

THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL COST OF WAR: THE CASE OF AFRICA

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1. Introduction: The African Crisis

The turn of the century sees Africa slowly approaching total collapse of life support systems with unfolding crises of untold dimensions. These multiple crises are characterized by economies overridden by debts that cannot be serviced; low production capacities that are unable to provide for even basic human needs such as food, health, and education; crippling poverty notably in rural areas and urban peripheries; an ever-expanding population that relies on an increasingly fragile natural resource base and a dearth of financial resources and appropriate technologies. This grim situation is compounded by widespread conflicts and war.

A myriad of interrelated causative factors have contributed to the erosion of life support systems in Africa within the last century. Life support systems encompass those economic, physiological, and environmental factors that are required to secure human well-being and sustain life in the long-term. These factors are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are interactive and interrelated in nature. For instance, while economic decline in most African states has resulted in extensive poverty, particularly in rural areas,

poverty has led the rural population to wreak havoc on the environment in search of fuel and shelter. In turn, conflict has further exacerbated environmental degradation, leading to the erosion of life support systems.

Recent years have seen an unprecedented increase in civil wars and ethnic conflicts in post-independent Africa with dire economic, social, and environmental consequences. African conflicts have often been blamed on the fragmentation of the continent by colonial powers since the Berlin Conference (1884–85) without due consideration to ethnic, social, and cultural affinities that prevail among indigenous neighboring populations. However, post-independent African governments must take their share of the blame, since many escalated these conflicts by instituting authoritarian and totalitarian systems of governance characterized by social, economic, and political injustices. Most post-independent conflicts have their roots in political and economic marginalization, cultural hegemony, political oppression, tribal and ethnic rivalries, religious chauvinism, the exploitation of religion for partisan ends, and/or the illegitimacy of political authority.

For some African analysts, these conflicts are part of the healing process that would lead to a stronger political Africa.

Before a seed germinates, it must first decay. A mango tree grows out of a decaying mango seed, and a new Africa may be germinating in the decay of the present one. (Ali Mazrui)

However, if there is to be any process of political regeneration, account must be taken of environmental rejuvenation. In many parts of the continent where conflicts have prevailed, environmental degradation has been swift and often irreversible; forest fires have been used to flush out enemies resulting in wanton ecological destruction, massive populations have escaped battle zones to camp in safe congested settlements visiting havoc on natural resources, and a new economy of war has emerged. Forests are destroyed in the search for wood-based energy, wildlife is decimated for food and river supplies, and other water resources are polluted through heedless utilization. The use of anti-personnel mines has been widespread and devastating to man and nature. The extent of the degradation may only become apparent when conflict is over and the population discovers the impairment of their natural resource base.

2. Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa

From East to West, North to South, the African continent is plagued by civil and ethnic conflicts, and inter-state wars of threatening dimension, with each passing day. The cost of sustaining these wars on national budgets is immense and is often at the expense of social and economic development. At the peak of conflict in Angola and Ethiopia, defense expenditure amounted to 15.1 percent and 17.9 percent of the GDP respectively (IISS, 1997). Health expenditure as a percentage of GDP in 1990 only amounted to 2.3 percent for Ethiopia and 1.7 percent for Angola (UNDP, 1997). Further analysis of these wars indicates that the natural resource wealth that would have been channeled towards economic and social development has over the years been traded to sustain conflict. Natural resources have not only been depleted by conflicts in the continent, they have

also become the very reserve from which the wherewithal which sustains conflict is drawn.

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