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Why do conflicts over scarce renewable resources turn violent? A qualitative comparative analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the question why intergroup conflicts over scarce, renewable resources in peripheral areas of the global South escalate into violence. In order to do so, twenty cases of such conflicts, seven of which turned violent, are analyzed. The method of fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis is used in order to bridge the gap between quantitative and qualitative accounts in the field and to detect patterns of conjunctural causation. In theoretical terms, structural conditions (negative othering and high power differences between the conflict parties) and triggering conditions (external resource appropriation and recent political change) of a violent escalation of renewable resource conflicts are distinguished. The empirical results as well as various robustness checks and comparisons with individual cases suggest that the simultaneous presence of negative othering, low power differences and recent political change is a sufficient condition for the violent escalation of conflicts over scarce renewable resources. I conclude that research on socio-environmental conflicts should pay more attention to conjunctural causation, local power differences and qualitatively different forms of conflict and political change.

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1. Introduction

The possible impact of global environmental change on intra-state violent conflict onset has received considerable attention since at least the 1990s, with a special focus on the scarcity of renewable natural resources (Bächler, 1998; Homer-Dixon and Blitt, 1998). In recent years, this research has been related to and picked up by a growing literature on climate change and conflict (e.g. Scheffran et al., 2012; Theisen et al., 2013). But the role of renewable resources for violent conflict onset is not only discussed by scientists, but by policy makers as well. US Secretary of State John Kerry, for instance, recently expressed his concern about the issue: 'If we don't respond adequately to the challenge of global climate change over the course of these next years there will be people fighting wars over water and over land' (U.S. Department of State, 2013).

Research on the possible links between natural renewable resources and conflict has been conducted in a range of disciplines, including geography, political science, sociology and anthropology. But despite considerable research efforts, no scientific consensus on the issue has emerged as yet. Some quantitative studies suggest a link between low precipitation levels (Fjelde and von Uexkull, 2012; Raleigh and Kniveton, 2012) or freshwater scarcity (Gizelis and Wooden, 2010; Raleigh and Urdal, 2007) and intra-state violent conflict, while others find no significant relationship (O'Loughlin et al., 2014; Wischnath and Buhaug, 2014) or even a negative correlation between low rainfall/water scarcity and violent conflict within states (Hendrix and Glaser, 2007; Salehyan and Hendrix, 2014). The same is true for quantitative studies on soil degradation (Hendrix and Glaser, 2007; Raleigh and Urdal, 2007; Rowhani et al., 2011; Theisen, 2008) and deforestation (Esty et al., 1999; Theisen, 2008). The findings of qualitative studies are similarly ambivalent. Some authors claim a role for renewable resource scarcity as a cause of violent conflict in certain cases (Homer-Dixon, 1994; Kahl, 2006; Schilling et al., 2012), some scholars reject such a link (Adano et al., 2012; Selby and Hoffmann, 2014), and some provide mixed results (Benjaminsen and Ba, 2009; de Châtel, 2014).

In order to advance our knowledge about the links between renewable resource scarcity and intra-state violent conflict, scholars have repeatedly emphasized three tasks. First, according to Barnett (2000), scholars have convincingly argued how resource

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scarcity causes grievances, livelihood insecurities and conflicts, but we do hardly know how, when and why such tense situations escalate into open violence. Similarly, Engels/Chojnacki (2012: 94) claim that 'the transition from conflict to violence has not yet been analyzed in a sufficiently sophisticated manner in the literature on "environmental conflicts".'

Second, the inconsistent results of previous studies suggest that renewable resource scarcity is linked to violent conflict only if specific (combinations of) context factors are present. This claim is nowadays shared by nearly all authors in the research field (Homer-Dixon and Blitt, 1998; Scheffran et al., 2012). 'It is important to ask, therefore, why violence [related to scarce resources] occurs in some places and not in others' (Peluso and Watts, 2001: 29). Recently, quantitative studies have tried to address this problem by introducing interaction terms between some independent variables, such as reduced precipitation, political exclusion and economic marginalization (Fjelde and von Uexkull, 2012; Theisen et al., 2012). However, the number of interactions terms that can be used in a statistical regression is limited (Vis, 2012). Case studies, by contrast, are able to consider complex interactions between different variables, but often suffer from a lack of generalizability and comparability.

This relates to a third, more general point. The methods most widely used in the research on renewable resource scarcity and violent conflicts are so far either large-N regression analyses or qualitative single-case studies. The latter have repeatedly been criticized for the low external validity of their findings (Gleditsch and Urdal, 2002; Koubi et al., 2014), although case studies are in principal able to produce generalizable results (Flyvbjerg, 2006). But the shortcomings of large-N regressions have been pointed out as well. Besides their limited ability to consider interaction terms and non-linear effects (Sterzel et al., 2014), they cannot include important variables on which quantitative datasets either do not exist (e.g. resource distribution) or are hard to produce (e.g. identities, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms) (Ide and Scheffran, 2014; Selby, 2014). Other datasets have only a low spatial resolution, usually the national level, or are criticized for their low reliability (Ide and Scheffran, 2014; Koubi et al., 2014). As a consequence, calls have been launched to explore middle ways between qualitative single-case and quantitative large-N studies which combine the strengths of both approaches (Meierding, 2013; Solow, 2013).

All these three suggestions are picked up by this study. In order to do so, it utilizes the rich case-study literature on renewable resource scarcity and conflict. Twenty cases of intergroup conflict around land, water, fish or forest resources are identified, seven of which escalated into open violence, while 13 remained largely non-violent. The twenty cases are compared in a systematic manner with the help of the qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) technique/approach in order to detect the conditions under which conflicts around scarce renewable resources turn violent. QCA is well suited to deal with complex causal relationships and to uncover relevant context factors and interaction effects. Since cases are selected from a variety of locations and contexts, the results are much more generalizable than single-case studies. However, the analysis is still essentially based on the in-depth, qualitative knowledge of the twenty cases under study. In this sense, the QCA provides a middle ground between quantitative large-N and qualitative case studies.

This article proceeds as follows. In the next section, the theoretical background of the study is developed (2). Afterwards, the research design (3) as well as the results and several robustness checks (4) are presented. In the following discussion, the results are interpreted and compared to in-depth analyses of singular cases (5). Avenues for future research as well as policy implications are spelled out in the conclusion (6).

2. Theoretical background

In this study, a conflict is defined as a manifest clash of the interests of two or more social groups. Violence refers to the use of direct, physical force against human beings. And renewable resource scarcity describes a situation in which the land, water, fish or forest resources in a given area are insufficient to satisfy current human demands for these resources. Such scarcity can be supply-induced, demand-induced, and/or structural (induced by unequal distribution) (Homer-Dixon and Blitt, 1998: 6). But under what conditions do conflicts around such scarce resources turn violent? Albeit not without objections (Selby and Hoffmann, 2014), previous research largely agrees that violent conflicts around scarce renewable resources are most likely to occur in relatively poor countries (often termed global south or non-OECD world), and there especially in rural and peripheral areas where the state's capacity is limited (Bretthauer, 2014; Buhaug et al., 2010). These factors are used to demarcate the 'area of homogeneity' of this study, which makes sure that the cases selected are similar enough to compare them in a meaningful way (Berg-Schlosser and de Meur, 2009: 20f). But poverty and peripheral location are not suitable for distinguishing cases of violent conflict from cases of non-violent conflict about scarce renewable resources, since both conditions are quite prevalent.

A starting point for my theoretical framework is the distinction between structural and triggering conditions (roughly equal to independent variables) of violent conflict escalation (Hendrix and Glaser, 2007; Kaufman, 2001). The former are defined as the pre-conditions of a violent conflict which are largely static and invariant over time, while the latter refer to short-term dynamics or 'precipitating events' (Hislope, 2007: 154) of violent escalations. In the QCA terminology, both structural and triggering conditions are INUS conditions for the violent escalation of conflicts over scarce renewable resources. An INUS-condition 'is an insufficient but necessary part of a condition which is itself unnecessary but sufficient' for the outcome under investigation (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012: 79). Since the number of conditions that should be included into a QCA is limited, the analysis will focus on four conditions, which is in line with recent recommendations (Berg-Schlosser and de Meur, 2009; Marx and Dusa, 2011). The conditions are selected in accordance with the theoretical literature, but also in a dialogue with the cases (Schneider and Wagemann, 2012: 281). Only such conditions can be chosen on which reliable and location-specific information are available for all (potential) cases under study. More specifically, the analysis will focus on two structural and two triggering conditions for the violent escalation of conflicts over scarce renewable resources. It is expected that a combination of structural and triggering conditions is sufficient for the violent escalation of conflicts over scarce renewable resources, while the mere presence of (combinations of) either structural or triggering conditions is neither necessary nor sufficient for such an escalation.

The first structural condition used in the analysis is *negative othering*. The importance of collective identities for the use of violence by conflict parties (Fröhlich, 2012; Kaufman, 2006) as well as the stability of such identities over time (Jabri, 1996) is well known. Identities can be understood as collective social constructs which define who are the members of a given social group, what attributes and goals they share, and how they relate to other groups (Abdelal et al., 2006). The delineation from other groups ('othering') can facilitate the use of violence if the respective Other is portrayed in negative terms (Chatterjee, 2012; Hansen, 2006). The concrete forms of negative othering are time and place specific. But it has been shown that the construction of another group (a) as an aggressor or existential threat to the Self and/or (b) as much lower in value/legitimacy than the Self usually provides motivation and

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