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Book Review: Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment

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BOOK REVIEW

Abiodun Alao, *Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Tragedy of Endowment*.
Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007.

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In this book, Abiodun Alao explored the relationship between natural resources and conflicts in resource rich African countries. The fact that several domestic conflicts on the African continent have been associated in one way or the other with competition over the control of natural resources, have given some credence to the popular notion of a “resource curse” on resource rich African countries. The assumption, specifically, is that the mere existence of a valuable and highly sought after natural resource, is enough to trigger and perpetuate violent conflicts in African countries. Alao takes this as his point of departure and proceeds in a very methodical fashion, to debunk that assumption in a theoretically sophisticated, analytically rich, and highly detailed study. He concludes that it is not the mere existence of a particular natural resource, or the scarcity or abundance of the resource that causes or prolongs conflicts, but the weakness or absence of a credible, effective and trustworthy natural resource governance mechanism, that determines the nature and extent of violent conflicts associated with that particular resource.

To achieve this goal, Alao sets out four clear objectives: to lay out the contextual focus for the relationship between natural resources and conflicts; explore the conceptual linkages between natural resources and conflicts; demonstrate how the mechanisms of natural resource governance, in terms of contexts and contents, help to explain the connection between conflicts and natural resources; and finally, to locate the discussion within the historical context of post-cold war Africa. Each of the subsequent chapters was organized to achieve these objectives. A consistent thread running through all the chapters is Alao’s central arguments, that: (1) current explanations of the linkage between natural resources and conflicts, that ignore the relationship between natural resources, the causes, prolongation and resolution of conflicts, are narrow and insufficient; (2) level of technological advancements and extent of the use of technology in the exploration of natural resources help to explain the pattern and nature of some African conflicts; and (3) the nature of the governance of

natural resources, not just democratization of the political superstructures, “is central to how natural resources become linked to conflict.” (p. 15)

In conceptualizing natural resources, Alao departs from traditional definition and categorizations of natural resources, broadly defined as renewable and non-renewable. He defines natural resources “as non-artificial products situated on or beneath the soil, which can be extracted, harvested, or used and whose extraction, harvest, or usage generates income or serves other functional purposes in benefiting mankind.” (p.16) These include land, solid minerals, petroleum, water, water resources, and animal stock. He categorized natural resources as “existence-dependence,” such as water and land; and “comfort-dependent,” such as oil and solid minerals. Valuation and importance of a particular natural resource is said to be culturally determined. Therefore, the more value a culture associates with a resource, the more prone to conflicts and the extent of associated violence. Alao also categorized levels of conflicts over natural resources as, intrastate communal; interstate communal; intrastate state government vs. community; community vs. multinational corporations; and interstate government vs. government, conflicts. At this level of specificity, one begins to appreciate the complexity of multiple actors and issues associated with natural resource conflicts.

By their nature, the studies of natural resource use and management require interdisciplinary tools, because the critical issues involved cross traditional disciplinary. In this case, Alao’s approach to his subject recognizes the relevance and impact of the disciplines of geography, geology, environmental studies, security, political science, law, international relations, economics, sociology, and history. This greatly helps his attempt to provide a holistic explanation of the conditions under which natural resources are linked to violent conflicts, how natural resources are used to prolong violent conflicts and the extent to which natural resources can also be used in the search for peace.

In a detailed and focused study of four classes of natural resources—land, solid minerals, oil and water—Alao demonstrates how a multiplicity of actors, both governmental and non-governmental, at the local, national, regional and international levels, become involved in the contestation over control, ownership, management, extraction, revenue sharing, and enforcement of laws, concerning natural resources. This diverse group of actors include: *local communities* who demand recognition of communal land tenure rights, control and/or equitable revenue sharing of natural resources located on those lands; *multinational corporations* and *foreign nationals* engaged in the acquisition and exploration of natural resources; *central governments* and *political elites* who monopolize the control of natural resources and revenue from them; *warlords*

and *criminal gangs* who initiate violent conflicts to control sources of natural resources and then use revenue from their sale to prolong conflicts; *foreign governments* with strategic interests in natural resources; *international financial institutions* who as part of the demand for neo-liberal economic reforms, require African states to deregulate resource governance and privatize resource management; and finally, domestic and international *civil society organizations* who come to the aid of marginalized and suppressed minority communities in their struggles with central governments and multinational corporations.

According to Alao, most of these contestations take place usually within states, but external actors occasionally become involved, such as, in cases of internationally shared water resources (River Nile or Lake Chad), attempts by regional neighbors to exploit the instability or weak political structures of resource rich neighbors (Uganda and Rwanda in the DRC, and Liberia in Sierra Leone), when a resource rich neighbor decides to use its wealth to support intervention in the internal conflict of a weaker neighbor (Nigeria in Sierra Leone and Liberia), or when international organizations such as the United Nations and the African Union impose sanctions on belligerent states or warlords by restricting their abilities to sell natural resources in the international market (UN sanctions on Jonas Savimbi and UNITA in Angola, Charles Taylor in Sierra Leone and the Kimberly Process for blood diamonds).

In all of these cases where natural resources and violent conflicts are linked, Alao finds the popular explanation of a “resource curse” too simplistic and inadequate. Instead, he goes to great lengths in each case to demonstrate convincingly, that there is no correlation between the mere physical presence of natural resources and conflict. In order to explain the occurrence of conflict, some contextual variables must be accounted for. Part of the conflict over land ownership in Southern Africa, he argues, is a consequence of the confusion over the application of incompatible customary African and European land tenure laws, while conflicts over solid minerals often involve competing claims over land on which the minerals are found, and protests over government resource management policies. On solid minerals where conflicts are the most pronounced, Alao argues that warlord activities in Angola, Sierra Leone and Liberia were centered on acquisition of wealth and the use of revenues to acquire weapons to fuel those conflicts, and in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone, external intervention of neighboring states and mercenaries took advantage of weak or non-existent political structures to pilfer the resources of resource-rich states. In oil-rich Nigeria, Alao’s most extensive case study of elite corruption, kleptocracy, and official maladministration, he presents conflict over oil resources as influenced by

the high degree of profitability; environmental consequences of exploration; international status of the resource; involvement of multiple local, national and international actors; and the broader context of the country's ethno-political and socio-economic affairs. Above all else, Alao ascribes the more significant influences on resource conflict in Nigeria to contestations over ownership between the central government and local communities in the Delta region, gross mismanagement of oil proceeds by the state, illegal oil bunkering and theft by political elites, and insensitivity to indigenous culture and needs by both the national government and multinational oil companies.

The most important and most consistent determinant of conflict over all types of natural resource, according to Alao, is without doubt, the nature of governance over those resources. Violent conflicts occur, he argues, when natural resource governance mechanisms break down or do not function as expected. To address these inadequacies, he recommends recognition of the importance of natural resource governance and a comprehensive reform of the natural resource sector. Such reforms must include national constitutions which specifically provide for the control and management of natural resources, an equitable and just distribution of revenues, fair treatment of local and minority groups on whose land the natural resources are found, and respect for an independent judiciary trusted to adjudicate without interference by the central governments. He concludes by re-emphasizing that "the prevalence of violent conflicts over natural resources in African is due largely to the management of these resources" (p. 278) and that even with greater transparencies and democracies, conflicts over natural resources will persist if the governance structures are unfair and disenfranchise local communities.

In other words, we cannot assure that increasing democratization and transparencies alone, while critical to good governance, will automatically resolve or prevent violent conflicts over natural resources. Those democratic structures must be purposefully designed to address the complexity of issues and actors involved in natural resource governance. It is here that Alao makes his most profound contribution to the growing discourse on the linkage between natural resources and violent conflicts in developing countries.

It is often assumed that increasing democratization and transparency of political institutions will be enough to checkmate corrupt political elites and provide multiple access channels for addressing the multiple sources of conflicts, including those over natural resources. Likewise, to address conflicts over internationally shared water resources, such as international river basins, efforts are often concentrated on signing international cooperative agreements and creating international regimes that are expected to prevent conflicts and

encourage cooperation. However, states sometimes withhold cooperation or threaten armed conflicts when existing instruments are perceived to either institutionalize conditions of inequality or impose unacceptable costs. It is therefore critical to understand, as Alao argues, that avoidance of conflicts over natural resources requires, also, specific and purposeful focus on the creation of strong, sustainable and institutionalized natural resource governance mechanisms. These must be deemed to be fair and equitable in their approach to the competing interests and claims of all concerned actors and stakeholders.