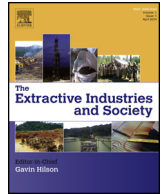




Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

The Extractive Industries and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/exis



Original Article

Oil and conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta region: Between the barrel and the trigger

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 January 2014

Received in revised form 16 March 2014

Keywords:

Oil
Conflict Niger Delta
Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Abundant oil endowment in Africa has largely been associated with high levels of violence and corruption based on the political economy of an oil curse. This article intervenes in the renewed debate sparked by recent oil finds across Africa between those who see oil as a resource for development and others that see oil endowment as presaging the curse of oil—authoritarianism, conflict, corruption in new oil states with dire prospects of replicating the same negative outcomes associated with older oil-endowed African states. It interrogates the “African oil curse” perspective, particularly the way it casts a spell of inevitability, often simplifying a more complex causal linkage between oil endowment and violent conflict and foreclosing the possibility of future change or non-violent developmental outcomes in oil-rich African countries. Drawing on the case of oil-related conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, the article critically examines the causes of one of Africa's complex oil ‘wars’, and comes up with an alternative perspective to the oil curse as the sole explanatory framework for violent conflict in petro-states.

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1. Introduction

Across Africa, oil, gas and minerals are being discovered more often than ever before. Nowhere is the global commodities boom being felt more acutely. . . But sadly, history teaches us that a more destructive path is likely – conflict, spiralling inequality corruption and environmental disasters are far more common consequences of resource bonanzas (Kofi Annan, 2012).

The new oil boom being experienced in parts of West, Central and East Africa continues to fuel concerns in scholarly, policy, security and media circles that the “oil bonanza” will likely perpetrate the “oil curse” across the continent (Annan, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012; Diamond and Mosbacher, 2013). Abundant oil endowment is variously represented as a cause, trigger or incubator for violence, instability, insecurity, corruption and the failure of state institutions in Africa. Some commentators point to Nigeria, Angola, Sudan, Chad and Equatorial Guinea as examples of petro-states afflicted by the oil curse (Alao, 2007; Billon, 2007, 2012; Shaxson, 2007; Kopinski et al., 2013, 584; Yates, 2012).

Hardly a day passes without the international media, multilateral organizations, strategic and policy analysts exploring the economic, geo-strategic or security ramifications of, or seeking solutions to the looming spectre of the oil curse in Africa (Annan, 2012; OSAA Report, 2006; Basedau, 2010, 1–10; Patey, 2010; Oliveira, 2007; Kopinski et al., 2013, 584).

Global attention has been focussed on the linkage between oil and violent conflict in Africa, particularly the threats it poses to strategic, security and economic interests of established and emerging powers in an oil-dependent world. In a testimony to the US House of Representatives, Corinna Gilfillan, Director of the US Office of *Global Witness*, noted that, “. . . the US government has a major role to play in combating the resource curse in Africa. Better governance of natural resources will contribute to stability and economic development in African countries, help protect US national and energy security interests and promote a more stable environment for American companies” (Gilfillan *Global Witness*, 2013). Also of great concern are the likely threats or destabilizing impact that any interruption in oil production and exports from African oil producing states can have on global oil markets and oil-import dependent countries.

Such concerns have grown against the background of an intensified international scramble for oil as well as the intensification of transnational counterterrorism efforts in Africa

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(Obi, 2009, 2010a; Carmody, 2011; Whitlock and Miller, 2011; Pham, 2013, 44–45). They have also grown amid reports on threats linked to the festering insurgency in Nigeria's oil-rich Niger Delta and acts of piracy off its coastal waters (Watts and Ibaba, 2011; Dulue, 2013; Obi and Rustad, 2011; Oriola et al., 2013, 67–96), the conflict between Sudan and newly independent neighbouring South Sudan over the oil-rich border region (Seibt, 2012; Raghavan, 2012; Gettleman, 2012). Other cases include the episodic outbursts of insurgency in Angola's oil-rich Cabinda province, tensions within Uganda oil-rich Lake Albert region (Kathman and Shannon, 2011, 23–45; Vokes, 2012, 303–314), and those between the country and neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) over contested trans-border oil reserves (Katschung, 2007). Also of note are the tensions in East Africa (Anderson and Browne, 2011, 369–410), and the Horn of Africa around oil finds in Somalia (Alic, 2012; Reitano and Shaw, 2013, 666–675; Manson, 2013; Bloice, 2007), and growing concerns over disputed (oil-rich) international boundaries involving Ghana and neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire.

This paper critically examines the reasons often advanced by those who associate oil endowment with violent conflict in Africa. It raises questions relating to the veracity of the claim in the popular press, academic as well as policy circles that abundant oil endowment inevitably leads to, fuels or prolongs violent conflict in Africa. Some scholars, in the fields of economics, political science and international relations have hinged their positions on showing a 'statistical correlation between oil abundance and the onset, duration and intensity of armed conflict' or a causal relationship between resource abundance and weak institutions (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Lujala, 2009, 2010, 15; Ross, 2003; Aslaksen and Torvik, 2006; Obi, 2010a, 483).

Such prognosis often lead to the solutions that are hinged upon the belief that more efficient management/governance of oil resources-based on transparency, accountability and sound investment of oil revenues can 'exorcise' oil cursed petro-economies and countries and set them on the path to democracy, peace and development. Such thinking has informed international policies and campaigns geared towards promoting transparency and accountability in oil transactions between international oil companies and Africa states in the expectation that public access to information about oil deals and earnings will empower civil society and citizens and spur them to demand accountability and good governance from the continent's petro-states.

In exploring the relationship between oil and violent conflict in Africa, this article is divided into four broad parts: the introduction sets out the objectives and scope of the study, while the conceptual section critically reviews the resource curse perspective, focussing on the extent of its usefulness as the dominant framework for explaining the causes and dynamics of violent conflict in oil-rich African countries. The third section largely draws upon the often-cited case of oil-related conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta region to show that explanations of conflict in oil-rich contexts should be more nuanced, historically-rooted and context-specific. It also points to the need to transcend a rather deterministic causal linkage between resource endowment and violent conflict. The concluding section of the paper suggests an alternative and radical explanation for the oil-violence nexus, while coming up with a set of recommendations for transforming the oil curse into a blessing for the majority of African people.

2. The oil curse: a conceptual review

According to Cotet and Tsui (2013, 77), "the resource curse doctrine holds that natural resource wealth is an obstacle to economic and political development." It is hinged upon a causal "relationship between natural resource abundance and conflict

propensity" (Wegenast, 2013, 392). The oil curse perspective defines oil largely in terms of a central role in increasing the risk of violent conflict, poor economic growth, or acting as a disincentive for peace (Basedau and Lay, 2009, 758).

At its core lies the notion of resource/oil abundance as underpinning the motives/opportunities (financial) for rebels to engage in armed conflict, or as a causal factor in (rentier) state or institutional weakness either through the propensity for corruption, misrule, authoritarianism or instability (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Collier, 2007; Rosser, 2006; Fearon, 2005, 483–507; Auty, 2004; Sachs and Warner, 2001; Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2000; Herbst, 2000; Lujala, 2010; Ross, 2003, 2008; Billon, 2007, 163–182).

Lujala (2010, 15) aptly sums up the current state of conceptualizing the resource curse by making a point of distinguishing the two main strands: between resource abundance as a "motivation and means" (incentive) for "rebel uprisings" (armed conflict), and as a causal link to "poor policy choices and a weak state". However, the oil-curse perspective has been subject to criticism, particularly by those that contest its empirical and logical basis. Such opposing views argue that "there is little systematic evidence that oil fuels domestic conflict" (Cotet and Tsui, 2013, 77; Alexeev and Conrad, 2009, 586–598; Basedau and Lay, 2009; Lahiri-Dutt, 2006; Mahler, 2012; Brunnschweiler and Bulte, 2006).

Much of the new emphasis in the dominant resource curse literature relates to the risk, onset, duration and intensity of armed conflict in resource-rich countries, and the exploration of the links between resource endowment and the viability or capacity of rebel groups. Of note in this regard are the works of Rosser (2006, 265–300), Collier and Hoeffler (2005, 37–59), Collier (2007, 21), Humphreys (2005), Lujala and Rustad, 2011, 20–21), De Soysa and Neumayer (2007, 201–218). Lujala (2010, 15–16), study which examines "empirically how the location of natural resources affects armed civil conflict," concludes that "oil substantially prolongs conflict when located inside the conflict zone", thereby rendering oil endowment a critical factor in the location, duration and intensity of armed conflict.

Cotet and Tsui (2013, 50–52) critique the "oil-fuels-war hypothesis" by arguing that studies based on the resource curse "typically do not control for factors that simultaneously affect both variables". They also note that "a high level of oil exports does not systematically affect political violence", but could actually strengthen the performance of the state, while drawing a connection between oil wealth and defence spending by dictatorships. Luong and Weinthal (2010, 6), drawing on cases of oil-rich Soviet successor states, equally dismiss the view that resource wealth fuels negative outcomes by arguing that "mineral rich states are 'cursed' not by their wealth, but rather ownership structure – that is, who owns and controls the mineral sector".

Several issues flow from the foregoing. These suggest that the oil curse perspective contains some conceptual shortcomings that limit its applicability as a framework for explaining the connections between oil and violence in Africa. It is important to note that debates between the protagonists of the oil curse and their critics show that oil endowment is not a sufficient cause of conflict. Oil endowment need not inevitably lead to conflict, it will only be a factor among several based on different contextual and structural factors. It may also combine with such factors to produce positive results, or be part of a combustible mix that triggers conflict.

In Nigeria's Niger Delta ethnic minority region, inter-ethnic tensions preceded the discovery of oil and its eventual emergence as the main source of national revenue. The advent of oil from the 1970s as the chief national revenue earner, becoming an object of inter and intra-ethnic as well as factional struggles for access to power, contributed to the deepening of pre-existing cleavages and

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