The assertion of rights to agro-pastoral land in North Cameroon: a cascade to violence?
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Introduction

"Tout le monde avant à manger, la paix peut régner dans les ménages et les familles, le clan ou la tribu" (Ngongo Mbédé 2003 : 30) “La médiation traditionnelle des conflits par les femmes au Cameroun”

The people of the small village Davagang in the Far North of Cameroon can catch fish all year round due to a deep spot in the Logomaty River situated within the village territory. Unfortunately, people in neighbouring Padmangay have no such wealth and are jealous of the high incomes generated from fish during 'fish-scarce' periods. When demanding access to this spot and negotiating their rights does not bring them the desired opportunities, Padmangay’s inhabitants start claiming what has not been given. The dry period of the year does not offer other income generating possibilities, so their demands become increasingly intense. They threaten and even molest Davagang’s women and children on their way to market or school. In the end they just start catching ‘their’ fish. “What is a village boundary, anyway? The river flows...” But Davagang does not accept the interference in its rights, its territory. As Cameroonian villagers, they call in the police for protection. However, Padmangay’s men do not seem to be impressed by these representatives of authority. They use guns to safeguard their catch, wound a policeman, hide successfully against reprisals and consider that the use of violence has helped them to the scarce resources. Davagang’s people, on the other hand, decide that the police are no use and that they have to defend their property themselves (own observations. Febr. 2000).

Is it indeed, as the women of Cameroon tell us, food shortages that are a threat to peace, is it the limited access possibilities to the natural resource fish, or is there something else that engenders violence along the Logomaty? Whatever it may be, the scarcity of natural resources certainly plays a role. It is this role in violent conflict that is the focus of the research field of Environmental Security (ES). The environment has been both a cause of, and a means

See also Dietz (1996).
in war since time immemorial, but it has only been since the 1970s onwards that politicians (e.g. Anwar Sadat in 1979\(^2\)) and security scientists recognised the importance of natural resources as a factor in the outbreak of violent conflicts. They reluctantly had to acknowledge that this factor was being chronically overlooked as a cause of conflict. Indeed, if not given specific attention, the environment will not automatically feature in the analyses (Noorduy and De Groot 1999). Moreover, disregarding one of the myriad ‘start-up conditions’ of a conflict prevents people “understanding the likely consequences of any cause [because that] may depend on understanding its relation to other causes” (Waltz 1959, in Porto 2002: 17). In such instances, reasons for conflict development may not become clear and an escalation of conflict cannot be prevented.

With a view to exploring the role of the newly discovered ecological factor, a host of publications appeared in the Eighties and Nineties of the last century which described cases in which environmental degradation or the scarcity of natural resources played a role in the outbreak of violence\(^1\). Nevertheless, to the present day, scholars from the security science field call the ‘ecological variable’ an underestimated factor [in violent conflicts] among commonly cited [ones]” (Porto 2002: 2). Nevertheless, the roles of renewable and non-renewable resources in both inter-state wars and intra-state conflicts were examined and a variety of projects focussed on the environment-conflict nexus.

Among the most renown is the Environmental Conflict Project (ENCOP) of Bächler and Spillmann in Switzerland\(^6\). The Swiss researchers focussed on renewable resources and found that ‘environmental discrimination’ (uneven distribution of resources between richer and poorer or more and less powerful actors) and “bad state performance outside the federal district or national capital areas” (Bächler 1999: xvi) are important factors in the causal chain. Based on the analysis of more than forty case studies worldwide, they concluded that environmental roots of conflict are mostly found in “domestic arenas” (id) and not in interstate wars. They speak of different problem syndromes (like ethno-political or interregional) in which the environment plays different roles. “There are different pathways of present violent conflicts and wars that could be traced to the environmental roots of the conflict genesis” (Bächler 1999: xv). The environment plays a role in violent conflict causation, they say, if and when more than one of five key factors are present. Those factors are: total dependency on the degraded resources, scarcity of regulatory mechanisms and poor state performance, using environmental discrimination to pursue (other) group interests, opportunities for ally-formation (often dependant on strong leaders) and a context of an existing (historic) conflict structure. Whatever the role of natural resource scarcity may be in the conflict, “the threshold of violence depends on socio-political factors and not on the degree of environmental degradation as such” (Bächler 1999: xviii).

Two other important projects in the ES-field, with profound political influence in North

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\(^{1}\) See Sandole (1999).

\(^{2}\) See the three-volume ENCO P report of Bächler & Spillmann and Bächler et al published in 1996.
America, are those of the Environmental Conflict and Security Project (ECSP) of the Woodrow Wilson Institute in the United States and the Environmental Change and Acute Conflict Project (ECACP) of Toronto University in Canada. The second one was headed by Homer-Dixon who, as long ago as in 1991, published a first article on the relationship of environmental scarcity and violent conflict. Further research on sixteen case studies only confirmed the early findings. In 1999, the total of the theory of the project, as it had been developed over the years, was compiled into one book. Interstate conflicts over non-renewable resources are not very likely, the conclusions stated, but the inescapable effects of scarcity of renewable natural resources is something to worry about. According to Homer-Dixon, such scarcities, springing from depletion of these resources, but also from population growth and an uneven distribution of resources, cause certain societal effects. These are, first, a decrease in agricultural production and economic productivity in general, specifically affecting those who depend directly on natural resources. Secondly, migration and increase of societal segmentation can be expected. Without ‘ingenuity’ (a certain amount of inventiveness and the combination of inventiveness with drive and the possibility to implement that inventiveness) to counter these effects and mitigate their consequences the effects will cause State breakdown and subsequent violence. This, therefore, shows a clear relationship with environmental scarcity. However, it is claimed to be even stronger because a lack of ingenuity may easily be caused by the scarcity itself.

A last project that has to be mentioned is the initiative of the Oslo-based International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) of Nils Petter Gleditsch. This focuses not only on environmental scarcity per se, but takes circumstantial factors, especially the presence of democracy or other regime types, into consideration. The different characteristics of democracies both prevent the depletion of natural resources and the outbreak of possible violence resulting from such depletion. In accordance with the ‘ingenuity’ paradigm of Homer-Dixon it is stated that innovation, substitution and price mechanisms can overcome resource scarcity.

Although a straightforward link between scarcity and violence has been claimed, the most obvious link in all the case studies seemed to be the one between abundance-in-scarcity and violent conflict. This means that generally the natural resource scarcity itself only appeared to lead to violence when a pocket of abundance of that same resource was present. It is not

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7 This project was headed by Geoffrey Dabelko. See the Environmental Conflict and Security Project Reports from 1995 onwards (ECSP (1995, 1996) or, for example, Dabelko (1997)).
9 See, for example, Gleditsch (1997).
10 Because PRIO studied the role of natural resources in general the ‘resource curse’ model is also described and analysed. See Gleditsch (2003) for the three possible types of influence of resource abundance on violent conflict.
11 People do not fight for ‘nothing’. Nevertheless, pure resource scarcity may be a strong factor in the “rising tensions in social relations [...] thus paving the way for evermore overt expressions of disharmony and violence”, as André and Plateau (1998) have proved for Rwanda. See also Bigagaza et al (2002).
13 See e.g. Oketch and Polzer (2002: 88) that it is “false to make a categorical distinction between the economic and political”, and that “greed [is not] the only relevant factor in civil war”. See also Ballentine and Sherman (2003a: 6) “conceptualising explanations of armed conflict in terms of greed or grievance has imposed unnecessarily limiting dichotomy on what is, in reality, a highly diverse, complex set of incentive and opportunity structures that vary across time and location.”
‘grievance or greed’ as is now often stated\(^1\), but mostly a combination of the two\(^1\), possibly with an emphasis on one of them\(^2\). Apart from the collection of example cases featuring both violence and environmental scarcity, the aim of the projects was to clarify the causal chain and to discover general patterns.

It is in this tradition that the current research is placed. In contrast to several critics, this study does not reject the ES field as such. Yet, the study is no repetition of the work done so far. On the contrary, this study tries to address the flaws\(^1\) that inevitably face such a relatively new science field as Environmental Security. By that, it tries to improve both conceptual and methodological weaknesses and the analytical profundity.

1.1 Insecurities and conflict

The most important consideration to be made when performing research in the ES-field is that natural resource scarcity is never an isolated phenomenon. It is the complex of insecurities and the interaction of the different types of insecurity, be it social, political, economic or human, that also makes natural resource insecurity important. It is possible to incorporate all the different (in)securities under one big heading, and then say that people’s actions are pre-eminently shaped by (the lack of) social security\(^6\). That concept will then cover “the sum of all regulations and practices within a society which aim to guarantee the individual or group not only physical survival, but also general protection against unforeseen risks which would entail the deterioration of their situation, the consequences of which can not be borne by the individual or group without external assistance” (Schmidt 1991, in Van den Berg 1997: 9). In such a grand category “social security presupposes [...] the availability of material resources (land, money, crops, labour)”, and “social resources (social relationships, rights, laws, status and power) [that guarantee that] the material resources can be transformed into social security provisions” (Von Benda-Beckmann and Von Benda-Beckmann 1994: 22).

In this concept, all types of scarcities in the different sub-domains of security are part of ‘social insecurity’, which is the reverse of what is defined by Schmidt (1991). This also applies to environmental scarcity. Because scarcity in one or more of the basic domains is inherent to human life (Mohamed Salih 2003), most people and societies have exercised a broad diversity of responses to it in one or more of these domains, of which violence is but one. One of the more frequently used investments to reach a more secure position is the assertion of rights which makes conflict apparent.

The men from Padmangy certainly did ascertain their rights to the environment, in this case the deep river spot and the abundant fish there. However, they did not choose violence right away. Before they felt a grievance over the unequal distribution of access rights, the conflict had been hidden, latent, in the sense that although they of course realised the potential of

\(^{11}\) And always in combination with other factors: “a key issue of contention [between scholars] has been the relative explanatory weight of economic factors vis a vis the role played by other political, cultural, and strategic factors...” (Ballentine and Sherman (2003a: 5)) I will come to that in the next chapter

\(^{15}\) I will address most of the shortcomings of current ES studies in chapter 2 (on theoretical notions) and chapter 3 (on methodology).

\(^{20}\) See e.g. Mazzucato and Niemeijer (2000) who stress the importance of social security arrangements to overcome or prevent environmental degradation.
the deep fish spot, they did not experience it as unjust, because they had their own possibilities in the flooding period, when fish can be found everywhere". Only in the dry season, when Davagang caught fish and Padmangay was denied access, did feelings of dismay start to grow, especially when their general insecurity increased. Soon after that, Padmanagay’s inhabitants reacted, in what scholars call ‘the phase of requirement’ (Griffiths et al 1996), by demanding their rights, thereby making the conflict manifest (Chandrasekharan 1997). Only because “…it [was] not possible to withdraw such a demand within the normal relationship between the parties, and the party with the grievance still want[ed] his ‘right’ …” (Griffiths 1996: 699), did the conflict escalate.

Indeed, the different stages described here show that conflict is a very broad concept, incorporating everything from almost invisible discords of interest or meaning to high-intensity contention with violent expressions. Thus, to prevent conceptual confusion it is important to discriminate between conflict and violence that is only part of conflict\(^1\). Moreover, confusing the two concepts makes researchers and managers forget that a conflict is sometimes desirable. Without conflict, societies would drift in a state of inertia. “Conflict is the seedbed that nourishes social change”, say Rubin et al (1994: 7). Van der Merwe (1993: 263) also states that “…social upheaval […] contains the seeds of regeneration and growth”. In conflicts the demand for new institutions in a changing world becomes apparent. However, although “[c]onflict in its peaceful forms has engendered much positive change within human society. […], we are concerned about […] the destruction wrought by violent conflict – the lost lives, the maimed and traumatised survivors, the economic devastation and the crippled hopes …” (Rupesinghe 1995: viii). Thus, a society needs a certain degree of conflict, but not too much, and not too intense. “[P]ositive functions of conflict are [often] swamped by the harmful consequences that derive from the use of heavy contentious tactics.” (Rubin et al 1994: 8-9). So, it is this switch from positive into escalated conflict that needs our attention.

Following the described notions of insecurities, scarcities and conflict, ES appears to be part of the study of social insecurity and the reactions and investments of actors to counter that. The type and intensity of actors’ strategies and tactics differ in relation to the type and stage of their insecurity and, subsequently, the phase of the conflict in which they find themselves. It is an ‘ES-in-context’ that systematically studies this ‘insecurity complex’.

In turn, the actions and the factual (physical and social) results thereof influence which stage of conflict will come next. Safeguarding the resource via a clear assertion of rights by way of purchase (an economic investment) may cause a diversion away from the next, more

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\(^1\) Besides being latent, a conflict can also be potential. In this case at the moment the boundaries were set, but nobody realised that this would lead to unequal fishing possibilities between the two villages, an attentive observer could have seen that it would lead to inequalities and could have denominated the situation as “potentially conflictuous”. ‘Latent’ means: involved persons see the problem but they do not (yet) feel a grievance, nor do they express it

\(^2\) In ES publications this is regularly forgotten. See, for example, the publications of Homer-Dixon and Bachler themselves and the critic of Peluso and Watts (2001a).

\(^3\) See also Laurent and Mathieu (1994), Chauveau et Matheiu (1996).

\(^4\) Hoeffler and Reymal-Queral (2003: 22). Violent conflicts such as civil wars, although perhaps started to improve a country’s (or a party’s) possibilities, always turn out to be “development in reverse”. An economic (and social) revival after a war always has to start at less than zero, and appears to be a very difficult undertaking. It seems as if this has met with success only after WW II in Europe and only then with substantial outside help to overcome the ruins of war.
escalated, conflict stage. As Rupesinghe (1995a: 51) said about the ‘requirement phase’: “if addressed at this stage the conflict may not escalate”. But what does ‘addressed’ mean? At different phases, different actions can be chosen, both by the direct actors and by the managing institutions, that all aim to improve the present insecurity. Each action can be the start of the continuation of, or the diversion away from, the conflict. However, security for one may mean insecurity for another.

In addition, it has to be stressed that conflicts need not show a linear pattern in the development of the different phases. ES in its context of different, mutually influencing insecurities has to be aware of the possibility of back and forward jumping or spiralling conflicts. For example, installing “negative peace” (that is, not addressing the structural causes of conflict (Sandole 1993a: 280-281)) out of necessity in a very acute and violent phase can mean that the conflict will develop anew. The phases can then show a circular pattern. Moreover, in seasonally occurring conflicts, temporary solutions can cause the discord to flare up each year, with the risk of a more escalated temporary end-situation each time: a spiral to violence. Of course, the stage of grievance, the very low-level insecurity situation (perhaps even only existent in the mind of the actor), occurs very often, but the human race, being a social race (Clark 1993), has learned (or got it in his genes)\(^1\) to handle these grievances peacefully most of the time. The social security arrangements of most societies include management and prevention institutions to resolve conflicts, from whichever domain they may spring, in an early phase.

Besides actions, causes can also differ per stage. There is, or can be, a difference between the factors that cause the conflict to develop in an early phase and the factors that cause people to resort to violence at a later phase. Different insecurities may be perceived differently when the conflict phase has changed. “… Escalation of a conflict does not simply involve greater size or intensity, but may add a new dimension” (Van der Merwe 1993: 269). Starting from differences in objectives (Van de Goor et al 1996:1), “in opinions regarding values, interests, aims, or relations…” (Miall in Van de Goor et al 1996: 1) between “at least two individuals or groups” (Van de Goor et al 1996: 1), conflicts arrive, when these differences are incompatible; when, out of those differences, “actors are pursuing incompatible goals” (Rupesinghe 1995: 73). It is, of course, not the difference as such that causes conflict. Nor is it each difference that leads to incompatibility. The use of a natural resource in two different ways that exclude each other can obviously lead to competing interests and give rise to initial conflict phases. Whether or not the escalation into violence of this conflict is also due to the resource scarcity remains to be studied. At that moment a careful ES approach will again have to involve the other possible insecurities and scarcities. Simply stating a one-dimensional cascade from environmental scarcity to violence, as Homer-Dixon (1999) did, risks overlooking inherent complexities and causational turns.

1.2 Land as a natural resource

The natural resource land can be expected to show more of the complexities that need to be clarified in the ES studies than any other natural resource would show. Of course land is first

\(^1\) De Waal (1998: 236) states that, “it is possible that conflicts between human beings are inevitable and that aggression has such a long evolutionary history, that you may expect excellent control-mechanisms”
and foremost the basis for agricultural and pastoral production and a place to live. Land is indispensable for very basic life needs. Although, in Latin America, the dependence of the poor on land is decreasing (Zoomers 2001) and the question that has to be posed in relation to that continent is whether land and natural resources are important for livelihoods (Appendini 2001: 27), in rural Africa “land and the biological resources the land supports are principal livelihood assets” (Toulmin and Quan 2000a: 4). There, it is an “insurance against uncertain employment [or] a pension fund for old age” (Platteau 1996: 50). Additionally, land, as a production factor and especially when commoditised, can become a source of wealth. On the other hand, “land […] is a stake and a resource within social and political competitions” (Le Meur 2002: 135). People use land to “gain control over others” (Juul 2002: 204) and over other resources (such as water wells). Apart from all-pervasive natural resources such as air, other natural resources are positioned in land. Although perhaps not officially, ownership and managerial rights to land also give de-facto rights (possibilities) to determine access to other resources that can only be reached via the piece of land in question. Land forms the basis for power21 and power forms the basis for land. For example, chiefs have rights of sovereignty that are connected with “political control over their territory and over their subjects” (Fisy 1995: 6).

A third characteristic of land is its function as a bearer of meaning which is different for different pieces of land and for different cultures. Land has a role as a source for social identity. The alienation of land means cultures risk losing their roots. Indeed, “[the value of land] is embedded in the social structure and history of a particular community […] and it has a significant symbolic component” (Platteau 1996: 50): the alienation of land is more than the loss of livelihood security. It easily violates “deep-seated social norms [upon which] bitter resentments and acute tensions are aroused which may lead to opportunistic acts and, in the worst cases, even erupt into open violence” (id: 56). Local individuals and groups may react strongly when scarcity rises and when they risk the alienation of land to outsiders. Thus, it may be expected that, if the phenomena being looked for in this research really do exist, they will show up explicitly when studying land.

In addition, because of the combination of the three properties, “power, wealth and meaning” (Shipton and Goheen 1992) but especially that related to power, higher level institutions quickly interfere in land issues. Indeed, the State’s sovereignty is ascribed to its territory, to its land, more than to its trees or rivers or wells. Even when State policy covers the other types of natural resources, it is connected to their being placed in the land.

Land therefore seems the most appropriate choice for a focus of attention when considering that a study into the causal pattern of environmental scarcity to violence needs comparable cases and, at the same time, when considering that comparison is only possible when the amount of variables is not too overwhelming. Indeed, this last can be achieved by restricting the amount of natural resources studied. Conflicts over water or fish, as in the Logomaty case, can only be part of this ‘land-choice’ when the connected discords are approached as conflicts over territory.

21 See also Quan (2000: 32).

22 For example Platteau (1996: 52) stated that “… to a significant extent, demand for land arises from non-economic motives such as social prestige and political power.”
1.3 Summary

In short, violence (frequency and seriousness) over scarce natural resources has become an issue for social as well as political scientists and practitioners. Testing the presence of the assumed relationship and understanding the causal relationship between the two variables is necessary to broaden the scientific understanding of society. Focussing on the natural resource land, clarity is sought on whether or not this understanding can aid (or prevent) the formulation of specific policy measures. Why do people under more or less the same circumstances choose for different strategies when confronted with growing insecurity? Why do the farmers that are busy clearing parts of the grazing area of Kila in North Cameroon raise their sticks against a cattle-owner that shows me the boundaries of the same pasture and yell that they would rather “kill you and your white lackey-woman” than give up their fields here? When, how and why do people invest in the assertion of their rights to land, particularly when the situation seems to be on the brink of violence? When and why do they choose violence to ascertain their rights to land? What is the direct and what the underlying cause of the extreme anger and the subsequent willingness of the younger men of Dzambou (North Cameroon) to organise armed protest against the prohibition of access and use of fields in a nearby pasture area?

This research studies three different cases of conflict over land at the local level in the Extreme North of Cameroon from 2001 to 2004, using different sociological, geographical and anthropological methods.

After this Introduction, chapter two will investigate some theoretical notions related to the Environmental Security field. Both the concept of Environment as well as the concept of Security will be dealt with to shed clarity on how these two terms are looked at in this study. Subsequently, I will outline the reason and necessity to come up with a kind of model to structure research in the Environmental Scarcity and Security field. Then, I will construct such a model and in the process I will discuss the concepts and ‘sub-models’ to be used. Thus, at the end of chapter 2, the flow-diagram “Violence-or-Escape” (VoE), which is to be used as a guiding model in the rest of the study, will have acquired form.

Methodology and methods used in the study are the subject of the third chapter. The focus is on the choice of theoretical background, the research sites, the way to perform the studies in the chosen villages and some problems encountered during the fieldwork.

In the fourth chapter, the general geographical background of the study will be described. First, some very brief information on Cameroon as a country is given. Then, I will focus on the Far North Province, where the three case studies were performed.

The next three chapters (5 – 7) are dedicated to the full description and partial analysis of the three cases, thereby following the VoE-model and using the concepts described in the theoretical chapter. By doing so, two purposes can be met. First, because of the strict use of protocols implemented in the diagram, the cases can be easily compared. Second, the usefulness of the model to guide Environmental Scarcity and Security research can be tested.

Chapter eight actually deals with these two goals. Again following the VoE diagram, the three cases are analysed and compared, so generalisations about the causal pathway from Environmental Scarcity to Violence can be formulated. This is followed by a presentation and examination of old and new criticism of the original Environmental Security notions. The document ends with a short section dedicated to the usefulness of the model itself.