

Abundant natural resources—such as oil, minerals, metals, diamonds and other gemstones, drug crops, and timber—have helped fuel a large number of armed conflicts in developing countries. Resource wealth plays an important role in the outbreak of conflict and tends to make conflicts last longer, although it has a more varied influence on their intensity. Altogether, in about a quarter of the roughly 50 wars and

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armed conflicts of recent years, resource exploitation helped trigger or exacerbate violent conflict or financed its continuation.¹

In those cases, natural resource wealth has turned out to be a curse, triggering a torrent of arms trafficking, human rights violations, humanitarian disasters, and environmental destruction. A rough, conservative estimate suggests that more than 5 million people were killed in resource-related conflicts during the 1990s.² (At least 2.5 million people died in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone).³ In addition, close to 6 million fled to neighboring countries, and anywhere from 11–15 million people were displaced inside the borders of their home countries.⁴

The money derived from resource exploitation in war zones has secured an ample supply of arms and military equipment for armed factions and has served to enrich a handful of people—warlords, corrupt government officials, arms merchants, mercenaries, and unscrupulous corporate leaders.⁵ (See Table 1.) But critical human needs have been trampled in the process. In oil- and diamond-rich Angola, for instance, almost 30 percent of children die before the age of six.⁶ Nearly half of all Angolan children are underweight, and a third of school-age children have no school to go to.⁷ Unsafe drinking water, a pervasive lack of health services, and food shortages have limited Angolans' life expectancy to 47 years.⁸

In places like Angola, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Colombia, the pillaging of resources allows wars to continue that were initially driven by grievances or liberation and ideological struggles.⁹ Elsewhere, such as in Sierra Leone or the Democratic Republic of the

Congo, nature's bounty attracts predatory groups that initiate violence as a means of establishing control over resource deposits.¹⁰ Finally, resource extraction can itself be the source of conflict where the economic benefits accrue to foreign companies and local elites, while the local population shoulders an array of the burdens. This has led to violent conflict in places like Nigeria's Niger Delta, Papua New Guinea's Bougainville island, and several provinces in Indonesia.¹¹

Violent struggles arising out of a context of contested resource wealth join a host of conflicts that emerge from situations of resource scarcity—overuse and depletion—and are exacerbated by the social and economic repercussions of environmental degradation. Where resource wealth is a factor in conflicts, it is primarily nonrenewable resources such as fuels and minerals that are at issue. Where resource scarcity is a factor, on the other hand, it is the degradation of arable land, the depletion of water for irrigation and drinking, and the decimation of forests that are focal points.¹²

Combatants have relied on a variety of means to secure the natural resources that finance their military activities. They use extreme violence to establish undisputed control, intimidate local populations, or depopulate resource-rich areas altogether. They pillage existing stocks, coerce large numbers of civilians into mining and logging operations, or put some of their own combatants to work. They “tax” loggers and miners or otherwise extract ransom before allowing the passage of commodities to their intended markets. They contract with unscrupulous companies to extract, smuggle, and market the resources.¹³

The countries with resource-related conflicts suffer from a number of debilitating economic and political conditions. Overly dependent on natural resources, they fail to diversify their economies, stimulate innovation, or invest adequately in critical social areas or public infrastructure.¹⁴ Resource royalties help political leaders maintain power, even in the absence of popular legitimacy, by funding a system of patronage.¹⁵ These governments also spend a

Table 1: Estimated Revenues from Conflict Resources, Selected Cases

Combatant	Resource	Period	Estimated Revenue
UNITA rebels (Angola)	diamonds	1992–2001	\$4–4.2 billion total
RUF rebels (Sierra Leone)	diamonds	1990s	\$25–125 million a year
Liberia (government)	timber	Late 1990s	\$100–187 million a year
Sudan (government)	oil	Since 1999	\$400 million a year
Rwandan army	coltan (from Congo)	1999–2000	\$250 million total
Afghanistan (Taliban, Northern Alliance)	opium, lapis lazuli, emeralds	Mid-1990s–2001	\$90–100 million a year
Cambodia (government, Khmer Rouge)	timber	Mid-1990s	\$220–390 million a year
Myanmar (government)	timber	1990s	\$112 million a year
FARC rebels (Colombia)	cocaine	Late 1990s	\$140 million a year

Source: Compiled from Renner, *The Anatomy of Resource Wars*.

high portion of state income on internal security to suppress challenges to their power.¹⁶ Ruthless predatory groups have emerged, intent on seizing control of a prized resource that represents one of the few tickets to wealth and power. Violent tactics are facilitated by the massive proliferation and easy availability of small arms and light weapons.¹⁷

Ending these kinds of conflicts and the associated pillage is not easy. In the Congo, foreign forces have withdrawn, yet fighting among various armed factions continues, and elaborate illegal networks have emerged that continue to exploit natural resources for the benefit of a handful of Congolese, Zimbabwean, Ugandan, and Rwandan elites.¹⁸

The enormous expansion of global trade and financial networks has made access to key markets relatively easy for warring groups. They have had little difficulty in establishing international smuggling networks and sidestepping existing international embargoes, given a degree of complicity among certain companies and lax customs controls.¹⁹

It is at least becoming a bit more difficult for “conflict resources” to be sold on world markets. In the diamond industry, this is due to

national certification schemes and efforts to negotiate a standardized global certification scheme. But the resulting set of rules still suffers from numerous shortcomings, including reliance on voluntary measures and a lack of independent monitoring.²⁰

Natural resources will continue to fuel deadly conflicts as long as consumer societies import materials with little regard for their origin or the conditions under which they were produced. Some civil society groups have sought to increase consumer awareness and to compel companies—some of them major corporations—to do business more ethically through investigative reports and by “naming and shaming” specific corporations.²¹

Promoting democratization, justice, and greater respect for human rights are key tasks, along with efforts to reduce the impunity with which some governments and rebel groups engage in extreme violence. Another challenge is to diversify economies away from a strong dependence on primary commodities. A more diversified economy, and investments in human development, would lessen the likelihood that natural resources become pawns in a struggle among ruthless contenders for wealth and power.

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1. One-quarter share of all conflicts having a resource dimension is the author's assessment based on existing literature.
2. Number of deaths estimated from data in Milton Leitenberg, *Deaths in Wars and Conflicts Between 1945 and 2000* (College Park, MD: Center for International and Security Studies, University of Maryland, May 2001).
3. Some 350,000 deaths in the Congo are attributable to violence, the remainder to disease and malnutrition resulting from war disruptions; Taylor B. Seybolt, "Major Armed Conflicts," in Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), *SIPRI Yearbook 2002: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 33.
4. Refugee numbers derived from U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, at <www.unhcr.ch>; number of internally displaced persons derived from U.S. Committee for Refugees, at <www.refugees.org>, both viewed 25 August 2002.
5. Michael Renner, *The Anatomy of Resource Wars*, Worldwatch Paper 162 (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, October 2002).
6. U.N. Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2002* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Renner, *op. cit.* note 5.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. Michael Renner, *Fighting for Survival: Environmental Decline, Social Conflicts, and the New Age of Insecurity* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996); Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Thomas Homer-Dixon and Jessica Blitt, eds., *Ecoviolence: Links Among Environment, Population, and Security* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998).
13. For specific cases, see Renner, *op. cit.* note 5.
14. Indra de Soysa, "The Resource Curse: Are Civil Wars Driven by Rapacity or Paucity?" in Mats Berdal and David M. Malone, eds., *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil Wars* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), pp. 120–21, 125–26;
- Jeffrey D. Sachs and Andrew M. Warner, "Natural Resource Abundance and Economic Growth," *Development Discussion Paper No. 517a* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Institute for International Development, 1995); Michael Ross, *Extractive Sectors and the Poor* (Boston: Oxfam America, October 2001), pp. 5, 7–9.
15. William Reno, "Shadow States and the Political Economy of Civil Wars," in Berdal and Malone, *op. cit.* note 14, pp. 45–46, 56–57; de Soysa, *op. cit.* note 14, pp. 120–21, 125–26; Philippe LeBillon, "The Political Ecology of War: Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts," *Political Geography*, no. 20 (2001), pp. 561–84.
16. Ross, *op. cit.* note 14, pp. 13–14.
17. Small Arms Survey, *Small Arms Survey 2002* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Michael Renner, *Small Arms, Big Impact: The Next Challenge of Disarmament*, Worldwatch Paper 137 (Washington, DC: Worldwatch Institute, October 1997).
18. Ongoing fighting from Marc Lacey, "War Is Still a Way of Life for Congo Rebels," *New York Times*, 21 November 2002; illegal networks from U.N. Security Council, "Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth of the Democratic Republic of the Congo" (New York: 16 October 2002).
19. Renner, *op. cit.* note 5.
20. Ian Smillie, *Conflict Diamonds: Unfinished Business* (Ottawa, ON, Canada: International Development Research Centre, 27 May 2002); U.S. Government Accounting Office, *Critical Issues Remain in Deterring Conflict Diamond Trade* (Washington, DC: June 2002), pp. 17–21.
21. See, for example, the Campaign to Eliminate Conflict Diamonds, at <www.phrusa.org/campaigns/sierra_leone/conflict_diamonds.html>.