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Navigating Peace

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The Environmental Change and Security Program's Navigating Peace Initiative, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and led by ECSP Director Geoffrey Dabelko, seeks to generate fresh thinking on the world's water problems in three areas:

- Expanding opportunities for small-scale water and sanitation projects;
- Analyzing water's potential to spur both conflict and cooperation; and
- Building dialogue and cooperation between the United States and China using lessons from water conflict resolution.

THE NEW FACE OF WATER CONFLICT

By Ken Conca

Amid the talk of looming "water wars," a less dramatic—but more immediate—link between water and violence is often ignored: the violence engendered by poor governance of water resources. Policies to expand water supplies, develop hydroelectric power, alter freshwater ecosystems, or change the terms of access to water can have devastating impacts on the livelihoods, cultures, and human rights of local communities. As these communities learn to voice their grievances, build networks across borders, and connect with human rights and environmental activists, once-local conflicts become international disputes. As a result, policymakers at all levels are being forced to rethink water's role in development. To ensure water security in the 21st century, social conflicts over water must be managed in ways that accommodate the full range of people affected by water development projects.

Social Conflicts Over Water

Social conflicts over water are, to some extent, inevitable, given water's multiple functions: it is a basic human need, the foundation of livelihoods, the lifeblood of critical ecosystems, a cultural symbol, and a marketable commodity. Managing social conflict is central to good water management. However, as the development of water resources and the transformation of freshwater ecosystems have intensified, so have the conflicts.

Social conflicts around water are not only increasing, but also being transformed by two simultaneous global revolutions. The communications revolution has produced an explosion in global networks, access to information, and personal mobility, making it easier for affected communities and sympathetic advocacy groups to partner with those in other countries. The democratic revolution has increased the ability of people in previously closed societies to organize and express dissent, making it easier (though not always easy) for communities to oppose projects or policies that harm their interests, livelihoods, and cultures. As a result of these two revolutions, conflicts that were once largely local matters have been dragged into international arenas.

Capital-intensive water infrastructure projects—such as large dams, irrigation schemes, and transportation canals—are the focus of some of these conflicts. The affected communities are typically rural and poor, and frequently home to cultural minorities or otherwise disempowered groups. The World Commission on Dams estimated in its 2000 report that such projects have forced some 40-80 million people to relocate—many without adequate compensation and most with little or no say in the process. Project sites have been the scene of many violent confrontations between communities and governments; in addition, project supporters have targeted local activists for violence.

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Changes in **community access to water supplies** can also generate social conflict. The increasing difficulty of financing water-supply infrastructure, as well as pressure from international financial institutions, has led some governments to contract out water services to the private sector. Many more are "marketizing" water by increasing prices, cutting off service for nonpayment, or otherwise limiting access to water. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, in 2000, large protests against price increases and concessions given to a private multinational consortium led the government to declare a state of emergency and deploy the army; at least one person died and more than 100 were injured in clashes with security forces. Similar protests (on a lesser scale) have broken out in many countries, recently claiming lives in China, India, Pakistan, Colombia, Kenya, and Somalia.

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Finally, **impacts on critical socio-ecological systems** that provide environmental services and sustain local livelihoods can trigger conflict. Aquaculture, for example, is an increasingly important source of food around the world, as well as a popular development strategy in many tropical coastal regions. Yet industrial-scale fish farming, particularly for shrimp, often has a severe impact on local communities: it can lead to water pollution, wastewater dumping, eutrophication, saltwater intrusion, mangrove deforestation, and the privatization of traditionally community-owned resources. These problems have spurred affected communities to protest, call for boycotts, and take other direct actions, to which some governments have responded by using coercive force and targeting local activists.

We must address these social conflicts over water because human rights and environmental justice are intrinsically important, particularly for people who are marginalized by current economic structures and development initiatives. In addition, the broad legitimacy needed to institute reform will not be obtained without better ways to resolve conflict, increase participation by members of affected communities, and encourage stakeholder dialogue—especially important now, when many countries are redesigning water laws, policies, and practices to emphasize conservation, environmental protection, efficient resource use, and integrated water resources management. Above all, we should view systematic and repeated protests as evidence that policies have failed—an early warning that must not be ignored in the rush to implement particular notions of development.

Policy Recommendations

- **Strengthen the human right to water.** The UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights has recognized the human right to water, including the obligation of states to respect, protect, and fulfill water rights. The human right to water is also implicit in rights to food, survival, and an adequate standard of living, and in peoples' right to manage their own resources. The challenge is giving these rights concrete—rather than theoretical—meaning. To achieve this goal, we should recognize the right to water in national framework laws and international development assistance practices; create better mechanisms to hold both state and nonstate actors accountable for implementing and complying with existing laws and policies; and ensure that economic reforms are implemented within a human rights framework.

- **Treat water projects as a means, not an end**. Too often, development agencies treat projects as an end rather than a means, and thus fail to assess the full range of alternatives. Worsening this problem are competition between donor agencies, corruption, and the practice of subsidizing dubious projects through export credit agencies. Donor agencies and host governments alike must improve their ability to survey all the options and choose those with the least negative impacts. In addition, they should remember that their ultimate aims are reducing poverty, meeting basic needs, and increasing human security, not simply reproducing familiar projects and continuing business as usual.

- **Create better ways to resolve environmental disputes**. The lack of effective mechanisms for resolving environmental disputes is perhaps the weakest link in the chain

of global environmental governance. While useful, current mechanisms—such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration, the World Bank's inspection panel, or the World Trade Organization's dispute resolution procedures—fail to provide effective, inclusive, and dispute-transforming outcomes consistently. The UN's High-Level Panel on System-Wide Coherence in the Areas of Development, Humanitarian Assistance, and Environment is currently considering a wide range of reforms. Its recommendations should include establishing a mechanism for arbitrating, resolving, and transforming disputes that involve not only governments, but also intergovernmental organizations, transnational business, NGOs, and local communities.

• **Learn lessons from transnational stakeholder dialogue initiatives**. As traditional interstate institutions have proved unable to manage cross-border conflicts over water and other resources effectively, broader and more inclusive "stakeholder dialogues" have begun to emerge, such as the World Commission on Dams. These initiatives are not a panacea, however. In addition, there is no easy way to identify all the stakeholders in a given dispute. Yet these efforts raise the bar by giving affected people a voice. In addition, they offer important lessons on how to build global consensus: recognize and work through difficult disagreements rather than seek "least-common-denominator" statements of general principles; cooperatively build knowledge through open, participatory processes; and support such "global" dialogues with robust national stakeholder forums.

• **Broaden participation in international river agreements.** Internationally shared river basins are often the subject of international diplomacy. Too often, however, this diplomacy is limited to dividing water supplies equitably between nations and reducing the potential for international conflict. Although these goals are important, they do little to address the human security of people living in the basin. Few international river basin agreements or the institutions they create include robust mechanisms for incorporating civil society. Without broad participation and a focus on human security, the rush to promote international cooperation—often driven by proposed large-scale water infrastructure projects—may simply accelerate exploitation of water resources.

• **Recognize the global demands that drive local resource pressures.** Social conflicts over water often arise at a local level, on the scale of a city or a watershed. Yet they may be driven by powerful external forces. The growth of industrial fish farming is fueled by changing consumer tastes in rich countries. Big hydroelectric projects in remote locations often power industrial processing facilities that plug into the global economy, while bypassing local economies and imposing a heavy burden on local communities. Local initiatives to improve water governance must be supported by mechanisms that connect the dots between global drivers and local impacts, such as product certification, consumer information campaigns, and "cradle-to-grave" accountability.

• **Do not sacrifice water rights to meet climate change goals.** As pressure mounts to respond to the threat of global climate change, poorly conceived hydroelectric projects may be pushed through as "clean" development projects. Hydroelectricity has its place in the world's energy-supply mix. But climate change will also affect stream flow and local water cycles—problems that can be dramatically worsened by some water-infrastructure projects. Rushing to replace "big fossil" with "big hydro" risks increasing the substantial water burdens confronting local communities in a greenhouse world.

BIOGRAPHY

Ken Conca is associate professor of government and politics at the University of Maryland and director of the Harrison Program on the Future Global Agenda, a research and teaching program on global issues. He focuses on the politics of water, global environmental politics, political economy, North-South issues, and peace and conflict studies. Conca's latest book is *Governing Water: Contentious Transnational Politics and Global Institution Building* (MIT Press, 2006).

Environmental Change & Security Program

The **Environmental Change & Security Program** (ECSP) promotes dialogue on the connections among environmental, health, and population dynamics and their links to conflict, human insecurity, and foreign policy. ECSP focuses on four core topics:

- Population, health, and environment;
- Environment and security;
- Water; and
- Environmental and energy challenges in China.

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Photograph: © CORBIS/David Mercado/REUTERS. Demonstrators in Cochabamba wave the Bolivian flag as they participate in a strike against water utility rate increases in April 2000.

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