Introduction

In this paper I critically engage with the recent international focus on how conflict diamonds are fuelling African civil wars. I argue that this kind of analysis simplifies the constructive interpretation of the root causes of African conflicts. Drawing from the comparative analysis of low and high-intensity conflicts in Africa, I surmise that the inadequate understanding of the fundamental causes of African conflicts has led to inappropriate international policy responses and ill-defined solutions in managing and resolving these civil wars.

But why the recent international focus on conflict diamonds? Violent and protracted civil wars in countries such as Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Angola have demonstrated the role and contribution of how strategic minerals like diamonds, oil, copper and gold are fuelling wars in African. It has been established that proceeds from the purchase of conflict diamonds are used to purchase arms, drugs, military uniform and even cultivate strategic alliances domestically, regionally and internationally. In effect, the exploitation of conflict diamonds has led to the criminal complicity of the international diamond industry and trading centres such as Antwerp, London, Tel Aviv, and political elites, regional leaders, warlords and MNCs, all of whom are taking advantage of the opportunities of economic globalisation. The international community has responded by targeting conflict diamonds and denying them access to the world market. It is argued that since ‘greed’ is the cause and driving force for these civil wars, targeting the illicit extraction and sale of diamonds would serve as a viable mechanism for their resolution. However, the recent international focus on conflict diamonds not only simplifies the analysis of

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African conflicts but also ‘obscure a range of other issues which are equally, if not more central to finding lasting solutions to these wars’. ¹

**Conceptualising Conflict Diamonds**

Some media commentators and political analysts have used the term conflict or ‘blood’ diamonds without attempt at definition. Conflict diamonds, according to the De Beers Diamond conglomerate, describes those ‘diamonds which originate from areas controlled by forces fighting the legitimate and internationally recognised government of the relevant country’. The London-based NGO, Global Witness contests the restrictive definition advanced by De Beers. Instead, it defines conflict diamonds as those ‘that originate from areas under the control of forces that are in opposition to elected and internationally recognised governments or are in anyway connected to those groups’² The Global Witness definition expands the scope of the definition of conflict diamonds in the sense that it embraces not only rebel factions but also government forces and government-held territories trading in illegal diamonds. Mike Bourne therefore asserts that though the focus on conflict diamonds is associated with African conflicts, the domestic and international dimensions of illegal diamond trading could conceivably occur in any conflict country with extractable diamond resources. The crucial element in the definition of conflict diamonds is the role played by illegal diamond trade in fuelling wars in Africa and the rather unusual criminal network forged between rebel factions, warlords, government and pro-government forces, corrupt politicians, rogue states, arms smugglers, drug traffickers and MNCs.

*Conflict Diamond Debate: ‘New Wine in Old Bottle?’*

But is the role-played by conflict diamonds in fuelling wars in African something new? The exploitation of war economies as represented by conflict diamonds is as old as warfare itself. The struggle for the control over strategic

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resources has been a common feature for most of the wars in contemporary world politics. In effect, the discourse that links strategic minerals and low-intensity conflicts is a familiar literature. As such, diamond as a currency of war is nothing new, rather like a ‘new wine in an old bottle’. The wars in former Zaire and Angola in the 1960s and 1970s have been about the domestic and international exploitation of strategic minerals, albeit, with an East-West ideological underpinnings. What becomes obvious is the fact that the role played by strategic minerals in fuelling conflicts in African were veiled during the Cold War. There can be no doubt that the superpower rivalry in countries such as Angola and Zaire (then Congo) was not only about political ideologies and shaping African diplomacy, but essentially about the control of strategic resources.

One would want to know what is new about the debate and why the recent international focus? The issue of conflict diamonds has only now become internationally prominent because of the security vacuum created by the absence of superpower rivalry. This vacuum has been filled by warlords, rogue states, arms and drug traffickers, and MNCs exploiting the economic opportunities of globalisation. The emerging network of barter system of arms for diamonds extends beyond the immediate conflicts territories to include regional and international intermediaries all of whom strive on the war economies. What we see is the emergence of a global informal economy that is inextricably linked with the globalisation of legal trade. The nexus between the globalised informal economy and legal trade is facilitated by contemporary economic and technological globalisation which has led to improved communications infrastructure and instantaneous commercial transactions. In the process, conflict diamonds have generated huge personal fortunes for warlords, rebel movements and their regional and international clients. For instance, the Sierra Leone rebel group the RUF’s sale of conflict diamond diamonds by 1999 was estimated as US$ 70 million. In the case of the Angolan rebel group, UNITA, an estimated US$ 150 million worth of rough diamonds were mined in UNITA controlled territories. In the DRC, approximately US$ 35 million worth of diamonds were produced in rebel-held territories.3 The proceeds from the sale of conflicts diamonds have been used to purchase weapons from Europe and establish strategic alliances. For example, the son

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of the former president of France Jean Francios Mitterand has been indicted for arms trafficking and sales to war-torn Angola. Warlords such as Foday Sankoh of the RUF, Charles Taylor of the NPFL and Jonas Savimbi of UNITA have established trans-continental smuggling and commercial networks that links them to the global financial market. Mark Duffield therefore argues that ‘a high level of complicity among international companies, offshore banking facilities, and Northern governments has assisted the development of war economies. There is a growing symbiotic relationship between zones of stability and instability within the global political economy’. The global dynamics of the contribution of conflicts diamonds in fuelling wars in Africa has therefore focused international attention on what possible role the international community can play in preventing and resolving civil wars.

The ‘New Wars’ Debate and the Analysis of Contemporary Civil Wars

Broadly speaking, the role of conflict diamonds in fanning the flames of civil wars in Africa is a manifestation of what Mary Kaldor has conceptualised as ‘New Wars’ or the character of contemporary internal wars. The international policy and academic discourse has focused on the nature and character of the new asymmetrical warfare within the context of globalisation in the 1990s in Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America. It is argues that the consequences of globalisation have compounded the governance capacity of weak states and in extreme cases have led to the collapse of the state apparatus and the privatisation of security. The ‘official state’ can therefore longer serve as the primary security provider. The World Bank-sponsored edited volume by M. Berdal and D. Malone (ed.) *Greed and Grievance: Economic Agendas in Civil War* (2000) further explores the theme of Kaldor’s ‘New Wars’ agenda with a specific focus on ‘how they are financed’. The conclusion is that these ‘new wars’ are not only different from the ‘old wars’ in terms of ‘their goals’ and ‘the methods of warfare’, but that ‘greed seems more important than grievances’. This is an attempt to bring to the attention of international policy makers the often neglected aspect of the economic agendas behind civil wars. To justify their claim, Collier and Hoeffler used

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the ‘probit model’ to predict the likelihood of civil war over the 1965-1995 period in terms of variables such as primary commodities endowment, level of youth unemployment and education, and proxy grievances. In effect, economic motivations are regarded as the primary cause of some of the ‘new wars’. The economic agendas of the key stakeholders and groups who benefit therefore wish to perpetuate the wars. The edited volume however makes the point that it is the interaction between greed and grievance that is significant, in which ‘greed generates grievances and rebellion, legitimising further greed’. It is this kind of claim about the ‘new wars’ that has largely informed international policy response to civil wars in Africa. It becomes evident that motivations of economic gain is an inadequate explanatory variable of post-Cold War conflicts. A more plausible interpretation is that economic and political exclusion and perceived injustice or fundamental grievances are the reasons for the majority of these ‘new wars’.

Conflict Diamonds: Simplistic Analysis of African Conflicts

The international focus on conflict diamonds or ‘greed’ as the main reason for civil wars in African has been dismissed by some analysts as a rather simplistic interpretation of the fundamental causes of African conflicts. The primary concern, according to Jenny Pearce, is that ‘The claim that grievance is only a convenient and externally palatable narrative which armed groups use to conceal their real motivations of greed, may begin to influence northern policy makers in ways that lead them to simplistic and ill-defined solutions’, as manifested by the EU. The concerns raised by Pearce have already been borne out by the spectacular failures of civil war peace settlements in both Angola and Sierra Leone.

The complexity of the ‘new wars’ and the inability of international organisations such as the UN and OAU to resolve these civil wars have foistered on the international community the imperative to ‘do something about these protracted eyesores that perpetually offend the western liberal sentiments through the CNN

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8 David Keen, ‘Incentives and Disincentives for Violence’ in Berdal & Malone, op cit, p. 32.
Effect’. Western governments and NGOs have been in the vanguard promoting the campaign against conflict diamonds. Global Witness in collaboration with key western governments such as Britain, Canada and America have been instrumental in promoting the campaign to conscientise consumers of the role played by war diamonds in fuelling Africa’s bloody conflicts. The Partnership Africa Canada (PAC) report entitled *The Heart of the Matter: Sierra Leone, Diamonds and Human Security* (2000) and the Fowler Report (2000) on Angola collectively helped to focus international attention about the contribution of strategic minerals to civil wars in Africa.  

The Fowler Report in particular established how African leaders have been covertly fuelling the war in Angola by supplying arms and other war fighting logistics in return for payment in diamonds. The diamonds industry and trading centres such as Antwerp, London and Tel Aviv have all been implicated in the purchase of conflict diamonds.

The international debate generated by conflict diamonds and the complicity of the diamond industry brought to the fore the dilemma between the protection of legitimate diamond trade and how to stop diamonds financing wars. The response of the diamond industry, led by De Beers which controls about 60% of the US$7 billion a year world market for uncut diamonds, is to champion the campaign against conflict diamonds. De Beers however argues that the estimate for conflict diamonds is only a mere 4% of the total global diamond production. The World Diamond Council, in collaboration with governments has organised a series of international conferences in an attempt at self-regulation. The fear of consumer backlash, as it happened to the Fur trade seem to be the driving force for the proactive stance taken by the diamond industry. These conferences brought together the primary stakeholders such as producing, processing, transit and importing countries, and the key players in the diamond industry. The objective has been to build a consensus on the need for an international certification scheme for rough diamonds. But what is underpinning this kind of response?

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Conflict Diamonds as Entry-Point for International Response

The rationale underpinning this kind of response to African conflicts is based on the need to reduce the profitability of war to the stakeholders by denying access of conflict diamonds to the world market. It becomes evident that the focus on conflict diamonds provides a useful entry-point for the international community in terms of responding to African conflicts. What the focus on conflict diamonds does is to provide an entry-point that is realistically ‘do-able’, a short-term response with an exit strategy. It is therefore not surprising that the response of the international community has been to impose a UN ban on the purchase of conflict diamonds in war-torn societies and the establishment of a international certification scheme to regulate the illegal diamond trade. But will this kind of international response end the wars in Africa? Even the global certification scheme is fraught with practical difficulties because such a certificate would only possibly show where diamonds were bought not where mined. Furthermore, gems are too small, portable and easy to hide. The porous nature of African borders would create serious difficulties in terms of implementation. Another crucial obstacle is how to balance the economic interests of the diamond producing and importing countries. In the case of Sierra Leone, the practical implementation of international diamond certification scheme still remains question. What is more, the UN ban and international certification scheme are solutions conceived from outside Africa, and thus a reflection of external, top-down approach to preventing and resolving African conflicts.

What the case study of Sierra Leone, DRC and Angola illustrate is the fact that these civil wars are not only about ‘greed’ or strategic minerals such as diamonds, gold and oil, but essentially about fundamental political, economic and socio-cultural grievances. One would want to know why in the case of Sierra Leone, even thought diamonds have been discovered in the 1930s the state did not degenerate into civil war in the pre-1991 era. This therefore begs the question of whether ‘greed’ or ‘grievance’ is the primary cause of African conflicts. What is important is that this rather simplistic analysis of the causes of African conflicts has led to inappropriate policy response and ill-defined solutions.
Some political analysts argue that the international focus on conflict diamonds is an attempt to protect the legitimate diamond trade and arms industry. They argue that conflicts diamonds are only but one aspect of the dynamics of the ‘new wars’, and such a focus fails to acknowledge the blurred boundaries of the ‘greed’ and ‘grievances’ nexus. Mike Bourne therefore argues that this approach potentially dissociate the ‘conflict diamond trade from the full range of structures of power and profit from which it results’. Also, the international community has paid limited attention to the link between conflict diamonds and other aspects of war economies and illicit trade. The war economies’ barter system has also involved other commodities which are exchanged for arms. Timber and agricultural products such as coffee have been traded for arms by rebel factions. For example, Charles Taylor as warlord between 1989 and 1997 supplied a third of France’s tropical hardwood requirements through French companies. These commodities also facilitate arms transfer to African conflict zones. The valid point is that diamonds are not the only incentive for war. It is however lamentable that the role played by other commodities and their inextricable link with conflict diamonds have not been acknowledge, let alone addressed. The international response to deny conflict diamonds access to world market will only begin to be successful if the interface between the legal and illegal trades that fuel wars in Africa is addressed. What is disheartening is the fact that in spite of all the international media-hype and focus on conflict diamonds, not constructive effort is made to link conflict diamonds and the need to stop illegal sale and shipment of arms to Africa. No one seem to be concerned with the role of arms smuggling and drug trafficking in fuelling wars in Africa. This noticeable neglect give the impression that by excessively focusing on conflict diamonds, the West is primarily concerned about protecting the legitimate diamond trade for fear of consumer backlash and also that of the arms industry, both of which are multi-billion dollar commercial enterprises of vital importance to their economies. Some cynics would argue that the

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12 Mike Bourne, *op. cit.* p. 4.
13 Mark Duffield, *op. cit.*
political and economic self-interests of Western governments are the driving force for the campaign against conflict diamonds.

*Conflict Diamonds as Donor-Driven Analysis of African Conflicts*

It becomes abundantly clear that the excessive focus on conflict diamonds is unhelpful in understanding the fundamental causes of African conflicts. What this focus does is to shift the debate from the traditional pigeon-hole analysis of African conflicts as mere tribal or ethnic wars to diamonds or resource-based analysis. The international campaign against conflict diamonds has also become another ‘donor-driven analysis of African conflicts. To illustrate this point, the Finance Minister of Sierra Leone, Dr. James Jonah, in a speech at the German Foundation for International Development in October 2000 simplified the war in Sierra Leone as ‘simply about diamonds’.\(^{14}\) It is obvious that the Finance Minister is merely dancing to the tune of the donor-driver analysis of the war in Sierra Leone. This is not surprising given the role played by key Western governments in leading the campaign against conflict diamonds, the majority of whom are Sierra Leone’s external backers. Ali Mazuri, one of Africa’ leading intellectuals also fall into the trap of the donor-driven analysis of Africa conflict by stating that ‘While Black against White in Africa is a clash over resources, Black against Black is a clash of identities. The thesis here is that racial conflicts in Africa are ultimately economic, whereas tribal wars are ultimately cultural.’\(^{15}\) This donor-driver analysis of African conflicts potentially diverts attention from analytically engaging with the problems that face Africa.

*Investment in Conflict Analysis: Framework for Conflict Prevention*

The above analysis shows that there is considerable need to understand the root causes of African conflicts and the inextricable link between ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’ in perpetuating wars in Africa. This therefore brings to the fore the emerging debate on

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the need to invest in conflict analysis as a new conflict prevention framework. We have seen that inadequate understanding of African conflicts have led to inappropriate policy responses and ill-defined solutions. The legacy of Somalia, Rwanda, Angola, DRC and Sierra Leone are solid reminders of the failure of the international community in responding to and managing African conflicts. The new focus on investment in conflict analysis is to establish a credible and comprehensive understanding of African conflicts. It is argued that providing a realistic and comprehensive understanding of the fundamental causes of African conflicts will feed into the international policy responses to African conflicts and would also facilitate constructive and achievable context-specific solutions to wars and conflicts in Africa. What is more, the investment in understanding the fundamental causes of conflicts in African would provide a framework to track the potential of certain conflicts and their potential to escalate into armed violence or degenerate into civil war over a period of time. What this new conflict prevention framework provides is to offer early warning and suggest what appropriate policy responses at national and international levels before armed violence and the greed agenda sets in. This is the future of Africa’s conflict prevention given the astronomical costs of wars and post-war reconstruction. It is a less expensive framework for peace and stability in Africa, but unfortunately this kind of conflict prevention framework hardly receive political support because it is often seen by politicians not as a ‘big issue’.

Conclusion

It was the Roman General, Scipio Africanus who once said that there is always something new for Africa. We have seen how decades of international policy response to Africa has led to what The Economist magazine described as ‘The Hopeless Continent’. The majority of these proposed ‘outsiders cure’ for preventing, managing and resolving African conflicts have sometimes aggravated or protracted the conflicts. It goes without saying that inappropriate international policy response and ill-defined solutions have played their part in making Africa what it is today. But all is not lost for Africa. The new conflict resolution framework that emphasis on investment in conflict

analysis is part of the wider approach based on utilising indigenous resources and capacity for conflict prevention, management and resolution. The most valuable contribution of investment in conflict analysis is that it provides the opportunity for African realism to feed into the international policy response on Africa conflicts. It is a radical departure from the previous approach whereby international policy prescription for Africa were formulated without consultation with Africans at any level below the narrow ruling and governing elites. From a broader perspective, this is part of the new partnership for Africa, and according to the British Prime Minister, ‘We need a new partnership for Africa, in which Africans lead but the rest of the world is committed’.  

Tony Blair, speech at the UN Millenium Summit, New York, September 2000.