Helpdesk Research Report: Global Drivers of Conflict and Instability
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Query: What are the key global drivers of conflict and instability discussed in recent literature?
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1. Overview

This review attempts to present the key literature found in relation to the global drivers of conflict and instability. The focus is upon recent ideas that are prevalent in literature from post-2007. The review emphasises positive drivers of conflict and instability rather than factors relating to absence (e.g. absence of a functioning judicial system), although these internal factors often play a pivotal part in conflict-affected and unstable contexts. Much of the literature has a regional focus on Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

The security-development discourse, which combines a concern with poverty and economic growth with that of national, regional and global security, incorporates country-level analyses within a broader framework of transnational issues that impact on conflict dynamics. Issues of poverty and inequality, reflect power relations framed by international forces. It is generally thought that isolating any one factor as the only driver of conflict and instability is to deny the complex inter-relation between various factors, both internal and external. A thorough consideration of the motivating and sustaining factors in conflict suggests that hard-and-fast distinctions between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ influences in a conflictual or unstable setting are not easy to maintain.

This review first considers the issue at a macro-level, relying on a paper concerning the global drivers of conflict as a whole (Putzel, 2009). Here, six key drivers are identified: international military intervention; transborder armed groups and refugees; the impact of structural adjustment reform on fragile states; the trade in arms, drugs and minerals; the impact of the global financial crisis; and climate change. This review does not follow this typology exactly, but does attempt to address the issues identified. Secondly, the review offers a recent background paper on the ‘greed vs. grievance’ debate in order to contextualise the literature presented. This debate – which is often integral in debate on the cause of conflict – entails a discussion over whether those who participate in conflict are motivated by economic gain (‘greed’), or are motivated to redress a perceived social, political or economic injustice (‘grievance’). The former is associated with countries with abundant natural resources; the latter with countries which experience high levels of horizontal inequality.

The key ideas from this review are:

- Climate change, migration, and conflict are inextricably linked. It is difficult to identify a linear process to explain causal factors, but climate change is thought to be a root
cause of both migration and conflict (Kolmannskog, 2008). This argument rests on the idea that scarce resources, e.g. local water scarcity, can lead to conflictual relations arising from either migration or from general competition over resources. It also leaves populations susceptible to international actors keen to obtain resources. Key conflict ‘hotspots’ include North and West Africa, both of which are expected to receive large numbers of climate-change induced migrants. However climate change and/or migration is never the only factor at play. Internal factors, such as governance and the role of the state, are critical.

- The developing world’s dependence on foreign aid and financial investments may prove a pivotal factor in inducing conflict and instability. This has been articulated on the basis of evidence from the impact of ‘foreign aid shocks’ (i.e. sharp declines in foreign aid) (Nielson et al, 2010) and a review of current thinking on the likely impacts of the global financial crisis (Bakrania and Lucas, 2009). It is important to note, however, that while the impact of reduced revenue can act as a driver of conflict and instability, it can also reduce the resistance of a country to rebellion, social tensions, and corruption.

- The role of remittances in conflict is as yet unclear, but early evidence from the Ethiopian diaspora has indicated that remittances can be used to foment conflict and socio-political tensions. However, given that the level of remittances is thought to be in decline following the global financial crisis, it remains to be seen what role it will play.

- Natural resources form part of the international political economy and are crucial in understanding the role of international actors in creating economic incentives that can fuel conflict and instability. Those who emphasise the role of natural resources tend to highlight ‘greed’ arguments (e.g. in the case of Sierra Leone and Nigeria’s Niger Delta). Revenue from natural resources is thought to have a role in both directly financing conflict and providing the incentives for parties to engage in violence, but also in sustaining the contextual conditions which makes an area rife for conflict (e.g. corrupt government, cross-border tensions).

- International trade in arms and drugs provides direct revenue – an economic incentive to start and sustain conflict. However this needs to be understood as a proximate rather than structural cause. Addressing these issues does not eradicate the need to address structural issues – such as poverty and weak governance.

The latter point is an important one: ‘global’ drivers have a significant role to play, but often act as triggers for underlying sentiments. A focus on the global dimensions of conflict should not necessitate a neglect of internal dynamics (whether these be local, national or regional). It is also clear from the literature that given the international dimensions of conflict and instability, their consequences cannot be divorced from that of the global system. This is particularly resonant in the case of countries where trade from goods such as drugs are thought to finance terrorist organisations, or provide indirect support to them. These organisations are indeed not only a threat to national and regional security, but have also had a negative impact upon the global system as a whole.

2. General Literature: Global Drivers of Conflict

http://www.crisisstates.com/download/others/R&G_DriversOfChangeOct09.JP.pdf

This policy paper attempts to highlight some of the external factors that can exacerbate conflict in fragile states. Six are identified:

- **External military intervention**: Recent research has shown that military interventions since 1945 make democracy less likely, increase the risk of coup d’état and have a deleterious effect on economic development (Gutiérrez and González, forthcoming).
Transborder non-state armed groups and movement of refugees: ‘Next door’ can easily become a source of conflict as many groups operate across the boundaries of fragile states. This has been seen most recently in Central and South Asia and the Middle East. However peace can be maintained when there is conflict in a neighbouring country (e.g. Tanzania and Zambia in wars in Central and Southern Africa). Terrorist networks such as Al Qaeda can also be considered a non-state armed group.

Impact of structural adjustment reforms on fragile states: ‘Many of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa that experienced exacerbated conflict and, at the extremes, state collapse, in the last two decades of the 20th century were subjected to severe constraints imposed on their states through structural adjustment and pressures to democratise during the years preceding the outbreak of warfare (Hesselbein 2009; Putzel, 2005). This is because reforms imposed to downsize inefficient states that had presided over economic mismanagement or to press for the introduction of competitive politics in the face of autocratic governments paid little heed to the extent to which existing arrangements had “bought peace” (p. 2).

Illicit trade in drugs, arms and minerals: International trading networks in illicit goods have exacerbated conflict conditions. When the international community attacks the ‘supply’ of illegal drugs this has done little to help matters, and instead impoverished the lives of poor farmers. Further, trade liberalisation has made trading in arms and minerals through illegal networks far easier. The ‘radical informalisation’ (p.3) of the mineral sector in the Great Lakes Region, for instance, enabled non-state armed groups to finance their operations.

International financial crisis: Whilst many fragile states saw their aid cut, another major factor in the escalation of conflict conditions was the decline in the price of primary commodities (e.g. copper), the export which many fragile states are reliant upon. The crisis has also had a significant impact upon remittances.

Climate change: ‘While the direct link between climate change and conflict is often the subject of scare mongering (see Hartman, 2009), the pressures placed on the weak organisations and institutions of fragile states by radical shifts in climate are likely to exacerbate conditions of fragility that leave countries vulnerable to the outbreak of violence’ (p. 4).

The Greed vs. Grievance debate


This paper offers a re-statement of the ‘greed and grievance’ debate which forms the basis of many discussions of the causes of conflict. These two phenomena have been recently utilised to explain conflict onset among rational choice analysts. ‘Greed’ arguments refer to elite competition over valuable natural resource rents, while ‘grievance’ argues that relative deprivation and the grievance it produces fuels conflict. Central to grievance are concepts of inter-ethnic or horizontal inequality. Identity formation is also crucial to intra-state conflict, as it overcomes the collective action problem. Conflict can rarely be explained by greed alone, yet, the greed versus grievance hypotheses may be complementary explanations for conflict.

The greed explanation regarding conflict duration and secessionist wars works best in cross-country studies, but has to make way for grievance-based arguments in quantitative country-case studies. This paper argues that grievances and horizontal inequalities may be better at explaining why conflicts begin, but not necessarily why they persist. Neither is the presence of greed or grievance sufficient for the outbreak of violent conflict, something which requires institutional breakdown which is described here as the failure of the social contract. The degradation of the social contract is more likely in the context of poverty and growth failure. The paper provides a synthesis of the greed and grievance hypotheses, ending with comments on post-conflict reconstruction.
3. Climate Change, migration and the environment

http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9268480.pdf

This paper takes global warming as a certainty, and stresses that ‘climate refugees’ have become a central part of public discourse, with developed countries fearing the arrival of a flood of so-called climate refugees. It does not agree with the concept of ‘climate refugees’ and argues that it implies a mono-causality that one rarely finds in human reality, and that no one factor, event or process, inevitably results in forced migration or conflict. It is very likely that climate change impacts will contribute to an increase in forced migration. Because one cannot completely isolate climate change as a cause however it is impossible to attribute migration solely to climate change. According to the author, forced migration can be triggered by – and itself also trigger – environmental conflicts. Some argue that climate change will trigger environmental conflicts that in turn trigger migration. There are also those who argue that migration may in itself trigger environmental conflicts. The two conflict constellations relating to the environment and migration can be simplified as the following:

1) Climate change impacts on the environment -> conflict -> migration
2) Climate change impacts on the environment -> migration -> conflict

For instance, in transit or at the place of destination, migration can (be perceived to and/or) contribute to a competition for already scarce resources such as land and water. For instance, the degradation of freshwater resources can trigger competition and conflict. Sudden disasters such as storms and floods often highlight existing domestic problems, revealing weaknesses of the government in power and may thereby exacerbate conflict. Conflict potential normally depends on a range of socio-economic and political factors that are often similar to those that can trigger forced migration – including governance and the role of the state.

The paper argues that it is likely that developing countries in lower latitudes will continue in the near future to be the hotspots in several senses of the word. Faced with climate change, there may be some increase in planned migration that is longer-distance, longer-term and more permanent. Increased urbanisation with the possibility of secondary migration can also be expected.

There are two main schools of thought in environmental conflict research: the neo-malthusians and the cornucopians. The neo-malthusians (e.g. Thomas Homer-Dixon) claim that population growth leads to over-consumption of resources, resource degradation, and finally scarcities, resulting in violent competition. The cornucopians emphasise the role of technology, human ingenuity and cooperation in overcoming scarcity. Cooperation rather than conflict may be the response to environmental challenges. Some researchers, (e.g. Nils Petter Gleditsch) have claimed that it is abundance rather than scarcity of resources that often leads to conflict – because rebel groups draw funding from the exploitation of natural resources and / or it is a conflict about the control of valuable resources. Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti are used as examples by the neo-malthusians, while those who claim abundance, rather than scarcity, fuels conflict point to countries such as the DR Congo, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Angola, Algeria, and Colombia.

Darfur is presented as a good example of how climate change can interact with other factors to trigger violent conflict. When Darfur first made headlines, the most common explanation of the violent conflict emphasised the ethnic differences between Arabs and Africans. The UNEP’s post-conflict environmental assessment (UNEP, 2007) indicated a strong link between land degradation, desertification and conflict in Darfur. The boundary between desert and semi-desert is shifting southwards partly due to declining precipitation. Several authors attribute this to climate change, while others maintain that the semi-arid Sahel with strong climate variability is not a good case for illustrating or proving climate change. However other factors are also at play: all countries in the Sahel have felt the impact of global warming, but so far only Sudan has experienced such devastating conflict.
A factor which has also received a degree of attention is the role of the international community. The UNEP’s assessment indicates that some international aid programmes may also cause significant harm to the environment, and there may be vicious circles of (particularly food) aid dependence, agricultural underdevelopment and environmental degradation. This is detrimental to Darfur’s existing problems of drought, desertification and disputes over land-use – factors that contributed to the conflict in the first place.

The following diagram (see below) identifies conflict ‘hotspots’ induced by climate change. This suggests that areas likely to receive environmentally-induced migrants are also thought to be susceptible to conflict.


This policy brief looks at how water can lead to conflict, and how these conflicts can be avoided. The first half of the paper (explaining the conflict potential of water scarcity) is of most relevance here. The brief argues that growing water scarcity, increasing demand for water and continued poor management of the resource can exacerbate competition over its allocation. Water resource allocation often reflects social, political and economic inequities. When there is increased competition over the allocation, these differences can become even more profound – resulting in the emergence or escalation of conflicts. The intrastate level is specifically affected by this phenomenon as influential positions in politics and society are often linked to the access to water – especially in agrarian countries. For example, lucrative export products can only be produced with sufficient water supply, and investments in the tourism sector are also closely linked to the resource availability.

Urban water allocation structures also mirror social disparities, such as those between rich and poor districts. Restrictions in resource availability therefore often have direct social and political consequences, as the hostilities following increases in prices of drinking water services have shown. Development countries are more affected by the politicisation of the resource competition because of their lower adaptive capacities to the effects of scarcity, as
well as their dependence on water in economic sectors. However water scarce regions of European Mediterranean countries are also showing increasing conflict potentials as a result of higher competition in resource allocation, for instance the Almaría region in Spain. In explaining the dynamics surrounding the emergence of conflict, the paper offers the following points:

- **Water scarcity has conflict-causing potential as increasing demand for water combined with shrinking supply lead to competition over resources.** Growing needs for food production, urbanisation and changes in consumption patterns are responsible for higher demands for fresh water worldwide. While the demand in industrial countries is expected to increase by 18% by the year 2025, it will rise by 50% in developing countries in the same period (WWAP 2006). This so-called overuse of surface or groundwater resources has already provoked ecological and social catastrophes in many parts of the world. The consequences are the loss of livelihoods for resident fishers and farmers as well as migration. The latter might in turn cause increased pressure on resources such as land and water when refugees migrate into already densely populated regions. In China, Yemen, Iran, but also in Central Asia and many Sahel countries as well as in the region of the Middle East and Northern Africa these effects are already being seen.

- **Competition over access to water within states provokes different types of conflicts.** There are five types of water-based conflict: a) water conflicts among nomads or between nomads and settlers; b) water conflicts between farmers; c) conflicts between urban and rural water-users; d) conflicts between users and managers of drinking water services; and e) conflicts between proponents and opponents of dams and large projects for water transfer.

- **The impacts of water scarcity have put the implementation of development intervention into question.** These links are particularly evident in the case of the Millennium Development Goals. Water plays an important role in the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty (goal 1). Especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia, water scarcity correlates with the spread of hunger and poverty and hampers the implementation of the MDG 1.

- **Alongside ‘classical’ competition between agricultural and urban water use, disputes over water allocation today increasingly occur within sectors.** For example, financially strong farmers may compete with poorer ones, or different urban investors may compete in allocation patterns. Water conflicts are complex: they require detailed analyses of the respective interests and positions at stake and cooperation possibilities between the actors involved. Water conflict is rarely linked to only the question of resource allocation. Conflict-triggering factors (such as the marginalisation of population groups regarding their income, their social position, or their religious, ethnic or political affiliation) existed prior to the escalation of a so-called water conflict. The restriction of access to the resource is then rather the determining factor for the escalation, but not for the formation of a conflict.

- **Water conflicts can be expressed in many different ways.** They may trigger violence, as the social unrest following the privatisation of drinking water supply in Bolivia or the hostilities between nomads and settlers in Kenya and elsewhere have shown. However many water conflicts are also firstly carried out without violence, for example when water supply is secured through corruption. Conflicts may further find their expression in competition between government institutions to secure their part in the allocation process. They may also be expressed in the political influence exerted by a private investor securing his individual supply. Another typical form of non-violent water conflicts is the bypassing of state regulations though informal means, such as the exploitation of groundwater resources without permission. Finally, conflicts may also result in constructive cooperation. They may facilitate the articulation of interests and of deeper causes of conflict and thereby create new perspectives for negotiation.

**GSDRC Topic Guide on Climate Change Adaptation: Climate change, conflict, migration and fragility**
4. Foreign financial flows and the financial crisis


This study attempts to resolve part of the confusion over how foreign aid affects armed conflict. Some arguments suggest that aid intensifies existing ethnic cleavages, which can make conflict more likely (Esman and Herring 2003), or that foreign aid increases the payoffs to rebels of initiating a civil war by increasing the value of capturing the state (Grossman 1991, 1992). Other studies argue that aid decreases the risk of civil war by promoting economic growth and strengthening state capabilities (Collier and Hoeffler 2002). Yet these studies appear to assume that aid transfers are steady and predictable, which is often not the case.

In this paper it is argued that aid shocks – i.e. severe decreases in aid revenues – inadvertently shift the domestic balance of power and potentially induce violence. The findings in this paper suggests that, in contrast to studies finding only an indirect connection between levels of foreign aid and armed conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 2002), there is a direct connection between changes in aid and conflict. This is explored using data on aid flows to countries from 1981-2005.

The central argument is: During aid shocks, potential rebels gain bargaining strength vis-à-vis the government. To appease the rebels, the government needs to promise more resources than it can immediately deliver. Such buy-outs might include: (1) formal political power and resource-sharing agreements that constitute a legal accord between conflicting parties, (2) side-payments in the form of direct financial transfers, (3) indirect transfers via differential taxation or public goods provision, and (4) implicit understandings that if a particular region or ethnic group does not receive sufficient funds from government coffers, rebellion might result. In addition to these transfers (or in place of them), governments may also spend resources to deter potential rebels from fighting by raising the probability of a government victory in an armed conflict. Foreign aid contributes to government resources and, as such, forms a key basis of government side payments or deterrence. Of the fifteen most severe negative aid shocks in the sample, four of the countries – Liberia (1999), Ghana (1981), Guinea-Bissau (1997), and Sierra Leone (1990) – experienced armed conflict within one year and Lesotho (1994) experienced violence within four years.

The authors argue that the results of the study suggest that aid can affect the likelihood of violent armed conflict primarily by influencing a state’s ability to credibly commit to an agreement that averts war at present and into the future. For aid recipients, sudden aid shortfalls make governments relatively less able to make enough side-payments or military investment to preserve the peaceful status quo in the future.


This report takes a detailed look at how the financial crisis of 2007 has reverberated in Africa, responding to a particular gap in the literature addressing its impact on conflict and fragility. Initially Sub-Saharan Africa was largely insulated from the initial stages of the financial crisis as the majority of the countries in the region are de-linked from the international financial markets. However, with the worsening of the global financial and economic crisis, the region as a whole has now been exposed to the downturn, and growth estimates have been continually lowered from 5 percent in 2008 to 1.7 percent in April 2009 (IMF, 2009).

Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly susceptible to the financial crisis because many countries are dependent on foreign finance inflows and are even more dependent on commodity-based export growth (Naudé, 2009). As such, some World Bank economists have warned that
although Africa is the least integrated region, it could actually be the worst hit (Devarajan, 2009a). In addition to financial shocks, Sub-Saharan Africa is also reeling from the food and fuel price shocks of 2007-08.

The first two sections of this report are the most relevant: Section 1 looks at the ‘transmission channels’ which enabled the financial crisis to have such an impact on Africa; while Section 2 considers the actual impacts of the crisis.

Based on the ten-country case study investigation undertaken by Velde et al (2009), the following ‘transmission channels’ are identified:

- Decline in private financial flows have led to a reduction of portfolio inflows of Africa’s prominent emerging markets (Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, Ghana). The crisis is likely to result in foreign investors reducing their investments in the region. A very visible manifestation of this has been the postponement, closure and cancelling of mining investments, which have had extensive media coverage (p. 5).
- A projected decline in remittances (4.4 percent predicted by the World Bank, 2009).
- A decline in Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), compounded by the falling value of the pound against the dollar and euro, effectively reducing the amount of UK aid.
- A decline in the demand for services, e.g. tourism.

Based on Mendoza (2009) this paper suggests that the financial crisis has the following impacts:

- Increase in unemployment and reduction in household income;
- Triggering of household coping strategies, which are often detrimental to children;
- Deepening poverty, with possible intergenerational consequences.

The escalation of conflict during economic downturns is more likely in countries recovering from conflict, or fragile states. Given that Africa is the most conflict-affected continent in the world, an exacerbation of resource scarcity could increase conflict across the continent. However, economic downturns can also create the conditions for previously stable government to become unstable (Desai, 2009).

The following are key points concerning the link between the impacts of the financial crisis and conflict and fragility?

- **State weakness and poor economic growth:** An analysis of the available literature suggests that weak economies often translate to weak and fragile states and the presence of violent conflict, which in turn prevents economic growth. In a body of work exploring the causality of civil wars in Africa, Collier & Hoeffler (2002; 2004) and Collier (2007) argue that the risk of war in any given country is determined by the initial level of income, the rate of economic growth and the level of dependency on primary commodity exports. They approximate that a typical LIC faces a risk of civil war of about 14 percent in any five-year period and halving the income of a country doubles the risk of civil war. Therefore, for countries growing at 3 percent, the risk is cut from 14 to 11 percent whilst an economic decline of 3 percent increases risk to 16 percent.
- **Decreased income levels, mass unemployment and the rising costs of living:** There are concerns that frustration borne as a result of increased unemployment, especially amongst young men, could be directed towards governments. Combined with rising costs of living, there is a risk that unemployment could lead to violence, public unrest and criminality. In addition, the selling of assets could exacerbate conflict as people become desperate and run out of options. Paul Collier, for example, has argued contentiously that rising unemployment in already fragile states can exacerbate conflict due to comparatively better income opportunities for young men in rebel groups as opposed to labour markets (Collier, 2007).
- **Rise in criminal activity:** An increase in crime levels related to unemployment and increasing living costs are a key issue, particularly for young people who are...
vulnerable to the compound affects of the food, fuel and financial crises. Instances of children stealing food from one another in schools have been reported as have instances of children trading sex for snacks in Kenya and Zambia (Hossain and Eyben, 2009). Unemployment may create a pool of people who are easily preyed on by criminal groups seeking recruits. The recent spate of piracy off the coast of Somalia for example, could be related to decreasing remittances, unemployment and the rising costs of living.

- **Increased government repressiveness in the face of unrest:** Braun (2008) found that food insecurity has become a source of conflict in many countries with people turning to the streets in protest with many instances of the political unrest becoming highly violent. Governments have dealt with public protest using excessive force and many who were claiming their right to an adequate standard of living have been killed and injured. Amnesty International (2009) for example, report that demonstrations against the sharp rise in living costs have taken place in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Mozambique, Senegal, Somalia and Zimbabwe.

- **Rising social and ethnic tensions:** Arbache and Page (2007) argue that institutions in poor countries tend to be so strained that ethnic tensions and confrontational politics can get worse when competition for scarce resources increases. There have been some signs of increasing unrest due to socio-economic cleavages amongst religions and ethnic groups. In Nairobi for example, tensions have emerged between Christian and Muslim groups because of exclusionary feeding programmes in mosques (Hossain and Eyban, 2009).

- **Further decreases in the capacity of the state to provide basic goods and services:** Fiscal pressures will mean that many governments are unable to provide necessary social safety nets, services and infrastructure. Countries that are suffering from low reserves may be soon unable to import food, fuel and medicine. A major concern is if governments are unable to pay their civil service and security forces; this leaves a power vacuum that is all too frequently filled by an agent of instability, either a transnational terrorist group or criminal activity such as drug trafficking (Jackson, 2009).

http://www.qsdrc.org/go/display&type=Document&id=3411

Interest in the role of diaspora groups in homeland country conflict is increasing. This article explores the case of the Ethiopian diaspora in North America, illustrating how it shaped recent political developments in the country. It also points to broader links between diasporas and homeland processes. Diaspora plays a critical role in financing political activities and framing political debates. This can have an effect on both the escalation of conflict and upon peace. Whilst most Ethiopian diaspora organisations and media focus on cultural, professional and economic self-help initiatives rather than partisan politics, they can be linked to conflict issues:

The Ethiopian case suggests that diaspora groups are not extraneous to homeland politics but serve to link actors in dispersed locations. Diaspora networks and transnational politics create outcomes that are shaped by multiple sources of power and authority that are based in different physical locations but part of a single political process. Thus:

- In the case of conflict-generated diaspora groups, homeland territory often takes on a high symbolic value and becomes a focal point for mobilisation. This point should serve to guide policymakers identifying global conflict ‘hotspots’.
- Diasporas often support militants and tend to frame conflicts in uncompromising and categorical ways that influence political strategies of parties (largely those opposing government) at home.
- Parties directly engaged in the homeland’s conflict depend on diaspora supporters for resources and access to international media, international organisations, and powerful host government. This gives diaspora groups influential roles in the adoption of strategies relating to conflict.
Beyond financial resources and influence through lobbying, transnational links between diasporas and homeland parties highlight the importance of the ways that diasporas frame conflicts and promote political strategies.

5. Natural resources


This paper considers the role of the forestry sector in fuelling conflict. Indeed, logging is seen to have fuelled conflict in countries such as Burma, Cambodia, Cote d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Liberia (where the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on timber in 2003 as a means of staunching the flow of revenue to the belligerents). Revenue from the forestry sector can contribute to the outbreak, escalation and/or continuation of armed conflict in a number of ways, including:

- Fuelling corruption, e.g., logging operators bribe (or are extorted by) politicians and bureaucrats to circumvent the allocation process, avoid forestry regulations, evade taxes, and elude punishment. This corruption, and the attendant impunity, undermines rational management and economic development, and thus, increases the risk of conflict.
- Financing conflict, e.g., belligerents use money taxed or extorted from loggers to purchase arms and other materiel.
- The participation of loggers in conflict, e.g. loggers traffic weapons, in some cases trading timber for arms.
- The participation of security forces working for logging operators in conflict e.g., as militia units.
- The facilitation of money laundering and other financial crimes.

It should also be noted that even after peace agreements, issues surrounding forests and conflict persist. These issues include contested land ownership, e.g. overlapping logging-concession claims; reporting systems that do not provide timely and accurate information; speculators that bid on concessions hoping to later sell them for profit; and an overall lack of capacity throughout society, which can be exploited by ‘spoilers’ intent on blocking reform.


This exploratory study was informed by academic literature on natural resource and environmental factors and conflict. Scholarship on this topic has included the examination of the causes of violent conflicts through a focus on ‘greed’ (or economic motivations) and ‘grievance’. Importantly, natural resources do not always play a primary role in starting armed violence. Conflict erupts for a variety of inter-related reasons, but they can be perpetuated by greed when a state is weak and unable to protect its porous borders from state and non-state armed combatants (Fearon, 2004; UN, 2001a). Among other scholars, there is consensus that weak, weakened and/or unaccountable states with natural resources such as minerals, diamonds and oil are more prone to conflict (Keen, 1998; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Berdal and Malone, 2000; UN, 2001a). However, in addition to internal factors, such as governance, the paper identifies the role of external actors as crucial, Neighbouring states, multinational companies (MNCs) and other non-state actors involved in illegal extraction of resources can benefit from – and consequently, contribute to – the perpetuation of chaotic conflict situations.

Conceptually, “greed” is often associated with the economic motivations of competition for natural resources, thus leading to conflict, or in situations where conflict is used as a strategic
tool so the resources can be unlawfully extracted with impunity. Paul Collier’s assessment of these issues (1998, 2004) has shaped this “greed” discourse. The role that natural resources play in perpetuating conflicts has been highlighted in the case of Sierra Leone, where it was found that opposing political actors even colluded to extract resources (Keen, 1998; UN, 2001a). External actors such as neighbouring countries, syndicates, criminal cartels and global private and governmental actors can also contribute to the perpetuation of conflicts for economic purposes. This is of particular importance in attempting to understand the conflict in the eastern DRC, where illegally exploited minerals and diamonds have been smuggled over the border by local armed groups or foreign military forces, and sold on international markets by criminal cartels in Europe and Asia (UN, 2001a).

Conflicts are also analysed through a focus on ‘grievance’, or the entitlement approach. This framework is particularly useful when assessing environmental factors and conflict. Grievance tends to focus on horizontal inequalities, power and group perceptions of injustices that may cause or drive conflicts, e.g. where there are inequalities in access to the economic benefits of natural resources, such as in the Niger Delta. However, a number of authors have pointed to certain weaknesses inherent in the greed and grievance theories.

6. International trade in arms and drugs


This paper principally considers how an EU-China partnership could be promoted in tackling the proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Africa and in doing so highlights the role of SALW in feeding instability and conflict in the continent. Over 95% of Africa’s most commonly used conflict weapons come from outside of the continent (IANSA, Oxfam and Saferworld, 2007, p.3). The causes behind Africa’s need for weapons are complex: historical, political, economic, global, social and cultural factors are all at play. The proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) across the African continent is a thread which ties all types of conflict and insecurity together. Such weapons are not a direct cause of conflict and insecurity; but are a proximate one, fuelling both violence and its duration.

SALW are the most commonly used weapon and responsible for the vast majority of direct conflict deaths and injuries. They flow across porous borders, following and then fuelling violence. SALW are used by smaller insurgent and rebel groups and are integral to their ability to challenge the state’s authority and territorial control. Indeed their excessive accumulation by one group can have a destabilising effect in a fragile environment. In post-conflict environments, the proliferation of SALW means that the state’s supposed monopoly on the means of violence – a core component of any functioning state - is continually challenged, undermining state-building efforts.

In southern Sudan, SALW proliferation amongst civilians and non-state groups is central to understanding the high levels of violence that continue to threaten stability and the peace agreement. It is not only in conflict afflicted countries that SALW proliferation threatens security. In Northern Kenya for example, the state’s security agencies are often outgunned by well armed pastoralist groups that continue to clash with one another. Elsewhere in the country armed criminals inflict great costs upon civilians and day to day life in urban areas. After the election-related violence of 2008, reports that some groups may be arming themselves with SALW in preparation for future rounds of political violence are especially worrying.

Since SALW fuel violence and insecurity, they also have other effects. Denis Caillaux, then Secretary-General of CARE International, noted in 2005 that attacks on humanitarian workers was making the work of agencies increasingly precarious. But worse than that, every time workers are targeted or cannot operate for fear of attacks, it is civilians who pay the price.’ The UN Secretary-General’s 2008 report on small arms made clear that they ‘facilitate a vast spectrum of human rights violations’ (p. 2). Lastly, as is the case in some West African
countries, the illicit trade in SALW creates underground routes along which other criminal activities, such as people and drugs smuggling, become established.

More broadly, security threats increasingly have a global impact. The example of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, which has roots in the perennial security crisis in Somalia, shows that trade routes are threatened in a way that impact on multiple countries. Terrorism is another example of security threats that have a global impact (p.7)

Despite the difficulty in accessing reliable and measurable data, China’s share of arms exports to Africa, especially in SALW, has grown markedly in recent decades. Many of the countries which have received weapons from China - for example Nigeria or Uganda - have also been supplied by EU member states, the US and other large arms exporters. However Chinese exports to sensitive destinations, such as Zimbabwe and Sudan, have led to substantial criticism from a wide range of actors, including many on the African continent. Despite the fact that China suspended arms exports to Sudan for a period of time and recalled an arms shipment to Zimbabwe in 2008, China’s international reputation had been tarnished as some questioned whether it was acting responsibly. In their defence, Chinese officials argued that it was not Africa’s largest source of weapons and that the US, EU countries and others remain equally culpable for SALW proliferation, both historically during the Cold War and in the contemporary period (p.14).


In this chapter, the author argues that the presence of a large-scale drug economy in Afghanistan threatens US primary security more than in any other region. In Afghanistan, the Taliban strengthens its insurgency campaign by deriving both vast financial profits and great political capital from sponsoring the illicit economy. The strengthened insurgency in turn threatens the U.S. objectives of counterterrorism and Afghan stability. The opium poppy economy also serves to fuel widespread corruption in Afghanistan’s government and law enforcement, especially within the police forces. It is argued that a failure to prevail against the insurgency will result in the likely collapse of the national government and Taliban domination of Afghanistan’s south, possibly coupled with civil war. This will further destabilise Pakistan, empowering jihadists and weakening the commitment of Pakistan’s military and intelligence services to tackle the Islamic militancy.


This report addresses the increased security threat posed by drug trafficking across West African borders. Although it does not directly link conflict with the drugs trade, it does establish that it contributes to an insecure context which can act as a breeding ground for conflict. It also suggests a source of funding for transborder groups and rebels.

As a result of declining US cocaine market and a rising European one, South American cocaine traffickers have sought to make use of low-governance areas in West Africa as transit zones. At least 46 tons of cocaine have been seized on route to Europe via West Africa since 2005. Prior to this, the entire continent combined rarely seized more than a ton annually. Based on an analysis of seizures in Europe where the origin was known, it is estimated that some 27% (or some 40 tons) of the cocaine consumed annually in Europe is presently transiting West Africa. This amount is worth an estimated US$ 1.8 billion at wholesale level. Perhaps US$450 million accrues to the traffickers, giving them more resources than governments have to combat them.
There are two parallel drug flows. One, involving large maritime and private air shipments, is owned and managed by South Americans. In exchange for logistical assistance provided with these shipments, West Africans are paid in cocaine. This has created a second flow, as West Africans also traffic these drugs to Europe, usually via commercial air flights. The large shipments are dangerous because of their extreme value relative to the local economies, but the small shipments, which are widely dispersed throughout the region, could have the potential to fuel local violence and drug use.

The single greatest point of vulnerability lies in the region’s under-resourced criminal justice agencies, which are highly vulnerable to corruption and thus present the potential for social tensions. At present, even when arrested, international drug traffickers operating in West Africa are seldom sentenced.

7. Additional Information

Some of the literature presented here can be found in the GSDRC Conflict and Fragile States Topic Guides.

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Selected websites visited

- Human Security Gateway
- GSDRC
- Research4Development
- Eldis
- United States Institute of Peace
- World Bank
- Danish Institute of International Studies
- JStor
- GFN-SSR
- UNDP Oslo Governance Centre
- Crisis States Research Centre
- SIDA
- African Studies Centre – Leiden
- OECD DAC
- Institute for Security Studies
- Kings College London War Studies Department
- Centre for the Study of African Economies
- Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity
- Saferworld
- Chatham House
- The Polaris Institute
- United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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