IS CONFLICT INEVITABLE?

By Eva Dooley
INTRODUCTION

Conflict is a part of everyday life, it exists within our families, schools, workplaces, and communities. For my report I have chosen to focus solely on conflicts over natural resources because I am interested in this topic and think it is an important issue in the world today. I wish to look into conflicts over resources from national, global and personal perspectives, and what can and has been done to resolve them.

Conflicts triggered by the desire for our world’s natural resources occur when the opinions of opposing parties differ. Disagreements over the management, possession, distribution, use and protection of our natural resources can often end in violent conflict unless a compromise is reached. The global human population has already exceeded 7 billion and is expected to rise to 8 billion people by the year 2025. This increase, in addition to the escalating rates of consumption, is placing significant demand on the world’s resources. As consumption rates continue to rise, nations worldwide will face growing shortages of vital resources including; fresh water, oil, minerals, land, and wildlife.

WHAT IS CONFLICT?

I define conflict as a disagreement between two or more opposing groups with contrasting needs, opinions, beliefs, or goals. Conflict may result in broken communities, large-scale displacement of individuals, or war. Conflict has existed since the dawn of time, and will continue to exist to some degree, whether it is just a conflict of interest or a violent war. Conflict is always inevitable however, it can be lessened if a solution is forthcoming or a compromise is reached.

WHAT ARE CONFLICT RESOURCES?

Many conflicts are over rights to land, water and other valuable resources. Conflict resources are "natural resources whose control, exploitation, trade, taxation or protection contribute to, or benefit from the context of armed conflict." Competing needs and demand for resources can fuel violent conflict. Some factors that contribute to conflicts, are population growth, land scarcity, increasing land prices, and environmental stresses.
IS RESOURCE ABUNDANCE A BLESSING OR A CURSE?

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Many African nations have been affected by the ‘resource curse’, and have misspent their mineral wealth, making their citizens worse off than before.

Nigeria - a nation rich with natural resources – is an example of this. Over the years, the oil division in Nigeria has gained the reputation of a nation where thieves and criminal syndicates have exploited the country’s resources. Despite its vast oil abundance, Nigeria is one of the 15 poorest nations in the world. Nigeria’s oil failed to produce economic growth, and instead increased the number of people living on less than $1 per day from 30% (before oil was discovered) to the current rate of 70%. Nigeria’s plentiful oil resources, instead of being a blessing, led to massive corruption and civil war.

In comparison to Nigeria, Ghana – another resource-rich African country – is expected to avoid the resource curse. Ghana’s political stability, good governance and relatively strong society should allow the country to effectively manage its resources. I feel that it’s absurd that resource-rich African nations are poor because of a lack of ‘transparency’, management and responsibility of the government. I believe that an obvious resolution to the resource curse is to make all governments and investors of natural resources more accountable for the management of their resources.

If governments and stakeholders continue to allow their resources to be exploited, then not only will the world’s remaining resources quickly be depleted but citizens will continue to suffer.

"Abundant natural resources can and should be a blessing, not a curse. We know what must be done. What is missing is the political will to make it so.” – Joseph Stiglitz
THE FIGHT FOR THE WORLD’S RESOURCES

Whether conflicts are over land, water, minerals or oil, the heightening global competition for these natural resources is only just beginning. As our resources diminish by the day, and the demand for them grows, it is likely that conflicts over our remaining resources will only escalate in the years to come.

NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Water is one of the world’s most valuable resources, is essential for life on Earth and has become a particularly active source of conflict and competition. In recent years, population growth and global warming have both been major factors in the growing demand and availability of water. The US government has estimated that by the year 2015, nearly half of the world’s people will be ‘stressed’ for water.\(^5\) Water is not limitless resource, and there are no replacements once it has gone.

In my country, there are conflicting opinions of the ownership and management of New Zealand’s water – an increasingly sought-after resource. Our current government is struggling to settle conflicts over how water is used and owned. The Maori people of New Zealand declared rights over land and water, and believe that the current system of water allocation doesn’t protect their rights or offer adequate consultation with them.\(^6\) Managing our national water resources means determining who has rights and ownership of the water and how it will be managed and conserved. In my opinion, New Zealand’s water doesn’t belong to anyone, but everyone has a right to use it.

“"The Maori water claim is not just an argument over an increasingly valuable resource. It is also another nail in the coffin of racial harmony and national survival."\(^7\)

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

The world’s timber, minerals, oil, land and water supplies are not limitless. Nor is the capacity of the Earth to absorb such a fast growing population. As part of the future generation, I along with many others will be left with a resource-scarce planet if current misuse of our resources continues. Current generations are happy to deplete all of the world’s resources today and leave none for the future generations of tomorrow – leaving them to deal with the consequences. I feel that this is unfair on future generations (including myself) and the people of today should feel obliged to help conserve resources for the survival of future generations. A possible solution to this issue is to encourage sustainable development strategies. Sustainable development involves development that meets the needs of today’s generations without compromising the capability of future generations to meet their needs.\(^8\)
GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

‘Blood Diamonds’ is the name given to diamonds that originate from areas of conflict and war and are sold to fund warfare, leading to human rights abuses. The illicit trade of the world’s riches often devalues the lives of men, women and children. Over the years, the world has seen numerous bloody civil wars sparked by the trade in diamonds, in African countries including the Congo, Angola, Sierra Leone and Liberia. Often, child soldiers are involved in brutal acts against civilians, and in the process of war, lose their childhood and their future.

“Diamonds aren’t just symbols of material indulgence, they’re emblems of a universe of cruelty, one that burrows deep into the poorest places on earth and reaches the highest echelons of corporate power.”(9)

In my personal opinion, diamonds symbolize a story of violence and brutality, because they are mined in a way that neglects the rights of people across the globe. For most people, diamonds symbolize love and romance, however to me it seems immoral to for us to contribute to the deaths of thousands of people and the destruction of nations, for the sake of vanity.

The Kimberley Process was established in 2003 due to growing concern, that diamond sales were funding conflicts in African nations (10). The initiative required all rough diamonds sold internationally to be certified. Unfortunately, the process failed to break the relationship between diamond trading and violence. The sad reality now is that most consumers still don’t know where the diamonds they have purchased have originated. This initiative whilst good in principle, may have been more effective with enforcement, and tighter regulations.

To prevent further bloodshed, I feel a possible solution would be to heighten consumer awareness on the matter and educate buyers on the effects of purchasing conflict diamonds. A 2006 movie called ‘Blood Diamond’ starring Leonardo DiCaprio highlighted the issue of blood diamonds to a wide audience. Murder, displacement, torture, and civil war are still a reality for thousands of people affected by the ongoing demand for and trade in diamonds.
CONFLICT FROM AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Through the course of my report, I have already commented on how conflicts can affect countries and individuals, however, the environment can also be impacted by conflict. These impacts are ultimately global as well as national.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Perhaps one of the most talked about environmental conflicts at present is the debate over oil drilling in the Arctic. In 2012, sea ice in the Arctic suffered its most severe shrinkage on record.\(^1\) Below the melting ice lie considerable, untapped energy reserves\(^2\), stirring interest among governments and companies wishing to exploit oil and gas resources. The Arctic has been described as ‘a hotly contested economic goldmine’ and conflicts are expected to escalate in coming years.

“The rapidly disappearing Arctic sea ice should be a wake-up call for this government to tackle climate change, not pave the way for a corporate carve up of the region’s resources.” ~ Joan Walley\(^1\)

Conflicts are arising due to environmental concern not only from the perspective of future ecological disasters but also the contribution to global warming. Another reason for potential conflict is the territorial claims made by countries who recognize the value of the Arctic. Countries including Russia, Denmark, China and Norway have already shown interest in making claims to the Arctic region.\(^2\)

In my opinion, the Arctic should be conserved and not exploited. I feel that drilling should be prohibited in this region, not only to preserve this pristine environment, but also I feel that there are already too many fossil fuels being burnt and we do not need to add to this. If drilling is inevitable, companies must be able to provide total assurance that they would be able to manage to contain a spill should it occur, something that they are currently unable to do.
NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Recently, the New Zealand government announced that it will allow more than 400,000 square kilometers for consultation on oil and gas exploration next year.[13] This declaration has already caused conflict throughout New Zealand, environmental activists and members of the public disagree with the government’s idea. I as a member of the public, also oppose the idea, while it may open new job opportunities and be a good source of revenue, I believe that gas and oil drilling would in fact damage New Zealand’s clean green image and pose significant threats to the environment.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

During my research, I found that conflicts don’t just exist among large multinational companies but also among villages and communities. An interesting example of this I found, is small-scale gold mining. 15% of the world’s gold is produced by small-scale gold miners.[14] Although it may seem unlikely, the environmental impacts caused by extracting gold are significant as mercury is used to extract the gold. In a recent article, the BBC highlighted a potential environmental and health catastrophe in Indonesia. Small scale gold mining although illegal, goes unchecked. Mercury leaches into the water supply, causing widespread pollution and, ultimately gets into the food chain as local farmers are forced to grow their crops in toxic water. In addition, resentment is growing among environmentalists, because an estimated 60,000 hectares of tropical rainforest have been cleared in one area alone. This to me is a tragedy on many levels. An obvious solution would be for the Indonesian government to enforce the laws regarding mining, but it does not stop there, this is a global issue and should be addressed by the global community. For example, finding more environmentally friendly solutions to the gold extraction process.
CONCLUSION

After all of my research, I am back to the question, “Is conflict inevitable?”. I have come to realize that there are different levels of conflict, from opposing interests at a personal level to civil war and war between countries. Each party has their own strong view and therefore I feel conflict will always be inevitable. It is the level of conflict that can change. Yet, conflict is not always a bad thing. It can lead to a compromise between parties and a catalyst for new solutions to problems. We are all consumers, it is our role to be aware of the impact that we have on the earth, and use resources sparingly.

“We are all a part of the nature that is given to us, and it is our responsibility to preserve it for generations to come”
~Evgeniya Khatanzeyskaya(15)
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