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The problem of water and conflict is often presented as one of scarcity. Declining water availability, it is said, triggers grievances, which in turn trigger violence. Yet, while there are places that experience water scarcity in an absolute, physical sense, much more common is scarcity as social construct—as a manufactured product of social relations including law, property rights, patterns of investment, the behavior of government agencies, and stakeholders’ differing access to decision making power. Mediated by these social facts, scarcity can exist, for some water users, even in a context of physical water abundance.

Such is the case in Julia Renner-Mugono’s detailed study of the water-conflict dynamics around two lakes in East Africa, Lake Naivasha in Kenya and Lake Wamala in Uganda. There are important differences between the two cases: Tourism and flower cultivation are major drivers of change around Lake Naivasha, while sand mining, gold mining, and the expansion of farming are central for Wamala. International donors and civil society are largely absent from the Kenyan case, while abundantly present in Uganda. Violence is more intense for Naivasha, although increasing in both cases.

Yet, the two settings share a few key features that drive conflict. Both have been the site of strongly “developmental” agendas by their national governments. Both have attracted significant transnational investment in industries that affect water availability, quality, and access (be it mining, tourism, flower cultivation, or farming). Both have been victims of the pathologies of decentralization at the national level, which has resulted in the devolution governmental responsibilities without a parallel devolution of capacity and authority. And both lakes have been the site of increasing conflict, despite seeming water abundance.

The study applies a few different analytic lenses to the two cases. Stakeholders are mapped in detail, according to both their stakes in the outcomes and their ability to influence those outcomes. Vulnerability assessment identifies actors’ sensitivity to change and the presence or absence of adaptive capacity. Conflict mapping, emphasizing the relational dynamics among stakeholders, is also presented. Careful attention is paid to the spatial and temporal patterns of conflict, and each case study is enhanced by interviews with local and national stakeholders (although more detail on the number, format, and participant mix among the interview subjects would be welcome).

A few important patterns emerge from the combination of these layered analyses. First, developmental interventions have radically altered the ability of local resource users to gain access to water and land or to tap their benefits. The result has been economic marginalization, intensified competition for resource access, and displacement. Second, weak state capacity and either the absence (Naivasha) or inattention (Wamala) of civil society organizations have left locals to navigate this terrain with few allies.
Third, conflict is intensifying, in the form of both localized violence and various forms of non-violent contention (protest, blockages, destruction of property). Although these changes are driven largely by external actors, most of the conflict is highly localized: farmer versus farmer, cultivator versus pastoralist, farmer versus fisher. Directing instances of protest at more powerful actors can put locals’ employment or remaining resource access at risk (as when protests around a lost corridor of access to Lake Naivasha were met with water-supply cutbacks). With such avenues for grievance blocked, victim-on-victim tensions intensify.

Finally, although climate change is part of the story, it is not the dominant driver of insecurity one often finds in global policy discourse. Certainly, climate change threatens to further destabilize livelihoods and marginalize local communities. But when it enters these cases, it is as an agent of increased variability, unpredictability and extremes, rather than some secular trend of growing water scarcity.

One of the book’s strengths is its effort to combine insights from the different analytic frameworks into a broader process model. The picture that emerges from the analysis is that of victim pitted against victim. As the author puts it (p. 121),

“[C]omparing Lake Naivasha with Lake Wamala demonstrated that the broader institutional, regulatory and legal framework play the most important role in shaping the overall eruption of water-related conflicts at the local level. An unanticipated finding was the low level of co-ordination and co-operation amongst the local stakeholders. Instead, recurrent violent incidents to access and use natural resources are a major impediment to security and adaptive capacity.”

A second strength of the book is its attention to detail. Indeed, the case material is thickly detailed, and the narrative can be challenging to follow. But the author has helpfully included brief chapter-ending summaries and deployed graphics throughout to capture key insights.

If there is a limitation to the work, it is that the recommendations arguably do not embrace the full implications of the findings. Policy advice is organized around three themes: “changing the narrative,” taking a more holistic approach to economic development, and empowering local stakeholders. The calls for enhanced dialogue and attention to cooperative opportunities among local actors are well taken. But the idea of “changing the narrative” around the national developmental agenda and its extractive instincts begs the question of how. That narrative is an expression of power, vested interest, and entrenched ideologies that reach far beyond mere discourse or specific policies. When violence has a strong structural dimension, managing the tensions among its victims is not enough for conflict transformation.

Ken Conca is a professor in the Department of Environment, Development and Health in the School of International Service, American University. Among his published works are Environmental Peacemaking (ed., with Geoffrey D. Dabelko), The Oxford Handbook of Water Politics and Policy (ed., with Erika Weinthal) and Governing Water: Contentious Transnational Politics and Global Institution Building.