Local and Global Intersections: 
Resources, Conflicts and the Politics of Development in 
West Africa


by
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Abstract
This paper critically explores the full implications of the intersection of local and global forces in West Africa's development crisis. Its point of departure is a critical assessment of the linkages between vast natural resources and conflicts in the region. This is accomplished within the context of local and global networks of power, particularly, as it relates to the locally grounded pre-conditions and a globally induced contradiction arising from the intensified exploitation of the region’s resources. This involves a theoretical and empirical exploration into the nature of resource extraction, production, access and distribution; the role of both local and global actors; and how these forces combine to generate conflict in the region. These conflicts have been attributed to local factors, which include: state failure, corruption, resource curse and the phenomenon of warlords, among others. This paper contends that the causes of these crises are not simply local, but that they derive from much wider global processes that tend to influence state-breakdown in the weaker zones of the global system, like West Africa. Thus, in comparative terms it brings to the fore the impact of global and transnational processes at the local level and how it can shape our understanding of locality and conflict. This becomes imperative owing to the fact that in the current global era the borders of these states do not confine social dynamics, particularly as they relate to the extraction of resources and the exercise of power.

Introduction
Contemporary African history has been characterized as one which depicts all manner of crises, ranging from: endemic structural and institutional deficiencies, to the perfidy and predatory inclinations of the ruling class, and the over-arching question concerning their competence as agents of democracy, development, nation-building and conflict management. Based on these, African states have largely been discounted as incapable of engendering any form of cohesion. The greatest post-colonial challenges have been manifested in a myriad of crises ranging from: one-party authoritarianism, violent coups and military dictatorships, simultaneous economic recessions and reforms, foreign debt and external conditionalities, to mis-governance and armed conflicts. The result has been the progressive alienation of the people from the state, social dislocations, population displacements and forced migrations that have engulfed the entire continent. This has raised critical issues of identity and citizenship, and questions the capacity of some states on the continent to function as states. After almost five decades of independence, most African states continue to grapple with the challenges of intra-state conflict, political instability, state failure and outright collapse. Between 1960
and 2000, almost twenty African countries (or about 40 percent of sub-Saharan African
countries) had experienced a civil war (Elbadawi and Sambanis 2000). In the post-Cold
War period, Africa has constituted one of the major arenas for major armed conflicts
with at least 19 conflicts occurring in 17 locations since 1990 (SIPRI 2005, 123).

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the West African sub-region, like the Great Lakes re-

gion and the Horn of Africa, was devastated by intense and highly destructive conflicts.
In Liberia (1989–1996; 1999–2003) and Sierra Leone (1991–2002) there were pro-
tracted and decade-long civil wars that assumed regional dimensions until ECOMOG,
and the UN in collaboration with the UK, US, and the international community inter-
vened to bring them to an end. By mid-2000, these crises led to raids into Guinea by
the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone and there were clashes in
Guinea’s Parrot’s Beak Area, which bordered both Liberia and Sierra Leone. A civil war
also erupted in Guinea-Bissau, and in 2002, another conflict surfaced in Cote d’Ivoire,
which had long been touted as the bastion of peace, prosperity and democracy in the
sub-region. In Senegal, the conflict in the separatist province of Cassamance between
the Joola peoples and the state over political and material resources which started in
the early 1980s has continued to linger. The volatile oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nige-
ria has also witnessed an escalation and intensification of violence by insurgent ethnic
minorities and youth militia groups, leading to a wave of kidnappings of expatriate oil
workers, incessant attacks on oil installations and open combat with state security
forces. While most of these conflicts have been intra-state in their origin and nature,
they tend to become ‘cross border’ or ‘networked’ conflicts, which turn into regional
conflicts encompassing local non-state actors, non-professional fighters, transnational
global actors and networks – all of whom pose formidable challenges to the authority
and legitimacy of these states.

At the heart of these conflicts in the sub-region are issues related to citizenship, access
to power, power-sharing and control of resources. Against the backdrop of the undue
emphasis placed on local factors, like state failure or collapse, corruption, resource
curse and scarcity, and the phenomenon of warlords, among others, this paper draws
on selected insights and critically explores the full implications of the intersection of lo-
cal and global forces in West Africa’s development crisis. Its point of departure is a
critical assessment of the linkages between vast natural resources and conflicts in the
sub-region. This is accomplished within the context of local and global networks of
power, particularly, as it relates to the locally grounded pre-conditions and a globally
induced contradiction arising from the intensified exploitation of the region’s resources.
This involves a theoretical and empirical exploration into the nature of resource extrac-
tion, production, access and distribution; the role of both local and global actors; and
how these factors combine to generate conflict in the sub-region. However, one major
argument advanced in this paper is that contrary to explanations that excessively
stress the role of local factors, the relationship between resources and conflict in the
sub-region are not simply local, but that they derive from much wider global processes
that tend to influence state-breakdown in the weaker zones of the global system, like
West Africa. Within this framework, this paper attempts in comparative terms to bring to
the fore the impact of global and transnational processes at the local level, and how it can shape our understanding of locality and conflict. This becomes imperative owing to the fact that in as much as nation-states still divide the global landscape into distinct territories and regimes, the borders of these states do not confine social dynamics, particularly as they relate to the extraction of resources, wealth and the exercise of power. Territory and space have become very crucial, and explanations in this paper will not only explore regional specificities, but will be firmly rooted in the interaction between local and global forces within particular contexts, and how these forces produce outcomes locally.

The Local-Global Nexus: A Theoretical Discourse

There exists a considerable amount of literature on the relationship between Africa’s vast resources and conflicts in the continent. Africanist scholars, analysts, policy makers, think-thanks, strategists and practitioners of international relations have continued to explain and attribute resource conflicts in Africa to local factors and actors. The central argument in most of these analyses focuses on local factors, such as: the phenomenon of ‘failed or out-rightly collapsed states’, the ‘resource curse’, ‘corruption’, ‘looting’, ‘warlordism’ and environmental scarcities (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1998; Chabal and Diallo 1999; Collier 2000; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Reno 1996, 2000, 2003; Ross 2001; Homer-Dixon 1994). In most cases, such analyses are predicated on clichés, categorizations and stereotypes which tend to gloss over the role of trans-global forces that deepen local contradictions and influence the outbreak and intensification of resource conflicts in Africa. Conversely, a critical exploration shows that in order to capture the essence of resource conflicts in Africa there has to be a re-examination of historical and contemporary social processes.

The theoretical premise of this paper hinges on two related propositions. The first is that local forces are shaped and influenced by global fields of power. Second, the local is also a specific site for the manifestation of global processes. This implies that the global has definite and particular enactments at the local level, echoing, in Robertson’s (1992) popular coinage, the concept of ‘glocalization’. Kalb (2000) points out that contemporary local development everywhere can best be understood as configurations of ‘glocalization’. He identifies local incorporation of global details and opportunities that affiliate with dominant global trends and produces an outcome that is dependent on local social histories, social relationships of power, advantage and the level of insertion into wider global processes. Kalb’s position gains support from Schiller (2007), who argues that the penetration of the global into the local requires a different interpretation of history and methodology that probes processes, social relationships and representations of inter-connections. Schiller further adds that by building on the historical perspective of how meaning and the confines of the local are experienced and defined across territories, a contemporary global perspective can be developed on the local. In essence, in order to develop a coherent theory of local experiences as witnessed in any specific setting, space and time, the issue of power as it is structured, enforced and contested within states must be adequately addressed. Burawoy (2001, 157) ar-
gues that the current trends of globalization are produced through a conflictual and nego-
tiated process within and between links of a global chain; the effects of which rever-
berate up and down the chain. Therefore, the local no longer stands in contrast to the
global, but constitutes the global. These perspectives by no means discount the impact
of local forces and state actors in the construction of locality, but, nevertheless, em-
phasize the fact that state boundaries do not delimit the forces and power that overlap
in the construction of the local.

Notwithstanding the emergence of globalization as the grand narrative of our time, and
its effects on economic, ideological, technological, historical, geographical processes,
most of the scholarship on African studies has reinforced and reified bounded and static conceptualizations of its historical and contemporary processes. Rather than re-
reflecting actual trends that are based on integrative, transformative, transcendental and transnational processes (Amin 2003; Mittleman and Chin 2005; Held et al 1999), most studies are marked by an inadequate theorization of the nexus between locality and global systems and processes. Of particular importance is the lack of a theory of con-
flict and power that seeks to rethink the changing nature of the state and the renewed forms of global penetration into state boundaries. Thus, the bulk of mainstream social science theories confined their analysis of locality and conflicts to bounded notions of state processes.

Some of the most critical elements of the current phase of global interpenetration into
the local relates to the nature of institutions, networks and paths, and their ability to
spawn social complexities, contradictions and contingencies (Kalb 2000, 7). As such,
this requires the development of new insights into how the local is being experienced
through a re-examination of the ways in which transnational and global processes af-
flect people situated in a particular place and time. Since locality and power are struc-
tured by transnational processes, it suffices to move any analysis of the local beyond
the level of descriptive name-calling, clichés and categorizations by rethinking the
meaning of locality as a means of contributing to theory-building. This provides new
approaches for the grounded theorization of power and conflict that forges together complexities of local struggles and brings a new perspective on the definition and study of the local.

With regards to resource conflicts, the consequences of global influences on the local
have been quite obvious. But remarkably, studies on the resource crisis tend to ignore
the impact of global flows on power relations and the continued hegemonic domination
of the centre over the margins (Ross 2001, 2003; Boschini, Patterson and Roine 2003).
This stance largely ignores the exploration and theorization of the manner in which
globally extended power defines locality and shapes the concept of the resource curse
(Obi 2007, 14). Hence, a theorization of the resource-conflict nexus necessitates the
adoption of a global perspective on the local that includes the role of individual actors,
relationships and transnational social fields in creating the contexts of production, ac-
cess and distribution of resources. Through the exploration of the nature of global capi-
talist penetration into resource-rich countries of the developing world, and the fierce rivalry for global dominance between competing and colluding imperial powers in col-
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The size and variety of the African continent sometimes presents the difficulty of embarking on any form of generalization. Yet, a deeper probe into Africa’s colonial and post-colonial history convincingly reveals a plethora of comparable economic structures and political dynamics. Although variations are bound to exist in the experience of regions and countries, the dominant features of Africa’s post-colonial trajectory cannot be disputed. Everywhere, both on a regional and country-basis, economic crises have engendered political crises, and this has manifested itself in the form of endemic instability, conflict or outright civil war. These crises stem from the structural constraints of external dependency, the imposition of foreign economic and political models and an emergent post-colonial state with shallow foundations in Africa’s history.

The West African sub-region was formally incorporated into the global market through the forces of Western imperialism in the mid-nineteenth century through the twin forces of European colonial enterprise and European monopoly merchant capital. According to Arendt (1951, 126), the notion of colonialism is strongly linked to the national limitations of economic expansion faced by capitalism in Europe. In a bid to sustain the capitalist system, whose inherent logic is constant growth, the ruling class of capitalist production imposed on their home governments expansionist policies as an ultimate political goal of foreign policy. As such, from the early decades of the twentieth century, the West African sub-region has been exposed to internally-generated and externally-induced cycles of economic growth and crises associated with the capitalist mode of accumulation in the West. Olukoshi (1994) attributes the contradictory manner of West Africa’s entry into the global capitalist network to two reasons. The first had to do with the subordination of the economies of the sub-region to those of the imperialist state that had hitherto controlled the affairs of these states. The second relates to the fact that the integration of West Africa into the global market exposed their economies for the first time to diverse structural and periodic crises that are innate to the capitalist mode of production. As Olukoshi (1994, 2) points out, this effectively meant that the economies of the sub-region, as part of their capitalist development process, were vulnerable to the dynamics of the internally-generated crisis arising out of their own local accumulation process. Besides, as an appendage of the Western capitalist economies, the economies of the sub-region also became susceptible to the dislocations emanating from the crisis of global capitalism.

The foregoing explains why West Africa economies experienced a series of crisis of accumulation in the twentieth century. The first involves the dislocations associated with the Great Depression of 1929, while the second is linked with the long-drawn out economic recession of the 1970s. The economic crisis of the 1970s was initiated by the recession that hit the developed capitalist economies of Western Europe and North
America, which was in turn refracted into the economies of their dependent capitalist formations in West Africa. As with other developing regions of the world, the recession had severe repercussions for West African economies, particularly those that relied primarily on agricultural commodity exports for their export earnings. Major West African exporters of coffee and cocoa witnessed a drastic drop in agricultural export earnings resulting in a disruption in the steady flow of income into these countries. By the late 1970s, several of the crisis-ridden countries of West Africa were compelled by their dwindling economic and political fortunes to open up direct negotiations with the IMF for some assistance in balance of payments and structural adjustment. At this point, structural adjustment made its entry as an economic reform package into the policy model of countries in the West African sub-region.

However, these changes did not occur in isolation, and thus need to be understood within the context of changing global economic conditions as well as the emergence of a new thinking in neo-classical economics, which laid emphasis on curbing inflation and a return to the rule market forces (Olukoshi 1990; Bangura and Gibbon 1992). These ideas as propagated by the monetarist school had already made their mark in intellectual circles during the early 1970s, but it was not until the late 1970s and the early 1980s that the stage was set for their globalization as they took the centre-stage of global economics. As Olukoshi (1994, 15) rightly observes, this process was aided by the rise to power in critical Western European and North American countries of conservative right wing governments dedicated to the cause of monetarism. The most prominent of these governments were those of Margaret Thatcher in Britain, Ronald Reagan in the United States, Helmut Kohl in West Germany and Brian Mulroney in Canada. A major fall-out of these developments was the re-orientation in the dominant outlook of the IMF and World Bank, which led them to abandon their Keynesian inclinations to embrace a monetarist agenda under the dominant influence of the West.

On a global scale, structural adjustment, which refers to the generic term used to describe a package of measures introduced by the IMF and the World Bank, had severe repercussions for peripheral regions of the world, like West Africa, where most countries thrived on the export of primary commodities. These states responded to the policy of the Bank and the Fund who used their leverage on the debt status of the countries in the sub-region to require that production be concentrated on primary commodity exports. As a consequence, there was a flooding of the global commodity markets which led to dwindling prices. From the beginning of the 1980s, the terms of trade for primary commodities began to witness a consistent and long-term downward trend in sub-Saharan Africa – more so than any other region of the world (Avramovic 1986). The major criticism leveled against the adjustment policy was that the excessive focus on export oriented production contributed to a decline in food production, thereby exposing many countries in sub-Saharan Africa to famine, epidemics in periods of droughts and war. Thus, by the end of the 1990s, food production was lower than it was in the early 1970s (Castells 1998, 117).

No doubt, the promises of the adjustment package initiated by the Bank and the Fund served to compel resource-rich African countries to liberalize and privatize these sec-
tors with a view to accruing a fare share of the economic proceeds realizable from its rents. This resulted in a wave of restructuring, radical deregulation and privatization, and divesting the state of its control and direct investment while providing generous incentive packages to foreign investors in the process. These developments provided a leeway for transnational corporations to exploit Africa’s resources, leaving conflict between the state-global extractive allies and the indigenous communities on whose domain these resources are domiciled in their wake. The rise of the hegemonic ideology of global monetarism in the 1980s quickly became the driving force in the economic relations between the West and the developing world, particularly Africa. This position was reiterated in a joint declaration to UNCTAD IX, where African NGOs condemned the imposition of the neo-liberal paradigm through the adjustment package as no less than a means of pillaging what remains of Africa’s resources and another form of recolonization of the continent (African NGO Declaration 1996). The former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa lends credence to this position by stating that “the IMF and the World Bank are now more powerful in Africa than the continent’s former colonial masters” (Quoted in Olukoshi 1994, 81).

Despite this situation, the theoretical assumptions of structural adjustment, especially as they relate to Africa’s resource-conflicts, have not gone unchallenged. A deeper probe links the failure of the theory to its global outlook, which ignores regional or national peculiarities and variations (Olukoshi 1994); while others point to its anti-people policies and the rolling back of the welfare frontiers of the state (Obi 2001a; Osaghae 1995; Egwu 1998). In retrospect, more perceptive observers have tied the rise of resource-conflicts in West Africa to the complex political and social context that the adjustment package engendered. This relates to the draconian measures, the deepening crisis of state legitimacy, the heavy dose of authoritarianism and the destruction of the welfare gains of the post-colonial era. These, in turn, reinforced factional struggles over resources, access to power and local autonomy along ethnic and religious lines, and thus, fuelled more mistrust, conflict and violence, and deepened contradictions between competing groups in the sub-region. While the conflation of global and local forces tends to alter the complexion of resource-conflicts locally, it is clear that the West African sub-region provides the context in which the intermingling of global and local forces are played out.

What is relevant to this study is the need to establish a link between global imperialist influences on West Africa, resource conflicts and the descent into anarchy and civil war. There is relatively little theoretical literature available that addresses this link. Even when a critical academic analysis establishes a background understanding of the wider adverse global context of resource conflicts in the sub-region, the portrayal of contemporary resource conflicts is still one that is often focused, if not entirely blamed on local factors. It presents an analysis that glosses over the direct global connections that sets the stage, stokes the fires, supply the weapons and purchase the resources (oil, diamonds, gold, timber, etc.), and in doing so reinforcing and reproducing the architecture of conflict. The implication of the present analysis is that the bases of resource conflicts in West Africa are more complex than perceived and lie in a combination of local and
global factors. Rather than dwelling on broad generalizations that are not grounded on historical and empirical realities, this study makes the case for a case-by-case approach and a more in-depth reading of the crisis. This task is the primary concern of this paper.

Resource Curse

The 1980s witnessed an upsurge in the emergence of scholarly literature upholding the view that natural resource abundance exacerbates the likelihood that resource-rich countries will be subjected to adverse political, economic and social outcomes, thereby culminating in poor economic performance, low levels of democracy and civil war (Rosser 2006). The “resource curse” thesis explains the underdevelopment in resource-rich sub-Saharan African countries by demonstrating how vast natural resource endowments dampen and weaken the prospects for development, ironically eliciting competition, struggle for access and control of resources, or initiating an outright armed conflict. This form of explanation would account, despite being relatively well-endowed resource-wise, for the poverty human rights abuse, lack of development and conflict-ridden character of sub-Saharan African states. Based on these findings, Ross (2001, 328) presents an apt description by observing that “many of the poorest and most troubled states in the developing world have, paradoxically, high levels of natural resource wealth. There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that resource wealth may harm a country’s prospects for development”. This perspective raises two pertinent questions: first, why do resource-rich states fail to transform into prosperous industrialized economies? Second, how does natural resource wealth contribute to a lack of development? A link is forged between resource abundance, on the one hand, and the prevalence of poor governance, absence of the rule of law and lack of economic development, on the other. It reveals how institutional weakness and poor governance can translate into the inability of the state to effectively manage its resource wealth and contribute to national development and stability (Boschini, Patterson and Roine 2003).

In a bid to calculate the probability and duration of conflicts in resource-rich, yet economically poor countries in the developing world a plethora of economic modeling and statistical regression analysis has emerged on this resource type/conflict type analysis. Ross (2004a, 2004b) argues that ‘lootable resources’ such as minerals and drugs, set-off non-separatist conflicts, while ‘unlootable resources’ like oil, natural gas and deep-shaft minerals are involved in separatist conflicts or civil wars. Furthermore, Boschini, Patterson and Roine (2003) claim that resource-rich countries are “cursed” only if they have “low quality institutions”, and what they also refer to as “appropriability” or profitability of the resource based on institutional capacities and national control. In furtherance of this view, resource-rich (but poor) economies like Angola, Sierra-Leone and the DRC are contrasted with oil-rich (and developed) Norway. The explanation offered is that the latter was successful in transforming resource wealth into development based on its institutional capacities. Taken together, the picture that emerges is one which depicts resource wealth as subversive of the process of development, with obvious repercussions for countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, in the quest to extend the
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borders of the connection between resource dependency and conflict, Ross (2001, 325–361) employs regression models in exploring the oil-democracy nexus by examining the thesis that “oil and mineral wealth tends to make states less democratic”. Stressing the ‘causal mechanisms’ known as the rentier effect, repression effect and modernization effect, Ross (2001, 332) undertakes the task of analyzing the “alleged link between oil exports and authoritarianism”, concluding that “oil does greater damage to democracy in poor countries than in rich ones, and a given rise in oil exports will do more harm in oil-poor states than in rich ones” (2001, 356). Contemporary views have been advanced towards the identification of a multiplicity of causal linkages and a variety of mechanisms linking resource wealth and civil wars, thereby, exposing the limitations of economic mono-causality as an explanatory framework (Ross 2004a; 2004b, 62), but the literature still remains focused on “advancing the natural resources-civil war research agenda” (Ross 2004b, 63).

Notwithstanding this plethora of views and its seeming attractions, the “resource curse” thesis fails to fully grasp the complex dimensions of the politics and international linkages underpinning the absence of development in resource-rich African countries. This relates to the contradictory manner through which Africa was integrated into the global capitalist system, both in the early and monopoly stages of capitalism. A critical reflection reveals the interplay of a host of inter-related factors (both local and global) as opposed to the inevitability of a mono-causal factor. As such, the chief weakness of the “resource curse” thesis is that it glosses over the fundamental questions related to the nature and character of the extractive industries in Africa and its external linkages (Obi 2007). Secondly, it fails to adequately address the question of who the dominant players in these sectors are. While excessive attention is focused on local actors and factors, for example, the state and the political elites, weak and inept bureaucracies, institutional weakness and the absence of state capacity, very little focus is placed on the role of external forces, transnational corporations and the absence of transparency that conceals the extent of their involvement in Africa’s “resource curse”.

In the contemporary global economy, the international scramble for, and exploitation of Africa’s vast resources has intensified (Bond 2006), which has led to a reinforcement of Africa’s subordinate position in the global economy with the accompanying effects of unprecedented poverty, de-industrialization and social crises. The cumulative impact of this scramble, the nature and value of these resources in the global markets (both in economic and strategic terms), the power relations corresponding to the exploitation of these resources and the political economy of access, ownership, distribution, democracy and social justice, all serve to aggravate the crisis of development in resource-rich African economies. This justifies the argument that while Africa’s resources may be a curse for those on the receiving end, those loosing their land, homes and rights for resource extraction, it turns out to be blessing for those extractive global forces and their local allies exploiting and controlling these resources in the global market (Obi 2007, 8). From the preceding analysis, it means that the “resource curse” thesis is an “ambiguous concept”, and it fails to capture the histories, contradictions and various inter-
By and large, resource conflicts are not solely produced by internal contradictions or factors. Instead they are embedded in globally refracted contradictions arising from the intensified exploitation of resources in the sub-region, and the predations of transnational elite at the local, national and global levels. A case in point is Nigeria’s Niger Delta, where a great deal of literature has emerged showing how the contradictions of intensified globalized oil exploitation in Africa feeds into the aggravated social contradictions and violence in the Niger Delta region (Obi 2001b, 2004; Fleshman 2001; Okonta and Douglas 2001). As Watts (2004, 76) observes, it is not possible to completely grasp the roots of the escalating conflict in Nigeria’s Niger Delta without taking into account the ‘unique qualities of oil itself’, combined with the role the state, local elite, oil multinationals and youth militia in the explosive politics breed by oil.

New Political Economy of War

As postulated by Paul Collier, this position is aimed at challenging the dominant trend that attributes the emergence of civil wars and insurgencies to the prevalence of perceptions of deprivation and social injustice among insurgent groups. According to Collier (2000) and his group, conflicts emanate out of perceived opportunities to profit from war. Captured more succinctly by Berdal and Malone (2000, 2), Ballentine and Sherman (2003), the position holds that “economic considerations often shape the calculations of and behaviour of parties to a conflict, giving rise to a particular war economy”. Rather than perceiving war as a consequence of disruptive systemic breakdown, the new political economy of war approach adopts a reasoning that imposes economic rationality on wars and conflicts, and sees war as an economic venture pursued by groups within society. Regardless of the fact that it is a position espoused by economists, this approach has gained acceptance in other disciplines. According to this view the objective of warfare is not to win or even reach an amicable settlement between the parties involved, but to create conditions that would enhance “looting” and “plundering” without any requirements for accountability. Hence, conflict and war may not necessarily represent a systemic breakdown of law, order or rationality, but the advent of a new form of order captured in “another system of profit, power and even protection, granting actors the opportunity to loot, and to exploit civilians” (Keen 2000, 22).

An economic perspective that privileges pillage, plunder and predation is situated at the core of conflict with the entrepreneurs of violence targeting ‘lootable resources’. Keen (2005) links the rationality of the civil wars in Sierra-Leone to the quest for diamonds and profit by the soldiers, rebels and warlords. With reference to the wars in Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Liberia and Sierra Leone, Orogun (2004) argues that “protracted internal and inter-state armed conflicts have been triggered, sustained and funded by the economic imperative of capturing and monopolizing territorial control over lucrative diamond producing areas”. In a similar vein, Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton (2000) argue that “diamonds have been the cause of widespread death, destruction
and misery in the small West African country of Sierra Leone”, thereby lending credence to the views of Keen (2000) and Hoogvelt ([1997] 2001) that the point of war may not lie in the desire to win it, but to engage in and perpetuate crime under the pretext of warfare. This becomes clear in a functioning war economy where neither side has any real incentive to bring the conflict to an end or even win a decisive victory.

Collier (2000, 91) further advanced his articulation of war economies perspective by asserting that “economic agenda appear to be central to why civil wars start”. This involves an argument which presents grievance as a pretext in order to mask economic motives, while gaining support and legitimacy locally and globally. The “conflict trap” analysis as postulated by Collier (2003) and Berdal (2005, 689) link conflict to “not to the motive of rebel actors, but to the opportunity for organized violence”. It attempts to make a link between the proportion of young men in the population and their levels of education; the more men with lower levels of education, the more likely they are to be involved in violence for greed or private gain. Within the context of this approach, other analyses of conflict are linked to the nature of the economy and its natural resource endowments, as well as the control and collection of taxes or rents within the location of extraction.

In spite of these analyses, the basis of resource conflicts in West Africa incorporates other crucial factors that are external to the region. It is pertinent to recall that these crises coincided with the collapse of global prices of traditional exports in the sub-region, and the consequent rise in the costs of imports like oil. This entailed severe repercussions for the balance of payment of non-oil exporting countries of West Africa. With the exception of Nigeria (which was one of the leading oil exporters in the world) and Cote d’Ivoire (which attracted strong interests from foreign investors and high investment flows), the other countries in the sub-region witnessed extensive economic crisis. Even in Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire, the crisis was merely postponed and was to set in at a later date. The onset of the crisis served as fertile ground for the increased external calls for economic reform policies in the sub-region. This sapped the state of its capacity to offer social protection and welfare to its citizens, leading to a breach of the social contract between the state and its citizens, the implosion of the state and the plunge into civil war and anarchy.

The developments in Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire and Senegal lend credence to this view. As a mono-cultural economy, the global oil glut from mid-1981 onwards led to a decline in oil prices and severely contracted economic activities in Nigeria. The reduced income created a shortfall in foreign reserves needed for imports and increased arrears in trade payments, effectively setting the stage for its prolonged economic crisis and the adoption of the World Bank/IMF-inspired Structural Adjustment Programme. The deepening contradictions of the adjustment programme contributed to worsening poverty, unemployment, land hunger and protests by excluded groups. As Osaghae (1995), Adekanye (1995) and Egwu (1998) rightly note, this fed the intensification of ethnicity and ethnic struggles over shrinking resources, power and the means of material production. The case of Cote d’Ivoire played out in a similar fashion. The collapse of the cash crop economy in the wake of the fall in global coffee and cocoa prices led to dras-
tic cuts in state welfare spending, the adoption of drastic IMF austerity measures – including the devaluation of the national currency. Compounded by the death of the President Boigny and the resulting tussle for political power, this led to widespread unemployment and social crisis. In the ensuing crisis, the notion of citizenship took centre stage and the use of ‘Ivorite’ as a criterion for participation in the distribution of scarce resources (jobs, property and power) became prominent (Akindes 2004, 26; Ahonji 2003; Chaleard 2003; ICG 2004; Coulibaly 2003). This and other related events, which started in 1993, created an atmosphere where the manipulation and deployment of identity politics and exclusion finally culminated in the outbreak of a civil war in 2002, and the actual division of the country into two-halves: with the North controlled by the rebels and the South by the government. In the case of Senegal, the ethnic violence in the separatist Cassamance province, which pits the Joola ethnic group against the Senegalese state, escalated into an armed conflict between 1980 and 1983. This was attributed to the hardship imposed by the adjustment programme that led to a more fierce competition for scarce resources (land) and an intense rivalry among different ethnic identities (Diaw and Diouf 1998, 266).

State Predation, Failure and Collapse

Political scientists, such as William Reno (1996, 2000, 2003) have contributed another important perspective concerning resource conflicts involving state predation and collapse. According to this perspective, war is presented not as the opposite of peace, but as the emergence of an alternative political economy of violence hinged upon ‘shadow states and economies’ (Reno 2000, 2003; de Soysa 2001; Ikelegbe 2006). Reno forges a link between corruption and politics in which the privatization of the state through personal ties, patronage and illicit deals, and the personalization of power impairs state institutions leading to state collapse, and engendering the subsequent rise of factions, above all those controlled by warlords, who utilize military force to plunder and loot resources.

Reno (2000), like Collier (2000) and Keen (2000, 2005), assigns a minor role to social grievance and injustice as ideologies used as a pretext by aggrieved persons to join predatory organizations. The shadow state thrives on personal ties that subvert state institutions for private gain while the ‘real state’ crumbles. By drawing on instances in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Reno (2000, 58) forges a link between the shadow state and violent conflicts in Africa. He sees the violent conflicts in Nigeria’s Niger Delta as a convergence of interests between rebellious members of the elite, like Ken Saro-Wiwa (the late Ogoni environmental activist) and youths who, according to him, “envision a world where everyone would become a millionaire, and own a Mercedes Benz car” (Reno 2000, 51). Reno (2000, 64) evokes a gloomy picture of the manner in which state officials, armies and rebel movements everywhere on the continent engage in “free-style looting” and infers that “the economic interests of belligerents may be an obstacle to the termination of conflicts".
The bulk of Reno’s analysis rests on the prevalence of patrimonial political networks, corruption and state collapse (or outright failure), and how these, in turn, breed perceptions of injustice, violence and predatory behaviour. Hence, the core argument is that corruption and the struggle for resources are the main sources of conflicts. Critics of failed-state theories attribute this reading of the roots of resource conflicts in Africa to one which locks the continent into an inevitable logic of violence (Obi 2006). By locking resource conflicts in Africa into a static frame of state collapse, it fails to capture the role of external actors and interests in the conflicts, and further intensifies stereotypes and static representations of African states and politics. Attention has been drawn to numerous ties that bind the private interests between state officials, rulers and warlords, on the one hand, and foreign commerce, investors and interests, on the other (Hoogvelt [1997] 2001, 190). For instance, the Sierra Leonean civil war presented a situation in which the rebel-held diamond-producing areas profited from the war through the illicit acquisition of diamonds. The diamonds were subsequently smuggled across the border into Liberia and sold to a number of Canadian companies with ties to the central selling organization of the De Beers Company (Smillie, Gberie and Hazleton 2000). In the case of Liberia, developments in the minerals sector also exposed certain linkages with external actors and agents. The government-owned holding company-Liberian Resources Corporation (LIBRESCO), which was vested with the entire mineral resources of the country, ceded forty per cent of its shares to Amelia Gold Corporation of South Africa allegedly in return for exploration work. But Taylor’s relations to the company, which predated the deal and the secrecy around the deal, lends credence to the predatory exploitation of the country’s natural resources by international and local actors during the war (Atkinson 1997, 27–28; Ankomah 1997, 21). Consequently, other studies have exposed the devastating intertwining of global rivalries and scramble for Africa’s mineral resources, and the defiant explosion of resource conflicts locally (Collins 1997; Outram 1997; Glendinning 2004; Annan 1998).

Environmental Scarcities

The end of the Cold War witnessed a shift in policy and academic circles to global environmental change and its implications for global security (Speth 1990; Brock 1991; Renner 1996; Brown 1994; Obi 1997; Leach and Mearns 1996). At the centre of this change is the expansion of the notion of security to include non-military threats, which take on board issues like environmental degradation, depletion of non-renewable resources and population explosion (Obi 2000). Basically, this approach is hinged on the perception that rapidly expanding populations beyond a particular limit places pressure/stress on renewable natural resources and on the environment, thus leading to the relative scarcity of resources (Homer-Dixon 1994; Myers 1993). Environmental scarcities are also evident where resources are being rapidly depleted as an outcome of degradation or an unsustainable pattern of exploitation and production. The scenario which produces such scarcities are often associated with developing regions of the world, like West Africa, where they activate conflicts over shrinking renewable resources – thus, echoing the population size/natural resource linkage to violent conflicts.
With specific reference to West Africa, Kaplan (1994) constructed an alarming image of a coming anarchy in a ‘Hobbesian’ sub-region owing to an imminent demographic-environmental cataclysm. As Obi (2006, 10) notes, this view reinforces a neo-Malthusian framework that presumes that population growth beyond the ability to replenish renewable resources (leading to scarcity) sets off violent conflicts in developing countries. The major concern, therefore, is environmental security, which among other things, endeavours to prevent threats emanating from the environment (environmental conflicts or resource wars) from threatening global security (Obi 2000). This approach incorporates questions related to “resource scarcity-induced conflicts” that are relevant to the dynamics of environmental conflicts. Other issues, such as the likelihood, duration, consequences, and measures that can forestall the occurrence of environmental conflicts are included (Maxwell and Reuveny 2000). The use of modelling and quantitative analysis has also been adopted to reinforce the prevalent qualitative efforts on this subject, emphasizing as they did, the role of external interventionism to punctuate the cycle of environmental conflicts and the need to combine competent environmental governance with population growth measures in other to promote environmental security, peace and development (Obi 2006, 10).

Authors like Brown and Jacobson (1986), Homer-Dixon (1994, 1996) and Klare (1996) have forged a link between population, resource scarcities and environmental stress; the consequences of which are migration, population displacement, urban overcrowding, decay and violence, inter-group conflict, over-stretched social services and inadequate control measures by the state. But their analysis glosses over other fundamental issues and is fraught with conceptual difficulties when viewed within the context of African specificities. Critical to this is the fact that the processes of resource depletion or degradation, rather than being tied exclusively to population explosion, must be viewed within the context of how political and economic systems interact with the ecosystem (Williams 1996; Hjort-af-Ornas and Lundqvist 1999). In order to reach the real roots of conflict the population-conflict model must be reconstructed. As such, it will be more analytically rewarding to locate conflict not entirely as a function of population explosion, but as a fall-out of the contention between socially defined groups for the control, distribution and use of resources (Williams 1996; Bookchin 1991).

The rendering of the ‘resource curse and scarcities’ approach is writ large in the interpretation of Africa’s civil wars – often portrayed as resource conflicts. Rather than providing an account of how these scarcities are ‘produced’, they are most often presented as natural. But a deeper reflection reveals that in some cases scarcities may yet be the outcome of distributive inequities attributed to historical injustices and political marginalization. However, as opposed to presenting some of these conflicts as “resource conflicts”, it would suffice to capture the “politics” at the heart of the issues of ownership, access, rights, justice, and the manner in which extractive global forces compound social contradictions and conflicts in Africa. The political economy of resource conflicts in Africa reveals that given the dominant mode of production is tied to land, resource conflicts transcend a mere possession of these resources, and instead inhere in the power relations bordering their ownership and control, the allocation of benefits, accu-
ulation and dispossession, power and (dis)empowerment, resulting in a cycle of resistance and repression.

Indeed, what are most often presented as “resource conflicts” in West Africa are ineluctably linked to demands for redistribution, citizenship and social justice, and are fundamentally connected with the struggle for democracy. As Ake (2000) notes, the conflicts that are generally referred to as ethnic conflicts are actually democratic conflicts and constitute an attempt by peoples hitherto excluded from the commonwealth to regain their rights as free and equal citizens. This assertion holds true in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region where insurgent militias of the Ijaw ethnic extraction are deadlocked in a fierce confrontation with state security forces and oil multination corporations within the context of a broader struggle over the control of oil resources in the region. In the Casamance region of Senegal the issue of citizen rights and access to resources have also played a crucial role in the land conflict between the Northerners, who migrated into the region, and the Joola peoples, who are the indigenes. Several thousand parcels of land have been expropriated and allocated exclusively to non-indigenes, while the indigenous population have been driven to the undeveloped outskirts of the urban centre and denied other benefits in their own territory. These conflicts must be understood within the context of an acute competition for resources “spurred by the outbreak of a major economic crisis and the subsequent introduction of orthodox market reforms in the form of IMF and World Bank supported structural adjustment programme” (Egwu 1998). Thus, various groups in the sub-region have cultivated ethnic identities and differences as a means of attaining a position of superiority in situations of competition for resources.

Furthermore, many resource-conflicts involving herders and farmers in the Sahel region of West Africa are presently rooted and driven by global warming, particularly in a context characterized by widespread social tension and political instability. Regardless of the fact that resource-based conflicts are not new in Africa, climate change presents a new and potentially disastrous dynamic, and has the potential to unfold into a major security issue. The problems include: parched and degraded land, water shortages, grain crop scarcity, livestock over-grazing, wood fuel shortages and deforestation – all of which are prevalent in poor tropical regions of Africa and in areas affected by expanding deserts in sub-Saharan Africa. This has resulted in the forced migration of millions of people, creating a category of refugees known as “climate refugees”, and has increased the chances of conflict over shrinking land and other depleting resources, particularly where access to these resources are politicized. The most prominent example is the conflict in the Darfur region of Sudan, which has claimed over 200,000 lives. The conflict erupted partly as a contestation between the mostly nomadic Arabs and farmers from the Fur, Massaleet and Zagawa communities, over land and grazing rights which have become scarcer due to climate change (BBC News 2007). In Ghana, skirmishes have occurred with Fulani cattle herdsmen reportedly arming themselves to take on local farmers in a confrontation over water and land as climate change expands the Sahara Desert (Borger 2007). In central Nigeria, conflicts between the Tivs and the Jukuns have been aggravated by attempts to legitimize control of land and ac-
cess to economic life in the area between the different groups in the face of ever scarcer resources. The competition for access to resources have also been politicized, while the Jukun regard themselves as ‘indigenes’, they consider the others as more recent ‘settlers’ (World Organization Against Torture 2002, 133).

**Conclusion: Outcomes and Lessons**

Several conclusions can be gleaned from the preceding analysis. Nevertheless, it must be reiterated that the dominant perspectives on the resource-conflict linkage are inadequate for grasping and understanding the intricate mix of local and the global dynamics in West Africa’s resource conflicts. A re-appraisal of resource-driven conflicts in West Africa brings to the fore a host of historically rooted contradictions, which are compounded by socio-economic and political factors (Abdullah and Rashid 2004; Ukeje 2003a, 2003b), as well as the impact of an emergent global state structure which shapes local actors and processes. The central issues in the articulation of resource conflicts in the sub-region relate to the broader concerns that surround the nature of resource extraction, exploitation, production, distribution and access, at the local, national, (sub) regional and global levels. It is clear that mainstream explanatory tendencies regarding resource conflicts in West Africa prioritize the “resource curse”, “state failure”, “phenomenon of warlords” and “environmental scarcity” analysis, above issues of justice, democracy, power, and the role of diverse factions of the international community and their transnational networks in creating the crises and compounding the internal contradictions that directly influence the outbreak and duration of these conflicts (Obi 2006).

Closely related to this point is the impact of globalization and the increased role of regional and global actors within resource conflicts in the sub-region. The global actors implicated in these resource conflicts involve (among others) diamond or gold traders, suppliers of ammunitions, mercenaries, private security companies and oil multinationals. Although, these actors are not present everywhere, their actual relevance depends largely on positionality, the dynamics of the conflict and the relations between local and global nodes within particular contexts. As such, violence provides a façade for the absence of accountability and transparency, and creates opportunities for profit as they provide the wherewithal for belligerents involved in the conflict. Of crucial importance is the need to understand that the resource conflicts in West Africa are often products or results of connivance between local and transnational actors. It is the outcome of a pernicious alliance where local actors and interests are shaped by global fields of power.

As Berdal (2005, 688–689) observes, “the explanatory power initially given to Collier and others on the exploitation of natural resources by rebel groups for purposes of self-enrichment as the principal cause and driver of civil wars, has had a marked impact on international policy-making towards civil wars, especially within the United Nations”. The basic appeal of this explanation is related to the desire of the international policy community to provide temporary palliatives and technical answers that economic and
quantitative analysis offers. Obi (2006, 5) points out the fundamental impact of such explanations provide certain kinds of international intervention, which aims at the economic motives and opportunities for conflict, and more critically, are linked to state reform in a manner that promotes market-led development. This perspective also portrays the market as anonymous hidden hands, but ignores the fact that the market is a product of structured relations of power between nodes in a network in which West African states are perpetually disadvantaged and incapable of improving their position vis-à-vis the developed countries.

Moreover, Reno’s (1996, 2000, 2003) thesis regarding the “shadow state”, which identifies “kleptocracy” and the looting of state resources by its officials as the source of conflicts, feeds into the “good governance” agenda espoused by the IMF and World Bank, which stresses technocratic and managerial policies predicated on transparency and accountability. Here, resource conflicts are merely symptoms of a larger crisis that reiterates how the process of economic globalization has eroded and undermined the capacity of the state in the socio-economic and political spheres through the imposition of market reforms; even when these reforms were obviously not going to guarantee the welfarist interests of the domestic constituencies. These reforms were marked by deepening mass poverty, social crisis and the collapse of the post-colonial mode of accumulation, thereby leading to the weakening and implosion of African states, and the downward spiral into conflict.

With reference to methodology, it is pertinent to state that territory and space have become very crucial, and the interpretation of sub-regional resource conflicts must necessarily be rooted in the interaction between local and global forces, rather than being situated in any intra-regional analysis. This becomes important due to the fact that the actual local import of global currents and influences on resource conflicts depend on the actors, interests and combinations in which they arrived, which are far from uniform from place to place. Hence, apart from embarking on an informed fieldwork – including interviews with global and local actors in these conflicts – there is a need to engage the fundamental causes of conflict by examining how political closures, exclusion, the social dimensions of economic crisis and reform, and the crisis of state legitimacy fuel resource conflicts in the sub-region. At the global level, it is possible to understand the global context of West Africa’s resource conflicts in a holistic and integrated sense. This involves a critique of an expanding array of multilateral institutions like the UN, IMF, World Bank, WTO, G8, OECD and the World Economic Forum that undergird cosmopolitan governance and serves as the harbinger of a neo-liberal global order. Authors like Gowan (1999); Arrighi (1994, 2000); McMichael (2003); Harvey (2003); Panitch (2000) and Wood (2003) have established that these panoply of transnational governance structures have increasingly taken on state-like functions and obey the interests of some states far more than others. In spite of the rhetoric on “global governance”, these institutions of neo-liberal imperialism are implicated in the sub-region’s resource conflicts, with undeniable and painful consequences for local development. In this lies the crux of the relationship between global forces and the deepening of socio-economic crises, the politics of exclusion and resource conflicts.
Attempts at resolving the resource conflicts in the sub-region must be carefully designed and dependent on locally-owned initiatives that address the grievances of different sections of the population, and guarantees equitable access and distribution of resources. Rather than reflecting hegemonic externally imposed solutions, or the imposition of a “liberal peace” model – aptly captured as ‘mission civilisatrice’ (Paris 2002, 637) – attempts must be made by West African states to revert to the developmental, democratic and socially equitable state that would address the need for impartial access to power and resources, as essential components for development in the sub-region. It is also essential to engage the current onslaught of neo-liberal globalization and its attendant inequities, which have spawned huge income gaps between the rich and the poor, both within and between countries. The furtherance of neo-liberal reforms by the rich countries of the West have deprived the developing regions of the world, like West Africa, of the ability to seize policy-making and formulation in a manner that enhances resource management and market access for development purposes. In the final analysis, the sub-region’s development ultimately lies in the capacity of local policy makers to rethink the political space for public policy making with respect to their resource wealth. A great deal would, therefore, depend on making national interest, economic growth and development the benchmarks of policy formulation and initiation, not an externally-imposed project of globalization and market economics. Equally important is the need for those external hegemonic forces that exploit the sub-region’s resources and impose solutions and models of development that further their own interests, and contribute to the sub-region’s underdevelopment to respect the humanity and collective rights of indigenous people to own their natural resources and direct their developmental aspirations.

References


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