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Linking poverty and environment as causes of conflict: A case study of Pakistan

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Abstract: This paper presents a theoretical analysis of an International conflict i.e. East Pakistan Crisis, 1971, and reveals that un-equal development creates conflict in society. Natural resource scarcity and environmental degradation can also become a source of conflict, so marginalized and excluded people fight for their rights through non-peaceful means. This essay supports the theoretical approaches of poverty, environment, and conflict nexus and reveals that un-equal development and resources scarcity deepens the poverty and creates conflicts in the society, causing harm to the environment. The degraded environment deepens the poverty as environment and poverty are interlinked and poor has limited choices other than to degrade the environment for their survival. This vicious downward spiral link of poverty and degradation of environment requires working extensively for poverty alleviation to reverse the environmental decline.

Key words: Poverty and environment, poverty and conflict, conflict and development, conflict and environment, un-equal development.

Development is a complex phenomenon. It creates conflicts when un-equal development happens in the society. Marginalized and excluded people try to get their rights through non-peaceful tactics. Natural resource scarcity and environmental degradation can also be a source of conflict in the society (Homer-Dixon, 1994). This essay supports the theoretical approaches of poverty, environment, and conflict and reveals that un-equal development and resources scarcity deepens the poverty and creates conflicts in the society, causing harm to the environment.

This essay aims to analyze the poverty-environment-conflict nexus by discussing a case study of East Pakistan crisis 1971. Initial paragraphs of the essay would provide literature review of the issue under discussion. In subsequent paragraphs theoretical framework will be discussed. From next paragraph onward there will be a case study of East Pakistan Crisis 1971.

Traditionally it is believed that the poor are more responsible for environmental degradation than any other segment of society (Duraiappah, 1998). Modern discourse of poverty and environment reveals that as a result of

the degraded environment the poverty has been increasing. Environment and poverty are interlinked and poor have no choice other than to degrade the environment to survive off the poverty line (Broad, 1994; Anantha K. Duraiappah, 1996; A.K. Duraiappah, 1996; Duraiappah, 1998; Leach & Mearns, 1991; Ohlsson & utvecklingsamarbete, 2000). This vicious downward spiral link of poverty and degradation of environment requires working extensively for poverty alleviation to reverse the environmental decline (Cleaver & Schreiber, 1994; Duraiappah, 1998; Scherr, 2000; Steele, Oviedo, McCauley, Asian Development Bank., & International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources., 2007).

The poor are the victims vis-à-vis the agents of environmental degradation. They meet their day to day needs unsustainably (Broad, 1993). Poor and marginalized often use more natural resources than other segments of society. They use forests and grasslands for their home and livestock; their tendency to urbanization resulted into congested cities in growing numbers. These phenomena create environmental scarcity and as a result trigger the

poverty which itself is a global issue (Holden, 2008; Wheeler & Beatley, 2009).

The growing environmental scarcities are of the result of increased poverty in the society (Homer-Dixon, 1994). This vicious circle of poverty and environment creates immensely increased social inequalities, and an enormous increase of economically marginalized people in society. This phenomenon also threatens the livelihoods of the marginalized, and, as a consequence these marginalized utilize the resources unsustainably. This unsustainable use of resources and threat to livelihood creates a sense of deprivation and strengthen the bonds of ethnic, linguistic, national or regional fault lines prevalent in almost all societies. In case of a rapid threat to livelihood these deprivations create conflicts in the society and demand a change in status quo (Ohlsson & utvecklingsamarbete, 2000).

Percival & Homer-Dixon (1998) has segregated environmental scarcities into three main types: *“(1) supply-induced scarcity is caused by the degradation and depletion of an environmental resource, for example, the erosion of cropland; (2) demand-induced scarcity results from population growth within a region or increased per capita consumption of a resource, either of which heightens the demand for the resource; (3) structural scarcity arises from an unequal social distribution of a resource that concentrates it in the hands of relatively few people while the remaining population suffers from serious shortage”* (Percival & Homer-Dixon, 1998).

Resource capture and environmental marginalization are two patterns of interaction among these three types of scarcity. Resource capture occurs when powerful groups of society anticipate future scarcity of a heavily used natural resource and shift its distribution in their own favor thus resulting in shortage for the remaining population. Ecological marginalization happens when mass consumption of a natural resource and its unequal distribution/ access by powerful segment of society compelled the weaker groups

to migrate to ecologically fragile regions that results further degradation of that regions (Homer-Dixon, 1994). The result of this scarcity and its interactions is a number of social effects, especially poverty including migrations from environmental scarcity zones, lower agricultural production, and weakened institutions (Homer-Dixon, 1991).

Homer-Dixon (1999) describes that “scarcity of renewable resources—or environmental scarcity—can contribute to civil violence, including insurgencies and ethnic clashes” (p. 177). In future, the incidence of such violence will, perhaps, increase shortage of freshwater, cropland, and forests worsen in many parts of the developing world (Homer-Dixon, 1999). The author is of the view that environmental scarcity is a cause of conflict and its influence can typically be mediated by social, political, and economic factors. Environmental change and its social effects especially poverty can cause civil violence of different types (Homer-dixon, 1999).

According to Le Billon (2001) natural resources have played a prominent role in the history of armed conflicts (Le Billon, 2001). From competition over wild game to merchant capital and imperialist wars over precious minerals, natural resources have motivated or financed the violent activities of many different types of fighters and gangsters (Westing, 1986). Although abundant natural resources accelerate economic growth but it is also evident that countries economically dependent on the export of primary commodities are at a higher risk of political instability and armed conflict (Collier & Hoeffler, 2002).

Le Billon (2001) argues that renewable resource scarcity causes conflicts, likewise non-renewable resource abundance also causes conflicts. In both perspectives, societies confronted with their specific environmental circumstances — scarcity or abundance — have a higher risk of being affected by violent conflicts. People or nations will fight each other to get resources necessary for their survival: the more scarce the resource, the more bitter the

fight (Homer-Dixon, 1999). According to the *abundant resource wars* argument, primary commodities are easily and heavily taxable, and are therefore attractive to both the ruling elites and their competitors (Collier & Bank, 2000; Le Billon, 2001). The availability of abundant resources would therefore represent the 'prize' of state or territorial control thereby increasing the risk of greed-driven conflicts, while providing armed groups with the 'loot' necessary to purchase military equipment. Such armed conflicts thus tend to be commercialized; that is, characterized by both the integration of trading in natural resources into their economy and a move from political towards private economic agendas (Dietrich, 2000; Keen & Studies, 1998).

Low levels of violence (25–1000 battle-related casualties per year) have a positive relation with environmental degradation, however abundant renewable resource in poor and developing countries and non-renewable resources in all countries increases the possibility of armed conflict (Homer-Dixon, 1999).

British Empire decolonized India in August 1947, and Pakistan and India became independent states. Pakistan consisted of two territories, East Pakistan and West Pakistan; separated by 1500 kilometers of Indian Territory (Schendel, 2009). West Pakistan had political, economic and administrative hegemony on East Pakistan.

East Pakistan was a highly densely populated area with a high poverty rate comprising of a single ethnic group called "Bengalis" (T. Rahman, 1997). Bengalis had contributed a lot to the struggle for independence during the British regime. Soon after the independence of Pakistan, Bengalis began to feel a sense of deprivation, when Urdu was announced as national language of Pakistan. Only 2.3 percent were Urdu speaking while Bengali was a language of 54 percent of Pakistanis. The Bengali educated elite openly opposed this decision. But the West Pakistani Muslim League leadership was considering Urdu as a symbol of

national integration. Bengalis started a movement for recognition of their language as a national language. This movement was suppressed by force and in February, 1952 police killed some activists of this movement in Dhaka. This was a turning point, when Bengali nationalism arose and people of East Pakistan considered the West Pakistanis as the dominating class, which was exploiting their rights (T. Rahman, 1997).

From 1947 to 1965, a lot of development happened in West Pakistan due to foreign aid and income from exports of raw material. Heavy industries, big dams, and communication networks were established, economic activities accelerated, public and private investments were encouraged, basic health and education facilities were provided. But during all this process East Pakistan was excluded or only received a small share (Haq, 1966).

East Pakistan was a raw material producing area and contributing a major share in the exports of Pakistan. It was not getting equitable share in the national income. The economic growth rate of Pakistan during the 1960's was more than five percent. Bengalis believed that the economy of East Pakistan was organized to accommodate the interests of West Pakistan (O'Donnell, 1984). Poverty was growing in East Pakistan day by day and it was happening due to the diversion of the real resources of East Pakistan to West Pakistan. During early twenty years of independence, it was officially estimated that resources of about one billion dollar were transferred from East to West Pakistan (Nanda, 1972). Two thirds of Pakistan's foreign exchange was earned in East Pakistan, mostly through jute exports, but much of this amount was spent in West Pakistan and East Pakistan received only 30 percent of this earning amount. In this way, West Pakistan was receiving considerable resources from East Pakistan to finance its own development (Haq, 1966).

The transfer of resources created disparity among the income of residents of both East and West Pakistan (M. A. Rahman, 1970). The income of West

Pakistanis was lower than East Pakistanis in 1947 but after twenty years it was twenty five percent higher than of East Pakistanis (Nanda, 1972). East Pakistan's regional income was less than twenty-five percent than of West Pakistan while it was higher in 1947. East Pakistan's GNP rose by 22.1 percent during five years of 1965 and 1970 while it rose by 34.8 percent in the West during this period (M. A. Rahman, 1970).

Rahman (1970) describes that the per capita income of West Pakistan is almost double than that of East Pakistan. Dr. Mehboob ul Haq (1966) revealed that the standard of living of the vast majority of Bengalis, especially those living in the lower income groups (below 60 US dollars a year) was declined. Facilities of education and communications advanced much more rapidly in West Pakistan than in the East.

Disparities were also created by the allocation of private and public investments to West Pakistan or West Pakistanis rather than to East Pakistan and Bengalis. West Pakistan had almost no manufacturing industry in 1947 but just within a ten years' time, almost 70 percent of Pakistan's manufacturing industry was situated in the West (M. A. Rahman, 1970). Big industrial zones were setup in West Pakistan. From Karachi to Hyderabad, Faisalabad to Sheikhpura, and Lahore to Gujranwala, major industries were setup, but East Pakistan was totally neglected in this process. Just twenty-two families owned 66 percent of Pakistan's industrial assets and had controlled 87 percent of resources of the banking and insurance industries. None of these twenty-two families were from East Pakistan. West Pakistanis owned all industries of East Pakistan; these industrialists were one way or otherwise, beneficiaries of financial support from the federal government. The small-scale traditional and cottage industries wasted away when big industrial units were established by West Pakistanis in East Pakistan (Haq, 1966). This unequal industrial development deepens the poverty in East Pakistan in spite of rapid economic growth of Pakistan and grievances of Bengalis heightened when

they compared their livelihood with that of West Pakistanis (O'Donnell, 1984).

The annual increase of agricultural production in the West had been 5.5 percent in comparison with a three percent rise in the East. Although both wings were producing about the same quantities of food grains, but the comparative nutritional level of the Bengalis was lower due to their larger population, so the poverty was increasing by every coming day (O'Donnell, 1984).

The west was also favored in the allocation of central government expenditures, including foreign aid (Haq, 1966). There were also disparities in distribution of foreign aid, and central government favored West Pakistani interests above those of East Pakistan. The internal allocations of foreign economic and military aid by and large went to the Center and to the West Pakistani provincial government. East Pakistan received only 25 percent of the economic portion of the foreign aid and hardly any of the military monies. Almost 80 percent of Pakistan's budget and 70 percent of its development funds was spent in West Pakistan (Nanda, 1972; M. A. Rahman, 1970).

As Ohlsson & utvecklingssamarbete (2000) argue that the un-equal distribution of resources and threat to livelihood creates a sense of deprivation and strengthen the bonds of ethnic, linguistic, national or regional fault lines prevalent in almost all societies. So the un-equal development and resources distribution created a sense of deprivation among the people of East Pakistan and they considered these phenomena as a threat to their livelihood. In case of a rapid threat to livelihood these deprivations create conflicts in the society and demand a change in status quo (Ohlsson & utvecklingssamarbete, 2000). So, the Bengalis started a struggle for their rights, which lead to a conflict in the state (Hasan, 1971).

In the 1970 elections East Pakistanis got a majority of seats in the National Assembly, but power was not transferred to their leadership. This political issue further heightened

grievances among people of East Pakistan who already perceived a relative decline in their standard of living compared with West Pakistanis (Gurr, 1993). As Gurr (1993) argues that it is not only high levels of grievance which lead to large scale civil violence; but at least two more factors should be there: groups with strong collective identities that can potentially challenge state authority, and clearly advantageous opportunities for violent collective action against authority. The aggrieved must see themselves as members of groups that can act together, and they must believe that the best opportunities to successfully address their grievances involve violence. (Percival & Homer-Dixon, 1998). All these factors of violence were already present among the Bengalis of East Pakistan so the situations lead to large scale violence in East Pakistan.

Awami League, a Bengali nationalist political party, started a vocal Bengali opposition to the discriminatory economic policies and programs of the Central government. It had started a campaign against the Ayub government and demanded provincial autonomy (Hashmi, 2005). The party got support from the middle class and the peasantry of East Pakistan and started criticism of the Ayub Khan Government in public processions. Sheikh Mujeeb, the leader of the party, called for a general strike in June, 1966 for implementation of his six points program of provincial autonomy. A riot occurred during this strike, in which a dozen or more people killed. The government immediately arrested Sheikh Mujeeb. This act of government further deteriorated the situation in East Pakistan and people started violent agitation against the government of Ayub Khan (O'Donnell, 1984).

In October and November 1970, elections were held. The two major political parties, Awami League got 160 seats out of 162 allocated seats of East Pakistan, while PPP got 81 out of 138 seats in West Pakistan (Malik, 2008). West Pakistan's politicians were not much optimistic about the outcome of the elections. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the chairman of Pakistan Peoples Party, was

already considering violent repression. Bhutto advised Yahya Khan in the summer of 1970 to forget about the elections: 'Yahya the soldier and Bhutto the politician will make a very good team and can together run the country.' When Yahya asked him what he proposed to do about East Pakistan, Bhutto reportedly replied: "East Pakistan is no problem. We will have to kill some **20,000** people there and all will be well" (Khan, 1983). General Yahya Khan did not transfer power to Awami League despite its clear majority seats in the National Assembly. He favored Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and used delaying tactics to transfer the power (Rais, 1985). On the other side, Bengalis were protesting and demanding the transfer of power to Awami League. During the first week of March, 1971, peaceful protests of Bengalis turned violent. Riots started in the whole of East Pakistan. On March 25, 1971 the Pakistan Army launched a full scale military operation in Dhaka to control the agitators (Deutschman, 1971; Schendel, 2009). Awami League's militant wing "Mukti Bahni" started a guerilla war against the Pakistan army. The conflict turned to a civil war and the Awami League declared it a war of liberation. India provided support to militants and setup training camps along the border of East Pakistan (Faruki, 1971).

This large scale civil war compelled the already disadvantaged masses to take refuge in India. The refugees crossed into India at an average of 60,000 per day. In December 1971, When India's military crossed the International border for intervention, their estimated number was about eleven million (Marwah, 1979). These refugees left behind their agriculture lands and cattle unattended which created environmental hazards.

This conflict attracted international attention because it was a part of two larger geopolitical games: the rivalry between India and Pakistan and the struggle between the Cold War superpowers. Pakistan was an ally of the United States in South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) while India was making an alliance with Soviet Union (Schanberg, 1971). As the war continued

throughout 1971, India and the Soviet Union came closer together and provided more direct support to the fighters of the Mukti Bahni (Schendel, 2009).

Freedom fighters got control of a lot of area of East Pakistan till October 1971, and it was obvious that the Pakistan army was unable to regain control of this area. On the other side, the freedom fighters also could not win a military victory. India moved forward from supporting freedom fighters towards full-scale military invasion. On December 3, 1971, India entered into East Pakistan with 400,000 troops, and the (third) India—Pakistan War started (Faruki, 1971). The Soviet Union provided air cover to the Indian armed forces. On the other side the United States halted military aid to Pakistan blaming civilian casualties and atrocities (Warner, 2005).

The Indian armed forces, and the freedom fighters that battled alongside them, had all the advantages. They entered into East Pakistan from all directions. They were better armed than the Pakistan army, and had control of the air and the sea. They were welcomed as liberators by the majority of the local population. The Pakistan army put up fierce resistance and it resulted a lot of casualties. The supplies of Pakistan armed forces were already cut down by India, while the local population was supporting Indian forces, so the Pakistan army did not resist for a long. On December 16, 1971 the Pakistan army surrendered, the war was over, and an independent state “Bangladesh” had come into being (Niazi, 1998).

The number of people who were victimized during this war remained unknown. It is estimated that approximately one million people were killed during this war. Millions were displaced from their homes. Material damages were very extensive, hundreds of roads, railways, bridges, and six airports had been destroyed. Chittagong—the main port—was full of mines. Telecommunications network was out of action. Countless houses, schools, hospitals and community centers had been damaged. Agriculture, fisheries,

livestock, and horticulture were badly affected which further expanded the already increased poverty in the state (Schendel, 2009).

The nine months civil war left severe impacts on the environment. About ten million people migrated to India leaving their land and cattle unattended. Non-maintenance of land, water reservoirs, and death of unattended cattle created environmental issues. On their return in March 1972, the migrants found their houses destroyed, and agriculture land in almost barren and mashie conditions. Restoring the livelihood cost a greater environmental degradation, people cut the trees for rebuilding of their houses, and utilized natural resources for a long time to fulfill their basic needs. This forced migration deteriorated the living conditions of the people and they had to struggle for decades to restore their livelihood at the level of pre-war conditions (Marwah, 1979).

At the time of its independence in 1947, Pakistan was a unique state with two territories separated by 1500 kilometers of Indian Territory. It inherited very little resources and state infrastructure from the British. The West Pakistanis had more influence on its political, administrative and economic affairs. It was a raw material producing country which relied on foreign economic and military aid. From 1947 to 1965, Pakistan’s economic growth rate was more than five percent. It was a period of industrial and economic development of Pakistan, but East Pakistan was excluded from this process, thus increasing the poverty and creating a sense of deprivation among East Pakistanis. They started struggle for their rights but unfortunately their grievances were not addressed properly. A lot of economic disparity and un-equal development between East and West Pakistan ultimately lead to a civil conflict. In 1970 elections, East Pakistanis won a majority of seats in the National Assembly, but power was not transferred to them. They started agitating for their rights, and the Government of Pakistan launched a military operation to suppress the

agitation. The people of East Pakistan retaliated and a civil war broke out. This civil war converted to an international conflict when India attacked on East Pakistan. The Pakistan Army surrendered on December 16, 1971 and East Pakistan became Bangladesh. A total of 90,000 troops and civilians of Pakistan were captured as prisoners of war. About one million people were killed during this nine month long conflict.

This case study supports the theory of development and conflict and reveals that an increasing poverty and un-equal development creates conflict in the society damaging the environment and vice versa. It also describes that resource scarcity in developing countries is a source of conflict which deepens poverty and deteriorate the environment (Homer-Dixon, 1994).

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