Conflict, Economic Development and Peacebuilding in the African Context

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Abstract

The intricate nexus between conflict, economic development, and peace presents a defining challenge for the African continent. While often analysed through simplistic lenses of resource scarcity or ethnic rivalry, this paper argues that the relationship is a self-reinforcing cycle driven by historical legacies, institutional frailties, and the political economy of violence. Drawing on contemporary case studies and theoretical frameworks, it posits that colonial-era policies established patterns of regional inequality and weak state structures, which post-independence governments often exacerbated through resource dependency and systemic corruption. This has created environments where conflicts fueled by economic marginalisation stifle the investment, human capital, and stability necessary for development, thereby perpetuating conditions for further violence. Moving beyond diagnostic analysis, this paper explores the imperative of transformative peacebuilding. It concludes that sustainable peace is contingent upon moving beyond mere conflict

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resolution to actively fostering distributive justice, accountable governance, and resilient, diversified economies that address the root causes of instability.

Keywords: Conflict-Development Nexus, Political Economy of Violence, Transformative Peacebuilding, African Governance

Introduction

The quest for a peaceful and prosperous Africa is the great unfinished business of our time. It is a continent of breathtaking potential, yet it remains trapped in a cruel bind: violence stifles development, and the absence of development breeds yet more violence. To speak of this cycle is commonplace; to truly dissect its deep, structural logic is the urgent task of scholarship. One cannot understand the tumult of the present without first listening to the echoes of the colonial past. Modern African states were not born from organic social contracts, but rather from the cartographer's pen, creating nations that too often privileged some groups and marginalised others. The post-colonial inheritance was thus one of brittle national consciousness and state structures fundamentally unequipped to manage diversity. As these new nations found their footing, a perilous pattern emerged. Economic ambition narrowed to a reliance on raw material exports- the familiar "resource curse." This created economies built not on production, but on rents, making control of the state the supreme prize in a high-stakes contest for wealth. In such an environment, systemic corruption was not a malfunction; it was a predictable feature.

From this fertile ground of historical grievance and institutional weakness springs the contemporary crisis. War, in all its forms- civil conflict, communal strife, insurgency- is the great dismantler of an economy. It shatters roads and ports, lays waste to farms and markets, scatters a generation of talent to the winds, and sees budgets for schools and hospitals diverted to bullets and guns. The result is a descent into profound poverty and a catastrophic loss of human capital. And it is from the ashes of this ruined potential that new armies often rise; the young, with nothing to lose, find purpose and profit in the very militias that perpetuate their despair.

This paper argues that to break this spell requires seeing the problem holistically. It is an intricate tapestry woven from historical, institutional, and economic threads. It begins by unravelling the political economy of the colonial and post-independence era, laying bare the roots of humanity's current predicament. It then examines, with forensic detail, the precise ways conflict devours economic progress. Ultimately, the case made here is that our models of peacebuilding must be transformed. A lasting peace cannot be brokered merely between warlords; it must be built within societies. It must be rooted in governance that earns the people's trust, in a commitment to share national wealth equitably, and in an economy that offers every citizen a stake in a stable future. These are not mere aspirations; they are the non-negotiable conditions for a final, lasting peace.

Conceptual Clarifications: Deconstructing the Conflict-Development Nexus

A precise understanding of the core concepts underpinning this study is crucial for meaningful analysis. The terms "conflict," "economic development," and "peace" are often used interchangeably in policy discourse, yet they carry distinct theoretical weights and nuances that shape both diagnosis and intervention.

Conflict in the African Context

To meaningfully conceptualise conflict in Africa, we must move beyond the classical model of interstate war and engage with the complex realities articulated by scholars of "new wars" (Kaldor, 2013). In this paradigm, the battlefield is fragmented among a hybrid array of state and non-state actors, and the distinction between political insurgency and criminal enterprise fundamentally dissolves. This blurring of motives is central to the "political economy of violence" (Le Billon, 2001), which reveals how the illicit resource trade- in everything from diamonds to coltan- can fuel a self-sustaining war economy. Within this system, the original political grievance often becomes secondary to the powerful financial incentives for perpetuating violence, transforming conflict from a contest over governance into a perverse mode of economic production and social control, what Boas and Dunn (2017) aptly term a destructive yet functional "ecosystem." This writer concurs with the duo; the illegal trade of resources fuels self-sustaining war

economies. Within these systems, the initial political goals often become less important than the financial incentives that drive the continuation of violence. As a result, conflict is transformed from a struggle over governance into a destructive but functional economic system.

This ecosystem, however, is not merely an economic free-for-all; it is often underpinned by a distinct political order. Reno's (1998) theory of the "shadow state" provides a critical institutional lens, showing how formal governance is subverted to create personalistic networks that use violence and patronage as their primary tools of control. This is not a simple absence of the state, but the erection of an alternative, illiberal one. Yet, a comprehensive understanding also demands that we descend from these macro-structures to the grassroots, where Autesserre's (2021) work on the "micro-politics" of conflict illuminates how localised grievances and interpersonal disputes become the essential fuel for larger patterns of violence. Ultimately, conflict in this context is a multi-layered phenomenon: it is simultaneously a globalised economic circuit, a reconfigured system of governance, and a deeply localised social condition, each layer reinforcing the other to create a resilient and devastating alternative to peace.

Economic Development

A nuanced understanding of economic development in fragile contexts must transcend the narrow, if convenient, metric of Gross Domestic Product. While GDP measures the scale of a nation's economic activity, it is famously silent on the distribution of its benefits and the quality of its outcomes. This paper, therefore, grounds its analysis in the capabilities approach advanced by Sen (1999), which defines development as the process of expanding the substantive freedoms- the "capabilities"- that people have to lead the lives they value. This shifts the focus from aggregate wealth to human well-being, prioritising the ability to live in good health, to be knowledgeable, to participate in community, and to exercise economic agency. As Nussbaum (2011) further elaborates, these central human capabilities provide a concrete framework for assessing development not by the money in a system, but by the opportunities and functioning available to its people.

From this vantage point, violent conflict is exposed as the ultimate agent of developmental reversal. It acts as a systematic "capability depriver"

(Stewart, 2004), directly undermining the pillars of human development: it shatters health systems, disrupts education, and severs the social and political bonds that enable civic participation. This creates a perverse paradox in which a nation's macroeconomic data, potentially buoyed by a capital-intensive enclave economy in oil or minerals, can show growth while the majority of its citizens experience a collapse in their real freedoms and well-being. This aligns with the critique of "jobless growth" and rising inequality articulated by scholars such as Piketty (2014), who shows that capital returns can outpace economic growth, leading to entrenched disparities. Consequently, authentic development is irreducibly linked to distributive justice and the cultivation of resilient, inclusive human capital, without which statistical gains remain a mirage.

Redefining Peace: From Ceasefire to Transformative Justice

The conceptualisation of peace has undergone a critical evolution, moving beyond the minimalist definition of "negative peace" as merely the absence of direct, physical violence (Galtung, 1969). While a ceasefire may silence the guns, it often leaves the underlying architecture of conflict- systemic injustice, political exclusion, and economic despair- fundamentally unchallenged. This results in a fragile state, more accurately described as a "cold war" or a "no-war, no-peace" stalemate that is inherently volatile and prone to relapse. Scholars like Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) critique this as a "liberal peace" model, often imposed from the top-down and failing to resonate with local populations, thereby creating a peace that is hollow and unsustainable.

In contrast, this paper is anchored in the more robust concepts of "positive peace" and transformative practice. Drawing on Galtung's (1969) foundational work, positive peace entails the active presence of social justice, equitable relationships, and institutional structures that address the root causes of violence. This aligns with Lederach's (2005) vision of "transformative peacebuilding," which is less about restoring a pre-war status quo and more about fundamentally transforming the broken relationships and societal patterns that fuel conflict. In essence, sustainable peace is not a final destination but a continuous, endogenous process. It is the outcome of cultivating resilient societal structures- as explored by authors like Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) in their work on inclusive institutions- that can manage

conflict constructively through legitimate political and economic channels, thereby making violence a less attractive or necessary option.

The Scholarly Evolution: Unpacking the Conflict-Development Nexus

The scholarly conversation on the conflict-development nexus has progressed through several overlapping phases, each adding layers of nuance to our understanding.

The Greed vs. Grievance Debate

Academic inquiry into the relationship between conflict and development has been significantly shaped by the "greed versus grievance" debate. This framework emerged as a pivotal challenge to earlier theories that explained civil wars primarily through ethnic animosity or ideological divides. The work of Collier and Hoeffler (2004) was instrumental in catalysing this shift, presenting quantitative evidence that the economic feasibility of rebellion- often predicated on the availability of "lootable" natural resources- was a more powerful predictor of conflict outbreak than measurable political grievances. This "greed" thesis, however, was met with robust critique for its potential to oversimplify complex motivational landscapes. Keen (2012) powerfully argues that the dichotomy itself is a false one, proposing that economic agendas often operate *through* the manipulation of social and political grievances. In this view, elites instrumentalise historical injustices and identity politics to recruit followers and legitimise a conflict whose underlying engine is the capture of economic rents. A key strength of this argument, to this writer, is its rejection of a simplistic greed-grievance dichotomy, revealing how economic and political motives are intertwined as elites manipulate social grievances to enable profiteering. However, a potential weakness is that, in emphasising this instrumentalisation, it may still understate the genuine political and social motivations of non-elite participants who are not merely duped by their leaders.

Further scholarship has sought to move beyond this binary by integrating institutional and social dimensions. For instance, Fearon and Laitin (2003) shift focus toward state capacity, arguing that weak central governments and poverty create the permissive conditions- or "insurgent credit"- that

make rebellion a viable enterprise, regardless of the initial motive. Adding a crucial layer, Autesserre (2010) emphasises how these macro-level drivers become entrenched through "micro-level" practices and local political economies, where conflict becomes self-sustaining through everyday routines and vested interests. In the African context, this evolving discourse reveals a complex reality: a conflict may be rooted in legitimate historical marginalisation (grievance), yet be sustained by a war economy that benefits a narrow elite (greed), all within a permissive environment of state weakness. Understanding this interplay is essential for designing interventions that address not just the symptoms but the deeply intertwined political and economic logics of violence.

Institutionalist and Historical Perspectives

A powerful institutionalist perspective posits that enduring conflict and poverty are not anomalies but the logical outcomes of specific institutional legacies. Scholars like Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) provide a broad framework, arguing that extractive institutions- designed to concentrate wealth and power within a narrow elite- create the foundational conditions for societal failure. This view is historically grounded in the work of Africanist historians like Mamdani (1996), who details how colonial-era "decentralised despotism" engineered systems of ethnic patronage and divisive rule. Mkandawire (2015) further refines this analysis by demonstrating that the often-criticised behaviour of post-colonial elites is not "irrational" but a calculated response to the perverse political and economic incentives embedded within these inherited state structures.

This institutional analysis is deepened by considering the challenges of state geography and internal variation. Herbst (2000) contends that a core problem for many post-colonial states has been the "problem of stateness" itself- the immense difficulty of projecting authority over vast, sparsely populated territories, which creates power vacuums ripe for conflict. Complementing this, Boone's (2014) research on the political economy of rural Africa reveals that institutional control is rarely uniform. She shows how central governments negotiate distinct "political settlements" with local elites in different regions, leading to a patchwork of governance that explains why violence can be localised within an otherwise peaceful state. Ultimately,

from this combined perspective, conflict emerges as a rational feature of institutional frameworks historically designed for control and extraction rather than the public good.

The Resource Curse and Rentier State Theory

The presence of abundant natural resources, rather than fostering prosperity, has often exacerbated instability in many African states. This phenomenon, known as the "resource curse," suggests that windfalls from resources like oil, diamonds, or minerals can distort economies, fuel corruption, and ignite violent conflict (Ross, 2013). This dynamic is critically linked to the formation of a "rentier state," a political entity where the government's revenue comes predominantly from external sources- such as selling oil on the global market- rather than from domestic taxation (Basedau & Richter, 2014). This financial independence from its citizenry fundamentally severs the traditional social contract; with no need to levy taxes, leaders have little incentive to be accountable to their population or to invest in broad-based public services and development.

The consequences of this rentier logic are profound and multifaceted. Scholars, like Karl (1997), detail how oil wealth leads to the "paradox of plenty," where states become increasingly poor and unstable despite their resource revenues. The work of Ross (2013) further shows how resource wealth can specifically inhibit democracy and empower authoritarian regimes by providing the financial means to co-opt opposition and fund extensive security apparatuses. Collier and Hoeffler's (1998) influential economic models add a key dimension by arguing that conflict is driven by opportunities for rebellion; natural resources provide the lucrative "lootable" rents that finance and motivate insurgent groups, making civil war more likely and protracted. In this light, governance failures are not merely incidental but are a direct and rational outcome of a political economy structured around unearned income and the absence of public accountability. This writer toes the same line as Hoeffler's economic models, which posits that conflict is primarily driven by the opportunity for rebellion, where lootable natural resources provide the financial fuel. Consequently, governance failures are not a mere side effect but a rational outcome of a political economy built on unearned resource rents and a lack of public accountability.

Critical and Feminist Interventions

Recent critical and feminist interventions have fundamentally challenged the orthodoxies of conflict and development studies, demanding a reckoning with overlooked actors and scales of analysis. Autesserre's (2021) work is pivotal in critiquing the international peacebuilding industry, contending that its standardised, top-down "peacebuilding consensus" routinely fails by ignoring complex local contexts and power structures, often perpetuating the very violence it seeks to resolve. This focus on the local is complemented by feminist security studies, which deconstruct the masculinist biases inherent in traditional conflict analysis. Sjoberg (2016) and other feminist scholars argue that mainstream definitions of security and political violence are gendered, rendering women's experiences and agencies invisible. They illuminate the critical, yet often unacknowledged, roles women play in war economies- not only as victims but as combatants, organisers, and peacebuilders- and emphasise the gendered and sexualised dimensions of violence that are central to wartime political orders (Baaz & Stern, 2013).

These critical traditions insist that a holistic understanding of the conflict-development nexus must be grounded in the everyday, lived experiences of diverse local actors. This includes analysing how development policies and humanitarian interventions themselves can have differential, and sometimes negative, impacts based on gender, age, and social status. The work of Enloe (2014) prompts us to ask "where are the women?" not merely to add them to the picture, but to reveal how gendered power relations are fundamental to the operation of militarism and the global political economy. By integrating these perspectives- from Autesserre's local turn to feminist critiques of masculinity and power- this paper is positioned to move beyond state-centric and economistic models. It instead pursues a more transformative analysis of the cyclical relationship between conflict and development, one that centres the complex human security of individuals and communities in the pursuit of a meaningful peace.

The Vicious Cycle: Historical Legacies and the Political Economy of Conflict

The persistent underdevelopment and recurrent conflict that characterise many African states are not independent phenomena but are locked in a

self-reinforcing vicious cycle, the roots of which are deeply embedded in a problematic political economy established during the colonial era. As scholars like Mkandawire (2015) and Ake (1996) contend, colonial powers engineered states with "extractive institutions" designed not for integrated development but for the efficient control of territory and the systematic funnelling of resources to the metropole. This process deliberately created regional and ethnic inequalities, sowing the seeds of future grievance. At independence, rather than dismantling this apparatus, new elites often perpetuated its logic, leading to what Cooper (2002) terms the "gatekeeper state," where control of the central government becomes the primary mechanism for wealth accumulation. This system was tragically exacerbated by the discovery of natural resources, which, following the "resource curse" thesis articulated by Ross (2013), often led to greater corruption and instability. The state, now a "rentier" entity reliant on external resource rents rather than domestic taxation (Basedau & Richter, 2014), became even less accountable to its citizens, with political competition centring on the control of these lucrative revenue streams, as analysed in the economic models of Collier and Hoeffler (1998).

This historical and institutional legacy sets the stage for conflict, which in turn systematically dismantles the very foundations of development through several interlocking mechanisms. First, a massive diversion of resources occurs, as scarce public funds are reallocated from health and education to military spending, a trend extensively documented by institutions like the World Bank (2020). Second, conflict directly destroys physical capital and creates a climate of pervasive uncertainty that deters the investment essential for growth, a dynamic Collier (2007) identifies as a key component of the "conflict trap." Finally, and most devastatingly, is the erosion of human capital. Beyond the immediate loss of life, violence creates mass displacement, disrupts education, and inflicts profound psychological trauma. As Justino (2012) argues, these micro-level impacts- the destruction of livelihoods and social bonds- create a legacy of vulnerability that cripples societal resilience and ensures that the developmental consequences of conflict endure for generations, long after the violence itself has ceased. Thus, the cycle is complete: historically shaped, extractive institutions create conditions ripe for conflict, and the ensuing violence ensures that

developmental progress is not merely halted but actively reversed, perpetuating the very instability from which it sprang.

The Mechanisms of Stagnation: How Conflict Undermines Development

On the premise of earlier discourse, this section focuses on how conflict undermines development, hence, culminates in the mechanism of stagnation. These are elucidated below:

(i) Diversion of Public Resources: Violent conflict functions as a powerful engine of underdevelopment, systematically eroding the core pillars upon which prosperous and stable societies are built. This process operates through several interconnected channels that cripple economic potential across multiple fronts. A primary mechanism is the catastrophic diversion of public resources from productive investment to destructive expenditure. As documented by institutions like the World Bank (2020), governments in conflict-affected states are forced to prioritise military and security spending, often at the direct expense of vital sectors like agriculture, health, and education. This fiscal reallocation starves the very sectors that build long-term human capital and economic resilience. This aligns with Collier's (2007) concept of the "conflict trap," where the immediate imperatives of war eviscerate the state's capacity to fund the public goods that are essential for future development, thereby locking countries into a cycle of violence and poverty.

(ii) Destroys Existing Economic Foundations: Beyond the diversion of funds, conflict actively destroys existing economic foundations. Physical infrastructure- the roads, bridges, and utilities that facilitate commerce- is often deliberately targeted or becomes collateral damage, severing market linkages and crippling supply chains. More insidiously, conflict generates a climate of pervasive uncertainty that acts as a powerful deterrent to investment. As Collier (2007) argues, both domestic and foreign capital flee environments where property rights are unenforceable, and the risk of asset destruction is high. This "investment strike" is further compounded by the breakdown of financial systems and the rise of a war economy that prioritises lootable resources and illicit trade over formal, productive

enterprise, a dynamic detailed in the work of scholars like Keen (2012) on the economic functions of violence.

(iii) Devastation of Human and Social Capital: Perhaps the most profound and lasting impact of conflict is its devastation of human and social capital. The direct loss of life is compounded by mass displacement, which fractures communities and severs generations from their livelihoods, creating a dependency on humanitarian aid. The disruption of education systems creates a "lost generation," depriving the economy of the skilled workforce necessary for recovery and modernisation. The work of Justino (2012) is crucial here, highlighting how violence at the micro-level inflicts deep psychological trauma and destroys the social fabric of trust and cooperation. This erosion of social capital undermines the informal institutions that enable collective action and economic exchange (Oladipo, 2023). Furthermore, the gendered impacts are severe; as feminist scholars like Caprioli (2005) have shown, conflict often exacerbates pre-existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting women's security, health, and economic opportunities, thereby hindering the participation of half the population in reconstruction. The cumulative effect is a societal scar that impairs productivity and cohesion long after a formal peace is declared, ensuring that the developmental costs of conflict endure for generations.

Practical Examples of Conflicts in Africa, and Their Impact on Economic Development and Peace

In the African context, the relationship between conflict, economic development, and peace is often described as a vicious cycle, as earlier stated. Conflict destroys economic assets and institutions, which in turn creates conditions of poverty and grievance that fuel further conflict. Scholars, like Collier (2007), have famously framed this as a "conflict trap," where economies become stuck due to their own internal dynamics of violence. The following examples illustrate this cycle with nuance, showing that the impacts are not merely about GDP loss but about the fundamental distortion of state-society relations and long-term developmental pathways. It should be noted that violence destroys economic potential, and the resulting poverty and grievance, in turn, fuel further instability (Collier, 2007). This cycle fundamentally distorts state-society relations and long-term developmental

pathways, moving beyond mere GDP loss to reshape the very fabric of political and economic life.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): The Predatory State

The protracted conflict in the Eastern DRC, a lingering aftermath of the regional wars of 1996-2003, exemplifies the lethal intersection of resource wealth and institutional failure. The economy in conflict zones has shifted from production to systematic plunder, where armed groups and state military factions (FARDC) exploit minerals like coltan and gold. This creates what Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) term "extractive economic institutions," designed not for broad-based growth but for elite enrichment, thereby destroying incentives for investment and public goods provision. This predation fuels a "conflict economy," where, as Le Billon (2001) argues, easily "lootable" resources finance rebellion and make peace less profitable than war for armed actors. The state's complicity in this system eviscerates its legitimacy, creating a vacuum filled by militias. However, Autesserre (2010) provides a crucial nuance, arguing that international peacebuilding fails by focusing solely on national politics while ignoring the "micro-level' sources of violence- local disputes over land, chieftaincy, and resources- which must be addressed for sustainable peace.

Rwanda: Authoritarian Development as a Peace Strategy

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi represents a catastrophic collapse of both the state and social fabric, annihilating the human and social capital essential for development (World Bank, 2018). In its aftermath, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) government pursued a strategy of centralised, authoritarian developmentalism, staking its legitimacy on delivering security, economic growth, and poverty reduction rather than ethnic patronage. This has involved enforcing a ban on ethnic identification and aggressively promoting Rwanda as a regional hub for investment and technology, resulting in remarkable macroeconomic growth. The scholarly debate on this model is deeply divided. On one hand, it is hailed as a successful case of post-conflict state-building and poverty reduction. On the other hand, critics, like Longman (2017), argue that this "coerced unity" and the government's use of the genocide narrative to suppress dissent create a brittle, illiberal peace.

The central trade-off, as identified in the literature, is between the apparent efficacy of authoritarian development and the long-term sustainability of a peace built on political repression.

Somalia: The Resilient Informal Economy and State Collapse

Since 1991, Somalia has been the archetype of a collapsed state, yet its economy has demonstrated remarkable resilience through informal networks. As documented by Little (2003), a sophisticated economy operates without a central government, sustained by remittances from the global diaspora, livestock exports, and robust telecommunications, all underpinned by clan-based systems of private governance and adjudication. However, this statelessness imposes a hard ceiling on development; the inability to provide public goods like national infrastructure, a central bank, or a regulatory environment prevents large-scale investment and access to international finance (Menkhaus, 2006). Consequently, peace remains fragmented and localised, while the conflict itself creates perverse economic opportunities. As Percy (2016) notes, phenomena like piracy, which began as a form of local "coastal defence," evolved into a rational criminal enterprise, while extremist groups like Al-Shabaab fund themselves through sophisticated extortion and taxation networks, entrenching violence as a viable livelihood.

Nigeria: The Niger Delta and the Paradox of Oil

The conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta is a textbook case of the "resource curse," where abundant oil wealth has fuelled underdevelopment and violence. The political economy, as analysed by Watts (2008), is characterised by "petro-violence," where state and corporate control over oil extraction has led to massive environmental degradation and the systematic marginalisation of local communities. This generated legitimate grievances that initially fuelled militancy. However, the conflict dynamics evolved, illustrating the "greed versus grievance" framework (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004), as the infrastructure of violence- including illegal oil bunkering (theft) and kidnapping for ransom- became a lucrative economy in itself (Oladipo, 2017). The government's primary response, a large-scale amnesty programme co-opting militant leaders with cash payments, has been critiqued by scholars like Obi (2010) as a strategy of "buying peace" that fails to address root causes. This approach fragments armed groups and enriches

their leaders while neglecting the fundamental needs of the population, ensuring the underlying drivers of conflict persist.

The protracted violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt, characterised by attacks from armed Fulani pastoralist militias on sedentary farming communities, represents not only a potential mass atrocity crime but a fundamental threat to national development and the very premises of peacebuilding. While the state frames the crisis as a resource conflict driven by climate change (International Crisis Group, 2018), scholars like Ochonu (2021) argue it is a strategic project of "territorial expansionism," exhibiting genocidal processes as per Stanton's (2016) model, including the systematic dehumanisation of groups like the Berom and Tiv and the organised clearing of ancestral lands. This has profound developmental implications: it has decimated the agricultural sector- a critical pillar of the national economy and food security- and created a massive internal displacement crisis, straining urban infrastructure and social services while destroying the human capital necessary for sustainable growth. For peacebuilding, the conflict has shattered inter-communal trust and rendered traditional models, which rely on a legitimate state arbiter, nearly obsolete. The state's perceived complicity and failure to provide security, as documented by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2023), has legitimised violent self-help groups and entrenched a national narrative of grievance and sectarian polarisation. Consequently, as Sampson (2020) notes, this erodes the social contract and fosters a "conflict economy" that benefits political and criminal entrepreneurs, making sustainable peace contingent not merely on local dialogues but on a fundamental restructuring of the Nigerian state towards equity and effective sovereignty, without which both development and peace remain unattainable.

The Evolving Topography of Mass Atrocity Violence in Nigeria: A Multi-Regional Analysis (Up to 2025)

The scholarly debate on the applicability of the term "genocide" to Nigeria's ongoing conflict has intensified and geographically expanded by 2025, moving beyond an exclusive focus on the Middle Belt to encompass a complex and interconnected topography of violence across the North West, North East, and South West regions. While the manifestations differ, a common thread

of systematic civilian targeting, demographic alteration, and state failure links these crises, compelling a re-evaluation of whether they constitute distinct conflicts or facets of a broader, coordinated genocidal process. Proponents of this graver analysis, applying Gregory Stanton's (2016) "Ten Stages of Genocide" framework, argue that Nigeria is witnessing a "genocide by attrition" across multiple fronts, characterised by widespread dehumanisation and organisation.

In the North West (states like Zamfara, Katsina, and Kaduna), violence was initially dismissed as banditry. However, the scale has escalated into what scholars like Felbab-Brown (2024) term "criminal governance and mass kidnapping." The systematic attacks on villages, the mass abduction of school children to destroy educational futures, and the sexual enslavement of women specifically target the social and biological fabric of predominantly Hausa communities. This aligns with Stanton's stages of "persecution" and "extermination,' not for ideological purity but for territorial and economic control, effectively dismantling the social order.

Simultaneously, the North East remains a theatre where the jihadist ideology of Boko Haram and its Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) splinter continues to enact a more explicit genocidal campaign. As documented by Bukarti (2023), their violence is explicitly aimed at the physical destruction of Christians, moderate Muslims, and anyone participating in the "Western" state system. The group's massacres in predominantly Christian villages in Southern Borno and Adamawa, and its systematic use of suicide bombers in mosques and markets, fulfil the *dolus specialis* (specific intent) required for a legal finding of genocide against specific religious and political groups.

Crucially, the violence has metastasised to the South West (states like Oyo, Ogun, and Ekiti), primarily through the escalating tensions between Fulani pastoralists and Yoruba farming communities. This has sparked a violent ethno-nationalist backlash, exemplified by the rise of groups like the Yoruba Nation agitators. Scholars like Adebanwi (2024) analyse this not merely as local conflict but as a direct consequence of the northern crises spilling over, fuelling a politics of autochthony and existential fear. The rhetoric and occasional violence from both sides- including evictions, threats, and killings- demonstrate advanced "polarisation" and

"dehumanisation," creating a tinderbox, where localised genocidal violence becomes a palpable risk.

This multi-regional analysis implies that Nigeria faces a polycentric and synergistic threat to its existence. The failure of the state to provide a monopoly on violence, as noted by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2025), has created a marketplace for atrocity where different armed actors- jihadists, criminal warlords, and ethno-nationalist militias- operate with impunity. For peacebuilding, this means that localised solutions are doomed to fail. A national-level strategy that addresses the core drivers of state illegitimacy, arms proliferation, and the political economy of land and identity is the only remaining, albeit rapidly closing, path to preventing a full-blown national disintegration, characterised by overlapping genocidal processes.

This environmental pressure, however, does not occur in a vacuum. It is weaponised within pre-existing contexts of political and religious polarisation. In the Middle Belt, scholars like Mustapha (2023) argue that climate-induced resource competition is filtered through a long history of indigene-settler politics, where access to land is tied to political representation and belonging. This transforms a struggle for grass and water into a battle over identity and territorial sovereignty, enabling the rhetoric of dehumanisation central to Gregory Stanton's (2016) genocidal model. Simultaneously, in the North West, the collapse of agrarian and pastoral livelihoods, under environmental stress, has created a vast pool of disenfranchised youths, whom criminal syndicates readily recruit. The work of Burnley (2024) demonstrates that these "bandits" are not merely criminals but political actors who employ genocidal tactics- mass abduction of women and children, systematic village burning- to establish control over territory and resources, effectively engaging in a form of "criminal genocide" aimed at displacing populations for economic dominance.

The spillover of this violence into the South West has ignited a potent ethno-nationalist response, analysed by Adebanwi (2024) as a "politics of existential threat." Here, the environmental pressure is perceived not just as an ecological issue but as a demographic invasion, fuelling movements that advocate for territorial exclusivity. This creates a feedback loop of polarisation, where both pastoralist militias and ethno-nationalist vigilantes

frame the other as an existential enemy to be eliminated, thereby normalising exterminatory violence. Therefore, by 2025, the scholarly consensus is coalescing around the understanding that Nigeria's violence represents a "nexus crisis." It is a convergence of environmental scarcity, criminal opportunism, and ideological extremism, all facilitated by a state that has abdicated its fundamental duty to protect. To this writer, this complex interplay makes peacebuilding uniquely challenging, as it requires not just mediation but also climate-resilient agricultural policies, robust disarmament programmes, and a fundamental renegotiation of the social contract to foster a shared national identity over competing ethnic and religious sovereignties. The failure to address this interconnected web of drivers ensures the continued normalisation of genocide as a tool of political and territorial control.

Towards Transformative Peacebuilding: A Path Beyond the Cycle

Moving beyond the destructive cycle of conflict and underdevelopment necessitates a fundamental reimagining of peacebuilding itself. This requires a shift in focus from achieving a negative peace- defined simply by the cessation of overt violence- to cultivating a positive peace that actively addresses the root causes of instability. This paradigm, championed by scholars like Lederach (2005), is known as transformative peacebuilding. It argues that sustainable peace requires the holistic transformation of relationships, institutions, and structures that perpetuate injustice and violence, aiming to build resilient, inclusive, and legitimate societies.

A cornerstone of this transformative agenda is the profound restructuring of governance to ensure distributive justice and break the "winner-takes-all" model that so often fuels conflict. As argued by Waal (2015), peace agreements and post-conflict constitutions must be intentionally designed to create inclusive political settlements. This involves building robust institutions of accountability, such as independent judiciaries and anti-corruption commissions, and ensuring transparent management of natural resources. The work of Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) on inclusive institutions is highly relevant here; sustainable peace requires moving from extractive institutions that benefit a narrow elite to inclusive ones that distribute power and opportunity broadly. By guaranteeing the equitable distribution of national revenue and political power across all regions and

identity groups, the state can build legitimacy and give all citizens a tangible stake in maintaining peace, thereby reducing the incentive to resort to violence.

Simultaneously, economic policy must be reoriented from extraction and rent-seeking to diversification and inclusive growth. A return to the pre-war economic model, which was often dependent on a narrow range of primary commodities, simply re-establishes the conditions for conflict. Instead, post-conflict planning must actively foster a diversified economic base. This includes investing in agriculture and agro-processing to enhance food security, supporting the growth of small and medium-sized enterprises, and fostering entrepreneurship, particularly among the youth populations who are often vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Critically, as security scholar Muggah (2009) emphasises, Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes must be effectively woven into these broader national development strategies. When former combatants are provided with viable, sustainable livelihoods, the risk of re-recruitment into militias is significantly lowered. This approach is complemented by the insights of Autesserre (2021), who argues that supporting local-level, grassroots economic initiatives is just as crucial as national-level policy, as it builds peace from the ground up by addressing the immediate needs of conflict-affected communities.

Conclusion

The intricate nexus between conflict and underdevelopment in Africa represents one of the most pressing challenges of our time. As this analysis has illustrated, this relationship is not a mysterious or inevitable curse but a predictable outcome of a specific political economy, the roots of which are deeply embedded in historical and institutional choices. The colonial imposition of extractive institutions established a blueprint for governance that prioritised control and resource appropriation over public service and inclusive growth. This legacy was tragically perpetuated in the post-colonial era. From this perspective, conflict is not an aberration but a rational, if devastating, outcome of systems that were never designed to serve the public good. The consequences of this institutional failure are catastrophic and self-reinforcing. Conflict acts as a powerful engine of stagnation, systematically dismantling

the foundations of development through the diversion of resources, the destruction of physical and human capital, and the erosion of the social trust necessary for economic activity.

Therefore, breaking this vicious cycle demands a fundamental paradigm shift that moves beyond short-term crisis management and technical fixes. The goal must be nothing less than transformative peacebuilding. This requires a dual-track approach that simultaneously addresses the political and economic drivers of violence. Politically, it necessitates a deliberate move away from winner-take-all systems toward inclusive governance, robust accountability mechanisms, and distributive justice to rebuild the social contract. Economically, it requires a committed transition from rent-dependent, extractive models to diversified, resilient economies that provide sustainable livelihoods, particularly for youths, and are integrated with strategic reintegration programmes. This is not a quick or easy undertaking; it is a long-term, deeply political project that requires both local ownership and sustained international partnership. Ultimately, the path to a stable and prosperous Africa hinges on the conscious, collective endeavour to replace institutions of extraction with institutions of inclusion, thereby forging a future where peace and development are not opposing forces, but mutually reinforcing realities.

Recommendations

On the premise of the above discussion, the following recommendations are germane:

(i) Post-conflict interventions must move beyond technical capacity-building to fundamentally reconfigure governance incentives. This involves supporting constitutional and electoral reforms that dismantle "winner-takes-all" politics, such as mandating power-sharing agreements, decentralising fiscal and political authority to sub-national levels, and strengthening independent oversight institutions (e.g., anti-corruption commissions, supreme audit institutions).

(ii) Make transparent and equitable management of natural resources a non-negotiable component of all peace negotiations and post-conflict constitutions. Establish multi-stakeholder oversight bodies,

including civil society representatives, to monitor resource contracts and revenue flows, and legally mandate the equitable distribution of a significant portion of these revenues to local communities and regional governments.

(iii) Design Demobilisation, Disarmament, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes not as standalone security projects but as core components of national economic development strategies. Link reintegration packages to investments in rural agriculture, public works programmes, and vocational training aligned with local market needs, particularly targeting youths and women.

(iv) International donors should channel a significant portion of peacebuilding funds directly to local civil society organisations, women's groups, and traditional mediators. Support should be flexible, long-term, and focused on strengthening the "infrastructure for peace" that exists within communities, rather than imposing external, standardised templates.

(v) Allocate dedicated funding and integrate psychosocial support and trauma healing into education, healthcare, and community development programmes. Support inter-community dialogues, shared history projects, and collaborative livelihood initiatives that actively rebuild broken social trust.

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