

The Role of Forest Tenure and Governance in Addressing the Global Challenge of Reducing Violent Conflict in Forest Countries

Summary

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Violent conflicts are one of the strongest manifestations of governance failure, and they frequently occur in remote forest landscapes. Poverty, ethnic tension, the abuse of human rights, competition for natural resources – all these factors exacerbate tension and make conflict more likely. One recent estimate suggests that almost 9 % of the world’s dense forest, and 20 % of tropical forests, is located in areas that experienced armed conflicts between 1990 and 2004. These forests are spread over 28 countries and are home to almost 130 million people. Africa has most forest at risk, while Asia counts the highest number of people living in forested conflict zones.

Forests frequently provide shelter for belligerent groups. For example, during the 1980s and 1990s, rebel groups like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone used forests as a place to hide. Forest lands have also provided natural resources such as timber and diamonds for groups conducting armed conflict. Grievances over the allocation of natural resources frequently lead to violent conflicts, many of which have their roots in the colonial and post-colonial appropriation of land from local communities. Deforestation and forest degradation – for example, by the conversion of land to agriculture by migrant groups or agribusinesses – increases the risk of both violent conflict and human rights violations.

There is a very real risk that sustained poverty, and a failure to recognize and clarify rights to resources and political access, will condemn a significant portion of the globe to open conflict and chaos over the next decades. But at the same time, there are real opportunities to reduce conflict by improving governance in forest areas, tackling corruption and clarifying the rights and obligations of local communities.

Experience suggests that efforts to reduce violent conflict have the greatest chance of success during the early stages of conflict. Dealing with conflict requires a multi-pronged approach. Clarifying tenure and rights is the first step. Corruption in the military, forest bureaucracies and the judiciary needs to be swiftly tackled. Governments further need to adopt consistent and appropriate regulatory standards. This implies putting in place effective monitoring systems and providing incentives to promote responsible corporate behavior. Multi-stakeholder processes should ensure that the marginalized and the poor are involved in dialogue at every level. Conflict often occurs in areas where there is deep frustration about the lack of basic social services and opportunities for economic development. Investing more in remote forests areas can help prevent conflict.

The required investments in forest areas are great, but small compared to the cost of armed conflict, once it breaks out. This understanding is insufficiently incorporated in government policies and development assistance to countries affected by civil war and political turmoil. Governments are too slimmed-down or too preoccupied with their defenses to invest in policy reform and in social-economic services. At the same time donors appear hesitant to engage for several years in countries where their return on investment is likely to be very low. New ways of delivering non-emergency aid—such as technical assistance to guide policy reform and the provision of basic services—are needed in high-risk countries that emerge from armed conflict. The restructuring of natural resource sectors along the lines identified above should be at the top of this aid agenda.

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