



CONFLICT PREVENTION AND DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION IN AFRICA: A POLICY WORKSHOP

SESSION 6 MANAGING NATURAL RESOURCES

Managing Land and the Prevention of Violent Conflict

**James Putzel
Crisis States Research Centre
London School of Economics**

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Development processes are inherently conflict-ridden and historically, even violent conflict, regardless of claims made by Paul Collier (2007) to the contrary, has been the mid-wife to progressive change. This needs to be kept in mind as we discuss “conflict prevention” and development intervention. President Yoweri Museveni has presided over the longest period of relative stability and progressive developmental change in Uganda’s post-independence history and was able to do so because he and the National Resistance Movement fought their way to power. While it is important to keep an open mind about the possibility that violence may sometimes lead to progressive change, nonetheless it is overwhelmingly clear that most people in the “here and now” value security and the absence of violence as essential to meeting their life goals. The question this gives rise to is how conflict may be managed to avoid a descent into violence.

In every society access to land provides both a home and possibilities for production, first in terms of mere subsistence and beyond in terms of generating surplus. Land is precious and central to the livelihood processes of any society, so it is not surprising that it has often figured as the object of conflict. What is surprising is that with people’s livelihood in most “fragile states” so dependent on agricultural sources of income, there is not more focus on both this sector and on land in recent debates about, and plans for, promoting development. There is a complex relationship between land and conflict. Seldom is a violent conflict uniquely about land, but access to land and disputes over land rights have loomed large in almost every episode of prolonged violence and war.

In this brief paper, I would like to draw on some insights emerging out of our Crisis States Research Centre’s case studies, to raise a few simple propositions for debate.¹ First, I want to make a case about the neglect of attention to agriculture and production in development assistance more generally. In the second and third parts of the paper I would like to raise just two ways in which land can figure centrally in conflict as a means for thinking about how problems of land should be taken into account in any donor interventions that hope to contribute to the prevention of violent conflict.

Bringing Production and Agriculture “Back In”

Transformations in agriculture, and the way land is used, were historically central to development processes. While development challenges in today’s globalised world economy are different than in the past, it is still the case that at the core of any

¹ The states we are looking at are the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Uganda and Rwanda, Colombia and Philippines and Tanzania and Zambia as core case studies, though we cast our net more widely with a number of secondary studies. See Putzel, 2005.

development strategy worth the name must be processes of *internal* economic integration. Most economic policy prescriptions emanating from the donor community over the past two decades have centred on external economic integration through trade liberalisation and other forms of market opening. While it is questionable that the reigning development prescription can still be characterised as over attention to growth (as suggested by Picciotto and , p.5), to the extent that growth is promoted it is disconnected from focusing on basic production processes. Little attention has been accorded in recent development thinking to the age-old problems of raising productivity in agriculture and initiating processes of industrialisation. The Millennium Development Goals are all about improving welfare and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers focus only in very general terms on problems of increasing production.

In countries where a significant proportion of people still depend on income (or subsistence) from agriculture (land cultivation and livestock husbandry) for their survival, the way the land is managed, patterns of access to land and water, as well as investment in making the land and people on it more productive, are central to the conditions in which conflict is managed. We know that the major revolutionary upheavals of the 20th Century (Bolshevik, Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions) were all dependent for their success on marrying ideological projects of socialism with peasant hunger for secure access to land and they heavily drew on poor peasants to fill the ranks of their armed forces. Despite the penchant to see the wars that have so disrupted the lives of people in many African countries over the past two decades as “new wars” (Kaldor, Ignatieff, Duffield), or wars motivated by “greed” (Collier), in one way or another land has usually figured prominently in the logic of these violent confrontations.

Taking just our case study countries into account (Table 1), in the African cases the majority of the population as well as the majority of the economically active population depend primarily for their income on agriculture. This is so even in the mineral rich countries of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia. The structural transformation of these countries in terms of sources of livelihood has changed at a snail’s pace since independence. The most extreme case is Rwanda where some 89% of the population still depend on agriculture (often subsistence farming) for their survival, just slightly fewer than in 1960.

Table 1: Changing Structure of Employment (percent)

	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Colombia						
Agricultural population*	52.7	45.7	41.1	27.1	20.8	15.8
Non-agricultural population	47.3	54.3	58.9	72.9	79.2	84.2
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active**	52.1	45.1	40.5	26.6	20.4	15.5
Philippines						
Agricultural population	63.5	57.7	52.2	45.6	39.4	33.5
Non-agricultural population	36.5	42.3	47.8	54.4	60.6	66.5
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active	63.6	57.9	52.4	45.8	39.5	33.6
Tanzania						
Agricultural population	91.6	88.7	84.0	82.5	78.2	73.0
Non-agricultural population	8.4	11.3	16.0	17.5	21.8	27.0
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active	92.6	90.1	85.8	84.4	80.4	75.7
Zambia						
Agricultural population	84.6	79.0	75.9	74.4	69.2	63.2
Non-agricultural population	15.4	21.0	24.1	25.6	30.8	36.8
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active	84.6	79.0	75.9	74.4	69.2	63.2
DRC						
Agricultural population	79.3	75.5	71.6	67.8	63.2	58.3
Non-agricultural population	20.7	24.5	28.4	32.2	36.8	41.7
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active	79.3	75.4	71.6	67.8	63.2	58.3
Afghanistan						
Agricultural population	80.0	76.1	72.5	70.3	67.0	63.6
Non-agricultural population	20.0	23.9	27.5	29.7	33.0	36.4
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active	80.0	76.1	72.5	70.3	67.0	63.6
Rwanda						
Agricultural population	94.7	93.6	92.8	91.8	90.6	88.9
Non-agricultural population	5.3	6.4	7.2	8.2	9.4	11.1
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active	94.7	93.6	92.7	91.8	90.6	89.0
Uganda						
Agricultural population	92.2	89.3	86.3	83.6	79.0	73.4
Non-agricultural population	7.8	10.7	13.7	16.4	21.0	26.6
Agriculture as % of Total Economically active	92.7	89.9	87.1	84.5	80.1	74.7

Source: UNFAO, Popstat, 2007

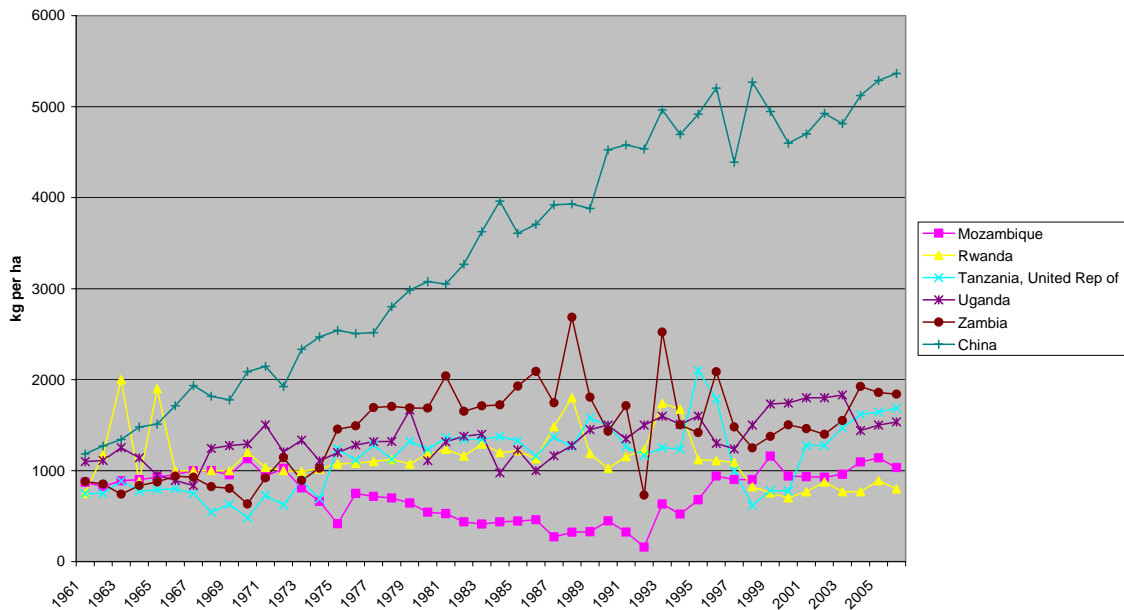
* The percentage of the population who depend on income from agriculture for more than 50% of income

** The percentage of economically active workforce that depends on income from agriculture

What is more, these agricultural systems have experienced only very gradual improvement in terms of land productivity, whether observed in their principle staple crop or in their principal export crop. In the staple crop of maize, the African cases saw a slight improvement in yields per hectare over the past forty years, except for Rwanda where they have declined. However, none of these countries has achieved anything like the productivity rises in Asia, as illustrated in Chart 1 by the exceptional performance of China. Looking at coffee, the principle commercial crop cultivated for export, productivity per hectare has also remained extremely low, in contrast to the magnitude of gains in Asia, this time illustrated by Vietnam (Chart 2). Recent achievements in Rwanda are an exception and I will return to this later.

Chart 1

Maize Productivity 1960 to 2006



While poor performance in African agricultural systems was caused in no small part by governmental neglect throughout the region, interventions by the donor community have done nothing to improve things. The decade of structural adjustment in Sub-Saharan Africa following the Berg Report did not see any significant structural change in African economies, except perhaps the disappearance of embryonic efforts to establish manufacturing sectors. Bilateral aid to African agriculture has fallen by over 50% since its peak in 1990 (see Chart 3). The international community has moved away from promoting purely market based reforms on the continent, but it has not moved towards

promoting the expansion of production.² This is starkly illustrated by the decline in foreign assistance to agriculture.

Chart 2

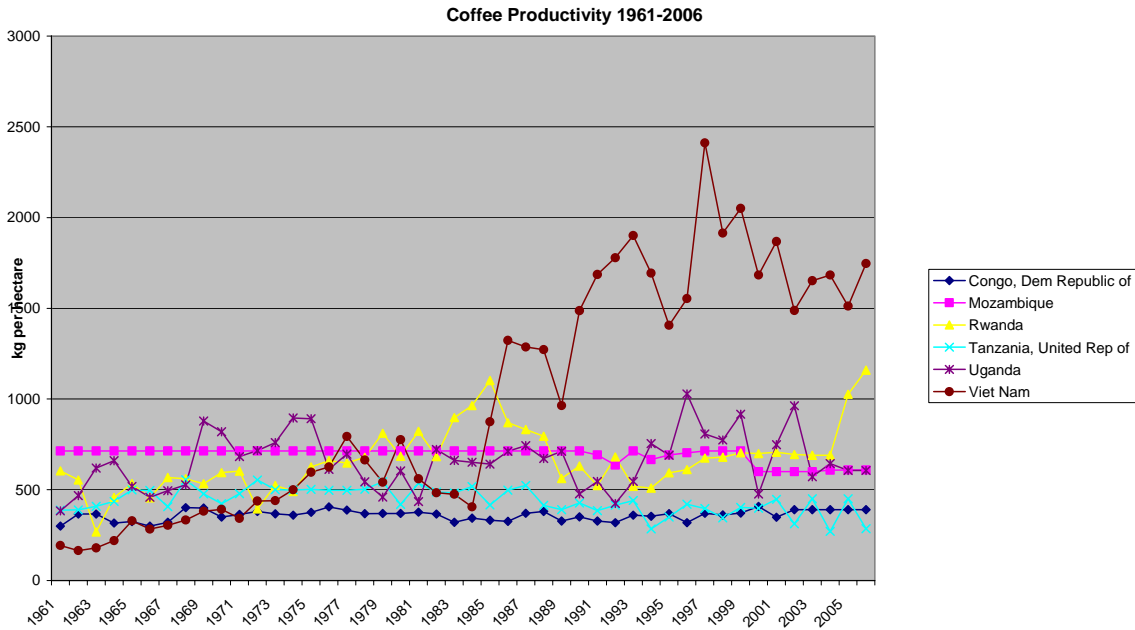
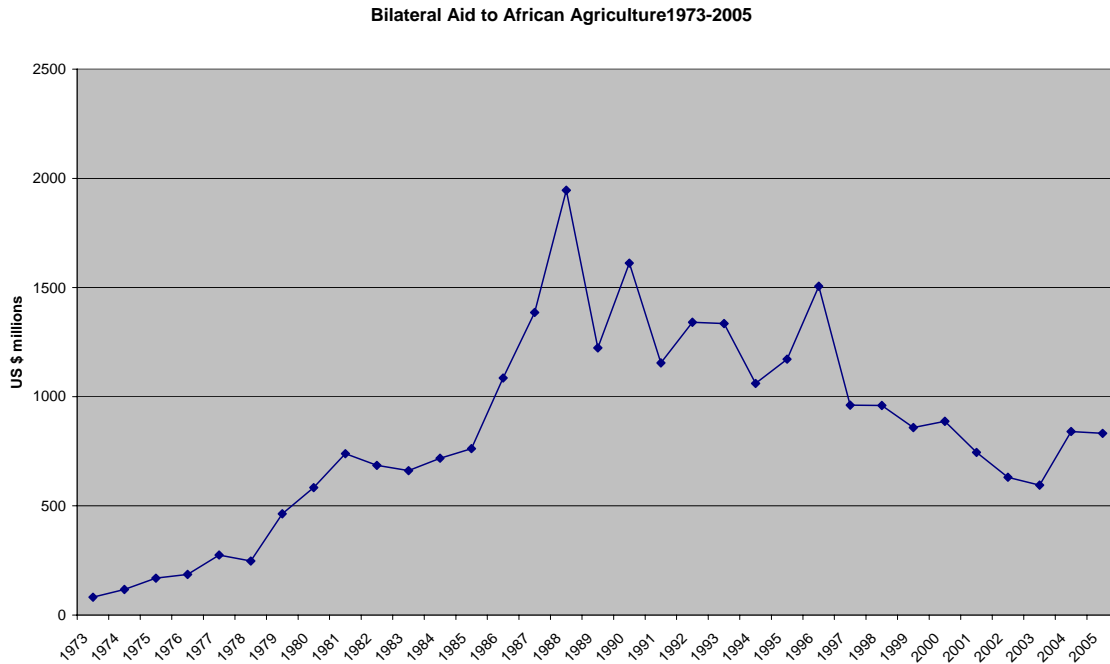


Chart 3



² A good example of this lack of attention to agriculture is illustrated by the scant attention given in the UK government sponsored Africa Commission Report

Rural poverty, low productivity in agriculture and the absence of structural transformation in the economy do not in themselves give rise to violent conflict. Long term stability in countries like Tanzania and Malawi illustrate this point. Nevertheless, at the root of state fragility in Africa are economies where the majority of people eek out subsistence in low-productivity agricultural systems. This is the economic context in which violent conflicts have arisen on the continent and any major attempt to prevent such conflicts needs to begin with a focus on improving land management and investing in agriculture.

When does land play a part in violent conflict?

The ways in which land figures in the dynamics of conflict in the “fragile states” of the developing world are as complex and varied as the forms of land tenure found within these states. In this sense, there is no single formula for land reform that can be adopted across the board to prevent conflicts over land turning violent. The point I wish to stress is that understanding the potential for violent conflict and engaging in any sort of “preventative” action must necessarily involve analysing patterns of access to land and the means to make it productive and how these have changed and are changing over time. Here I would like to draw on emerging insights from our research at the Crisis States Research Centre to sketch out some different scenarios of how land can come to play a central role in violent conflict.

a) Low productivity, high population density and access to land through ethnicity

In states where an important proportion of the population survive through income generated in agriculture, where land productivity is low and access to land is determined by ethnicity (for instance allocation of the land through traditional authorities), conflicts over land can lead to eruptions of violence. These conditions clearly formed a backdrop to the genocide in Rwanda as it reached the rural areas, though they were clearly not the proximate cause.³ There, land politics were characterised by both horizontal inequalities between Hutu and Tutsi communities and agrarian class politics among the Hutu community.

The context in which ethnic politics was played out in Rwanda was one that saw extreme density of population on the land (an average of 275 inhabitants per km² by the early 1990s)⁴ with almost no improvements in agricultural productivity as illustrated above.⁵ Agricultural production was virtually stagnant throughout the 1980s, while population grew by 3% per year. The land tenure laws introduced at independence built on long traditions of equally dividing land among all descendents of a family leading to extreme parcelisation over time. Extensive agricultural expansion had reached lands of the steepest slopes and deforestation was extreme. By 1980, Rwanda could not produce more

³ Uvin points out that mobilisation for the genocide began in the cities and towns.

⁴ Nohlen 1993: 584; In some areas density has reached 550 inhabitants per km² (Becker 1993: 114).

⁵ This account draws on Hesselbein, Mutebi and Putzel, 2006.

than 54% of its food requirements and the first of a series of intense famines beset the country in 1989. By that time, the regime was discussing plans of moving substantial parts of the population to less densely populated regions in neighbouring countries.⁶

While land holdings of rural poor Hutu families got smaller and smaller, holdings of wealthy Northern Hutu elites expanded with large lands accumulated by those close to the Hutu dominated regime pushing peasants into increasingly marginal uplands. It is estimated that by 1989 some 50% of cultivated land was on slopes of higher than 10 degrees.⁷ Unemployment had reached almost 30%. The situation led to significant conflict *within* the Hutu community between the land poor peasants and the Hutu elite in power. Youth groups were mobilised among the rural poor in the south who engaged in episodes of violence against those associated with the regime. A collapse of world coffee prices radically reduced incomes. Acts of violence were concentrated in the worst food deficit areas. Gasana argues that it was to counter these actions that the regime mobilised its own youth groups, the *Interahamwe*, to defend members of the elite and leading politicians. This violence took on the character of growing class warfare. Generalised crisis was exacerbated by structural adjustment and pressure to introduce competitive party politics advocated by the donor community, as well as an attack launched by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), formed in exile among Tutsis long excluded from power, who took advantage of the weakened state of the regime in 1990 just as the country was hard hit by the collapse of coffee prices. Genocidal moves by Hutu extremists, at least in the rural areas, appear to have been, at least partially, motivated by an attempt to turn the ire of rebelling peasants away from the regime and towards the remaining Tutsi communities. This extremist mobilisation of a land poor and food poor peasant community by the *Interahamwe* and the Armed Forces of the regime likely contributed to the genocide of 1994.

In Congo/Zaire, similar dynamics characterised the mobilisation of rural populations during the long period of decline of the Mobutu regime. While one cannot argue that the wars of Zaire and the DRC were over land, land figured more prominently in the mobilisation of violence than is usually assumed.⁸ Despite the expansive territory of the DRC, in the eastern part of the country pockets of high population densities on low productivity lands, also played a part in violent conflict. There, struggles over land have been intimately tied up with, and reflected by, debates over citizenship. An important dimension of on-going conflicts in the Kivus can be traced back to patterns entrenched in the colonial period where access to land and water was governed by “native authority”. The Kinyarwanda population – those from the territory of what is now Rwanda who settled in Congolese territory even as early as colonial times – had no native authority of their own and thus no secure access to land. They were only “tolerated” on the land by a native authority that was not their own. Later some among them, with means, could purchase land, but the legitimacy of such contracts was never secure. During Mobutu’s early years in power, inclusive citizenship laws that recognised rights of Kinyarwanda as

⁶ Becker 1993: 128

⁷ Gasana, p. 28.

⁸ Vlassenroot et al.

Zairian citizens appeared for a short time to have resolved the question, only to be later reversed when Mobutu was losing his grip on the state and needed to defer to local power brokers anchored in rival ethnic communities. With the influx of refugees into the eastern DRC after the genocide in Rwanda, tensions, in part, over access to land formed the bedrock of violent conflict that exists up until today.

The ways in which land has been an object of violent conflict in different regions of the DRC are varied and complex.⁹ The point here is that development interventions that do not take account of this legacy of access to land and the ways in which land rights are contested, could as easily exacerbate violent conflict as serve to prevent it.

b) When land beyond the reach of the state becomes the source of violent conflict

When the state's jurisdiction does not effectively reach throughout its statutory territory this may have little significance for stability and peace *if* the land is sparsely populated, with few possibilities for resource mobilization and not contiguous with neighbouring countries rife with violent conflict. Historically, this was the case in one of the middle income countries in our study – Colombia.¹⁰ However, if any of these conditions change over time, then the absence of the state and its jurisdiction over land can lead to important sources of violent conflict. In Colombia, a failure to tackle agrarian inequalities through land reform due to intra-elite compromises that preserved oligarchic privileges on the land, gave rise to a trajectory that has seen forces promoting violent conflict become deeply rooted in territories beyond the purview of the state. Land outside of the effective jurisdiction of the state became home to ideologically driven rebel challengers to state authority. Something similar emerged in the Philippines.

When such lands become new sources of economic resource mobilization, as happened with the rise of the coca trade in Colombia, forces promoting violence can become deeply rooted territorially. Communist guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug barons have been able to sustain for decades their challenge to state authority by occupying such lands. This has occurred in a middle-income country where agricultural incomes no longer figure prominently in the formal economy. The larger point that is relevant here, for Africa, is the way in which the absence of the state's effective jurisdiction over land can give rise to, and sustain, forces promoting violent challenges to the state.

Conclusion

The majority of people living in “fragile states” are still making their living from agriculture – often largely from low productivity subsistence production. Development assistance programmes need to focus much more attention on this sector than has been the case in recent years. What happens in agriculture and in relation to access to land forms the vital setting in which conflicts brew and violence erupts.

⁹ See Hesselbein, 2007, for a detailed treatment of these questions.

¹⁰ For a detailed treatment of how land figures in the internecine violence of Colombia, see Gutierrez et al, 2007.

While land is seldom the sole cause for violent conflict, when combined with other factors, such as high population density and exclusionary institutions that govern access to land any big shock can precipitate outbreaks of violence. This appears to have been the case in Rwanda and the Eastern Congo. Sharp economic shocks, movements of internally displaced people or refugee flows when occurring on the foundation of such patterns of land use and access have a high propensity to lead to violent conflict.

The failure of a state to expand its jurisdiction throughout its territory may not immediately or even for many years appear to breed violent conflict. When new opportunities for resource mobilisation emerge on land beyond the purview of the state, or when organised and armed contestational movements establish a presence in such lands or when such lands border neighbouring zones of conflict, the failure of the state to establish its territorial authority can lead to pernicious and deeply rooted armed challenges to its authority.

The simple argument suggested here is that understanding patterns of access to land, the institutions governing how land is used and patterns of production on the land must be central in any plans to develop foreign assistance programmes that aim to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict.

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