

RESOURCE CONFLICT IN NEW ZEALAND: TOWARDS EXPLANATIONS

Ton Bührs

Lincoln University

E-mail: ton.buhrs@lincoln.ac.nz

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Abstract

In recent years, conflicts about resources (water, minerals/mining, land, among other) appear to have gained in prominence in New Zealand. However, New Zealand is the not only country affected by resource conflicts, and there is a growing literature that signals a rise of conflicts about resources around the world, and between and within countries, in large part due to increased scarcity. In parallel, governments are said to have become more concerned about resource security.

However, whether the conflicts around resources in New Zealand can be (best) explained on the basis of the ideas or theories of this increasingly influential school of thought is open to debate. There are at least two other, more traditional, bodies of thinking - pluralism and political-economy - that offer alternative interpretations and explanations of conflict. The aim of this paper is to assess the extent to which these three theoretical perspectives, on their own or in combination, offer plausible explanations for the more recent resource conflicts in New Zealand.

Introduction

Conflict about resources is not a new phenomenon but is arguably as old as humankind or even life. What has varied over time and place is the intensity of conflict and the nature of the resources over which conflict exists or erupts. At the extreme, human societies have been, and some arguably still are, torn asunder by resource conflict, especially when resources get scarcer. In many existing societies, most of the time, resource conflict does not reach such a high level of intensity in part because of the way it is managed. However, with the 'return of scarcity', it has been argued, it is likely that resource conflict will intensify and be much harder to 'manage', within and between countries (Ophuls and Boyan, 1992).

Although conflict about resources has also been a common feature in New Zealand history, it is debatable whether the recent spate of conflicts, among other about land, water, and minerals, can be attributed to 'a return to', or growing, scarcity. Other factors and explanations, such as related to competing uses (even when scarcity does not increase), and/or the effects of resource use on humans and/or ecosystems, or associated with ownership and control, may also play a significant role, if not more significantly so than growing scarcity. The three main 'schools of thought' associated with these different factors are referred to here by the labels of Resource Scarcity, Pluralism, and Political-Economy.

How resource conflict can or should be addressed or 'managed' depends in large part on one's interpretation of the conflict(s), notably the underlying drivers or factors. Addressing growing scarcity is likely to require a different solution or approach than when a conflict is associated with conflicting use of resources, or with ownership and control. However, conflicts may have their roots not just in one of these sources, but in several or all three. What factor(s) is/are seen as more fundamental also influences views on the nature and extent of change (in policies and/or institutions) that is required or desirable.

This paper discusses these three different ways of interpreting resource conflict with a view to contributing to a better understanding of resource conflict in New Zealand. The main argument put forward is that, although competing resource use and growing

scarcity of resources do play a role in these conflicts, political-economic issues, including regarding ownership and control, are fundamental. The main drivers behind these conflicts are political-economic, and increase the (relative) scarcity of resources, which in turn aggravates conflicts about use. Although solutions to resource conflicts are mostly sought in a 'balancing' between competing uses, and scarcity is downplayed, denied, or relegated to the realm of uncertainty, the political-economic sources are, if recognised, accepted as 'the reality'.

First, I will briefly discuss the three 'schools of thought' referred to above, advancing different interpretations of resource conflict, to highlight what are seen as the main factors or drivers. This will be followed by a brief discussion of two examples of the more recent and prominent resource conflicts in New Zealand, centred on water and minerals, to explore the relative importance of resource scarcity, competing use, and ownership and control.

Interpretations of resource conflict: growing scarcity, competing use, and ownership/control

In this section, I will briefly discuss three 'schools of thought' that can help explain resource conflict, referred to here as resource scarcity, pluralism, and political economy. Although these schools of thought are not homogenous and comprise a variety of views within them, each can be seen to emphasise the importance of one factor related to resource conflict. These can be identified as growing scarcity, competing use, and ownership/control respectively.

Growing resource scarcity

As its name suggest, this perspective emphasises the role of growing scarcity in generating or aggravating resource conflict. As a rule of thumb, the scarcer a resource gets, the more likely it is that (serious) conflict occurs. Scarcity, of course, is a relative concept associated with supply and demand. Resources may decline or even dwindle, but if demand drops concomitantly to the same degree, the extent of conflict may not be affected. However, the more common scenario described in much of the environmental literature is that of declining resources and rising demand, leading to increased scarcity and a likelihood of (growing) conflict (Brown, 2006; Klare, 2001; Meadows, 1972; Sachs and Santarius, 2007). I will refer to absolute scarcity as a situation where a resource declines while demand remains at the same level or rises.

That the growing human demand for resources leads to increased scarcity of resources and poses a threat to societies became a theme in the literature since the publication of Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society* in 1798 (Malthus, 1798). Malthus saw the exponential growth of population as the source a growing gap between population and food supply, leading him to recommend the denial of support for those who were unable to feed themselves, effectively advocating mass starvation, especially among the poor, as the 'solution'. That, apart from ethical considerations, such a policy might itself become a source of major conflict or even revolution was apparently not considered. Although Malthus's views are widely seen as having been discredited by actual developments, notably the expansion of food supply by modern farming techniques, the idea that the growing demand for resources, from population growth and increased standards of living, will outstrip the capacity of the earth to provide for humans, has not disappeared. It made

a strong come-back with the publication, in 1972, of the *Limits to Growth* report by the Club of Rome (Meadows, 1972), which, although criticised for flaws in the models and underlying assumptions on which they were based, has stood up remarkably well to the test of time (Meadows, *et al.*, 2005; Turner, 2008). That resources are getting scarcer, because of the unmitigated growth in demand and the decline or erosion of the environmental basis on which their production depends, is an idea that has gained wide support in scientific and political circles, not just from doomsayers (Brown, 2006; Cohen, 2007; Gordon, *et al.*, 2006; Kerr, 2007; Menzie, *et al.*, 2005; Simpson, *et al.*, 2005).

That growing resource scarcity may, or is likely to, lead to (increased) competition and conflict is a view that also attracts much attention and support, in academic, government and popular circles, in particular related to oil and water (Homer-Dixon, 1991; Klare, 2001; 2004; 2008; National Intelligence Council, 2008; Renner, 2002; Seager, 2007; Stern, 2005). Many governments have become concerned about 'resource security', in particular the ongoing and secure supply of resources for which they depend to a large extent on imports, such as oil and minerals. As the demand for resources, including from rapidly 'developing' countries, grows, and as it becomes increasingly difficult for supply to keep up, competition for resources at the international level is becoming fiercer, especially in areas where significant reserves have been identified or are assumed to be present, including the Arctic area (Borger, 2008; Bowcott and Jha, 2007). The view that growing resource scarcity is an important factor in causing or aggravating conflict between states and governments can be loosely linked to the 'Realist' or 'Geopolitical' school of thought in the study of international relations, which regard group competition/conflict is a permanent human feature or predicament, and assign primacy to the role of states in the pursuit and protection of 'national interests' (Gilpin, 2002; Sterling-Folker, 2005).

However, the argument that increased scarcity leads to conflict is not uncontested, for several reasons. First, as some authors point out, there have been many examples where dependence on shared resources has led to co-operative arrangements for their management. Military or physical conflict has a high price, which actors may choose to avoid. Moreover, military means are usually unsuitable for achieving (long-term) solutions (Deudney, 1990). Second, other solutions, such as demand management, technologies that enhance an efficient use of resources, and substitutes that may be available or could be developed, can be more advantageous, for a variety of reasons, including economic (competitive advantage), environmental (reduction of emissions), and (geo-)political (reduction of dependence on external sources). Third, resource conflict seems most prevalent and violent not at the international level, but in places where resources are abundant *and* political order has broken down. It is most prevalent in politically unstable countries or in 'failed states' that have been torn apart by conflicts that have political, social-economic, historical, ethnic, religious and possibly other dimensions, and where competing local 'warlords' try to exert control over resources to boost their power and position (Kaplan, 1994; Renner, 2002).

In short, growing scarcity may not be the only or even main source of resource conflict. In many cases, resource conflicts are linked to, or have their sources in, other conflicts and conditions. Growing scarcity, however, may well aggravate already existing conflicts, so should not be dismissed as insignificant. Also, in situations where scarcity is becoming serious and absolute in the sense that the availability of a resources declines in the face of steady or rising demand, it may well be a contributing factor to

political and social disintegration (Diamond, 2005; Wright, 2005). As many countries depend increasingly on trade to maintain or improve their standards of living, resource scarcity has become an international or even global issue. Even where resources may be or seem abundant, growing global demand may have significant environmental, social-economic, and political impacts on the local or national level, causing or contributing to conflict.

Competing use and pluralism

Even where resources are abundant, they may be the source of conflict. As noted above, scarcity is a relative concept, and an abundant resource can become 'scarce' because of growing demand/use. Whether a particular use of a resource is essential, desirable, or dispensable is a question that is subject to different views and interpretations. Arguably, most forms of resource use are contestable. Although humans need resources to live, in most parts of the world they now consume (and demand) resources way beyond what they need to survive. 'Modern' standards of living and lifestyles are highly resource intensive, and much of the world aspires to achieve higher standards of living, even where they are already very high. However, as resources and the ecosystems on which they depend come under increasing pressure, disagreement on the use and 'management' of resources, given the multiple and often conflicting demands on them, intensifies.

Resource use is largely socio-culturally determined, related to the perceived needs and preferences of societies and groups therein. Views about the (un-)acceptable or (un-)desirable use of resources are influenced or shaped by the (diversity of) values in and between societies. While whales are seen as a resource by some societies or groups, their killing for human use is regarded as abhorrent by others, even when their number is not in decline. National parks are viewed by some as playgrounds for all kinds of human sports whereas others regard them primarily as areas that need protection for their ecological or 'intrinsic' values. Many a conflict is related to the different values attached to land: where some see mainly productive or economic value in a particular area, others assign aesthetic or ecological value. For indigenous peoples, nature is much more than a collection of utilitarian values but has also spiritual value. For Maori, for instance, rivers are not just a resource supplying water and food, but also embody 'life force'. Where conflict about the use (or non-use) of natural resources is associated with differences in strongly held socio-cultural values, it is often very difficult to resolve, as compromise may be seen by some side as unacceptable.

Pluralism takes the existence of multiple and often conflicting interests and demands in a society as a basis for the explanation of politics. Modern societies are 'pluralistic' in the sense of comprising a multitude of different but to some extent overlapping groups that pursue their own views and interests. Governments need to accommodate multiple, often competing interests in their decisions and policies. In pluralist theory, no group or interest dominates decision-making in all areas or issues, although neo-pluralism acknowledges that some, especially business interests, are much more influential or powerful than others (Dahl, 1982; Lindblom, 1977). Pluralist theory is also not unified also in its views on the role of the state: while many pluralists see the state as a battleground between interests, with variable coalitions dominating at different times, others put more emphasis on the autonomy of the state and its capacity to pursue its own interests (Nordlinger, 1981). Some pluralists, however, deny that

collective or public interests exist, arguing that such notions are used only for manipulative purposes (Miller, 1962).

Pluralist and neo-pluralist accounts of resource conflict look at the diversity of interests and values that express themselves in the political and public arena, including the media. They tend to focus on how different parties interact, the means they use to get their way, and on the role of intermediate agencies like the media (newspapers, television), the courts, and government actors and organisations (politicians, departments, councils). Such analyses can reveal the relative power and influence of the various parties and interests in particular conflicts. As noted above, there are different views within pluralist thinking and study on the role of the state in resource conflicts, varying in the extent to which the state (which is not a unitary agent but comprises a wide range of organisations, each with their own views and interests) plays an independent, mediation, or partisan role.

Depending on these views and the findings of (neo) pluralist studies, different implications for how resource conflict can or should be managed can be drawn. In some cases, especially where analysts take an advocacy position, suggestions may be offered on how a party could strengthen its position and role in such conflicts, whereas other analysts may emphasise the need for enhancing opportunities for public participation in decision-making processes, advocate the adoption of 'alternative dispute resolution' approaches, or an increased role for science or science-based 'tools' for creating common ground, mitigating or defusing conflict. Others may propose some form of political-institutional change to create a more 'level playing field' or 'balance' between parties and interests. As noted above, while difference regarding the use or non-use of resources may be an element associated with most if not all conflicts, growing scarcity is likely to contribute to the intensification of such conflicts and may make their resolution by such means more difficult.

Pluralist accounts of resource conflict, however insightful and useful, do not provide a full explanation of the *sources* of conflict. Explanations can, and have been, sought at a more fundamental level, in particular, related to ownership and control, straddling the realms of politics and economics.

Political economy, ownership, and control

Although, at the surface, many resource conflicts appear to be about conflicting use or demand, they can be linked also to underlying (systemic) factors, forces of drivers. As mentioned above, use and demand are 'socially constructed', not given or autonomous entities. To a large extent, the demand for and use of resources is created and driven by a capitalist economic system that has expanded across most of the world, and that is strongly intertwined with the dominant political systems. Fundamental to this political-economic system is the question of ownership of and control over resources. As resource conflict about use and non-use intensifies and becomes harder to resolve or manage by the means mentioned above, these underlying systemic issues are likely to come more to the surface.

Political economy is a broad school of thought which, at its core, posits the view that, to understand what is going on in the world, we need to look at the way politics and economics are intertwined at the systemic level. Harking back to 19th century thinkers, in particular Karl Marx, political-economic theory emphasises the importance of more or less autonomous economic development (forces of production) and its influence on

societies, including social structures (classes) and political institutions (and the role of governments in protecting and advancing the ‘imperatives’ of capitalism). Although ‘crude Marxism’ (taking a deterministic view of politics by economic imperatives) has been largely abandoned, ironically the centrality or even dominance of economic interests in national and international policy has become even more apparent since the fall of the Soviet Union and the ‘victory of capitalism’ also in other socialist countries, notably China. Hence, that governments must foremost serve the needs of capitalism (‘the economy’) has become an almost self-evident truth in political (and academic) discourse.

Since the 1980s, belief in the superiority of markets in resource allocation (and hence of private ownership), became the dominant tenet of ‘sound economic management’. Ownership of and/or control over resources shifted increasingly to (transnational) corporations, while governments opened up their economies for international investment and ‘free’ trade. In the words of one author, “It’s all for sale” (Ridgeway, 2004), from minerals to fresh water, land and forests to biodiversity (for genetic engineering). As corporations, assisted by governments, are engaged in a continuous and fierce battle for resources and markets, conflict is a standard feature of the global capitalist system. This has become most apparent with regard to energy resources, notably oil and gas, in part because of the expected decline in reserves and growing demand (Klare, 2001; 2004; 2008). But, as Ridgeway points out (Ridgeway, 2004: 26-26), the problem for companies is often not growing scarcity but oversupply: oversupply depresses prices and income and the makes investments less or not lucrative. What they seek foremost is control over supply, for instance, via cartels, take-overs, tacit agreements, or ‘vertical integration’ of activities from the exploitation of raw materials to the production and marketing of end products. When resources are considered to be of strategic national importance, the roles of governments and companies may get very blurred, for instance, with regard to oil and gas, where governments are playing a key role in securing supplies (Klare, 2008), and more recently the purchase of agricultural land in other countries to enhance the security of food supply (Hanes, 2009).

As noted above, conflict over the control of resources is most apparent in countries where political order is weak or has broken down, especially the so-called ‘failed states’ (Kaplan, 1994; Renner, 2002), most of which are in the poorer areas of the world. However, the struggle for the control over resources is not just confined to poor countries. As wealth and financial power accumulates in countries with big surpluses in trade, from oil or industrial exports, questions regarding ownership and control of resources are also increasingly becoming of concern in rich countries, including the United States (Klare, 2008).

While ownership and control of resources increasingly raise issues associated with the ‘sovereignty’ of nations, more fundamentally they relate to the self-determination of people, within and between nations. Self-determination is not just a question of keeping the ownership and control of resources in (a few) ‘national hands’ but encompasses also questions related to the allocation and use of resources, the distribution of benefits and costs of their use, including social and environmental consequences, equity and equality, and the quality of life in communities. As ownership and control become increasingly concentrated, it also poses a threat to democracy, as strong economic and financial actors exert disproportionate or dominant power in the political arena, nationally and internationally.

From this brief discussion, it will be apparent that resource conflict is never simply about (growing) scarcity, but also involves questions about resource use, ownership, and control. In a capitalist system, the private ownership of the means of production drives competition for resources and markets, fuelling economic growth, the demand for resources, and ultimately increasing their scarcity. Competition for resources is inherent to the system and is likely to lead to conflict when multiple and conflicting demands are aggravated by growing scarcity. How this trend plays itself out in New Zealand is the topic of the next section.

Resource conflict in New Zealand

The aim of this section is to provide a brief illustration of how the three different perspectives on resource conflict sketched above may help to explain some of the more recent and prominent resource conflicts in New Zealand. In particular, I will focus on two main resources: water and minerals.

Of all resources, water arguably has been subject to the sharpest rise in conflict in New Zealand. Although conflict regarding the protection of lakes and rivers has a long history (from the campaign to save Lake Manapouri in the 1960s and efforts aimed at the protection of wild and scenic rivers from damming to generate hydroelectricity), in the recent years the focus has shifted to the use of water by farming, in particular in the Canterbury region. Concerns about the pollution of streams, rivers, and groundwater by animal waste and fertilisers, the construction of water storage dams for irrigation, combined with greater extraction of water from rivers and groundwater (also mainly for irrigation purposes), increasingly have pitched farmers against environmental groups and other sections of the public. Prominent conflicts on this front have centred, among other, on the Central Plains Water Enhancement Scheme and the Hurunui (Water Project), and for extending farming (and irrigation) in the Mackenzie district, but water allocation has been the subject of many other battles, also involving district and the regional council (ECan), the Environment Court and, in 2009, even provoked the intervention of Central Government in the form of the dissolution of ECan and the appointment of Commissioners.

Conflict about water is commonly portrayed in the media as resulting from a clash between farming and other (recreational, environmental) interests. The solution advocated is usually one of compromise and the ‘balancing’ of interests, preferably by mutual agreement of the affected ‘stakeholders. Efforts aimed at achieving solutions based on deliberations and agreement between stakeholders include the Land and Water Forum, initiated by the Minister for the Environment and the Minister for Agriculture and Forestry, and the parties involved in the Canterbury Water Management Strategy (CWMS), initiated by the Canterbury Mayoral Forum. These approaches support the framing of conflicts around water primarily as one about use, including for irrigation, recreational purposes, social purposes (including drinking water, health Maori, and aesthetic values), and ecological/environmental protection.

Even though (growing) scarcity of fresh water is often invoked as an additional concern in these debates and conflicts, scarcity, in this case, should be seen in relative rather than absolute terms. While the Canterbury region is relatively less endowed with rainfall than many other areas of New Zealand, and climate change models envisage a reduction of rainfall in the future, as yet, it does not seem that the total amount of fresh water available to Cantabrians is declining, although availability (notably from

river flows) may fluctuate from year to year. Although there is uncertainty regarding the rate at which groundwater reservoirs are being recharged, fresh water is a renewable resource that, in principle, can and should be managed on a long-term sustainable basis. The pressure on this resource is primarily stemming from relative scarcity, in the sense that the demand for fresh water, especially for irrigated farming, has risen (and is still rising) rapidly while the supply remains (on average) at about the same level. The reasons for this rising demand are of a political-economic nature and relate to the integration of the New Zealand economy with the world economy, which invoke also issues of ownership and control.

Although, since 1984, New Zealand governments have sought to strengthen and diversify the New Zealand economy by neo-liberal policies, the economy, notably with regard to exports, remains heavily dependent on the primary industry. Although tourism has become the single most important export earning industry, the primary sector overall is still the most important sector. Within this sector, the dairy industry has seen the most significant expansion, driven by growing foreign demand for dairy product in the 'emerging economies' of Asia. In 2010, exports of the primary sector accounted for 69 percent of merchandise exports, and manufacturing only for 24 percent (New Zealand Statistics, 2010). With the onset on the global financial-economic crisis and the economic recession, this sector, and the dairy industry in particular, has become of even greater importance to the New Zealand economy. The number of dairy cows doubled between 1981 and 2009 from 2,9 million to 5,8 million, (Statistics New Zealand, 2010), but increased sevenfold in Canterbury (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). In Canterbury, the number of hectares under irrigation, especially for dairying, increased more than tenfold between 1965 and 1999 to around 400,000 hectares, approximately 80 percent of all irrigated land in New Zealand (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2004: 112-113). The continued expansion of the dairy industry, based, in Canterbury on irrigation, has been characterised by the government as being of strategic importance to New Zealand, used as a ground of justification for its political intervention in regional politics.

At the same time, the expansion of the dairy industry is bringing about a restructuring of the industry that involves a shift in ownership and control. Family-owned farms are taken over by farming corporations, a process accompanied by an increase in scale and intensity of farming operations driven by competitive forces and the pursuit of bigger profits. Almost inevitably, given the significant amounts of capital involved, this provokes bids for the ownership of New Zealand farms by overseas companies and investors. This, in turn, raises or fuels further public concern, to the point where the government sees itself to be obliged to acquiesce these concerns by (seemingly) tightening the rules on foreign ownership of (agricultural) land.

In general, however, overseas ownership of New Zealand's economy has substantially increased. According to CAFCA (Campaign Against Foreign Ownership of Aotearoa), direct ownership of New Zealand companies by foreign parties increased from \$9.7 billion in 1989 to \$83 billion in 2007 (more than a 700% increase), while 41% of the New Zealand sharemarket valuation is now overseas owned, compared to 19% in 1989. Around 7% of all New Zealand agriculturally productive land is also foreign-owned (Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (CAFCA), 2010).

The recent government proposals to allow mining in areas that are presently excluded from such activity can be seen in a similar light. In this case, the issue was initiated by the government (although no doubt under pressure from mining interests) and cast in terms of the importance of mining to the New Zealand economy. Government papers explicitly emphasised the economic value of the minerals contained in national parks, including the areas (under Schedule 4 of the National Parks Act) where mining is excluded. About \$18 billion worth of minerals were estimated to be in the area to be removed from Schedule 4 in the Coromandel alone, about one third of the \$54 billion believed to be remaining in the area. The total value of New Zealand's mineral deposits was estimated to be in the order of \$194 billion (Kay, 2010).

The government tried to present the issue as one where the various interests, economic and environmental, could be accommodated noting that the proposals would only affect 7058 hectares, representing just 0.2% of Schedule 4 land (initially, the government was said to have 500,000 hectares in its sights). Furthermore, the potentially adverse environmental effects were played down by arguing that mining operations would be 'surgical' by nature and be subject to strict environmental conditions. In other words, the proposals implied that different (multiple) use of conservation land was possible and even desirable, given the significant economic gains.

However, the proposals provoked one of the biggest public reactions in New Zealand's environmental history, some 38,000 submissions, mostly opposed, a petition signed by nearly 50,000 citizens and a protest march by 15,000 people through Auckland. The strong and overwhelmingly negative response illustrated and confirmed the importance of nature conservation to many New Zealanders, and the almost iconic status of national parks as an inherent part of New Zealand's identity. Moreover, the expected economic gains to New Zealand were challenged, in particular on the grounds that most of the profits would go to foreign-owned mining companies, that government income derived from the mining was small, and that there would be little if any economic benefit to most New Zealanders (Bennett and Bradley, 2010). On the other hand, many people emphasised the potential risks, notably in terms of tarnishing New Zealand's 'clean and green' image, which could adversely impact of its largest industry, tourism. As a result, the government backed down, but not without a comment from the responsible Minister that about 85 per cent of the country did not have priority conservation status, and that a great deal of that available land had mineral potential (Earth Times, 2010; Taylor, 2010).

Conclusion

This paper has looked at three alternative schools of thought on resource conflict as a basis for explaining such conflicts in New Zealand. The three perspectives discussed are those of Resource Scarcity (loosely allied with the Realist/Geopolitics School), Competing Use (linked with Pluralism), and Ownership and Control (with roots in Political Economy).

The Resource Scarcity school of thought interprets conflict in the light of a growing scarcity of resources, within countries as well as globally. Internationally, competition for resources that are considered of strategic importance, like oil, is on the rise, leading to potential or even likely 'resource wars' between countries. At the same time, resource rich countries become the local theatres of resource conflict, tearing apart the political and social order. To address the concerns about growing resources

scarcity, governments seek to enhance ‘resource security’ by a variety of policies and means, including diplomacy, the formation of alliances, and military deployment.

Although there is ample evidence of both growing international competition for strategic resources, and of the destabilising effects of the competition for resources in a range of resource rich countries, this interpretation of resource conflict has limitations. Growing resource scarcity does not always lead to conflict, let alone war. More importantly, it does not explain the *sources* of conflict: the focus is on the interactions between rivals, taking for granted their motives and the reasons behind the growing demand for resources.

The Competing Use school of thought interprets resource conflict mainly in terms of different and often conflicting uses (including non-use) advocated by parties, based on differences in interests, values and views regarding resources. Competition and conflict over resources is an inevitable and inherent characteristic of pluralist societies and (liberal-) democratic political systems. Even where and when resources are not getting scarcer, conflict is common, as parties disagree on the (most) desirable use of resources. The solutions sought and achieved to conflict involve the ‘balancing’ of interests and compromise, a process in which governments and states play a central role. However, protagonists of this school of thought recognise that achieving such solutions becomes more difficult when resources become scarcer.

The competing use perspective is plausible in that this aspect can be recognised in many if not all conflicts about resources, including where (proposed) use leads to environmental concerns. Many environmental and resource conflicts centre on the (proposed) use of resources and are ‘resolved’ by means of a ‘balancing’ of interests and compromise that mitigate the possible or actual environmental effects. This perspective can also account for conflicts in which some parties advocate non-use (resource conservation, protection), and keeps the door open for challenges to the rationales for resource use, on environmental, social, or ethical grounds. Resources are almost always used for a reason, and in that sense this perspective identifies potential or actual sources of conflict.

However, the Competing Use perspective does not necessarily imply a questioning of the underlying, systemic factors and drivers behind the rising demand for and use of resources. In this respect, the Political Economy school of thought offers more insights, in particular related to the workings of the now globally dominant capitalist economic system and the role of states and governments in this inherently competitive system. It is this system that, in the continuous pursuit of profits and economic growth, drives the demand for resources, leading inexorably to their growing scarcity and rising environmental pressures. It is also this system that shapes interests, ‘needs and preferences, increasingly concentrates ownership and control, and that entrenches these vested interests in political, economic and socio-cultural institutions (organisations and rules) that create a ‘non-level playing field’ for competing uses of resources. From this perspective, efforts aimed at boosting resource security only contribute to the demands and pressures, while the ‘balancing’ of demands and interests fails to address the underlying drivers. Resolving resource conflict requires more fundamental, systemic change. However, what changes are required and whether and how these can be achieved, are very much the subject of ongoing debate and disagreement.

A political-economic perspective of resource conflict, therefore, offers a ‘deeper’ explanation than those offered by the Resource Scarcity and Competing Use perspectives. However, that does not mean that competing use and growing scarcity should be discarded as irrelevant or unimportant factors when trying to explain conflict. Understanding the intricacies of particular resource conflict requires looking at the modalities of conflict associated with the characteristics of resources, their multiple (potential) uses, and the interactions between and relative influence of the parties involved. Although growing scarcity has its sources in systemic drivers, it also is a source for action and interaction that shape political ‘reality’. To better understand resource conflict, more inclusive accounts that recognise the importance of all three perspectives discussed here, seem desirable or required.

This paper has only started to look at how these three perspectives may help explain resource conflict in New Zealand, in particular related to water and minerals. But even from this very cursory sketch one can conclude that deeper and fuller explanation of these conflicts requires including a political-economic perspective. While pluralist accounts focusing on competing use can help explain the modalities of particular conflicts (involving different groups, interests, and ideologies), and growing resource scarcity plays some (but lesser) role in these conflicts, the sources of these conflicts lie in the growing integration of New Zealand’s economy with the global economy, creating a ‘reality’ that sets the parameters for the policies and actions of New Zealand governments.

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