

## Armed conflicts, refugees and the environment (academic version)

Currently, there are 22 armed conflicts<sup>1</sup> and an estimated 68.5 million forcefully displaced people worldwide, mainly due to wars (UNHCR 2018). We are in the midst of what is commonly referred to as the world's worst refugee crisis in history<sup>2</sup>. There are multiple ways in which these social crises interrelate with environmental issues (Adger 2014). First, the same economic forces that devastate the environment also directly affect human populations. For example, mining in Congo endangers ape populations and is also responsible for child slavery and provoking bloodshed (Eichstaedt 2011; Essick 2001); oil exploitation in the Amazon brings deforestation and pollution which harms both humans and wildlife and violates Indigenous rights (Acuña 2015; Finer et al. 2008). Palm oil plantations in Asia devastate the environment and cause the displacement of many local farming communities (Obidzinski et al. 2012). Second, several of the conflicts in Africa are funded through the exploitation of natural resources such as oil, diamonds, timber and minerals (Boekhout van Solinge 2008). This deadly relationship between the exploitation of natural resources, armed conflicts, and the destruction of nature will only be stopped if the global demand for natural resources is reduced, better regulated, and balanced alongside respect for conservation and human rights (Boekhout van Solinge 2008). These kinds of interventional regulations are contradictory to the [Neoliberal ideology](#) which could be a factor in the rising levels of global violence during recent years (Institute for Economics and Peace 2018).

Climate change is often used to explain the growing violence. The Council of the European Union, for example, determines that 'Climate Change is a threat multiplier which threatens to overburden states and regions which are already fragile and conflict prone' (Council of the European Union, 2008). Moreover, mainstream environmental discourse often uses concepts such as "scarcity", "state-failure", "under-development", "mismanagement" and "technological primitivism" to explain social conflicts related to resource sharing in what they describe as fragile ecosystems (Selby and Hoffmann 2014; Verhoeven 2009, 2011). These deterministic explanations obscure political and economic factors such as: international pressures to "develop" related to Neoliberalism trends, international debts, and resource exploitation, as well as the interests of elites. This results in marginalisation and violations of rights of different sectors of the population, inequity of resource sharing, as well as land expropriation and operation (Bromwich

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1 This is the common, mainstream number for global conflicts. On the other hand, The Institute for Economics and Peace study covers 163 countries of which only 13 countries were not involved in conflicts of one kind or another Institute for Economics and Peace, 'Global Peace Index 2018: Measuring Peace in a Complex World', (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2018).

2 <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/20/world/world-refugee-day-worst-crisis-in-history/index.html>, <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/6/20/17479612/world-refugee-day-immigration-venezuela>

2018; Hoffman 2018). These discourses are also used to justify colonial interventions in the name of rescuing the environment (Davis and Burke 2011).

Many, however, identify the cause of socio-environmental problems in some of the war stricken countries as resource abundance rather than scarcity (Eichstaedt 2011; Hoffman 2018; Selby and Hoffmann 2014). Abundance of water and fertile soil or minerals attract national and international developers looking for profits, who force local people away from the resources, and in many cases incite violence among and between local groups. Moreover, over-engineering of nature for the building of dams, or irrigation of large-scale agriculture or mining, causes or intensifies ecological damage, which in turn aggravates social problems for local people who depend on these resources (Eichstaedt 2011; Hoffman 2018).

There is a growing base of academic literature that concludes that there is very weak or no evidence pointing to a direct relationship between climate change related phenomena, such as short term warming, droughts or floods, and armed conflicts. However, there is strong evidence that climate change mitigation strategies, like REDD projects, biofuels and externally funded food security programs, do create and aggravate social conflicts (Adger 2014; Gemenne et al. 2014; Hunsberger et al. 2017; Hunsberger et al. 2018; Kane et al. 2018; Verhoeven 2011). These findings are comparable with [Neoliberal Conservation](#) literature, which finds economically based solutions advanced in mainstream conservation damaging to both nature and wildlife.

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