

IN WHAT WAYS DO NATURAL RESOURCES INFLUENCE THE DYNAMICS OF ARMED CONFLICT?

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RESUMEN

PALABRAS CLAVE
*Conflicto, recursos naturales,
guerras civiles, África.*

Los recursos naturales tienen un papel determinante en los conflictos. Pueden motivar su inicio, su duración o su finalización. Este ensayo analiza el papel de los recursos naturales durante las fases del conflicto en los casos más representativos de guerra civil en África después de la Guerra Fría. El análisis se enfoca específicamente en el inicio, escalamiento, des escalamiento y finalización del conflicto (Jeong, 2008). Se concluye que los recursos pueden: motivar y dar forma al conflicto, determinar la duración y la intensidad del mismo y finalmente influir en los procesos de paz y reconstrucción al finalizar la guerra.

ABSTRACT

PALABRAS CLAVE
*Conflict, natural resources,
civil wars, Africa.*

Natural resources have a determinant role in conflicts. Natural resources can in fact motivate the initiation, duration, or finalisation of a conflict. By analysing the most representative civil conflicts in African countries after the Cold War, this essay explores the role of resources in each phase of the conflict. The essay looks specifically at the role of natural resources in the initiation, escalation, de-escalation and cessation of conflicts (Jeong, 2008). It is concluded that resources can: motivate and shape the type of conflict taking place, determine the duration and intensity of the conflict, influence the peace and reconstruction processes after the end of the conflict.

Natural resources have a determinant role in conflicts. They can in fact motivate the initiation, duration, or finalisation of a conflict. Paul Collier, Director of the Centre for the Study of African Economies at The University of Oxford, has portrayed resources as a main cause and perpetuation of war.

On the one hand, he argues that countries dependent on the export of primary commodities have a higher risk of conflict (World Bank, 2003). On the other hand, he states that resources have a role in the perpetuation of conflict by financing rebel movements (World Bank, 2003).

One of the main criticisms to Collier's work is that he portrays resources as simply raw materials by diminishing the fact that resources vary in their spatial location, relative abundance, economic value, use, social and environmental impacts (Le Billon, 2012). In addition, Collier does not give special attention to the political conditions and level of governance in the countries where resources have performed a prominent role during the conflict. In relation to this, Le Billon (2005) argues that governments in resource-dependent countries tend to be corrupt. As a result, corruption, governance failure and political patronage play an important role determining the nexus between resources and conflict.

Africa is the region most negatively affected by resource dependence and conflicts (Le Billon, 2005). By analysing the most representative civil conflicts in African countries after the Cold War, this essay explores the role of resources in each phase of the conflict. The essay looks specifically at the role of natural resources in the initiation, escalation, de-escalation and cessation of conflicts (Jeong, 2008). It is concluded that resources can: motivate and shape the type of conflict taking place, determine the duration and intensity of the conflict, influence the peace and reconstruction processes after the end of the conflict.

THE ROLE OF RESOURCES IN THE INITIATION OF CONFLICT

In the literature, there are two important theories that emphasise the role of resources on the initiation of conflict. The first is the resource curse, which asserts that resource dependence results in economic underperformance and weakening of governing institutions (Le Billon, 2012). Because of the economic dependence on resources, societies become more vulnerable to armed conflicts (Le Billon, 2008). The second view known as resource conflicts argues that the exploitation and control of resources increase the risk of larger-scale armed conflict (Le Billon, 2012).

These theories emphasise the economic and political context and social pre-conditions where conflicts take place. We can distinguish two different roles that resources have in the initiation of war. On the one hand, resource dependence can set the pre-conditions and fuel grievances that might detonate the conflict. On the other hand, resource wealth and gain can motivate armed conflicts.

Le Billon (2005) explains that resource dependence can affect the economy through declining terms of trade and revenue shocks, budgetary mismanagement and negative effect on non-resource economic sectors. In fact, the lack of economic diversification, the volatility of prices and the dependence on natural resources can stagnate the economic growth and have negative effects on the production, consumption and exports and imports of a country.

However, it is important to emphasise that resource dependence does not condemn a country to developmental and economic failure and even less to war (Le Billon: 2005). Even if resource dependence influences the economic performance of a country, it is relevant to recognise that the role of resources in a conflict cannot be detached from the misuse and misdistribution of the revenue obtained from its exploitation.

Sierra Leone and Botswana are two examples that show that the engagement of resources in a conflict does not result merely from the resource dependence of a country. The economy of these two African countries was dependent on the exploitation of diamonds. Nevertheless, the diamond nature and extraction, and well as the government performance made their experience completely different. Botswana was more dependent on diamonds than Sierra Leone; however, its extraction was organised, institutionalised and manageable (World Bank, 2003). In addition, the democratic government re-invested in social services and development programmes for the population.

On the contrary, the Sierra Leonean government was not able to manage successfully their diamond mines, in part because of the alluvial nature of the diamonds. Diamond mining and revenue allocation were closely interlinked with corruption, predatory institutions and poor fiscal management (World Bank, 2003 and Le Billon 2008).

Overall, the resource curse view portrays a fatalist view on resource dependence. The examples have shown that resource dependence becomes dangerous in a country where resource exploitation is difficult to manage and is poorly governed.

The second view theorising the role of resources in the initiation of a conflict, focuses on the greed of economic and political extractive institutions. In fact, the purely economic gain obtained from resource exploitation has motivated several conflicts in Africa, for instance in Sierra Leone, Angola and Zaire.

THE ROLE OF RESOURCES IN THE ESCALATION OF CONFLICT

According to Jeong, “the escalation is often drawn out by the eruption of new conflict spirals in which opposing sides search for every possible advantage in their battles” (2008: 98). Since escalation endures as long as each party retains any hope of victory (Jeong: 2008), the main determinant of the escalation of war and resistance against the enemy can be reduced to the accessibility of resources to fuel and sustain the battle.

The significance of resources in the escalation of conflicts is not systematic; in fact it depends mainly on: the nature of the resource, its accessibility, its location and finally, its trade. The nature of the resource is crucial to determine its use during the conflict. For instance, alluvial diamonds and minerals are more likely to be embroiled in civil wars because of their relative easier extraction and profitability.

However, there are other types of natural resources used during conflicts with other functionality. Forests are an interesting resource to analyse since they are not only a recurring place where rebels hide, but they can also provide timber and food for them (Le Billon, 2012). Agricultural commodities have also been used as resources to fuel conflict. In general, they are less trafficked since they are not easily transportable and are less profitable; however, they can be used to feed the troops (Le Billon, 2005).

Finally, oil is a very particular natural resource. In general, it is difficult to extract and commercialise for rebels. Therefore, oil remains an important resource for the government, which in theory has the infrastructure for its extraction and is able to extract and commercialise it. However, it is relevant to point out that it is impossible to generalise the role of oil in conflict situations since its management and exploitation depends on the government, rebel groups and in some cases transnational companies.

The accessibility of resources depend on the concentration of the resource revenues and on how easily the government can control those revenues (Le Billon, 2005). Le Billon (2005) distinguishes between diffuse and point resources. Diffuse resources are highly accessible and difficult to control or tax. As a result, diffuse resources fuel pillage and illegal operations. In Angola and Sierra Leone, alluvial diamonds funded the conflicts because of their easy accessibility and extraction, and the incapacity of the governments to control permanently the diamond mines.

Contrary to diffuse resources, point resources are exploited in small areas generally by governments. They require a large-scale infrastructure for its exploitation and trade. In theory, they are easily manageable, administrated and taxable. When the government has predatory intentions, point resources can fuel conflicts. For instance, in Angola, the government relied on a quasi-exclusive access to oil revenues; however, the personal ambition of the leaders and the uneven budgetary allocations motivated and prolonged the war (Le Billon, 2001).

The location of resources is also very important to determine the role of natural resources during the escalation of war. Considering the location of natural resources, Le Billon (2005) argues that they can either be proximate or distant resources. Proximate resources refer to the natural resources which are easier for the government to control and less likely to be captured by rebel groups. On the contrary, distant resources are more difficult to control since they usually lay on porous borders. During the

conflict in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, diamonds were placed in the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone. Due to the accessibility and locality of diamonds in Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) could exploit the diamond mines to fuel one the most atrocious conflicts in the after Cold War period in Africa.

The last important factor that determines the importance of resources during the escalation of the conflict is their trade and commercialisation. In order to be profitable, natural resources need a trade route and a market where they are commercialised and sold. Once natural resources are exploited, they need to be transported to the place where they are sold or exchanged. Depending on the nature of the resource, they can be more or less easily transportable. For instance, timber is bulky and hard to conceal, furthermore, it needs roads and transport corridors to be shipped (Le Billon, 2012). On the contrary, diamonds are easily portable and tradable.

The successful trade of natural resources depends on the infrastructure available to transport them and the channels of commercialisation, which can be national, regional or international and legal or illegal. There are different factors that can determine the trade path of natural resources, including local authorities and population, domestic and foreign consumers and traders.

THE ROLE OF RESOURCES IN THE DE-ESCALATION OF CONFLICT

The de-escalation of conflict depends on a consistent movement through the accumulation of many conciliatory moves (Jeong; 2008). During the de-escalation phase of a conflict, the role of natural resources tends to be diminished in order to ensure stability and peace.

According to Jeong (2008), “the structure of the conflict such as the incompatibility in the objectives of the parties and the relative balance of forces, has a big impact on the outcome of the bargaining processes” (Jeong, 2008:99). In other words, in order to ensure successful bargaining processes after a conflict, the extraction and trade of natural resources needs to be controlled and monitored.

In the case studies discussed so far, the United Nations had a major role in the control and monitoring of natural resources during the de-escalation phase of the conflict. After several attempts to re-escalate violence, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) finally agreed to cease-fire in 1999. On 22 October 1999, the Security Council established the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to cooperate with the Government and the other parties in implementing the Lome Peace Agreement (Berdal and Eonomides:2007).

The UN deployed a reconstruction plan for the Sierra Leonean State. The first step consisted in meetings between the RUF, the Government and UN officials to determine demobilisation duties and the timing for disarmament and demobilisation processes (Silberfein, 2005). Unfortunately, this was a hard process because the RUF attempted to re-gain the power in several occasions.

In this specific case, natural resources made more complicated the negotiation process. However, it is important to note that diamonds did not exclusively finance the rebel movement in Sierra Leone. In fact, the RUF had several international coalitions in Liberia and Guinea to obtain resources (Silberfein, 2005).

The example of Sierra Leone shows that the control of natural resources during the de-escalation process is essential for peacebuilding. Unfortunately, there is not a universal path to ensure a stable transition between war and peace during “resource wars”. Overall, the parties involved in the conflict, as well as their goals and their strategies are the ones that determine the role of resources during the de-escalation of the conflict.

THE ROLE OF RESOURCES IN THE CESSATION OF CONFLICT

One of the other more challenging decisions to make during the cessation of conflict is what to do with the natural resources. Le Billon (2005) discusses three ways to “end resource wars”: capturing resource areas from rebels, sharing revenues between belligerents and imposing economic sanctions. The international community has experimented in different conflicts with the implementation of these different options.

According to Le Billon (2005), during the short-term end of the conflict, sanctions are not effective because they have negative humanitarian impact on local populations. The management of natural resources constitutes a big challenge during the cessation of conflict due to four main reasons.

First, the economy of many of the countries in conflict depends on natural resources trade. Second, it is important to take into consideration the potential spillover effects of sanctions or aid conditionality on the local population. In several occasions, the exploitation of natural resources does not only fuel the conflict but it also provides resources for the civil society to survive.

The third difficulty in managing natural resources after conflicts is the effect that the implementation of restrictive policies will have in the short and long term, in the post- conflict context. During the short-term after the conflict, the political, economic and social structures are very weak. Unfortunately, some policies implemented to re-structure the natural resource market have failed to make this distinction and create more problems for the economic reconstruction during the post-conflict period.

The last concern about implementing regulations in the cessation phase is the impact that they could have at the regional and international level. As previously discussed, the resource market is international; therefore, its national regulation might have an impact beyond its borders.

To sum up, the international community has implemented a range of different regulations to control and manage the trafficking of resources during the cessation of the conflict phase. Depending on the context, some of these sanctions might be more or less successful. Nevertheless, while implementing these policies it is important to keep in mind the post-conflict economic, political and social situation, the civilian society and the neighbouring countries.

CONCLUSION

This essay has discussed the role of natural resources during the conflict phases using the most representative case studies in Africa during the 1990s. It has been argued that natural resources can influence the initiation of the conflict. However, what really determines the initiation of war goes beyond the economic greed of some individuals. It has been demonstrated that what really influences the detonation and escalation of the conflict is on the one hand the nature, accessibility and location of the natural resources and on the other hand, the national and regional socio-political conditions that enable its exploitation and trafficking.

During de-escalation and cessation phases, the role of the international community has proven to be determinant for peace stabilisation. Nevertheless, the management and administration of the natural resources in the aftermath of the conflict is not a simple task. The international community has to integrate different socio-economic and political considerations while designing the sanctions or regulations during the post-conflict phase.

Overall, this essay has shown that resources can: motivate and shape the type of conflict taking place, determine the duration and intensity of the conflict, and influence the peace and reconstruction processes after the end of the conflict.

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