



Review Article

Resources, conflict and governance: A critical review[☆]Jeroen Cuvelier^{a,c,*}, Koen Vlassenroot^a, Nathaniel Olin^b^a Conflict Research Group, University of Ghent, Belgium^b Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States^c Special Chair for Humanitarian Aid and Reconstruction, Wageningen University, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

The past two decades have witnessed growing concerns in policy circles about the role of natural resources in conflicts in the Global South. New frameworks of intervention have been designed with the aim of cutting the assumed links between armed groups and resources, and promoting transparent models of resource governance. This article argues that these interventions are often based on unwarranted assumptions about the relationship between resources, conflict and governance. It presents a critical analysis of a broad set of peer-reviewed publications and influential research reports about the different ways resource governance affects people in fragile and conflict-affected areas. The authors identify a number of gaps and weaknesses in the literature, pay particular attention to the quality of the empirical evidence base for certain theoretical claims, and suggest avenues for future research.

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Contents

1. Introduction	340
2. Methodology	341
2.1. Systematic literature searches	341
2.2. Overview of the reviewed literature	342
3. Assessment of the evidence base of the literature	343
3.1. Natural resource abundance and the 'resource curse'	343
3.2. Greed as an explanatory factor of armed struggle	344
3.3. War economies, criminality and rebel governance	345
3.4. Hybrid (resource) governance arrangements	346
3.5. Resource governance and post-conflict reconstruction	347
4. Conclusion	348
References	349

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of armed conflicts in the Global South, many of which are believed to have been caused, prolonged or intensified

by the abundant availability or lack of natural resources. It is often assumed that armed groups start fighting because they want to gain or maintain control over natural resources in certain areas. There is also a widespread conviction that many conflicts drag on because belligerents are able to finance their war efforts through their control of the exploitation and trade of natural resources.

These views have been echoed repeatedly over the past 20 years, and have been embraced by such a large number of activists, journalists, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), researchers and policymakers that they have become conventional wisdom. There is a strong tendency to reduce violent conflict in a resource-rich or resource-poor area as being (at least partly) motivated by rebel

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leadership's greed or by their ambition to secure access to scarce natural resources.¹ When in 2012 rebel forces in the Central African Republic were fighting the army of President Bozize, a reporter from the British newspaper *The Independent* wrote that '*in reality they're battling for the dominance of the diamonds*' (*The Independent*, 2012). Likewise, when in December 2013 South Sudan was on the brink of civil war, the NGO Global Witness sent out a press release stating that '*historically, South Sudan's oil fields have been a target for rebel movements, raising concerns that competition over resources could be a key driver of the unfolding crisis*' (*Global Witness*, 2013).²

Growing concerns about the role of natural resources in conflict have also encouraged policymakers to design new frameworks of intervention, aimed at cutting the supposed links between armed groups and resources and at promoting transparent models of resource governance. Examples include the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme (KPCS) and the Regional Initiative Against the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR). However, these interventions often tend to rely on unsupported assumptions regarding how natural resources are linked to the motivations of combatants and the dynamics of conflict, and rarely consider the populations in conflict-affected regions, who play an integral role in these dynamics.

The accounts that resources produce a key explanation for the behaviour of armed groups or that cutting access to minerals reduces the risk of violence and warfare, often lack sufficient empirical support but have become so dominant that little room is left for alternative approaches. The aim of this article is to investigate the empirical evidence of these claims through a systematic review of the literature on the relationship between resources, conflict and governance. The article particularly seeks to examine the quality of the information that has been used to analyse the different ways resource governance affects people in fragile and conflict-affected areas.³ The focus of our attention is, first, on the solidity and reliability of the empirical evidence base for the arguments that are currently dominating the debate about the relationship between natural resources and conflict, and, second, on the strength of the empirical evidence base for arguments about hybrid arrangements⁴ that define access to and control over natural resources in conflict-affected areas.

The article presents a critical analysis of a broad set of peer-reviewed publications and influential research reports on resource governance in conflict-affected and fragile areas. In our literature search, which was carried out according to the principles of a systematic literature review, we decided to use 1990 as a cut-off year. This choice was motivated by the fact that, in the literature, the end of the Cold War and economic globalisation are widely acknowledged as having had a significant impact on warfare throughout the world (Kaldor, 1999; Duffield, 2001) and as having contributed to the growing importance of natural resources as causes or drivers of violent conflicts (Berdal, 2003). It should be added that we have been

especially interested in literature that addresses the experiences and perspectives of conflict affected populations, and that we have decided to concentrate on non-renewable lootable and/or tradable natural resources, including oil.⁵ One caveat, though, is that even if the search strategy was carefully developed and aimed at being as representative as possible, some literature is probably under-presented or even missing in the review. This literature review therefore is not only meant to present an analysis of existing evidence on resources, conflict and governance, but – as will be explained – also points at some of the limits of this kind of exercises.

The article is organised as follows. In the first section, the methodology will be discussed, which search strategy was used and how the publications database was assembled. The second section is dedicated to an evaluation of the evidence base present in the literature and looks into existing knowledge on (i) natural resource abundance and the 'resource curse'; (ii) greed as an explanatory factor of armed struggle; (iii) war economies, criminality and rebel governance; (iv) hybrid (resource) governance arrangements, particularly in borderlands; and (v) resource governance in post-conflict reconstruction. Finally, in the third part of the article, we identify the gaps in the literature and identify avenues for further research on resource governance in conflict-affected areas.

2. Methodology

2.1. Systematic literature searches

The reviewed publications were systematically selected using several criteria. We reviewed research conducted in the following conflict-affected countries and regions: Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, Central African Republic, Kenya, Angola), the Sahel (Nigeria, Mali, Niger, Chad), the Caucasus, and Afghanistan–Pakistan. These regions were selected on the basis of the presence of natural resources as defined above, and the recognition that these resources have been identified in dominant narratives as complicating factors in local conflict.⁶ We only included research which dealt with the impact of resources on conflict-affected populations or which provided local-level empirical data.⁷ As our search was mainly based on English-language

¹ This is not meant to imply that the effects of resource scarcity and resource abundance are similar, or are portrayed as such in the literature.

² Similar explanations have in the past been given to account for the eruption or continuation of violence in countries like Liberia (timber, diamonds, drugs), Angola (diamonds, oil), Sierra Leone (diamonds), Colombia (cocaine), Myanmar (opium, timber), El Salvador (coffee) and Iraq–Iran (oil), to name but a few (see Le Billon, 2010: 573).

³ Our choice to concentrate on the impact of resource governance on people in fragile and conflict-affected areas is motivated by the fact that this is in line with the general research goals of the Justice and Security Research Programme, which is funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) of the United Kingdom (UK) and which is coordinated by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). For more information about this research programme, see <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/jsrp/>.

⁴ Based on our own research experience in the field of resource governance in the Global South, we have the impression that hybridity is one of the key characteristics of this type of arrangements.

⁵ These resources have taken centre stage in the literature on resource abundance and conflict, while the assumed struggle for control over these resources has inspired a broad spectrum of policy responses. Existing literature and policy responses have paid the most attention to diffuse resources, i.e. those "spatially spread over vast areas and often exploited by less capital-intensive industries" (Le Billon, 2004: 8), but point resources (i.e. those "spatially concentrated in small areas (which), can be exploited by capital-intensive extractive industries", Le Billon, 2004: 8) will be part of our review as well. Other natural resources such as water and land have received increased attention from scholars and policymakers, but will not be included. Nor will the literature on resource scarcity and pastoralism be integrated into our assessment.

⁶ Needless to say, we are aware of the fact that there is also a large body of literature on the relationship between resources, conflict and governance in other parts of the Global South such as Latin America and the Asia-Pacific Region. While some of this literature discusses topics and themes that also has come up in the scholarship on regions under investigation in the present review paper (e.g. the issue of the "resource curse", the involvement of armed groups and global shadow networks in the illicit exploitation of natural resources...), it needs to be acknowledged that there are also a large number of publications dealing with debates and concepts that we did not encounter in our own literature search. In the literature on Latin America, for example, there is a lot of attention for so-called "corporate-community conflicts", i.e. large-scale mining projects threatening local livelihoods and giving rise to social protests (e.g. Triscitti, 2014; Bland and Chirinos, 2014).

⁷ Consequently, we only took into account part of the literature on the relationship between armed groups and natural resources [0]. The survey does not pay attention, for instance, to themes like the impact of access to resource flows on insurgent organisation and behaviour (Staniland, 2012), the dynamics of inter-rebel violence (Fjelle and Nilsson, 2012), the impact of the location of natural resources on the duration of armed conflict (Lujala, 2010), and the crime-rebellion nexus (Cornell, 2007).

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