

RESOURCES AND CONFLICT IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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[Back to Previous Page](#)

Internal conflict has become increasingly widespread in the Asia-Pacific region, creating an “arc of instability” around the southern rim of the region, stretching from Indonesia in the west, through East Timor, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and the other parts of the Pacific, to Fiji in the east. There are significant economic causes and consequences associated with this instability, including effects on resource utilisation and export earnings, and on wider issues of economic development and regional cooperation.

On Tuesday April 6 a symposium was held in Sydney to discuss how far economic concerns are implicated in internal strife within the countries of the region, and what sorts of strategies might offer promise for bringing about peaceful resolution of these problems. As well as a focus on economic issues, an important theme running through the symposium was the role of the media in reporting on conflict and in playing a constructive role in processes of conflict resolution. The symposium was made possible as a result of the generous financial support of the Ford Foundation. It was organised by the Australian affiliate of ECAAR, with the cooperation and assistance of the Department of Economics at Macquarie University, the Economic Society of Australia, and the Australian overseas development agency AusAID through its International Seminar Support Scheme.

Keynote speakers were ECAAR Vice-Chairs Jurgen Brauer and Michael Intriligator. Panellists in the morning and afternoon sessions comprised a range of academics, policy makers and journalists across the fields of economic development, governance, conflict resolution and media studies. The presenters included Peter Aitsi (Papua New Guinea), Glenn Banks (Australian Defence Force Academy), Malcolm Brown (Sydney Morning Herald), Rowan Callick (Australian Financial Review), Steve Darvill (AusAID), Usha Harris (Macquarie University), Graham Hassall (University of the South Pacific), Ben Reilly (Australian National University) and Keith Suter (International Law Association).

The formal sessions began with Jurgen Brauer's keynote address focussing on the environmental consequences of war, especially the local effects that do not make big news but that can be very serious for local communities. Many of these problems, such as those caused by refugee movements or resulting from damage to land and water resources, have been experienced in various parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

The major panel sessions of the day dealt with the economic causes of conflict, the possibilities for peaceful conflict resolution, and the role of the media. It was noted that most conflicts in the Asia-Pacific region have been internal, not between states, and that this region has had the highest number of such conflicts in the world in the 1990s. The region is very ethnically diverse, although this diversity is not the only, or even the primary, source of conflict. In fact the “resource curse” thesis has a strong role to play; this proposition holds that there is a strong correlation between abundance of natural resources and poor economic growth. Low growth in turn is reflected in poverty, which has been shown to be a significant source of conflict. Indeed, even in times where economic growth is rapid, poverty-based conflict can still arise, because distribution of the gains from growth rarely benefits poorer groups. Cultural factors can sometimes provide the origins of conflict, as in the case, for example, of Fiji, Bougainville or parts of Indonesia, but generally these conflicts have an important economic dimension as well - it is often greed rather than grievance that exacerbates the problem.

Peaceful resolution of conflict requires, first and foremost, an understanding of the causes. In almost all cases there is no single cause, but a variety of factors that precipitate the internal strife. A key to long-term resolution of these internal problems is seen in governance, especially in building a strong institutional infrastructure for a

stable, secure and fair society. In the Asia-Pacific region there are particular problems in following this path that have to be recognised: the importance of land, for example, and the possible tensions between traditional and western systems of authority. In many cases, power relationships within society are an important determinant of outcomes, and it may be necessary to deal with powerful interests that have more to gain by perpetuating rather than preventing conflict. In the end, peace building strategies have to be holistic, recognising that attitudinal change is a precursor to behavioural change and that multi-layered interventions will be necessary. The importance of aid agencies, NGOs and international organisations in bringing about change in the region was strongly emphasised.

In regard to the media, discussion focused on the difficulties facing journalists and others in reporting on conflict in the region. Media personnel can be threatened or intimidated by various parties to a conflict, and may find their capacity for objective analysis is compromised. Often, the demands of the international media dictate that coverage must be orientated towards what makes a good story. Thus reporting tends to be event-driven and often over-simplified, with simplistic portraits of “good guys vs. bad guys” as the basis for a story. It was emphasised that local media need to find their own voice, with emphasis on reconciliation and conflict resolution rather than violence as the basis for their reporting. In this context, the development of specific criteria for “peace journalism” holds out considerable promise. If such criteria could be more widely applied, the role of the media in peace building in the region could be greatly strengthened.

The day concluded with an evening dinner, at which the speaker was Mike Intriligator. He gave a strong presentation on the subject of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, providing a sober context within which to sum up the day's proceedings.

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