



Panel Discussion on Conflicts Over Water, Land and Food: Prevention and Responses

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Introduction

Growing from our own interest in natural resources conflict and cooperation – we have been collaborating with the Geneva Water hub hosted at the University of Geneva towards the development of this event on conflicts on water, land and food looking at prevention and responses. Indeed, while water and land are key natural resources that shape billions of peoples' livelihoods, food security, wellbeing and identity, their equitable and peaceful management is an increasingly challenging task due to a multitude of factors such as resource degradation, climate change, population growth and violent conflict that can exacerbate vulnerabilities. Multi-faceted policies and practices that combine approaches from humanitarian, development, peacebuilding and human rights in a complementary and mutually reinforcing way present potential for preventing both structural and direct violence.

To this end we invited practitioners in their respective fields of expertise to come and discuss the potential of land, food and water as instruments of peace in preventing conflicts and building peace in emergency situations. We have with us today:

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Mr Murray Burt - Senior WASH Officer at Global level, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) based in Geneva, who currently focuses on WASH policy and strategy development and implementation, lead research and innovation in WASH, and supports the technical assistance to UNHCR WASH staff.

Mr Julius Jackson - Technical Officer (Protracted Crises) UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in Rome, who under FAO's Strategic Programme on Resilience works on conflict-affected contexts, with a particular interest in how building resilience and supporting livelihoods relates to sustaining peace.

Ms Nora Meier - previously working for QUNO and now a Consultant for the FAO, is continuing research on the role of farmers' seed systems in sustaining peace with an emphasis on social cohesion.

Mr Michael Talhami - Urban Adviser on Water and Habitat, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva, who focuses on urban policy and humanitarian programs in support of helping utilities to ensure operational continuity in service provision during times of crises.

Dr Mara Tignino – co-convener of this event and Reader at the Faculty of Law of the University of Geneva and Coordinator of the Platform for International Water Law at the Geneva Water Hub, whose research interests include international humanitarian law, human rights, and dispute settlement. Mara also acts as an expert and legal adviser for States, international and non-governmental organizations.

How do you see the challenges in resource management and how does this play out in the conflict cycle?

To gain an insight into the variety of ways in which natural resources management plays out in the conflict cycle – we will start by asking a broad question on what each panelist sees as the key challenges in their particular sector, approach or area of work regarding or linked to natural resource management.

Mara Tignino - Senior Lecturer and Coordinator of the Platform for International Water Law/Geneva Water Hub, University of Geneva.

There are linkages between natural resources particularly water, land and food. Conflicts around water are not only conflicts around water, there are usually multiple factors at play such as also a conflict over land and natural resources and access to food. Natural resource management is a multidimensional concept.

Using the example of [land grabbing in Ethiopia](#); the local community are the first involved in these conflicts around natural resources and the first to have an impact, but they can also play a part in the prevention of conflict.

Using the example of the dams in the Euphrates and [Tigris Rivers](#); water can be used as a weapon during armed conflicts and threatening the life of millions of people.

Mr Murray Burt - Senior WASH Officer at Global level, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The average protracted refugee situation now is exceeding 26 years, and many refugee situations are much longer. When we look at the reasons for forced displacement, it's usually conflict and sometimes isolated persecution. As we look at the

reasons behind conflict it's usually political and if you then go deeper into this situation it is usually related to competition for resources.

Climate change, with its changes such as higher temperatures and increased flooding and droughts, is also a driver of conflict and displacement. People have moved across borders due to food insecurity that is as a result of conflict but also due to increased droughts and decreased rainfalls with South Sudan and Somalia providing an apt example.

As refugees move over a border into another area, this results in another type of conflict, and another type of resource competition, as the communities hosting these refugees start to feel threatened by the refugees which have come into their communities, we have seen this in Europe after the 2015 influx of Syrian refugees. In Bangladesh however, which is a resource-poor area, when 600 thousand new people arrive, there is definitely new resource competition, prices are increasing for commodities on the market, there's competition for food and cooking fuel, there is deforestation, there is need for building materials to construct houses and often it's forests and natural resources which are covering some of the cost. This in turn can create a secondary conflict between host communities and refugees. This can also occur when there is service-level inequality, as sometimes refugees can get services like water and cooking fuel for free, because the humanitarian and international community has recognized them as vulnerable, whereas the host community is having to still pay for these resources, again, acting as a source of conflict. Refugees are seen as being better-off by the hosting communities such as in [Kenya](#) as an example. There is also inequality in access to resources, like sanitation and the job and labour market.

Mr Julius Jackson - Technical Officer (Protracted Crises) UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Rome.

There is a real need to acknowledge complexity. The relationship between natural resources and violent conflict is complex, very political and depends on the specific context that it is in and it can play out at very different levels simultaneously. These interlinkages also play out in cycles.

To illustrate this need to complexity acknowledgement, if we look to the UN Secretary General, who made it clear that prevention is at the heart of the reform and his tenure but the recent UN SG report on Boko Haram and the Lake Chad basin, it doesn't address the underlying environmental dynamics which affect the water security and food security of local communities in the region.

There is a risk of oversimplification of issues. When talking to policy makers in various sectors there is a tendency to try and create links that may not be there, such as youth and radicalization, not everyone young will be an extremist, climate change and conflict, there is not a direct causal link, and supporting rural livelihoods and reducing migration flows. If we design policies without a wider-angle lens and broader view, we will be getting interventions wrong.

We also need to change mindsets. There is a tendency to look at problems with a technical perspective and not look at the political context, especially around natural resources. Our programmes and policies need to address underlying drivers and root causes.

Mr Michael Talhami - Urban Adviser on Water and Habitat, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

ICRC have seen natural resource competition directly contribute to fueling conflicts and often suffers directly from the consequence of conflicts. For instance, pollution of water resources or the direct destruction of infrastructure. Water plays

an indirect as opposed to direct role in causing conflict, water competition can lead to civil unrest within a conflict area. The Arab Spring was an apt example of this. In Yemen, there have been tribal feuds over water for years.

Ms Nora Meier - Consultant, Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO)/UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

Competition over natural resources and conflict can become a vicious cycle.

Conflict impacts not only the relationships between State and society but also social relationships and can create lower levels of public trust in governance and willingness of individuals to cooperate. Once destroyed it is hard to rebuild these structures.

We need to capitalize on well-functioning government arrangements and networks, creating the space for and facilitating dialogue to rebuild trust amongst societies.

Questions and comments from the audience:

- [How are intentional designs around the theories of change having a direct impact on peacebuilding through the natural resources management programmes?](#)

Response from Julius Jackson: How can we better move ahead in terms of design of programmes? There is a real issue with there being a lot of rhetoric and perceived wisdom around pathways and a lack of empirical evidence supporting those interactions and relationships. FAO is working with other organisations to put in place some monitoring and evaluation in programmes around resilience where conflicts are existing to see if there is anything we can uncover there. There is very little evidence out there and it can lead to a problem of oversimplification. We need better designed monitoring and evaluation and evidence building. There is too much ‘tick-boxing’ at the moment.

- [Do you use artificial intelligence to analyse the interdependencies between all the different factors?](#)

Response from Julius Jackson: I am not aware that this is something which is being done, or at the very least not at the FAO.

- [Could dialogue between the local authorities and civil society be aided through a public platform for best practices or guidelines?](#)

Response from Julius Jackson: Some tools used in the FAO address this, for example, relating to land tenure, [the Participatory Negotiated Territorial Development \(PNTD\)](#) approach is exactly that kind of an approach which seeks to bring stakeholders around the table, communities and other actors within the power dynamics that are around the particular natural resource in question to come up with an agreed and shared plan of how to approach use natural resources more equitably. There are plenty of other examples across different agencies. Local communities themselves also have in place their own systems of managing natural resources which we need to be mindful of when designing and working with them.

- [Will increasing food security in a place be enough to decrease the refugee flow?](#)

Response from Julius Jackson: In and of itself, no. We need to be very much more nuanced in understanding all of the complexities of drivers that make people decide to move somewhere. In certain cases, this is due to human rights abuses, persecution, conflict, fear of death and when you add the exacerbating impact of climate change onto an already economically marginalized community which is heavily dependent on agriculture but has been neglected by the State with support around, for example, extension services, there is a tipping point. Food security is not unimportant, it is important, but it is part of a much wider set of issues which need to be explored. By improving food

security through developing rural livelihoods, access to services, political engagement, etc. you will then create a different dynamic for those making the decision of whether to move or not.

Response from Murray Burt: These decisions are always complex and related to a whole range of factors. The issue of food security has been the tipping point in a number of examples. One being that of [Somalian famine in 2011](#), but it was related to a much more complex situation where conflict had hindered the ability to plant on the land and climate change had exacerbated these conditions through drought. All of these factors culminated to be the final tipping point, but you can't always isolate a tipping point in every refugee situation.

Response from Florence Foster: There is a lack of existing research into the mixed reasons why people might move but it is developing. These reasons are different depending on age, location, etc.

The transformative element of natural resource management

Considering that natural resource management is often linked to tension or even violent conflict in many contexts – I will now invite you to elaborate on the transformative nature of such initiatives – namely how is natural resource management, food, water, land, you name it, a positive driver of cohesion, cooperation – and how can we enhance that towards bettering or complementing prevention strategies and conciliation efforts.

Mara Tignino – Reader and Coordinator of the Platform for International Water Law/Geneva Water Hub, University of Geneva.

A good European example of this is the [Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes](#), also known as the Water Convention, was the result of bringing together Eastern and Western European countries. Shared water resources became a tool for bringing together Eastern and Western Europe at the end of the Cold War, as this convention was adopted in 1992.

This instrument was a source of inspiration for other agreements in particular in the Balkans region, such as the agreement on the Sava River basin, which brought together all the neighbouring countries just after an armed conflict.

Ms Nora Meier - Consultant, Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO)/UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)

The communal management of natural resources, particularly at the local level, can serve as the basis for rebuilding relationships and trust, therefore promoting governance and peacebuilding. It provides a platform for dialogue by fostering communication and interaction between stakeholders and communities.

For the concept of our research on farmers' seed systems in sustaining peace; the farmers' seed systems themselves are argued to be a positive form of local collective action, leading to increased trust and cooperation.

Farmers' seed systems are defined as social networks that emerge with the formation of ties by seed transfer events. Farmers obtain up to 90% of their seeds from sources within their farmers' seed systems, such seeds are produced, reused and stored at the farm or community level and in their natural habitat by farmers from their own harvest through exchange and barter among friends, relatives, neighbours and through local grain markets. The circulation of seed is a local process in all farmers' seed systems which is based on trust and is influenced by sociocultural norms and practices.

Farmers' seed systems are important for the socioecological resilience of our global food system as well as the ability of local rural communities to build their resilience to conflict. In terms of socioecological resilience, the majority of

agricultural biodiversity is actively maintained through farmers' seed systems. This diversity is what enables our global food system to adapt and respond to environmental and other changes.

Small-scale farmers in developing countries depend on this agricultural biodiversity to maintain sustainable production and meet their livelihood needs. The current erosion of agricultural biodiversity diminishes their capacity to cope with such changes and leads to yield instability and loss and can increase their vulnerability to becoming food insecure.

Farmers' seed systems also provide access to seed and so can play an important role in fulfilling local and national seed requirements and eventually achieving food and nutrition security. In particular, the storage of seed at communal level may provide important safety nets and serve as coping mechanisms in times of conflict.

Collective action that underlines these farmers' seed systems is based on social cooperation. Interaction between groups to address mutual problems such as the management of natural resources is often a good starting point for building trust and establishing cooperation. For instance, we have found that trust among farmers can increase cooperation, lower transaction costs, increase bargaining power within the market and allow groups of individuals to share the risk associated with experimentation and adoption of new innovations.

On the other hand, we also found a case of community level seed production in which a lack of social cohesion was a constraint to collective action, in that a lack of trust among people lead to reduced willingness to cooperate among parties, and ultimately lead to a decrease in food production.

Community-based management of natural resources plays a vital role in restoring collaboration at the local level and therefore overall local peacebuilding and prevention efforts. This is important as an increasing number of conflicts are fought around natural resources as well as at the local level. Enhancing relationships at community level can increase both the community's resilience to future shocks as well as promoting social cohesion by providing inclusive and participatory frameworks of collaboration. The thereby established levels of trust and relationships can then lead to future collective action in other areas.

Mr Michael Talhami - Urban Adviser on Water and Habitat, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

What are some of the most pressing issues around armed conflicts, natural resource management and service provision today? We primarily see that challenge in being able to stabilize and ensure some level of access to urban services be it water, waste-water, electricity, etc. and the interconnectedness between those various services and the interdependencies that exist there.

This is a challenge for humanitarian actors who have developed their traditional humanitarian responses to be responsive to either short-term emergencies or to provide and help foster short-term reactive coping mechanisms. But now we're moving far beyond simply water-trucking and establishing water tanks and tap-stands and distributing jerrycans to actually engaging in urban services. This speaks somewhat to the social cohesion, although it is very difficult to measure. There are definitely cases where we see that social compact between a service provider at a local level and the population can be strengthened by purely the quantity and quality of the service; moving from an intermittent to poor-quality service to a more reliable service is one example.

There is a nuance, often in humanitarian settings, the concern can be that you're then attaching yourself to one side of the conflict, for instance, being a local actor linked to a government. This is where humanitarian principles play a critical role and what we see today especially in non-international armed conflicts, which makes up most of these conflicts that we are

involved in today, is that it provides opportunities across lines to open up humanitarian access and to ensure coverage of the service-provision in both opposition-held areas and government-held areas. Additionally, there's an increasing sophistication of armed groups these days to recognize that controlling territory also means being able to provide services. And so, these open up opportunities to work across lines and develop potential for negotiating humanitarian access but the interdependencies that exist between various resources open up the opportunity for conflict management and conflict resolution at a local level.

More robust responses factor in both the root causes and humanitarian consequences provide a contribution to alleviating local tensions, avoiding certain grievances and possibly play into edging closer towards a transition for peace. The work on urban-services is one of those areas that is slowly moving us towards that.

Mr Murray Burt - Senior WASH Officer at Global level, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

We need a durable and long-lasting solution for refugees. UNHCR works in three areas. One is return to the home-country, so resolving the conflict so that refugees can return home. We've seen this happen in many parts of the world over the last years. The second option is third-country resettlement, where we can move refugees from an immediate hosting country to a third country which then can reduce this refugee-host community conflict but in turn create these conflicts in the third country. This gets a lot of media attention, but refugee resettlement is only a tiny part of resolving refugee situations. What UNHCR has found over recent years is that more and more refugees situations are becoming long and protracted. This is where integration or integrating refugees more fully into the host communities where they are becomes more important. This is something UNHCR has focused more and more on in recent years.

As we move into the age of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the fact that many of the SDGs talk about universal coverage and access for all, and in particular [Water and Sanitation Goal 6](#), which is sustainable access to water and sanitation for all, it means that all within your borders, including refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people, are now the responsibility of governments or those countries to include in their sustainable development goal targets so that by 2030, all people in the world can have safe access to water and sanitation.

Conflict-affected and fragile states are the ones that are lagging behind in the SDGs progress. People believe in their minds that peace is the normal state and that conflict is abnormal but what is evident in many parts of the world is that conflict is the normal reality. So, learning how to work within conflict-affected areas, within fragile states and within border regions with refugees is a new way of thinking.

UNHCR is looking to harmonize service-levels between host communities and refugees to avoid this level of conflict at the ground level so that we can be providing refugees with the same level of service-provision as local people would be receiving in that area. We are looking at how to integrate refugee WASH service provision within national systems and integrate planning for refugees within national development planning. When you have a situation where refugees are in a country for longer even than 20 years, this is a normal development cycle and refugees can be incorporated into that development funding mechanisms.

Also, if refugees can be given the right to work and freedom of movement, which is part of the [1951 Convention](#), then they can become an economic contributor and can pay for services in the same way as local people. UNHCR and ILO have been working to change the mindsets of hosting countries to see refugees as a contributor towards sustainable development and a net contributor towards economic growth and not to be seen as a burden to a country.

Mr Julius Jackson - Technical Officer (Protracted Crises) UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Rome.

We need to recognize Uganda and their role in taking in, predominantly, South Sudanese refugees and affording them the right to work and freedom of movement and giving them a 30 by 30 sq. metre parcel of land on which to grow food. We are talking about 1.2 million refugees in this context so that is a significant open-door policy by Uganda.

On the SDGs and 'Leaving No-One Behind'; stated in the [report](#) released this autumn The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2017, co-authored by FAO, if we don't resolve conflict we will not achieve SDG 2 by 2030. There is a small increase in the amount of severely food-insecure people in the world, 815 million now up from 777 million last year. We know that in protracted crises and conflicts, people are 2.5-3 times more food-insecure than they are in other development situations.

One of the challenges is about scaling up and how to do that in a context-specific way.

Another challenge is that these things take time and you need time on the ground which more often than not we do not have with project cycles and funding. We need longer-term engagement with communities. Another key challenge is trust and how you build it and building this trust takes time.

In Aba, the borders haven't been defined by Sudanese and South Sudanese governments, there is a stabilization force there which provides security which is a UN mission. There are two tribes which are both pastoralists, who both use that area as pasture land for grazing for their cattle. Over the years the situation has deteriorated, they previously had an accord between tribal leaders and communities over the use of this land but that has become complicated by external factors such as the situation in Sudan over the years, the South Sudanese independence and the dysfunctional or minimal administrative bodies set up. Working with them was through a livestock vaccination campaign, which started by training community-based animal health workers of one tribe to vaccinate the cattle of the other tribe and vice versa. So, this started a movement of people across lines where there wasn't before. This gave birth to a peace agreement. The natural resource of grazing pasture land was used in a window of opportunity to have a substantial discussion on peace.

Wood is a key natural resource for refugee and host communities, which can be used for building but is often used for fuel, cooking and heating as traditional biomass. The [Safe Access to Fuel and Energy \(SAFE\)](#) approach tries to tackle the problems with wood fuel collection, environmental degradation, sexual exploitation, nutritional issues as well as food security. You can put out community wood lots which are managed by either the host community or the displaced population. That can set up an economic interaction between the communities done on an equitable basis. Sustainable charcoal production is also another technical solution to competition over a natural resource. Pastoralist field schools can bring together rivaling pastoralist communities where they can engage with each other in a learning environment.

Questions and comments from the audience:

- [What is the role of states in this unfolding reality? We are seeing new inequalities in terms of access to water so are we talking about a withdraw of the State where access is provided by multi-national corporations?](#)

Response from Mara Tignino: This brings to mind the [Cochabamba Water War in Bolivia](#). From a legal point of view, the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) are considered as a point of reference on the governance of corporations.

Response from Murray Burt: The way that we deal with service-provision in conflict-affected and fragile communities and States needs to be a paradigm shift from the way in which we've thought in the past. Large scale water, irrigation,

sewage and sanitation projects can be seen as the easy solutions to achieving the SDGs but what we are seeing more and more in reality that large-scale projects have problems of their own. It is an easy system to control and gives rebel groups in conflict areas a large amount of power if taken control of, so smaller scale systems work better in some areas such as in Lebanon. Having a centralized system that relies on unstable governments and contexts doesn't always provide security.

Response from Julius Jackson: We need to invest over time and you won't see results even in your preferred electoral cycle.

- In [Sao Paolo](#), there are areas in conflict where the State couldn't go before because they were controlled by gangs, so they contacted a private company which had contact with the women in these communities and these women engage the community in joining the water and sewage system. There are points where the gangs aren't willing to give up their control over water access and State doesn't have the will or the power to try and control the gangs and the communities also do not have the power to overthrow these gangs. So how can we make this access viable?

Response from Michael Talhami: Migration issues as well as gang violence is often characterized as 'other situations of violence'. Typically, those that we see in much of Latin America are dealt with in a very reactive, humanitarian way. Primarily, it's an issue of legitimacy and access in terms of different humanitarian actors on the ground. Whereas in conflict settings we are seeing a very different trends complementing traditional humanitarian responses, such as access to bottled water and long-term support through engagement with service providers. The aim is to move as quickly as possible to support local service providers and strengthening humanitarian principles to ensure that the coverage area extends from just government or opposition-held areas.

- 80% of wastewater is untreated today and that could be a good way of alleviating poverty because everybody has wastewater and the value of wastewater is higher than the value of water in certain cases. Interaction in commodity trading is taking a lot of water at the moment, virtual water is traded via soya, sugar or meat?

Response from Julius Jackson: 70% of water use in the world is for agriculture, and that has a huge impact on the human ability to produce food, farm and our food systems as a whole. Commodity exchanges have to deal with that and should be factored into commodity prices in time.