The management of land and natural resources is one of the most critical challenges facing developing countries today. The exploitation of high-value natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and timber has often been cited as a key factor in triggering, escalating or sustaining violent conflicts around the globe. Furthermore, increasing competition and conflict for diminishing renewable resources, such as land and water, is on the rise. This is being further aggravated by environmental degradation, population growth, and climate change. The mismanagement of land and natural resources is contributing to new conflicts and obstructing the peaceful resolution of existing ones.

To improve capacity for land and natural resource management and conflict prevention, the European Union partnered with the Expert Reference Group of the UN Framework Team (FT) in late 2008. The aim of this partnership was to develop and implement a strategic multi-agency project focused on building the capacity of national stakeholders, the United Nations system, and the European Union to prevent land and natural resources from contributing to violent conflict. Six UN agencies, programmes or departments have been involved, including UNDP, DPA, UNEP, PBSO, UN-HABITAT and DESA. The partnership is also designed to enhance policy development and programme coordination between key actors at the field level.

The first outcome of this project is an inventory of existing tools and capacity within the UN system and a set of three Guidance Notes on addressing natural resource management and conflict prevention. These Guidance Notes cover: (i) Land and conflict (ii) Extractive industries and conflict, (iii) Environmental scarcity and conflict, (iv) Capacity development for managing land and natural resources.

Based on the Guidance Notes, the second outcome of the project is to deliver a series of training modules for UN and EU field staff, as well as local partners, to enhance the knowledge and skills needed to understand, anticipate, prevent, and mitigate potential conflicts over land and natural resources. Participants will acquire the skills to formulate and operationalize preventive measures in relation to natural resource management (NRM) and conflict.

In countries where specific NRM and conflict challenges are identified, the project will aim to provide focused technical assistance in the development of conflict prevention strategies. This could include the deployment of staff and other experts to assist the UN Country Team (UNCT), including the Resident Coordinator (RC) or Peace and Development Advisor, in analysing options and designing programmes. Where needed, dedicated follow-up measures will also be undertaken on an inter-agency basis, in partnership with the EU.

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Environmental Scarcity and conflict

Executive Summary

Natural resources and conflict
Conflict arises when two or more groups believe their interests are incompatible. It is not in itself a negative phenomenon, but violent conflict can be a essential component of social change and development, and is a necessary component of human interaction. Non-violent resolution of conflict is possible when individuals and groups have trust in the outcomes of the process. The following are some of the potential outcomes of conflict between user groups:

1. Demand for natural resources exceeds supply - increases in population growth and rates of consumption will reduce the per capita availability of a particular resource. Tensions may develop between competing user groups when the overall quantity of the resource is not adequate to meet the needs of the local population. When these tensions intersect with other issues, such as socio-economic, ethnic, or religious, they can lead to violence.

2. Degradation of natural resources reduces supply. The depletion or degradation of a specific resource can occur for a number of reasons, including uneven, rapid, and violent conflict itself. For example, pollution from industrial activities, agricultural run-off and poor management of waste can impact resources, leading to their scarcity, such as a source of grievance. Soil and forests can be impacted by conflict, used to fund conflict or deliberately affected through conversion of one type of land use to another. Decreases in the supply of resources can place different user groups into direct competition and thereby lead to conflict.

3. Access to natural resources is restricted or unequal. When one group controls access to renewable resources to the detriment of others, natural resource-dependent communities are often marginalized. Violence can occur as these groups seek greater or more equitable access to key resources.

It is therefore crucial that UN and EU agreements, as well as to unite existing tools and guidance under a single framework, can help reduce the vulnerability of populations to environmental stress.

Environmental Scarcity and conflict

Resource depletion, environmental degradation and climate change pose fundamental threats to human security. Separately or in combination with other factors, they can drive livelihoods, negatively affect ecosystems, undermine peace and development. When local and national institutions cannot provide the necessary interventions, it may lead to resolve disputes over the degradation or depletion of natural resources. The ability to detect potential conflicts early on allows for far more flexibility in addressing the issue.

Environmental risk assessments

Determining what preventative actions are needed can be conducted through three main types of interventions: Reducing livelihood vulnerabilities can take place through livelihood strategies, improving the quality and quantity of natural resources, and livelihoods in order to detect and identify potential conflict hotspots. Joint assessments can help identify potential conflict hotspots and promote a common understanding of the challenges and a shared vision for cooperation.

Conflict prevention strategies

Conflit prevention refers to the set of approaches, methods and mechanisms that can be taken to reduce or avoid the potential impact of climate change on the livelihoods of communities, promote sustainable development and reduce the risk of conflict. Conflict prevention strategies can be conducted through detailed and systematic environmental risk assessments. These risk assessments should help identify potential conflict hotspots, develop a common understanding of the challenges and identify potential conflict hotspots.

First, early warning systems are essential to identify potential problems that could eventually result in violent conflict. The ability to detect potential conflicts early on is therefore critical in determining what preventative actions are necessary.

Second, multi-stakeholder dialogues are crucial to ensuring that local communities and marginalized groups are heard and that their perspective is adequately reflected. Environmental governance can also refer to the implementation of natural resource-dependent policies and practices that may have negative impacts on natural resources. In order to prevent and mitigate the negative impacts on natural resources, it is crucial to implement policies and practices that will have a positive impact on natural resources.