



## Summary of the Nexus Network

### Resource Conflicts and Social Justice workshop

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Lyla Mehta and Cian O'Donovan

#### Introduction

The Nexus Network Resource Conflicts and Social Justice workshop, held at the Institute of Development Studies on 29 February 2016, provided the opportunity to tease out often implicit and unstated challenges that come with nexus frameworks and nexus thinking.

In recent years, the notion of the nexus has gained traction in the domain of natural resource governance. It has become the defining vocabulary to understand the inter-linkages between land, water, food and climate.

Since the 2008 *World Economic Forum* pushed key players to be concerned about water, food and energy security and their inter-linkages, the nexus has become a strong policy metaphor to address the 'world in crises'.

The nexus has also brought in new players such as global corporations, who are now taking a keen interest in addressing water, climate change and energy risks. Driven by narratives of scarcity and uncertainty, the 'nexus' is increasingly framed in the language of security. These framings present academic, civil society activist, business and policy challenges.

The aim of the workshop was to stimulate debate between diverse stakeholders on these contested issues and create the opportunity to tease out the academic, civil society activist, business and policy challenges as well as develop research agendas around the themes of the nexus, resource conflicts and social justice. Around 40 people from different research backgrounds, activists and NGOs took part in the one-day event.

**The nexus debate:** Whilst workshop participants emphasised the importance of integration across diverse sectors (e.g. water, food, energy, climate), it was also acknowledged that debates have tended to be abstract. Despite the buzz at the global and policy level, there

have been several missing dimensions from the debate which critical social science can address.

These were discussed in detail during the workshop and include the origins of nexus thinking and the need for long term historical perspectives, on-the-ground challenges of integration across domains and diverse political and geographical scales, questions of social justice.

### **The origins of nexus thinking and the need for a long term historical and political perspective**

The origins of nexus thinking stemmed from very powerful corporate actors who largely sought to address their own security risks regarding water, energy, food. While terms like the nexus tell us that things are connected, are we obfuscating various political and historical issues? Therefore it is important to ask who is framing the debate, why and to what end?

It is important to look at the origins of the so called food, energy, water crises. They didn't start in 2008 with the *World Economic Forum* report. We need to look at the history of modernity and capitalism and the accompanying processes of expropriation, commodification and financialisation.

It is also striking that land and labour are missing from nexus debates. This is why a political economy lens to view nexus debates brings in some missing and much needed perspectives. Methodologically, it is important to follow the nature and source of resource conflicts as well as the protests and resistance to these. By doing so we might be able to reverse processes of unequal distributions of resources.

**What is missing from the debate?** As well as considering the history of nexus ideas, we might also think about what is missing. The nexus is well defined as water, energy and food, but what about other resources such as minerals, ecosystems and also the aforementioned land and labour and what is the role of the state?

The state is required to regulate, hold actors to account, but what we are seeing in many places is either the rise of an authoritarian state which does not want or allow democratic debate, or a diminished state that cedes influence to powerful corporate players. The danger is that that certain prescriptions of nexus thinking hide these important issues.

However nexus thinking does help capture new junctures in resource politics, namely the emergence of new corporate and military actors and their increased role and convening power in resource management. Other trends include, the rise of militarised discourses around the environment (e.g. "the poacher as a terrorist").

Furthermore, narrow framings of anxieties and risks turn nature into finance and capital. The nexus becomes something that is commodified and financialised and it has both discursive and material dimensions. Because of these (not accidental) tendencies, it is important to track circulations of power, goods and capital and various social, material and discursive dimensions of the nexus. Finally, we need to understand how resource conflicts are often used to extend and maintain control over so called 'unruly' environments.

**The on-the-ground challenges of integration across diverse political and geographical scales and how nexus thinking is being picked up in bureaucracies, institutions and scientific bodies, especially in the global South where capacity to deal with data/ knowledge challenges can be limited**

Farmers and fishers have long been aware of the connections between land, water, energy and so on and it is axiomatic for them to think in terms of the nexus was is part of everyday life. However, the higher you go, silos begin to emerge. Are we to think then that the nexus is more of a problem at higher levels of policy and decision making than on the ground?

For example, the water sector is plagued by the distinction between water supply and water management. This led to the emergence of Integrated Water Resources Management which was supposed to be a panacea to solve the problems of the water sector. More than 20 years later, IWRM is still having difficulties being implemented on the ground – especially in Africa.

Reform processes have been thrust from outside and more effort has been spent in creating new institutions that are supposed to be integrated rather than actually improving poor people's access to water. There is a lack of political will to implement integration. If this is so difficult to achieve just within the water sector, cross sectoral approaches such as the nexus will probably raise more challenges on the ground.

It is also important to ask: why integration is not happening and why organisations intentionally do not talk to each other? These issues raise further questions concerning a wider political economy, targets and funding that prevent ministries from cooperating. This means we need to look at decision making processes and struggles about both accountability and decision making.

Also methodologically there are challenges in doing empirical fieldwork on the nexus. How does one conduct interviews about the nexus in the global South when people are not really aware of the issue? Also what are the boundaries of the nexus? One could for example include land, labour but also ecosystems, minerals etc. What is not the nexus?

## **Can ‘nexus thinking’ be used to achieve social justice in resource management?**

Ideally, nexus thinking should be used to highlight linkages between local resources, livelihoods and rights and social justice, not just between sectors such as food, water, energy etc.

But currently, these issues are not addressed in policy and practice. Social justice is not just about struggle for rights but is also a process of expanding awareness of marginalisation and oppression. Therefore it is important to create new forms of friendships, alliances and solidarities and networks to reframe debates and debunk conventional neo-Malthusian understandings of resource scarcity, limits and boundaries. Here there may be room for optimism and nexus thinking might also offer a space in struggle between commons and capitalism. As such it is important to promote dissensus in nexus governance, which helps radically open up and challenge current thinking and discourses.

Local livelihoods are messy and embodied in politics and power. It is important to look at how capitalism intersects with daily livelihoods and in order to do this, we need to open up and democratise debates and processes of democracy. Usually, politics and resource conflicts are seen as an add-on in nexus thinking. But through our research and policy interventions we need to actually begin with locations of conflict and politics if we are to take seriously issues of social justice in resource management.

## **How are competing trade-offs and their associated resource conflicts dealt with across local and national scales?**

There is no one way to view the nexus. Diverse framings of the nexus mean different things to different people and different trade-offs for different actors. But trade-offs are packaged in particular ways and they take on a neo-liberal flavour (not just in terms of discourse but also in terms of material outcomes).

Often the idea of integration of nexus resources can become a panacea that forestalls more politically informed discussions. Instead, we can use the nexus as a basis for understanding socio politically constructed enclosures of material circulations and question the politics produced and reproduced by nexus discourses.

Efficiency driven technological ‘fixes’ represent conventional market based approaches. But we can and indeed must go beyond these if we are to understand deeper challenges and contradictions of water/ energy/ food linkages. It is also important to examine if trade-offs/ tensions/ maladaptations can provide the basis for a radical critique of current paradigms of environmental governance.

## **What does it mean to securitize water, food, energy and the environment/ climate? Is this securitization enhancing local people's wellbeing and rights or is it allowing new actors to increase the insecurities of poor and marginalised people?**

Many participants argued that securitization discourses of the environment and resources may not necessarily enhance local people's wellbeing and rights. Instead, they can allow new actors to increase the insecurities of poor and marginalised people. For example, in southern Africa land and water reform processes allow companies to displace existing small holders from their informal rights to land and water and legitimise so called water and land grabs.

In many parts of the world, resource conflicts arise due to power differentials between diverse stakeholders resulting in the unequal allocation and re-appropriation of resources. It is therefore important to ask who is winning and who is losing in these processes. Often the nexus can be a distraction from land and water grabs and a re-allocation of resources from local resources users to more powerful ones.

More and more large corporations are seeking to understand their risks regarding resource depletion, both for themselves and for the communities they interact with/ employ. But there still exist huge asymmetries in power, knowledge and skills between companies and local communities, despite the implementation of corporate social responsibility programmes such as water footprinting, stewardship and so on.

**Nexus thinking:** Nexus thinking is about understanding risks but also understanding that risks maybe differently defined by competing actors according to their own self-interest. Examples from southern Africa show that often companies offload risks to local and marginalised land and water users whilst reaping most of the rewards themselves. The critical question then concerns who makes decisions and who is accountable in resource governance. There are various sites of resources conflicts, for example, communities versus companies; informal versus formal users and the problematic impacts of Corporate Social Responsibility policies and thinking.

## **Conclusions**

Discussions at the workshop highlighted a number of aspects about nexus-thinking which we may usefully take into future debates:

**What does 'nexus' mean to different people?** First and most clearly there are diverse framings of the nexus. Nexus means different things to different people and there is no homogeneity amongst actors in how they see the nexus. There is value in linking issues across different sectors and silos but we need to get beyond the notion that everything is

connected. Nexus thinking is also important for elite and high end consumers to be aware of embodied land, water, labour in everything we consume.

**Nexus as a buzzword:** Second, nexus is of course a new buzzword and development discourse. And it's important to unpack it as we have done in this workshop. Indeed, the workshop illustrated the value of reflexive social science approaches which aim to understand and keep open definitions, rather than closing them down. Furthermore, nexus thinking is about understanding risks but risks are also differently defined. Examples from southern Africa show that often companies offload risks to local and marginalised land and water users whilst reaping most of the rewards themselves.

**Sustainable Development Goals:** Finally, there is a need to also ensure that integrated thinking is pursued in the Sustainable Development Goals agenda. Nexus thinking could be valuable here not only as an instrumental framework with which to analyse interconnections between resources, but as a site at which to construct democratic encounters, and to hold powerful players to account. If this is to occur, nexus thinking then must become truly transdisciplinary, a process of equal exchange between disciplines, where scientists and citizens participate together in discussion and decision-making.

#### **Authors:**

Lyla Mehta is a Professorial Research Fellow at the Institute for Development Studies and a Visiting Professor at Noragric, Norwegian University of Life Sciences.

Cian O'Donovan is a Research Fellow at the Science Policy Research Unit and an Associate Tutor at Science Policy Research Unit and The Sussex Energy Group.