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Book Review

Global Environmental Change and Human Security

Edited by Richard A. Matthew, Jon Barnett, Bryan McDonald, and Karen L. O'Brien The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA. 2010. pp 1-323 ISBN 978-0-262-01340-6

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Introduction

Global Environmental Change and Human Security is a volume edited by Richard A Matthew, Jon Barnett, Bryan McDonald, and Karen L. O'Brien, which compiles the most recent academic debates surrounding the linkages between global environmental change and human security. Adding the human security dimension to climate change, or as referred to throughout this volume, global environmental change, connects the issues and challenges faced at the individual, state, and global level as environmental change not only impacts people's lives and options but also

puts pressure on governments in many fragile states and post-conflict states. The link between access to natural resources and poverty requires that academics and practitioners begin to look at the way in which environmental challenges may play a role in future conflicts.

Since the end of the cold war, academics and practitioners in security and development fields have widened the traditional notion of security, moving away from a purely state-centered concept of national security, to include the idea of human security, which emphasises the importance of individual and human well-being within a society. *Global Environmental Change and Human Security* sets out to expand upon the concept of human security where global environmental change (with problems such as melting ice caps and carbon emissions) can be linked to and play a role in human security issues such as “poverty, vulnerability, equity, and conflict” (p 2). The central theme of the volume is that global environmental change poses new “and in some cases unprecedented threats to human security” (p 4). Global environmental change has required that academics and practitioners rethink the concept of human security and incorporate the ways in which the processes associated with environmental change and their outcomes transcend both space and time, for example, it challenges human security in ways that “that transcend the North-South binary and the rich-poor dichotomy” (p 5). Traditional notions of security are no longer adequate as global environmental change is raising new questions of “human insecurity, conflict, cooperation, and sustainable development” (p 7).

Global Environmental Change and Human Security – A summary and evaluation of the main research findings

Summary

The main objective of *Global Environmental Change and Human Security* is to bring together the latest research findings and emerging concepts that have come about since the Global Environmental Change and Human Security Project (GECHS), which began in 1999. The first section of the volume introduces and consolidates the current thinking related to the implications of environmental change for society, for peace and finally the ways in which the environment is linked to the likelihood for sustainable development can enhance human security and sustainable peacebuilding

initiatives. The editors section the remainder of the volume into three major themes associated with the interconnectedness between environmental change and human security (p 21).

The first four chapters of Section II discuss concepts surrounding “Global Environmental Change and Human Insecurity” in an effort to identify the different ways in which the environmental changes can and will undermine human security, leaving society more vulnerable to specific risks such as disease and natural disasters and the ability for governments to cope and respond to such challenges. This section also examines issues associated with population growth and ways in which growing ‘urban slums’ may be affected by environmental challenges.

In Section III, chapters 6 and 7 focus on how the interconnections between environmental change and human security can then go on to play a role in peace and conflict by looking specifically at how environmental change may exacerbate outbreaks of violent conflict, while maintaining a careful analysis that never actually equates the environment to conflict, more of a threat multiplier. It offers a case study of Nepal to help illustrate this point.

The final section of the volume is comprised of seven chapters, which are based on the security-development nexus where sustainable development is key to ensuring that human security needs can be met, especially in the face of environmental changes, which may threaten the peace and stability of the state. This section provides frameworks for analysing global environmental change and development, brings in gender and population as dimensions worth considering, how environmental security impacts development efforts, and brings in a case study from Central America.

Evaluation of the Findings

Global Environmental Change and Human Security brings to light very poignant arguments regarding issues such as population growth and the need for building up resilience and reducing human vulnerability to threats associated with the effects of environmental change. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this review to examine in depth all 15 chapters of the volume – this commentary will address some important themes that emerge from the research and, where possible, identify areas where further research is needed.

In Chapter 2 titled “Human Security, Vulnerability, and Global Environmental Change” authors Brklacich, Chazen, Bohle draw upon the main ‘vulnerability-security’ literature stemming from disaster response frameworks and apply this framework to human security/environmental change scenarios (p 36). The authors bring about useful points regarding

reducing human vulnerability to the effects of environmental changes by assessing and building up the states capacity to plan and respond for such cases. Human security, vulnerability and global environmental change in an effort to highlight how capacity to cope or adaptability, is central to understanding and potentially reducing human vulnerability, reducing chances for human insecurity (p 38). The greater the coping or adaptive capacities, the more likely individuals/communities can move towards a more secure state (p 38). Brklacich, Chazen and Bohle describe the 'double structured' nature of human vulnerability as encompassing internal constraints like the relative capacity to adapt and external constraints like the environmental stressors that may multiply threats, requiring more adaptability by communities and government (p 39). If the government is weak, and does not have the resources or capacity to deal with issues that arise from environmental changes – the state is in a vulnerable position.

Global Environmental Change and Human Security also draws upon research in the area of violent conflict and the security issues that arise from environmental changes. In Chapter 6 titled "Environmental Change, Human Security, and Violent Conflict" authors Barnett and Adger argue that the effects of environmental changes may greatly reduce individual "access to and quality of natural resources important for individual livelihoods" where the negative impact on livelihoods can increase the risk of violent conflicts (p 119). This also indirectly "undermines state capacity to provide opportunities and services to help people sustain livelihoods" (p 120). Barnett and Adger are careful not to identify environmental change as the root cause violent conflict but maintain that it can affect "parameters that generate conflict" (p 123). In East Timor, for example, at least "85% of the population is dependent on agriculture as its sole or main source of income" and the majority of the population must engage in subsistence farming to provide for their families (p 121). There is no structured "state-directed system of income support" which means that in times of low rainfall, producing low subsistence crop yields, most of the population is at risk of widespread hunger and child malnutrition (p 121). This means that if climate change results in even further low rainfall, then this can undermine human security in East Timor.

Global Environmental Change and Human Security delves deeply into issues concerning the linkages between environmental change and human security – and makes the point that global environmental change is adding 'impetus' to the realisation that traditional notions of security are limited and are "an inadequate basis for making policy" making it clear that "to varying degrees environmental change is a risk to citizens of states, to

states themselves, and to peace” (p 27). However, the volumes never really address the question of national security policy/planning in relation to climate change. National security strategy can play an important role in minimising the vulnerability of a country – and help governments plan and remain resilient in the face of climate change. For example, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the US Senate passed a bill requiring a National Intelligence Assessment to review how and to what extent climate change could pose new security threats to the United States (CNA 2010, p 5). This type of forward planning is essential if states are able to allocate resources for confronting the negative impacts of climate and environmental changes.

Global Environmental Change and Human Security makes a valuable contribution to the field of study pertaining to global environmental change and human security, and its potential to contribute to the threat of violent conflict in already weak or fragile states. This volume rightly maintains that there is a ‘continuum of positions on human security’ within international relations, such that resistance from the mainstream security community is due to concerns that “human security distracts from the imperative of national security” (pp 8-9). However, the research never really addresses how we bridge the gap between environmental and national security policies so that national security incorporates planning for the effects of climate change. Much like the critique against human security, environmental security may in fact draw the same level of criticism if not clearly articulated as to how it may be realistically included into the security interest of a state.

References

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