

[Background paper for The Hague Conference on Environment, Security and Sustainable Development, 9-12 May 2004]

## Arguing the case for an Environmental Marshall Plan

Leif Ohlsson, PhD, Dept. of Peace & Development Research, Göteborg University, Sweden (invited roundtable panellist)

### Summary:

A number of recent reports on trends in population dynamics, and research on links between livelihoods and risks of conflict, demonstrate the need to highlight certain areas of the international development policy agenda:

- World population increases at a lower rate than just a decade ago - but the expected increase until 2050 still amounts to almost half the present population.
- An amount of people equal to or surpassing this entire increase will come to live in cities in developing countries (albeit not as many in megacities as previously thought).
- This is a telltale sign that the traditional source of livelihoods, agriculture, no longer can absorb more people - not today, and even less so in the future (regardless whether enough food for a still growing population can be produced, or not, which is another issue).
- A clear grasp of the risks of conflict in this gigantic process of change requires a multifaceted analysis, including an assessment of the causal contributions of environmental factors and gendered aspects: The big problem demonstrably is constituted by young men, who fail to reach their culturally engendered, and gendered, expectations, partially as a result of growing environmental scarcities of arable land and water for irrigation.
- The conflict-creating mechanisms in this analysis stem from loss or lack of sufficient livelihood opportunities. In such a Livelihood Conflicts Approach, the opportunity for actors of evil intent to mobilize large number of ethnic militias in rural areas, as well as suicide bombers and terrorists in urban areas, is offered as one explanatory pathway.
- Policy conclusions include the importance of creating livelihood opportunities, rather than productivity increases in a narrow economic sense - but also the difficult task of getting young men to understand that they will have to forgo some of their gendered expectations in order to create a space for women in the world.

- Policy challenges include designing economic incentives to achieve an increased number of livelihood opportunities in rural areas in developing countries. It is suggested that this policy challenge is best thought of as amounting to an "Environmental Marshall Plan"; that such a plan may be included in present Climate Change mitigating efforts; and that Europe is uniquely positioned to spearhead such a plan.

## **1. Population decrease in rural areas - entire increase and more will end up in cities**

The latest authoritative population forecasts point at a world population of around 9 billion people in 2050. This means an increase of almost 3 billion from today's 6.2 billion people. (1)

The rate of population increase has slowed down, for beneficial, but also for terrible reasons. Women, particularly within the modern sector in cities, have gained the opportunity to choose not to have as many children as previously. At the terrible end of the scale, the AIDS pandemic, particularly in southern Africa, now is of the proportion that outright population decreases eventually are expected, even in countries with very high previous rates of population increase. (2)

Of even greater interest, however, are the forecasts for where in the world the additional three billion people until 2050 are expected to end up. The best available knowledge today says that they will live in cities, albeit not to such a large degree in the growing megacities (more than ten million inhabitants) of developing countries as previously thought or feared, but rather in a large number of smaller urban areas with less than half a million inhabitants each. (3)

This tendency is thought to be so strong that the total rural population of the world is even expected to diminish somewhat, from 3,3 billion people today (almost half the world population at this time), to 3,2 billion people in 2030 (at that time a far less proportion of the total world population).

A number equal to - or in rural areas in excess of - the entire population increase during the next two decades thus will end up in urban areas, and almost all of them in developing countries small urban areas. The ramifications of this fact, which has been known for some time, are seldom analyzed.

What it means, is that rural areas and the traditional source of rural livelihoods - agriculture - no longer can sustain even its present population; in the sense of providing jobs or wages, and a position of traditional social respect.

Since the rate of rural population growth still is, and will continue to be, higher than in cities (since old patterns of patriarchal oppression of women and an economic rationality of a large number of children still prevale), the projected outflow, from agriculture and rural areas to the modern sector in urban areas, is in fact enormous.

Nobody being born into rural areas in excess of the present population will be able to find a place of his [sic! - see section 2 below] own in agriculture, and some of the numbers of the rural population today will find it necessary to join the already large migratory flow of surplus rural people to urban areas.

This trend is already in full swing, and will increase as the next few decades unroll. This large-scale process of change is deeply conflict-ridden and poses huge challenges, both for rural and urban areas. It is a source of conflict-generating mechanisms today, and will continue to be so during the immediate next decades.

## **2. The problem of young men who fail to reach their expectations**

In order to describe the conflict-generating mechanisms inherent in this unprecedented process of change, a reasonable start is to identify what sections of the population will be subjected to the largest changes and the most severe restrictions in relation to their culturally engendered expectations; but also who, within these sections, have the greatest power and options to act - and react - in the face of increased pressure for change. (4a, b)

A tentative answer would be that young men, predominantly in rural areas, but also in cities, are hardest hit in relation to their expectations. They are also the ones who have the greatest option to voice their discontent. (How many women are regularly seen in TV reports of how "masses of people took to the streets in protest"? Not many - what you see is men, and predominantly young men.)

The young men are those who expect to inherit land, or to attain one or another coveted opportunity for livelihoods. Women may wish they had the same rights to such expectations, but in traditional rural cultures they have had very little grounds so far for entertaining them.

As young men in rural areas find themselves disinherited (since their fathers and grandfathers long ago have divided up the family property into agricultural units that would be unsustainable if they were further divided; since there is no more virgin land to plow; and since the large commercial agricultural enterprises are quick to swallow up any good land they wish to accumulate), they have lost any chance of gaining the attributes demanded from "a real man". They find themselves unable to get married according to custom, and consequently unable to enjoy the respect of their peers who have had better fortune.

In addition, when the modern discourse of women's rights today affect even distant rural areas, chances are that young men's level of frustration, if anything, will increase during the present era and the next few decades to come. (From this perspective, a fruitful area of research would be the very obvious manifestations of hatred of women in the world, most clearly seen in wars, but also in peace.)

## **3. Lack of livelihoods as a common root cause of different kinds of conflicts**

Lack of livelihood opportunities within the traditional rural sector, agriculture, thus leads to a surplus of uprooted and frustrated young men, most of whom will migrate to cities, which is a main aspect of the great processes of change in the world. Others will resort to alcoholism or commit suicide. (5a, b) There will, however, always be a hefty surplus left for actors of evil intent to mobilize as foot soldiers for any particular power-seeking agenda of their own such prospective leaders may entertain. (6)

In contexts of abject poverty, loss of dignity and lack of livelihoods, the promise of land, looting, and vengeance on women (c.f. the pandemic of rape in every civil war) manifestly has proven to be sufficient to mobilize yet another "militia" or "rebel movement", fuelling yet another civil war in yet another developing country.

Such mobilization regularly takes place along ethnic (or religious, or national, or regional) lines, since such fault lines are readily available for exploitation in every country. Under socially more stable conditions, they can be contained with relative ease by most societies. When the going gets rough, however, they quickly take on an extremely divisive character, since people (read here: young men) under pressure first tend to cling to "their own", then to interpret their own plight as the fault of "the others".

This mechanism is up and running in most, if not all, internal wars, whether they are classified as caused by lack of renewable livelihood resources (such as land in Rwanda 1994) (7a, b), or by the availability of lootable resources (such as gold, diamonds, strategic minerals, oil or timber in West Africa, Angola, Sudan, and DR Congo) (8a, b, c).

The lootable resources may serve as a readily available source for financing civil wars, but the foot soldiers of those wars still have to be mobilized from the swelling ranks of unemployed and frustrated young men. Wars are still fought by bands of discontented armed young men, whether their source of finance stems from plundering and terrorizing civilians, or from the extraction of illegal blood diamonds. (9)

Of the young men who instead seek their fortune in urban areas, far from all will be able to gain entrance to the modern sector in the decades to come. What the conflict-generating mechanisms stemming from such a failure will look like, largely remains to be seen.

Some, but far from all, of the archaic and patriarchal patterns of traditional rural societies are transformed in the urban and modern context. People who succeed in urban areas become more of adherents of the modern; they have fewer children, and their children get better education. In the best of cases, women gain better opportunities for a decent life. Men might even change their ways more readily. External values and cultural patterns are adopted, for better or for worse.

But urban concentrations still provide ample opportunities for actors of evil intent to exploit the failure of young men to attain what, in the urban context and during the decades ahead, will count as necessary

in order to become "real men". The suicide bombers of the Middle East grow out of urban areas; quite probably they also stem from families who have moved to the city relatively recently. Political and religious extremism thrive among the inflow of surplus rural people to large cities, whether Cairo, Islamabad, or Herat.

Thus, the young men who have come to believe that they have been robbed of their birth-right, by difficulties to gain access to livelihood opportunities, in rural areas will fill the ranks of militias and rebel movement, and in urban areas of suicide brigades and terrorist cells.

If this seems like an overly simplified analysis, it is well worth pointing to the corroboration by recent and independent research efforts (see section [5](#) below). At the very least, an explanatory effort along these lines has the advantage of accomodating and paying proper attention to some of the most powerful processes of change going on in the world today and for the foreseeable future.

#### **4. An Environmental Marshall Plan - and teaching young men to make space for women**

A large number of cases, selected from the daily flow of news from UN and humanitarian sources, can be used to underpin the underlying analysis, or hypothesis. The difficult part is to capture the main elements of the overarching policy challenges.

One such thread, relevant to policy formulation, is that the restoration of depleted renewable environmental resource, vital for livelihoods (soil and water) will require a lot of manpower. Apart from the fact that this is a worthwhile and indeed necessary goal in and by itself, it would also result in a number of urgently needed jobs and livelihood opportunities, for both men and women.

Such efforts would provide welcome relief from the pressure driving young men to urban areas, thereby creating the grounds for mobilizing militias in rural areas, and terrorist cells in an urban context. Not least important, it would create greater scope for sustainable livelihoods, resulting in rural areas being able to support more, not less, people in the future.

The mechanisms for accomplishing this, however, largely run counter to prevalent narrow economic rationality. At present, high premium is paid to increases of productivity per invested dollar. From environmental and social points of view, premium should be paid to sustainable increases of productivity per hectare of arable land, since that would promote sustainable resource utilization and furthermore is best accomplished with larger input of labour, as opposed to capital.

The idea would be to combine the urgent need for restoring depleted environmental resources, with the equally urgent need of creating livelihood opportunities. I suggest that this might well be thought of in terms of an "Environmental Marshall Plan", since it would require some form - by no means unproportionally high, though - of capital transfers from rich to poor countries. ([10](#))

To make this a win-win solution, some credible mechanism of financing the proposed scheme will have to be found. Fortunately enough, such mechanisms of capital transfer are already built into the present international efforts to curb emissions causing climate change. (11[a](#), [b](#)) The fact that climate efforts at the present moment largely are promoted by European countries by no means should be seen as a drawback, but rather as a most appropriate way of paying back some of the debt from the historic Marshall Plan, which helped safeguard European democracies after the Second World War.

The other thread of the policy conclusions is slightly harder, both to formulate and realize, since it is so seldom elevated to the inner spheres of "high politics". It runs parallel to the concentration within the international community on human rights, and more particularly women's rights, and it is about the necessity of young men in the world coming to grips with the fact that they can no longer expect to attain the same patriarchal and privileged position as their fathers and grandfathers may have enjoyed within their own traditional societies.

On the surface policy efforts in this area would seem counter-intuitive - more space for women in the world would seem to mean less space for men, and thus increased frustration among the already discontented young men. And that is in fact true - a desirable change within the zero-sum game between the sexes does mean a negative outcome for men, but that is also the very definition of increased equality.

## **5. Empirical corroborating evidence: The PAI report on "Security Demographic"**

A meticulously researched and well-reasoned report from Population Action International provides corroboration for the "Livelihood Conflicts" hypothesis advanced above.

The report, "The Security Demographic: Population and civil conflict after the Cold War" ([12](#)), finds a strong link between internal conflicts & strife, and three stress factors:

- A youth bulge in the population (the problem of which is further specified as young men).
- Scarcities of renewable resources of land and water, important for livelihoods.
- Strong migratory flows to cities (resulting from lack of livelihood opportunities in the agricultural sector).

A fourth stress factor, the demographic consequences of HIV/AIDS, is hypothesized to further aggravate some of the previous stress factors, although this is not yet possible to corroborate.

Based on calculations of widely available data, the report finds that countries in the late stage of demographic transition (lower birth-rates, higher expected life-span) were less likely to outbreaks of civil conflicts during the 1970-2000 period. For high-risk countries, that risk decreased as overall birth and

death rates declined. This decline could be quantified to a decline from more than 40 percent likelihood of conflict in the earliest stage of demographic transition, to less than 5 percent in the latest.

The demographic factor most closely associated with the likelihood of civil conflict during the 1990s were a high proportion of young adults (or more specifically, young men), aged 15 to 29 years, and a rapid rate of urban population growth. Countries where young adults comprised more than 40 percent of the adult population were more than twice as likely as countries with lower proportions to experience an outbreak of civil conflict. States with urban population growth rates above 4 percent were about twice as likely to sustain the outbreak of a civil conflict.

Countries with low availability per capita of cropland and/or renewable fresh water were 1.5 times as likely to experience civil conflict.

These findings, and the meticulous way in which they have been researched and calculated, constitute an urgent invitation to researchers and policy-makers to search for explanatory mechanisms and proper policies to ameliorate the stress-factors identified in the report.

Comments:

- One such attempt at identifying the explanatory causal pathways is the "Livelihood Conflicts" hypothesis. Here, explanations based on scarcities of renewable resources (land & water) are combined with explanations based on plundering of natural resources. The common factor is posited to be lack of livelihood opportunities, in societies where the agricultural sector no longer can absorb still growing populations, resulting in migration to cities. The abundance of frustrated young men is deemed to be the factor enabling actors of evil intent to mobilize discontented sections of the population.
- An attempt to capture the policy challenge following from this explanation is made by suggesting that it might well be formulated as the need for an "Environmental Marshall Plan". Such a plan would outline how the globally recognized need to regenerate depleted ecosystems might be combined with the urgent need to create livelihood opportunities. Not only would the immediate scarcity of livelihood opportunities be ameliorated; it would also lay the foundation of future sustainable livelihoods and ecosystems.

*a) Stress factor 1 in the PAI report: A youth bulge*

Roughly half of all states where young adults comprised 40 percent or more of all adults experienced civil conflict sometime from 1990 to 2000. That incidence is 2.3 times higher than countries below this high-risk benchmark.

The probable causal mechanism, it is argued, stems from the frustration of young men in those societies, who find it impossible to attain the position in society that cultural norms have led them to expect, due

to disproportionately large unemployment within their age-group.

Policy measures recommended include the widely recognized need for employment generation, and increased opportunities for women. (13)

Two comments are called for here:

- The report crucially stresses policy efforts to increase employment-generation. The correlation between a high proportion of young males in the adult population and civil conflict during the 1990's is strong. The "Livelihood conflict" hypothesis is further corroborated by the fact that youth unemployment in developing countries typically is three to five times larger than that of adults.

The idea of an Environmental Marshall Plan combines the need for employment generation with the equally widely recognized need for regenerating depleted ecosystems. This means that current obligations under international conventions such as the Kyoto Protocol could and should be used to generate financial means to generate employment among youth in developing countries.

- The immediate conclusion from the insight that unemployed young men in developing countries form a base for political mobilization by actors with a power-seeking agenda of their own, would seem to lend increased urgency to attempts to generate employment for young men. Other concerns - human rights and gender equality, plus long-term social development concerns - however dictates that employment-generating efforts should be equally or even more directed towards young women.

This may be the most difficult point to find support for, on the ground, in each and every instance. Precisely because of this, it is also an area which urgently needs more attention from policy-making circles.

#### *b) Stress factor 2 in the PAI report: Rapid urban growth*

Countries with rapid rates of urban population growth were about twice as likely as countries below a high-risk benchmark of 4 percent annual growth to experience civil conflict in the 1990s.

Factors that have made industrial world cities prosperous - ethnic diversity, a middle class, and proximity to political power - are potential sources of volatility for many rapidly growing cities in the developing world. A high proportion of youth, a trait of many of these cities, adds another conflict risk factor to the rapid growth of urban areas. Policymakers should strongly consider programs that strengthen urban governance, stimulate job creation, and foster ethnic-community relations. (14)

Comments:

- From the perspective of the "Livelihood conflicts" hypothesis, the important point to highlight here is

that 40 percent of urban growth results from in-migration. Rural-to-urban migration is fuelled by better job prospects in cities, shortage of agricultural work in rural areas, and flight from drought or warfare.

- A large proportion of these push-factors, including warfare, can be directly or indirectly linked to lack of livelihood opportunities within the agricultural sector, and/or environmental causes. This, in turn, underlines the urgency of an Environmental Marshall Plan, promoting both employment in rural areas, and environmental regeneration.

*c) Stress factor 3 in the PAI report: Competition for land and water*

Countries in high or extreme demographic stress categories for cropland or renewable fresh water were about 1.5 times as likely to experience civil conflict in the 1990s as countries that did not fall into these categories, suggesting a weak association between worsening scarcities of these critical resources, by themselves, and an increased likelihood of civil conflict.

Evidence from case studies cited in the report suggests that the major sources of vulnerability to civil conflict that are associated with declines in available cropland and fresh water have been generated by the decreasing capacity of rural areas to maintain secure livelihoods and absorb growing labour forces.

Policy prescriptions suggested in the report include strategies for easing tensions over cropland and fresh water that include formalizing and enforcing unambiguous property rights, training resource managers and funding management and extension programs, pricing agricultural products fairly, and investing in programs that slow population growth. [\(15\)](#)

Comment:

- Although the correlation between critical resource scarcity of land and water, and the likelihood of conflict, is deemed to be weak, the report importantly finds that the major sources of vulnerability to civil conflict that are associated with declines in available cropland and fresh water have been generated by the decreasing capacity of rural areas to maintain secure livelihoods and absorb growing labor forces - which is the "Livelihood conflicts" hypothesis.

*d) Stress factor 4 in the PAI report: HIV/AIDS*

In sub-Saharan Africa, where the hiv aids pandemic has hit hardest, countries are experiencing debilitating rates of illness and death among technicians and professionals in the private sector, in public services and in the military.

These losses threaten to erode the functional capacity of some of the world's weakest states and could significantly hamper their abilities to develop economically, and to respond to chronic domestic

discontent and sudden crises. (16)

Comment:

- A policy-problem only recently identified - not discussed in the PAI but necessary to take into account when elaborating the idea of an Environmental Marshall Plan - is the scarcity of labour in AIDS-stricken rural agricultural households. As soon as a family-member falls ill or dies in HIV/AIDS, the production of that family unit is effectively halved - despite the prevalent unemployment in the surrounding society.

## **6. Linking the idea of an Environmental Marshall Plan to Climate Change mitigating efforts**

After the Second World War, the U.S. stayed in Europe, and they made very sure that the "German danger" would not reappear. The classic Marshall Plan is widely recognized to have been instrumental in creating the present peaceful Europe.

An Environmental Marshall Plan - creating sustainable livelihoods, reconstructing degraded ecosystems, while addressing AIDS issues and gender gaps - could very well be Europe's way of paying back the historic debt we owe to the original Marshall Plan; while at the same time providing an example of true global leadership, and an alternative for the future.

Such a plan would fit very well into the present Climate Change mitigating efforts, under the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto Protocol, since this would allow for the necessary transfer of capital to create the economic incentives required to allow people to work with rehabilitating their local environmental resources, rather than being forced to migrate to cities.

The Environmental Marshall Plan could also be seen in the light of Europe's efforts to fulfill their part of the UN Millenium Development Goals.

## **7. Ten points in conclusion**

Summing up in ten points, the main contribution of this piece is to suggest that:

1. Loss of livelihoods, or an inability to provide enough livelihood opportunities, merits studying as a root cause of conflict.
2. Agriculture as an economic sector can no longer absorb the still growing number of people coming aboard during the next decades.
3. Part of agriculture's inability to provide an increased amount of livelihood opportunities is due to environmental degradation (in turn caused by the pressure on environmental resources to provide

livelihoods).

4. A number of internal conflicts, often regarded as "ethnic", are better explained as "livelihood conflicts".
5. Such livelihood conflicts have a particular gendered aspect - we should acknowledge that the problem is frustrated young men as immediate agents of conflicts, while young women most often instead are the first victims of such conflict.
6. These conflicts are in no way deterministic - it takes actors with a power-seeking agenda of their own to mobilize the frustrated young men; and there are ways and means and policies whereby such actors and the risk of conflict could be mitigated.
7. Conflict-prevention policies should be built on reconstructing degraded environmental resources important for livelihoods in agriculture, and they should go against the conventional economic wisdom and strive to maximize the number of people gainfully employed, rather than maximizing the productivity of investments.
8. On a more generalized level, the policies sought for bear a strong kinship to the classic Marshall Plan.
9. Such a "Global Environmental Marshall Plan" importantly have to address the special needs brought on by the HIV/AIDS crisis; and it has to address the gendered aspects of livelihood conflicts.
10. The Global Environmental Marshall Plan could be Europe's way of paying their historical debt for having achieved maturity and peaceful relations. It would also be a poignant statement at the present juncture of international affairs.

### **Endnotes:**

- (1) UN Population Division, [World Population Prospects, The 2002 Revision](#), New York 2003. Review & link to original study in EDC News April 2004 [<http://www.edcnews.se/Research/PopDynamicsEgero1.html>].
- (2) UNAIDS/WHO, December 2003 [AIDS Epidemic update](#). Review & links to original studies in EDC News April 2004 [<http://www.edcnews.se/Research/PopHIVAIDS.html>].
- (3) UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, "[World Urbanization Prospects: The 2003 Revision](#)", 2004-03-25. Review & link to original study in EDC News April 2004 [<http://www.edcnews.se/Research/PopUrbanUN2003.html>].
- (4a) Ohlsson, Leif, 2000, [Livelihood Conflicts - Linking poverty and environment as causes of conflict](#), Stockholm: Sida, Environmental Policy Unit. PDF-file of full manuscript version [<http://www.padrigu.gu.se/>]



