

Symposium on Climate Change and Political Violence: Environmental Change in Contested Political Contexts

March 12th 2012, The Informatics Forum, 10 Crichton Street, Edinburgh, EH8 9AB, Scotland



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This symposium explores how contested political contexts and environmental change collide. The Arab Spring has marked 2011 as a year of political transition. The events in the Middle East seem to reflect a new era of popular demand for democracy and rejection of entrenched authoritarian leaders. The sub-text to much of the political unrest, however, is the stark inequalities in income, access to opportunities, and the distribution of wealth from natural resources such as oil, gold, diamonds and other minerals, forests and agriculture. Such inequalities have significant implications not only for the ability of these societies to build lasting political stability, but also for creating positive responses to environmental and climatic change. From the torching of oil wells, to the shifts in access to common pool resources such as water and grazing land, violent political change has significant implications for ecosystems and the livelihoods of ordinary people. The inability to access resources and create resilient livelihoods, (along with a desire for less state repression), underpins many demands for greater political freedoms. Conversely, some insurgencies have unintentionally promoted the regeneration of forests, fisheries and other resources due to the threat of violence for people attempting to access such resources.

Political change thus re-shapes the resources of states in profound, but often unpredictable ways, yet such changes remain on the periphery of analyses of contested politics. This symposium brings together scholars, development professionals and policy makers concerned about environment and development to debate the potential of contested political contexts to address and support efforts to mitigate and adapt to environmental changes, whether it be those caused by climate change, pollution from industrial extraction, or socio-ecological changes produced through agriculture, forestry and other livelihood strategies. The engagement of the international development community into 'fragile' states can be an important element in the shaping of post-conflict institutional and organisational development, but equally poses challenges for effective monitoring of the changes that the 'aid' community are promoting and the global politics associated with that.

The questions addressed in this one-day intensive symposium include:

1. How do contentious politics transform the basic conditions of social existence through disruptions in property rights, access to and control over resources and changes in local social relations?
2. How do such shifts in resources and social existence offer opportunities and challenges for building stable post-conflict politics?
3. What are the consequences for post-conflict politics and development when 'aid' agencies promote particular solutions to environmental challenges (i.e. participatory governance, or payments for Ecosystem Services)?

Organisers: Dr. Andrea Nightingale, Professor Tim Hayward, Dr. Liz Grant, Mr. Jake Broadhurst, Dr. Sheelagh O'Reilly (IOD PARC)

Confirmed keynote speaker:

Professor Nancy Peluso, Henry J. Vaux Distinguished Professor of Forest Policy, Department of Environmental Science, Policy and Management , University of California Berkeley

Host organisations:

University of Edinburgh's Global Academies

University of Zurich, Department of Geography

International Organisation Development (IOD PARC)