

Ethnic Conflict in Africa: A Short Critical Discussion

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Statistics show that "one-third of the population in the South is income-poor and one-quarter is poor in terms of the UNDP's Human Development Index" (Pearce 2000: 16). And the majority of those people are located on the African continent which, no matter what form of measurement index is applied, tends to project the most mediocre development record, the slowest economic growth, and to include some of the world's poorest countries - as outlined in various reports produced during the past 2-3 decades by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, amongst others (see: World Bank.org; UNDP.org; OECD.org, online). For example, the most recent Human Development Report produced by the UNDP indicates that while "the global HDI is now 0.702, [...] the lowest regional HDI values are for Sub-Saharan Africa (0.502) and South Asia (0.588)" (Malik et al. 2014: 33).

More than half of all African countries have experienced at least a year of armed conflict during the past three decades. "African casualties of conflict exceed those of all other regions combined. About one fifth of the African population lives in areas severely disrupted by conflict" (Picciotto 2010: 2). A region where almost half of all developing countries affected by conflict are located, Sub-Saharan Africa alone includes 32 (out of 47) countries affected by 126 wars since 1980 (Picciotto 2010: 2). Once they start, conflicts and wars in Africa tend to last many years before peace is restored. And low-income nations coming out of conflict situations usually have a hard time overcoming poverty, implementing development strategies and improving economic growth.

Considering the extent to which living standards dropped considerably almost everywhere across the African continent and considering the repeated occurrence of extreme situations of poverty and famine - such as in Eritrea, Ethiopia or Sudan - during the past three decades, the proposition that ethnic and racial conflict is a significant impediment to development in poor countries may at first seem irresistible. But the inter-relationship between ethnicity, conflict and development in African countries calls for a nuanced analysis and discussion.

Some Key Terms and Concepts

Molded by heterogeneous historical experiences and divergent contextual specificities, 'ethnicity' is an inevitably elusive concept "as the type of identity usually referred to as 'ethnic' can be manipulated for political purposes and thereby transformed," as argued by Hettne (1993: 126) for instance. 'Ethnic conflict' is understood here as "organized large-scale violent conflict among ethnic groups of which at least one has not achieved statehood or is not in possession of the state apparatus" (Angstrom 2000: 25). 'Development' in the African Third World context is conceived

here, in the words of Todaro (1987: 61-62), as a multi-dimensional process that involves the reorganization and reorientation of entire economic and social systems, as such requiring "radical changes in institutional, social, and administrative structures as well as in popular attitudes and, in many cases, even customs and beliefs." Conceptualized in close association with 'modernization', 'development' here typically means "a strengthening of the material base of the state, mainly through industrialization in a form remarkably similar from one country to another. In this sense development is identical with 'modernization'" (Hettne 1993: 128). 'Modernization' in the present context is predominantly understood, since its discursive emergence from US President Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural address, in terms of "emphasis on technological progress and how developing countries should replicate the industrialization, economic growth and increased consumption" (Bull & Bøås 2012: 321) that have occurred in the First World.

The Background of Development

According to Pieterse (1991: 6), "the central thesis of developmentalism is that social change occurs according to a pre-established pattern, the logic and direction of which are known. Privileged knowledge of the direction of change is claimed by those who declare themselves furthest advanced along its course." Historically, the concept and practice of 'development' have usually been influenced and shaped by whoever happens to be the most powerful 'developer' at the time. Economically motivated development could be said to have its roots in the early stages of capitalism in Europe. From this perspective, what pre-20th century European empires essentially did was to develop their distant colonial territories so that these could subsequently produce more effectively and in larger amounts the commodities and goods traded and consumed in Europe.

By the 20th century, the emergence of international and state development agencies in Europe and in the US influenced a shift in the meaning and purpose of development. The creation of various international financial organizations and United Nations-related technical agencies during the 1940s led to the world being subsequently re-defined by means of each country being classified according to what stage of development it is deemed to have reached. In the aftermath of World War Two, the world has been progressively re-defined as the 'First World' (developed and modern nations), the 'Second World' (developing nations undergoing modernization), and the 'Third World' (under-developed and un-modernized nations). This re-definition of the world has predominantly been carried out by experts employed by various inter-connected institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the Food & Agriculture Organization, and the United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organization - all of which have always had their headquarters in Europe or in the US. Such institutions house experts (economists, educators, public health specialists, agronomists, nutritionists, and so on) whose job is to analyze and report on practically every aspect of the so-called modernization and development process in any country.

Cavalcanti (2007: 89) clarifies that "as the concept of development has its origins in the 'developed nations', it is no wonder that these nations have become the paradigm of what ought to be the ideal of progress and development. It is a desirable objective to be pursued unquestioningly." Since the ideal of progress and the model of what is considered to be a developed and modernized nation have always inevitably been European and American, the above-mentioned experts have hence proceeded to re-define the world by classifying countries principally in terms of how developed they may have become compared to their European and American counterparts.

The so-called Third World came about as a way of describing a collective of nations analyzed, assessed and reported by experts as not having yet achieved the kind of lifestyles and living standards inherent to the First World and to the Second World. Consequently, development

[...] since the 1970s, has come to inform official practice of the 'advanced' capitalist world, but is still more closely associated with the practice of confronting poverty and unemployment in Africa, Asia and the southern Americas. [...]. Equally, the period of development is invariably assumed to be a span of imperial and post-colonial history since 1945 (Cowen & Shenton 1996: 4).

In the context of contemporary global capitalism, development has become synonymous with the practice of First World development agencies that intervene to reduce poverty and other problems (such as malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, etc.) in specific regions that have been assessed and defined as Third World, underdeveloped and poor. This is due to the fact that most "theoretical categories and guides to development policy have been distilled exclusively from the historical experience of the European and North American advanced capitalist nations" (Frank 1995: 27).

Development and Modernization on the African Continent

During the 1950s, post-war reconstruction became one of the most important concerns in the development agenda internationally. Early 'modernization theory' and 'development' discourses focused on identifying why certain countries could not be like those in the First World and subsequently on working out how the First World could assist Second and Third World countries to modernize, develop and become like First World countries. Walt Whitman Rostow's modernization theory (1960) in particular became the dominant influence in the formulation of modernization initiatives and development strategies by the World Bank and major international development agencies. With regards to the African continent, Obeng-Odoom (2013: 156) explains how "it was in the 1960s that greater emphasis was given to broad social concerns of economic development. Economic development then became a process of change to free nations and peoples from multiple deprivations. Poverty alleviation or reduction was one key objective." With economic growth becoming the most important goal, what was hence prioritized in most development strategies implemented in Africa was the building of infrastructure (roads, hospitals, schools, telecommunications, and so on) conducive to economic prosperity.

The various American and European initiatives of development in Africa can simply not be dissociated from Rostow's (1960) theory about the stages of growth with regards to desired outcomes of the drive for modernization in African countries. But those outcomes were realistically unachievable in African countries that were simultaneously undergoing radical transformation as a result of decolonization and independence. First World modernization initiatives and development strategies were doomed to fail in Africa because they excluded or plainly ignored many significant contextual specificities and some of the 'scars' created over many decades by European colonial powers, such as: the arbitrary separation and amalgamation of entire tribal, language and ethnic groups; fracture zones produced by high ethnic diversity; and the 'colonization of the mind' complex (as described by Steve Biko) translated into a sense of inferiority that prevents black Africans from fulfilling their real potential. Such predicaments influenced the emergence of a First World "discourse that sees Africa as a problem to be fixed" and that is "tinged with Afro-pessimism because the continent is a sign of the failure of modernization or of development strategies" (Houston 2011: 84).

The Emergence of Post-Development

Development was eventually deemed to have failed in delivering its basic promise and, as a result, critiqued from the reactionary perspective of post-development which started from a basic assessment that attaining the First World's middle-class lifestyle and living standards - as the ideal of

what it means to be modern and developed - is fundamentally impossible to achieve for most of the so-called Third World populations (as argued by Dasgupta (1985) for instance). Some of the earliest critiques of development came about during the 1980s in the journal *Development: Seeds for Change*. These were particularly influential to the eventual emergence of a post-development perspective constituted by a number of prominent critiques of development during the 1990s - as produced by the likes of Verhelst (1990), Lummis (1991), Esteva (1992), Sachs (1992), Latouche (1993), Seabrook (1994), Escobar (1995), Rist (1997), and Tucker (1999).

One form of post-development critique of development has been shaped by the problematization of poverty, of the Third World, and of the First World's ignorance of the specific histories of each nation undergoing development. Ignoring the history of underdeveloped countries leads to the assumption that "their past and indeed their present resemble earlier stages of the history of the now developed countries" (Frank 1995: 27).

In arguing that the Third World has been problematized by First World experts, Escobar (1997) is in effect referring to the above-mentioned process wherein First World experts working for First World organizations based in First World nations identify everything that so-called Third World nations lack (and need to obtain from the First World) in order to eventually become 'developing' or 'developed' nations. As Escobar (1997: 88) comments: "problems were continually identified, and client categories brought into existence. Development proceeded by creating 'abnormalities' (such as the 'illiterate', the 'malnourished', 'small farmers' or 'landless peasants')." Such 'abnormalities' would later need to be treated and reformed by means of other First World development experts being brought in to advise Third World communities about how to utilize support/resources obtained from the First World in order to modernize and develop themselves. And this process would mostly occur without the Third World nation's socio-cultural specificities and historical predicaments being accounted for - as illustrated by Cavalcanti's above-mentioned analysis.

If from a First World perspective poverty is understood as lack of wealth resulting from insufficient participation in the global market economy and limited consumption of commodities, development initiatives are then intended to combat poverty in the Third World by enabling wealth generation and accumulation (for example, by providing the means to utilize modern First World methods of large-scale farming, manufacture and resource exploitation that enable cost reduction and profit maximization). Cammack (2004: 190) further explicates that the World Bank's "commitment to poverty reduction is real" and since 1990 it has been systematically engaged in promoting the proletarianization of the world's poor (their equipping for, incorporation into and subjection to competitive labor markets) and the creation of an institutional framework within which global capitalist accumulation can be sustained, while simultaneously seeking to legitimate the project through policies of controlled participation and pro-poor propaganda.

But from a post-development perspective, poverty is in practice a notion that varies according to specific historical and socio-cultural conditions that are unique to every single Third World nation. Rahnema (1992) and Latouche (1993), for instance, have been critical of the patronizingly sentimental representation of Third World poverty that has informed much of the development practice initiated by the First World. And Peet (2003: 200) has suggested that if the World Bank "aspires to end poverty, then the poor should not be sentimentalized but included in the process of planning their own development."

Another form of post-development critique of development has been shaped by a perceived neo-imperialist agenda of the US and its allies in the aftermath of World War Two. When US President Truman pronounced on development, it was perceived by some as "an expression of the world power of the United States and not a program of policy that aspired to a singular national source of state sovereignty" (Cowen & Shenton 1996: 6). Influenced by centuries of European colonization and exploitation of the Third World, the First World's predominantly pro-

American conceptualization of development - that emerged during a period characterized by the Cold War, the communist threat and intensive decolonization - inescapably "reproduces endlessly the separation between reformers and those to be reformed by keeping alive the premise of the Third World as different and inferior" (Escobar 1997: 93).

Kothari (1988) and Esteva (1992), for instance, have critiqued First World-initiated development practice as symptomatic of encouraging a consumer-dominated world order imbued with the middle class values of pro-American First World capitalism. This point-of-view has influenced a critical conceptualization of development along the lines of neocolonialization, Cocacolonization, homogenization, and westernization of the Third World. As such, the pro-American First World approach to development (as implemented by First World organizations in justifying the intervention of the experts and leadership of developed countries to decide what is to be done in underdeveloped countries) has been trying to make Third World realities "fit into ideas which have their strongest roots in the European Enlightenment" (Cavalcanti 2007: 88) or, in other words, attempting to transform Third World realities in ways that do not at all fit in with its concepts or ideas of history, civilization, rationality and progress.

Development and Ethnic Conflict in Africa: Some Perspectives

During the first twenty years after World War Two, "development was considered to be a precondition for peace in inter-ethnic relations. 'Melting-pot' theorists claimed that as poor nations continued their development, ethnicity would become obsolete and peace would ensue," according to Angstrom (2000: 23-24). The 'melting-pot' argument essentially proposes that with the advent of modernization, sub-state ethnic identities progressively become politically unimportant and are surpassed by national identities while tensions and violent conflict between ethnic groups are most likely to disappear as a result. Since they deem conflict to originate from scarce resources, 'melting-pot' theorists during the 1950s and 1960s hence believed that modernization, development and economic growth could "ensure that the conditions of conflict did not arise and therefore peace would reign" (Angstrom 2000: 31).

Deutsch (1953) and Huntington (1968), for instance, have argued that economic development nurtures political harmony, generates the condition for subordinate ethnic groups to thrive and decreases the influence of insular ethnic attachments. This particular argument can be validated by the case of ethnically diverse Mauritius, for example: one of the few African countries to have achieved relatively rapid economic growth and "managed to avoid large-scale inter-ethnic violence" through a combination "of economic development and hegemonic political projects that have extinguished the potency of ethnopolitical mobilization", according to Sriskandarajah (2005: 63 & 69).

By the 1970s, 'conflictual modernization' theory emerged to advocate that development is in fact a cause of conflict instead of enabling peace, in opposition to what 'melting-pot' theorists had previously proposed. From this perspective, development and modernization imply increased economic growth that will most likely not be sufficient nor be equally distributed, as such increasing issues over which different ethnic groups may disagree [see Scarritt & McMillan (1995); Uvin (1998); Mousseau (2001)].

Some North African countries for example may have had reasonable growth rates during the past decade - as suggested by some recent International Monetary Fund and World Bank reports (see: IMF.org; World Bank.org, online). But across the society in those countries, economic growth has mostly not been inclusive: only partial modernization occurred because of many state institutions being inefficient in conveying the full advantages of that growth to a broader segment

of people [see Posner (2005)]. And this is the kind of situation that can most likely trigger a sense of social exclusion and eventually ethnic tensions - hence emphasizing "the critical role that ethnicity is made to play in the violent mobilization of passions and interests in response to chronic inequities in economic opportunity, social protection and political influence" (Picciotto 2010: 22).

"Ethnically diverse developing countries feature prominently on the list of countries that have suffered from civil war and insurgency in recent decades," according to Sriskandarajah (2005: 63). Horowitz (2000) for his part considers tensions arising from ethnic diversity to have been the principal trigger of genocide in Rwanda, violent riots in the Democratic Republic of Congo, civilian mass killings in Burundi, army killings in Uganda and repeated hostilities in Chad - that have occurred during the last two decades of the 20th century. Such a state-of-affairs has inevitably influenced many scholars - such as Easterly & Levine (1997), Lian & Oneal (1997) and Alesina, Baqir & Easterly (1999) - to hypothesize that ethnic divisions suppress public goods and cooperation and, as such, constitute a major obstacle to development and growth. From the modernization theory perspective, ethnic diversity has been perceived as a deterrent to the good progress of development [see Bates (1974); Reynolds (1985); Bayo Adenkanye (1995)].

'Conflictual modernization' theory is characterized by two different schools of thought with regards to how development effectively leads to conflict. 'Primordialism'

[...] holds that modernization causes conflict as it threatens fixed parochial identities, namely, the modernization process and the values it represents may come in conflict with indigenous values. [...]. As a result violence may erupt between groups ascribing to traditional values and groups (often state bearing) who give priority to development (Angstrom 2000: 31).

This can be illustrated, for example, by how the introduction of Sharia law as a way of life in northern Nigeria generated ethnic tensions - to the point of violence in February and May 2000 as well as killings in Kaduna state where there were equal percentages of Muslims and Christians - hence confirming how religious concerns, race and ethnicity have determined the pace of development in Nigeria after independence in 1960 (Amusan 2001: 61). Langer, Mustapha & Stewart (2009) further explain that since the late 1950s, different ethnic groups have been in competition over representation in Nigerian government and state institutions. Often this led to feelings of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, race or religion among the groups that were inadequately represented, which in turn provoked tensions and conflicts, culminating in Nigeria's civil war (1967-1970).

'Instrumentalism', on the other hand, holds that because modernization and development give élites the "incentives to manipulate ethnicity to gain power and wealth," conflicts are likely to occur between ethnic groups as a result (Angstrom 2000: 32). Bardhan (1997), for example, has argued how economic factors directly linked to inter-ethnic economic competition often become the source of ethnic conflict in underdeveloped countries. The instrumentalist take on 'conflictual modernization' theory additionally outlines the socially constructed nature of ethnicity - if conceptualized as "a set of inert variables which remains indolent until it becomes strategically politicized for ideological purposes" (Prasad 2008: 957). As such, modernization and development cause multiple ethnic identities to "be 'created' by aspiring élites in the struggle for power, wealth, and security" and, consequently, violent conflicts "arise within and between ethnic groups as modernization tends to progress unequally" (Angstrom 2000: 32). This perspective is echoed in Storey's analysis of Rwanda that he considers

[...] to have suffered from the worst of both worlds as far as the relationship between economic change and ethnic mobilisation is concerned. The reality - and, even more,

the perception - of an ethnicised division of labour between public and private sectors laid a basis for political mobilisation in response to [economic] adjustment to take an ethnic form (1999: 57).

And such a dire situation was further exacerbated by the Rwandan ruling élite's intensely manipulative strategy of demonizing the minority Tutsi ethnic group in the eyes of the majority Hutus - all culminating in extreme violence and genocide during the 1990s.

Some Non-Ethnic Specific Reasons for Mitigated Development in Africa

Tecola & Scanlan (2007) have concluded that ethnic diversity and conflict alone do not account for low levels of human development and economic misfortune experienced in Sub-Saharan Africa. According to Fonge (2011: 84),

[...] in spite of modern training and technical know-how, African manpower is often operated so lopsidedly that the fruits of modernization are either obliterated by corruption, favoritism, wasteful spending and inefficiency or, at best, have remained negligible for the majority of the population.

Duffield (2001) and Sorenson (2007) have discussed how development is affected by the constant competition for power and control between civil regimes and military forces. Harris, Hunter & Davies (1995) have talked about the impotence of state institutions of governance, such as parliament and ministerial offices, in the effective implementation of development strategies and distribution of the benefits of growth equally to all sections of the population. Miguel (2006: 114) has argued that economic conditions can deteriorate so dramatically to the point of triggering civil insurgencies: extreme poverty can "breed angry armed movements aiming to loot the assets and natural resources controlled by élites, especially when legitimate earning options are scarce." While Hanlon (2004) and Fonge (2011) have both recognized the widespread local acceptance and foreign tolerance of bribery and corruption in practically all aspects of civil governance and in the management of aid to rationalize the failure of development initiatives in some African countries, Handelman (2011: 50) for his part attributes failure of development in African countries to a tradition of deep government corruption. And Crisp (2000) and Anthony (2006) have both identified how cross-border spillover of wars and conflicts in neighboring states - in the shape of massive refugee movements and population displacements - intensifies competition for already scarce resources between local and migrant communities. Population expansion has also significantly affected the economic development of many African countries, as illustrated by the African continent's less than 2% average of per capita GDP growth during the 2000s - a period which has also witnessed a noticeable increase in economic disparity and wealth distribution inequality.

The case of Sierra Leone, for example, contradicts Sriskandarajah's (2005) earlier commentary as well as various hypotheses favoring the ethnicity / conflict / impeded development nexus. Sierra Leone endured a brutal civil war between 1991 and 2002, during which a million people were displaced from their homes, an estimated 50,000 civilians were killed, thousands were victims of rape and amputation, and average incomes fell by 40% (see Human Rights Watch, 1999). Although one of Africa's poorest countries to be devastated by years of violence, Sierra Leone, according to Glennerster, Miguel, & Rothenberg (2013: 313), does not fit "the stereotype of a country torn apart by tribal hatred, where different ethnic groups are unable to cooperate to provide public goods." And they are unequivocal in their conclusion that "despite the leading role of ethnic appeals in national politics, ethnic divisions have been much less damaging in Sierra Leone than

in many of its African neighbors, and in particular were not a leading factor in the 1991-2002 civil war” (Glennerster, Miguel, & Rothenberg 2013: 287). For his part, Davies (2000 & 2008) has pinpointed the poor quality of foreign aid as well as the inadequacy of foreign development strategies and practices as strongly influential factors in the severe economic and social downturn of Sierra Leone - as illustrated by: excessively complex integrated rural development projects (that inevitably failed) favored by foreign donors; foreign insensitivity to or ignorance of local socio-political considerations; foreign tolerance of local corrupt practices.

Since 2012 and until recently, the ”Central African Republic has been marred by violence following a Muslim-led coup in the predominantly Christian country. But the conflict isn’t just about religion - it’s a struggle for power,” according to Deutsche Welle journalist Schlindwein (2013, Deutsche Welle online). With thousands killed and nearly a million people displaced so far, the ongoing conflict in the Central African Republic might superficially be thought to be the outcome of intrinsic ethno-religious differences that have been dividing the people for a long time. But people on both sides of the conflict are resolute in their consideration of themselves as being one people and constituting one nation (Schlindwein 2013: Deutsche Welle online). The Central African Republic’s current crisis should more realistically be viewed as the product of a particular combination of factors (similarly experienced by many other African nations): localized economic discrimination (specifically in the Miskine district); power struggle between political leaders; opportunistic exploitation of popular ethno-religious fears. And in 2014, the UNDP’s Human Development Report highlighted the conflict-affected region of South Central Somalia wherein ”young people experience exclusion in three dimensions - sociocultural, economic and political - and a lack of opportunities. As a result, they become both victims and sources of conflict”: the lack of voice, choice and options forces these young people to engage in violence and conflict (Malik et al. 2014: 65).

Concluding Remarks

The proposition that ethnic conflict has been one of the most significant impediment to modernization, development and growth in many poor African countries cannot be unproblematically accepted, considering that ’ethnicity’ and ’ethnic diversity’ in the African context are fundamentally elusive concepts. Many scholars have tried to make sense of the complex interplay of ethnicity, conflict and development but too often from a singular rather than from a plural perspective. Obeng-Odoom (2013: 170) pertinently muses that

[...] regardless of the reasons, whether Africa is doing well or badly depends on which indicators are used for analysis. Economic development is nothing and everything. Its meanings and objects evolve and are often contested. It means different things at different times. On some of its objectives, African countries are doing well, but on others they are not doing so well.

How development occurs across the African continent does not have a unique explanation - be it in terms of conflict, ethnic diversity, resource or aid management - but would be more productively understood as an outcome of multiple overlapping factors, historical circumstances and contextual specificities.

While good progress with regards to the reduction of poverty has been made, that progress has however not been on par with development in many African countries. Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (2014: 11) comments that

[...] two years from the 2015 deadline, Africa’s progress on the Millennium Development Goals remains uneven. [...]. Over the past decade, Africa has made great strides

in instituting political and economic reforms that are starting to bear fruits. These future successes are, however, vulnerable to many factors that are not within Africa's control but can be redressed through collective engagement and a new international development partnership.

Development practice in Africa should not simply be abandoned, and it would surely benefit from a methodological re-orientation of post-development thinking towards an 'alternative to development' perspective. This is more likely to encourage the formulation of realistic models that are relevant to specific contexts that favor development in their own terms - ultimately creating the possibility of real productive socio-economic change that improves lives. Considering that most African economies have reported relatively good GDP growth rates since 2000 (see: IMF.org, online), the future of African development is tainted with optimism, especially with a noticeable shift towards strategies of development created and managed by Africans, compared to the mostly unsuccessful First World modernization initiatives and assisted development strategies of the twentieth century.

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