

**Geneva Dialogue on Environment,
Climate, Conflict, and Peace:
Meeting 14**

2 March, Zoom

Participants: 15 individuals from research, practice, and policy backgrounds

Presentation from Dr. Erika Weinthal, Professor of Environmental Policy and Public Policy at Duke University and Dr. McKenzie Johnson, Assistant Professor in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois:

Dr. Erika Weinthal [Presentation](#)

- Vibrant exchange between academics, practitioners, and policy-makers is necessary to build the evidence base and build meaningful projects
- Dr. Weinthal has been working on these issues for decades, largely through the lens of water
 - The field largely started with water research on the interstate level - cooperation vs. conflict
 - Over time, as policy itself moved its focus, researchers also shifted focus to look at the intrastate landscape, looking at water access and poverty, human rights to water
 - Over time, research and policy went back and forth on:
 - Climate & water security
 - Water & post-conflict peacebuilding
 - Bottom-up approaches & the role of civil society
 - There has been a growing interplay between policy makers and researchers
- As an example, in the post-soviet era working on water issues around the Aral Sea, it became apparent that academics and policy-makers must engage each other more
 - Policy makers asked researchers point blank what to do
 - Researchers urged a focus on monocultures and the agricultural sector, but that approach posed too high political costs so was not followed
 - An example of disjoint between policy & research
 - After decades of interventions there have been no successful efforts to restore the Aral Sea - no environmental restoration was attained - a loss of collaboration
- Dynamic situations require not only an agile policy response, but also a research basis
 - Situations need historical lenses, which take longer
 - Cannot always continue to reinvent the wheel, and research offers insights
- Another example of collaboration is on the legal side
 - ILC work on the protection of the environment in relation to armed conflicts
 - Duke-UNH database on the targeting of infrastructure in the Middle East
 - The Geneva List of Principles on the Protection of Water Infrastructure
 - Interaction - Building the evidence base: addressing the reverberating effects of military operations on civilian life
- One great place for this collaboration is through the Environmental Peacebuilding Association
 - Conference upcoming in Geneva in February 2022
 - Knowledge platform, resources, newsletters, etc. for “all types” of actors

Dr. McKenzie Johnson [Presentation](#)

- Policy dimensions of environmental peacebuilding
- Her background
 - A lot of her work is indeed in following practitioners and analyzing their work
 - Focus on extractives and minerals governance
 - Worked on a statebuilding project in Afghanistan - looking at the relationship that was promoted - under what conditions does “good” environmental governance promote human security? (And environmental protection)
 - Examines intervening variables like justice, power, politics
- Worked on an intrastate environmental peacebuilding literature review
 - Many of the papers were policy-focused and actually written by practitioners on the ground, evaluating policy implications of natural resource management projects
- From this, there are 4 main policy-research interface areas
 - Environmental governance
 - Natural resource conflict reflects a “failure of governance, or a lack of capacity”
 - Build institutional capacity to foster “good governance”, which facilitates environmental peacebuilding
 - Institutional transfer & reconciliation between customary and modern governance models and structures
 - It can sort of produce illiberal outcomes that reduce international willingness to pursue reconciliation
 - Scale - bottom up vs. top down
 - Practitioners were advocating for bottom up peacebuilding - building capabilities and empower communities
 - Academics were critiquing the “prescriptive policies” - liberal state-building models, state-centric approaches
 - Increasing emphasis instead on *co-production* of knowledge and governance
 - Collaborative governance
 - Formal and informal resource sectors
 - Strong vs. inclusive governance institutions
 - Environmental consequences of informal resource extraction
 - Potential for social exclusion remains significant
 - Criminalization of informal actors rather than addressing root drivers of informality
 - “Legality” is a matter of perspective
 - Informality is critical to alleviate structural inequities in formal extractive policy
 - Social justice & indigenous rights
 - Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition
 - Effect of institutionalizing Indigenous recognition within state policy instruments -- What are the costs & benefits of state recognition for Indigenous peoples?
 - Role of the state?
 - Policymakers & activists increasingly problematize the role of the state

Discussion:

Q: What do you think at this stage are the research angles that could be most helpful for influencing policy discussions on good governance?

- Understanding why there is a continuing debate between bottom-up and top-down, because ideally there'd be both processing happening simultaneously and complementing each other
 - But instead, they both go at the same time, meet in the middle, and then they don't match
- What they find is that if you have a bottom-up peacebuilding approach, it can actually be threatening to the state and destabilize state-society relations
 - This has implications for the directions that practitioners could take
 - How can you strengthen state-society relationships based on whichever direction you're heading in
- Erika saw this same debate 25 years ago in Central Asia - policy-makers did not want to address the local level because it was complicated, and also because cotton monoculture served as a system for social and political control
 - So that's why all the interventions happened at the interstate level and focused on water agreements, but none of them scaled down and focused on the political economy

Q: Practitioners often have a need for reporting and backing up work with scientific evidence. Do you have ideas about how to facilitate this collaboration better?

- UNEP & ELL's lead with the six volumes on natural resource governance and post-conflict management ([linked here](#)) - generated case material which led to lessons learned
 - The project came about in an ad hoc manner, so that could have been a bit more organized
- There's space for a larger repository of materials
- A positive example of collaboration between practitioners, academics, and policy-makers
 - PAX is remote sensing and geospatial tools to look at infrastructure damage in the Middle East in real-time
 - While academics are going back 10 years to look at causal mechanisms and attributing responsibility
 - Combined, this evidence material can be used by policy makers to make the case of why we must protect civilian infrastructure through these mechanisms (like the ILC)

Q: There are so many levels - from the community to the international. Do you have tips for better collaboration or interaction? Do you find that there are sort of common pitfalls between academic, practitioners, and policy-makers?

- We all use different language - the words have real consequences for the people operating in the field
 - Having conversations about words and terminology are really important
- Academics have the luxury of time - working with teams to build databases, etc - recognizing that people on the front lines have to be making decisions with limited information
- Very different incentive structures - even between professors vs. assistant professors in the tenure system

- But then in the field you have incentives to deliver project based outcomes and showing that you can use the funding appropriately
- We must figure out how to leverage scholars' abilities to look historically and through wider lenses

Q: What do you do with the information on targeting civilian infrastructure, for example in Yemen? It borders on intelligence work. It would be so useful for us to have this information.

- We've published the results in an academic article. There is also a [Washington Post article](#).
- The database will be made publicly available once researchers have leveraged all the data
- The infrastructure targets have changed over time

Q from Annika: People in the room, do you feel your work connects well enough to scholarship or to scholars? How do you assess the efficacy of the connection between the two?

- In my prior role in policy, I funded quite a lot of applied research with both academics and consultants. I had to work with academics on what would be policy-useful to me, but then I really valued their input. Getting input from academics not associated with my work was really difficult.
 - Seminars by policy-groups in Washington tended to be too simplistic - I needed to go deeper on issues
 - I did not have access to journals or the time to dive in
 - The best mechanism for collaboration was when I reached out myself
- I find different outcomes in different fields.
 - In the human rights field, collaboration is difficult.
 - In the legal field, collaboration is much easier.
 - Right now we are working with UNIGE on environmental defenders. We meet and discuss specific issues, and are willing to overcome the "translation problems" and misunderstandings between our different backgrounds because of the urgency of the issue.
- I moved into a practitioner role right after my PhD, so I feel sometimes I'm trying to apply an academic approach in a practitioner's world.
 - The most useful things from academics are literature review articles that weave together all of the details and case studies
 - We are currently collaborating with academics and researchers, but it's under a specific MOU and structure and framework
 - It is time intensive to collaborate, communicate, and learn
- I have sometimes commissioned or asked to prepare field reviews for me on specific issues to help me quickly understand it and get key takeaways. I don't have time to read all of the academic articles.

Q: And vice versa. For the researchers, do you feel your work connects well enough to practice & policy or to practitioners and policy-makers? How do you assess the efficacy of the connection between the two?

- Practitioners and policy-makers can get frustrated with what I do, because it feels like I am just critiquing through an academic lens.
- Because of how fast policy makers and practitioners work, what I see in the research is that a lot of the same mistakes keep getting replicated

- There really is a necessity for researchers to take a step back and get a broad systems view of the world in order to try and prevent these types of repeating mistakes
- I have benefitted from research-practice collaborations, recognizing that myself and my NGO colleague each brought something else to the table
- It is important to be able to write in multiple formats. We write academic articles, but increasingly are writing in a more actionable way through...
 - Foreign Policy
 - Washington Post
 - Chatham House
 - Blogs
 - And having one on one conversations with the people who can *use* the information
- There remains a friction between academics & policy makers
 - Academic incentive structures push them to generate new knowledge and materials
 - Policy makers and practitioners don't need the newest knowledge and newest methods, they just need what work