Mills (2013, p. 112), citing Harding (2009) and Yoon (2009) who "query the scientific language which has come to dominate how humans talk about the world around them, for a while such language is purportedly objective and rational, instead it presents social ideologies as evidential truths". As Harding and Yoon show, other cultures have not insisted on such language, and this has allowed them to develop quite different relationships to the natural world; relationships which, in an environmental sense, might be more fruitful and sustainable (cited by Mills 2013, p. 112).

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