

# Understanding the Africa’s Contemporary

## Conflicts: An Assessment

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### **ABSTRACT**

*At a theoretical level, social change of some sort occurs and leads to the emergence of conflict. Conflict, however, is not necessarily a negative phenomenon; what is important is the way in which the society responds to the emerging conflict. Understanding the specific causes behind conflict is crucial to the effective reconstruction of the post-conflict environment. One of the distinguishing features of Africa's political landscape is its many dysfunctional and protracted social and political conflicts. This problem is made worse by lack of effective mechanisms to manage these conflicts. Where they exist they are weak and, thus, social and political relationships in the continent have been disrupted. This has had negative consequences, including the interruption of the development and the diversion of scarce resources to the management of these conflicts. Also, violent conflict in sub-Saharan Africa has been responsible for the direct and indirect deaths of millions of civilians and has contributed significantly to the low levels of human security in the region. The countries of sub-Saharan Africa that have been embroiled in violent conflict are characterized by abject poverty, inadequate service provision, political instability, retarded economic growth and other challenges to overall development that deter the enhancement of human security. The successful and sustainable resolution of these conflicts represents an enormous barrier to future prosperity in the region. Moreover, the post-conflict reconstruction of these countries, and those around them, symbolizes perhaps the greatest challenge for sub Saharan Africa. This paper is, therefore, intended to examine African conflicts i.e. interstate and intrastate and peace Building processes in Africa. It also discusses the interplay between local, regional and global forces in relation to peace building challenges in Africa. Lastly it covers the role of UN as well as AU & other regional organizations to resolve these conflicts in brief.*

**Keywords:** *Conflict, sub-Saharan Africa, human security, peace building*

### **I.INTRODUCTION**

Since the independence processes in the African continent, armed conflicts, peace and security have raised concern and attention both at the domestic level and at the international scale. In recent years, all aspects have undergone significant changes which have given rise to intense debate. The end of some historical conflicts has taken place in a context of slight decrease in the number of armed conflicts and the consolidation of post-conflict reconstruction processes. Moreover, African regional organizations have staged an increasingly more active internal shift in matters related to peace and security, encouraged by the idea of promoting “African solutions to African problems”. This new scenario has been accompanied by new uncertainties at the security

level and major challenges at the operational level, especially for the African Union. This paper aims to ascertain the state of affairs on all these issues and raise some key questions to consider.

## II. OBJECTIVES

Issues related to conflicts, peace and security in Africa have generated such a constant international debate in recent decades that other important political, economic or social aspects also taking place in the continent since its independent processes have been marginalized and obscured. This picture of a continent in turmoil raises several questions, which I hope to deal with in this paper. These questions are:

- How many types of conflicts are there in Africa?
- What are the causes of these different types of conflicts?
- How long have these conflicts been going on? Are they temporary or long-term phenomena?
- What are the strategic and policy implications for resolving these conflicts?

## III. CONCEPT OF AFRICAN CONFLICTS

According to HO-WON JEONG, “*Conflict is manifested through adversarial social action, involving two or more actors with the expression of differences often accompanied by intense hostilities*”. Most significantly, protracted conflict arises from the failure to manage antagonistic relationship. The following common elements in the definitions of conflict,

- There are recognized opposing interests between parties in a zero-sum situation;
- There must be a belief by each side that the other one is or will act against them;
- This belief is likely to be justified by actions taken;
- Conflict is a process, having developed from their past interactions.

As the twentieth-first century begins, Africa consists of some fifty-five countries, depending upon how we count some islands. Since independence, about one-third of these countries have experienced large scale political violence or war (Dunnigan and Bay 1996: 651–53). It is true that not all of Africa is afflicted to the same degree. Africa is an immense continent, richly varied in its cultures and peoples. The levels of violence differ greatly. Nor can one easily predict where violence will occur. There are three key concepts relating to African conflicts. These are as follows-

### 3.1. Network Wars

Some common characteristics emerge in an analysis of most African armed conflicts. First of all, they are mainly internal or intrastate (they take place within internationally recognised borders); localised (violence does not affect the whole country); regionalised; and internationalised (causes as well as consequences must be duly understood within the greater regional and international context). Second, all kinds of actors, each with a different agenda and purpose, participate in the dynamics of war. This ‘net of actors’ is made up of:-

- Primary actors: those who are directly engaged in armed violence (governments, armed groups or guerrillas, militias, paramilitary forces, warlords, organised criminal gangs, police forces, mercenaries, violent fundamentalist groups, regional armed groups, regional troops, etc)

- Secondary actors: those who although not directly participating in the confrontation are widely interested in its continuation (criminal networks, regional governments, businessmen, local and regional traders, international governments, private security companies, business with interest in natural resources, arms industry, etc)
- Tertiary actors: those who try to intervene, with or without a mandate to do so, in order to manage the confrontation (the diaspora, civil society organisations, local and international mass media, regional and international governments, regional and international organisations, diplomatic organisations, international humanitarian organisations, multilateral organisations such as United Nations, donor agencies, etc).

Finally, the economy of war is seen as strongly globalised and decentralised. Violence depends on external resources because units of combat are financed with the proceeds of looting and even humanitarian aid. Illegal arms deals and natural resources exploitation are critical in the mobilisation of resources. This is made possible by maintaining violence so that the dynamics of war are incorporated into the formal economy. In a suggestive way, Duffield has pointed out that these ‘new wars’ must be understood as ‘network wars’ that work through and around states. Conventional actors have been replaced by other kinds of actors who do not operate in an isolated way, but set up alliances or networks according to their interests.

### **3.2.Underdevelopment & Violence**

A second narrative regards underdevelopment as the main cause of Africa’s ‘new wars’. While one stream emphasises internal factors, such as the increase of poverty, environmental degradation, the rise of social exclusion and marginality, elite corruption and the militarisation of societies, a second stream focuses on external factors, such as the legacy of colonialism, external dependence, the impact of structural adjustment programmes (SAP) and the external debt, or the growing marginalisation of Africa in the global economy. Both approaches, however, uphold the idea that enhanced modernisation, improved literacy, and increased investment in basic services are all elements that diminish the occurrence of violence.

Nevertheless, this point of view, adopted primarily by those working in the realm of international cooperation, ignores a number of factors that contribute to violence. Yet the increased popularity of this approach has set up the promotion of development both as a right in itself and as a necessary ingredient for international stability. This merger of development and security is what Duffield has called ‘the emergence of the liberal peace’. This approach has culminated in the promotion of ‘conflict prevention’ by international NGOs and donors as one of the main priorities in addressing conflict.

### **3.3.Political Economy of War**

A third and last narrative, called ‘the political economy of war’, supports the idea that African armed conflicts are the direct response of certain elites to its unequal integration into the world’s economy. According to this view, the neo-patrimonial state built up since independence started (after the end of the Cold War) to suffer a crisis of accumulation and governance that prompted a crisis of legitimacy. In this sense, elites started looking for new sources of authority, privileges and material benefits, whether through processes of democratization or consolidating economies of war (control of natural resources, arms dealing, manipulation of humanitarian aid, etc).

The axis of this issue is located in the ‘greed and grievance’ debate, advertised mainly by World Bank theorists Collier and Hoeffler. This discussion tries to ascertain whether personal will of enrichment (greed) or historical, political and socioeconomic injustices (grievances) has more importance in the origin of those contexts of

violence in Africa. Although both approaches offer relevant contributions to understanding violence, Collier and Hoeffler, as well as Keen (at least in the 1990s) and Renner, among others, sacralised economic agendas as the main (and sometimes unique) cause of war in Africa. According to them, and quoting Clausewitz, ‘these civil wars could be better understood as the continuation of “economics” by other means’.

#### IV. ROOTS OF AFRICAN CONFLICTS:

As we know that the main type of conflict arises in Africa are INTRASTATE conflicts in recent period. There are several prominent characteristics contributing to the outbreak of intrastate conflict that are shared by most cases. These are:

- Internal battles to gain control of an existing state.
- Ethnic groups seeking greater autonomy or striving to create an independent state for themselves.
- ‘Failed states’, where the authority of a national government has collapsed and armed struggle has broken out between the competing ethnic militias, warlords or criminal organisations seeking to obtain power and establish control of the state.
- Impoverished states where there exists a situation of individual hardship or severe dissatisfaction with one’s situation and the absence of any non-violent means for change.

What will determine the result of the social change and emergent conflict is a combination of societal capacity and conflict triggers. If society has the capacity to manage the conflict, then a situation of cooperation amidst latent tension can arise and, if societal capacity is greater and conflict management can lead to conflict transformation, then an environment of peace is possible. However, if societal capacity not be adequate to at least manage the conflict and various conflict triggers are discharged, then violent conflict will materialise. The main roots are as follows-

- **Black Violence, White Roots**

While the most lethal of all wars in Africa have been those fought between blacks, the roots of these wars lie in the white legacy. It is true that the anti-colonial wars (primarily fought between blacks and whites) did cost a lot of lives. However, postcolonial wars have been fought mainly between blacks, and they have been even more ruthless. On the other hand, it must be recognized that the seeds of the postcolonial wars themselves lie in the sociological and political mess which ‘white’ colonialism created in Africa. The colonial powers destroyed old methods of conflict resolution and traditional African political institutions, and failed to create effective substitute ones in their place. In Africa, the states founded by Europeans were not effective. They were developed in newly fashioned countries and built on fragile bases. The Africans who inherited these states from the Europeans had, moreover, little experience in governing themselves. Self-government is not something easily taught. Failing states have been one of the major sources of conflict in postcolonial Africa.

- **Are Borders to Blame?**

While most African conflicts are partly caused by borders, those conflicts are not themselves about borders. Before the Western colonial powers arrived, there were virtually no boundaries in Africa. Most people lived in loose groupings. Their territories were unmarked. Empires came and went, absorbing new groups and being assimilated themselves, but possessing few, if any, rigid frontiers. But at the end of the nineteenth century the colonial West arrived. The Berlin Conference in 1885 imposed the iron grid of division upon the continent. The

political boundaries created by colonial powers in Africa enclosed groups with no traditions of shared authority or shared systems of settling disputes. These groups did not necessarily have the time to learn to become congenial. In West Africa, for example, the large territory which the British carved out and called Nigeria enclosed three major nations and several smaller ones. Among the larger groups, the Yoruba in the west were very different from the Muslim Hausa in the north, who in turn were quite distinct from the Ibo in the east. This artificial mixture was to lead to one of Africa’s great human tragedies, the Nigerian civil war of 1967–70.

If colonialism forced into the same political entity people who would otherwise have lived apart, it also separated people who would otherwise have lived together. A country like Somalia is in effect a nation trying to become an all-inclusive state. The Somali have scattered in four different countries, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. Their desire for reunification has resulted in deadly conflict. On the other hand, paradoxical as this seems, one cannot say that African conflicts are about boundaries. African governments, ironically, have tended to be possessive about these artificially created colonial borders. They have generally resisted any challenge to them. There have been relatively few disputes about borders. The borders generate conflicts within them but have not been encouraged to generate conflict across them. The dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea is in this regard an exception rather than the rule (Tronvoll 1999).

- **Religion or Ethnicity?**

While the worst conflicts in Arab Africa are religious, the worst conflicts in Black Africa are ethnic. The word ethnic in this case is used in the sense of the older word, tribal. By Arab Africa, we largely mean North Africa (Algeria, Libya and Egypt, for example, are Arab). Algeria is afflicted by arguably the worst conflict in Arab Africa. The conflict is between Islamicists and the military secularists, and religion, however politicized, is at its root. It is among the ugliest and most intractable armed conflicts in the world (Mortimer 1996). Religion is also at the root of the conflict in Egypt (Ansari 1984). By contrast, the worst outbreaks of violence in Black Africa in the 1990s occurred as a result of the conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi. The genocides in Rwanda and Burundi in the 1990s were ethnic (Nyakanvzi 1998). The conflict in Somalia was likewise ethnic or, at any rate, subethnic (between clans rather than between tribes) ((Hashim 1997). The civil war between northern and southern Sudan further illustrates my point. Sudan straddles the Arab and the African worlds (Deng 1995). Is its civil war primarily ethnic or primarily religious? You may take your pick.

- **Resources or Identity?**

While blacks clash with whites in Africa over resources, blacks clash with blacks over their identities. White and black people, in other words, fight each other about who owns what, but blacks fight blacks about who is who. Racial conflicts between blacks and whites in Africa are ultimately economic. Apartheid in South Africa, for example, was ultimately an economic war. By contrast, when you look at configurations of violence in those parts of Africa where blacks are fighting blacks, it is difficult to show that the struggles are over resources. Often there are no resources of any significance over which to fight. Sometimes it is possible see the struggle in terms of an effort to get a share of power. But for the most part, major clashes appear to be related to cultural demarcations. The struggle between the Hutu and Tutsi is one such example. That it is culture rather than economics that matters in the politics of Black Africa can best be illustrated by looking at what happens when Africans who are left of center attempt to invoke class solidarity. When they fight somebody who invokes ethnic solidarity, the cards are stacked against them.

• **Resources versus revenue?**

In the Africa, the presence of natural resources in countries has been the bedrock of despicable conflicts, the effects of which has been slow economic growth, prolonged violent conflicts, and undemocratic regimes. Africa is home to some of the best known resource related conflicts in the world today. This assertion is true if we consider the conflicts in countries like Angola, the DRC, Chad, and Republic of Congo, and to an extent in Nigeria. These countries have all witnessed some form of violent conflicts which could be explicitly or implicitly linked to the presence of different kind of natural resources.

Despite the absence of any form of violent conflicts in other countries such as Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon, the presence of resources has created a deep seated disgruntlement from a majority of the population as revenue from these resources hardly trickle down to the masses. The primary cause of conflicts involving natural resources (land, solid minerals, oil, and water) is a failure of governance over their exploitation. This failure is linked to other concerns, such as political and strategic interests, colonial institutional legacies, the inability of states to reconcile competing legal systems (colonial-based secular laws, customary laws, and in some countries, Islamic law), and the economic interests of African political elites have created or exacerbated competition over natural resources and/or inhibited initiatives to resolve tensions. This has resulted in zero-sum competitions that produce clear winners and clear losers. Also, Revenues from the exploitation of natural resources are not only used for sustaining armies but also for personal enrichment and building political support. As a result, they can become obstacles to peace as leaders of armed groups involved in exploitation are unwilling to give up control over these resources. Even when conflict gives way to a fragile peace, control over natural resources and their revenues often stays in the hands of a small elite and is not used for broader development of the country.

**V. EFFECTS OF AFRICAN CONFLICTS:**

- The effects of conflicts in terms of refugee flows into neighbouring countries and the emergence of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has demonstrated that no African country is an island unto itself . Refugee camps in the Mano River Union region of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone have served as source of instability for countries in the region. It is estimated that there are close to three million refugees in central Africa alone. The camps in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) from the Rwandan genocide of 1994, remain a source of concern for all the key actors involved in the Great Lakes region. 200,000 refugees have spilled into Chad as a result of the violent conflict in Sudan’s Darfur region, creating tension along the border. Dadaab(Kenya) hosts people that have fled various conflicts in the larger Eastern Africa region. Most have come as a consequence of the civil war in southern Somalia, including both Somalis and members of Somalia's various ethnic minority groups such as the Bantu. These situations illustrate the need for effective post-conflict reconstruction processes and the institutions to back them up. IDPs and refugees make it difficult for host communities and displaced communities to settle down and initiate development. Therefore, a central pillar of post-conflict reconstruction is the incorporation of IDPs and refugees into the host community or the repatriation of refugees, after consideration of possible risks, back to their country of origin.

- Chapter 5 of the Human Development Report 2005 focuses on violent conflict bringing the real threat to MDGs into focus. This report argues that insecurity linked to armed conflict remains one of the greatest obstacles to human development and the achievement of the MDGs, highlighting that violent conflict is both a cause and a consequence of mass poverty. In more general terms, certain obvious and immediate outcomes of violent conflict affect progress with achieving the MDGs directly and indirectly, such as loss of life, sexual violence, and the forced displacement of people or refugees. Violent conflict can lead to the spread of infectious disease, chronic hunger and malnutrition, lack of water, the destruction of private and public property, and the disruption of basic social services such as education and health. All these outcomes directly or indirectly spoil the efforts to achieve every target in the MDGs. This happens partly because protracted violent conflict not only takes the focus and resources away from the MDGs, but diminishes the human resources capacity of a state for planning policy, making decisions and designing programmes. If it results in the destruction of economies and local administrative norms, and drains resources for essential services, then it grinds down and reverses the gains of the MDGs, as well as discouraging international partners from providing adequate assistance. If it has the consequences of destroying productive human capacity and the infrastructure necessary for development, it damages the necessary conditions for implementing the MDGs. This in turn disrupts and weakens social, economic and political structures and, ultimately, contributes to more poverty and suffering.
- There is an important effect of violent conflict is to making a child soldiers. The military use of children takes distinct forms: children can take direct part in hostilities (child soldiers), or they can be used in support roles such as porters, spies, messengers. Throughout history and in many cultures, children have been extensively involved in military campaigns even when such practices were supposedly against cultural morals. These poor children are only used for a few years and then they are discarded like trash. At that point in their lives they have seen and done more than any other child their age. They have been torn apart mentally and probably physically. The mental issues that they have now are more than many people would know how to handle. There are many people out there that are trying their best to work with what child soldiers that have been tossed aside. But it is surely a task that is going to go on for the rest of their lives.

## **VI. CONCLUSION**

Conflict has long been studied through various lenses, from the general planning military strike to the diplomat exploring opportunities for resolution and reconciliation and the scholar attempting to piece together disparate notions of conflict and peace. It is through an appreciation of all these lenses, and others, that we can understand the waging of conflict and the winning of peace and how they interrelate. There is an explicit need for the development of effective conflict early warning and response systems ‘with the explicit goal of preventing the emergence or recurrence of violent conflict’. By focusing more of our attention on the prevention of conflict, we not only experience fewer outbreaks of violent conflict, but also develop mechanisms that can better manage those conflicts that do eventuate, because we have a more elaborate understanding of the root causes of a given conflict through a more comprehensive conflict analysis. Moreover, Conflict is not inherently a negative feature of society; ‘rather it is a natural expression of social difference and of humanity’s perpetual struggle for justice and self’. So the democratic process represents perhaps the best known of these management systems to deal

with conflict in a heterogeneous and pluralist society. However, as has been experienced in many African states, the rooting of effective democracy has not yet taken place. Neither could it be expected to do so in the same way as in the Western states, owing to the differences in points of origin and the length of time these have had to institutionalise in society. This then represents a challenge for conflict management in Africa as alternative mechanisms need to be identified, developed and institutionalised, whether they be based on indigenous systems or adaptations of effective structures from other states. Within such analysis should be incorporated a deeper understanding of the instruments that can influence the outbreak and containment of violent conflict.

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