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Actors, networks, and globalised assemblages: Rethinking oil, the environment and conflict in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on actor network theory (ANT) and assemblage to interrogate the potential future manifestation of open conflicts due to unresolved latent local socio-economic and political grievances associated with oil exploitation near fishing communities and the implications of oil-related environmental degradation on local livelihoods in the Western Region of Ghana. Drawing on network geographies, this paper argues that the impact of oil on the environment and conflict is conditioned and shaped by a 'globalised assemblage' – interactions between and among states, national, local and transnational actors. Bad policies and (in) actions of government and its agencies, oil companies, and local actors damage the environment and livelihoods and generate displeasure among locals. Consequently, violent conflict can later emerge in Ghana if the latent fisher-folks' grievances remained unresolved because conflicts are not events, but they build over time through complex processes. Unresolved environment challenges compromise livelihoods and create dissatisfaction among locals and can ferment conflicts in communities near the oil fields. Thus, inadequate engagement with locals to appreciate environmental challenges and covert conflicts between locals and government/companies highlights the temporality of oil impacts, where current tensions result in a future open display of resource-infused conflicts.

1. Introduction: natural resource paradox and development

Natural resources can stimulate development. Yet, under certain circumstances, the exploitation, appropriation and utilization of natural resources create difficult environments for development. In the 1990s, some development researchers suggested that natural resources have been a curse ('resource curse'), especially in developing economies [1,2,113]. The curse is elucidated by how natural resources are implicated in economic growth, decline/neglect of agriculture and industry, weak institution and corruption, poverty and inequality, environmental degradation and violent conflict [3–6,1]. Others refer to the inverse connection between natural resource abundance and poverty as a 'paradox of plenty' [7–9] since conventionally, natural resources are supposed to provide development advantages [10–12]. The concerns about resource abundance and development however date backs to 1850s when John Elliot Cairns raised questions about Australia's economy amidst the gold rush [13]. Countries like the US, Australia, and Norway have however used technological advantage to exploit their natural resources to spur industrialization [10]. Hence, the resource curse thesis is a tendency, and not a law [2].

Exploration of natural resources like oil can have diverse impacts, including environmental degradation due to pollution from companies, and violent conflict because of competing individual or group interests for resource windfalls [14,6]. It should be noted that grievance arising from real or perception of being cheated in windfalls distribution, greed and 'mismanagement' to the detriment of locals can lead to resource infused-conflicts [15–17]. This highlights a complex relationship between natural resources, people, and the environment [18–20]. Hence, the explanation of the curse has been extended beyond the econometric approach, to include how natural resources impact and are impacted by the political economy, including the environment and conflicts [21].

Questions are however raised about how the resource curse is produced and manifested temporally and spatially, and the actors that condition it. Drawing on network geographies and assemblages, this paper argues that the impact of oil on development, including the environment and conflict in Ghana is conditioned and shaped by a globalised assemblage – interactions between and among states, transnational, national and local institutions and actors. Globalised assemblage is used here to describe the network of actors in the hydrocarbon industry. This framing is informative and novel as most of the existing literature on the curse suffers from methodological nationalism, where national actors (elites and institutions) are mostly blamed for poor natural resource-based development [22] without critically analyzing how state level actors interact with local and global ones. A network or assemblage is relatively new way of analyzing how several actors (global, national and local) interact to condition and shape the

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problematic impacts of natural resources. Assemblage perspective transcends national governments to examine how global and local factors shape the impact of resources such as oil. In practice, government policies and activities are partly informed by actions of natural resource importing countries and transnational companies, including conditioning resource rich economies as exporters of raw materials and importers of finished products [23–25]. Thus, the analysis of the hydrocarbon industry and how it produces the curse, including conflicts should move beyond the state, to a more nuanced politico-economic interests of winners and losers [26].

Natural resource infused-conflicts transpire where persons or regions, especially where resources are located are cheated or marginalized in windfall allocation. Local persons or communities can sometimes resort to violence to disrupt production or to demand for their share of resource windfalls [5]. Violent conflicts emerge from the use of arms by governments or people over disputed resources or territories [27,28]. For this paper, various questions are raised. What has been the impact of oil exploitation on the environment in Ghana? What local grievances are not being addressed in Ghana's oil sector and what are the implications for future conflicts? Why Ghana has not (yet) experienced oil-related violent conflict? What is unique about Ghana's political economy that potentially insulating it from conflict? Is the country merely deferring open violent conflict associated with oil? Deferred is used here to refer to latent conflicts emanating from grievances with deep-rooted causes that have not been addressed.

Analyzing the impact of oil from an assemblage view is relatively novel since other studies examined the oil industry in Ghana from different perspectives. Obeng-Odoom [29] probed oil and education development in Ghana. Others analyzed thriving sex-trade in Takoradi amidst oil discovery in Ghana [29]. Obeng-Odoom [30] further revealed that Ghana government policy that focused on local businesses providing services to transnational companies in the oil industry is reenforcing systemic inequality and labor exploitation. Ablo [31] analyzed Ghana's oil industry and local business development. Other studies focused on oil and women's livelihoods [32], restricted linkages between oil, other sectors and employment [33,34]. This study however, analyses seeming delayed open manifestation of conflicts due to unresolved latent economic and social grievances linked with oil exploitation, and environmental challenges connected with oil exploitation in fishing communities in Ghana. The rest of the paper discusses assemblages, study area/methods, and the dilemma of seeming open manifestation of delayed conflict and environmental degradation. The conclusion posits that interactions among varied actors condition resource conflicts and the environment.

2. Network theory and assemblages – framing environmental challenges and conflict

The framing of the curse thesis suffers from methodological nationalism where state weaknesses or strengths are mainly credited for natural resource impacts [22,35,36]. Gelb [37] noted that natural resource windfalls during the booms periods (1974–1981) were harmful for the economies of Algeria, Indonesia, Nigeria, Venezuela, Ecuador and Trinidad and Tobago. Mehlum et al. [38] also posited that the manifestation of the curse is conditioned by weak governance and institutions at the time of natural resource discovery. For example, Oliveira [39] noted that in Equatorial Guinea, because of increased revenue from oil, corruption and Dutch Disease (strengthened local currency that favors imports instead of local production) have led to limited economic diversification. This can have negative consequences in the future economic growth of the economy when the oil reserves deplete. When states or individuals capture already existing revenue (rent seeking), especially from natural resources without creating new wealth, this can negatively affect development [40]. There are outlier resource rich economies like Botswana which has a high growth rate due to budget systems and policies that ensures checks on how windfalls are spent and elites (political and technocrats) that are committed to the national development [16]. Further, Wright and Czelusta [10] argued that the US, Australia and Sweden used their advanced technologies to exploit their natural resources for industrialization. While, strong institutions assisted Norway to exploit its oil for development [41]. Within these political economy approaches, meagre economic diversification into manufacturing, rent-seeking that diverts windfalls into private hands, and irrational behavior of the elites via spending of windfalls on exorbitant projects are credited for the adverse impact of natural resources [42,43,35].

Most of the natural resource-based development analyses fail to adequately unpack the hydrocarbon assemblages – interactions between and among transnational companies and actors, energy discourses, national and local institutions, politics and actors and their implications for development. The assemblage can be referred to as a 'natural resource complex'. Focusing on network geographies assist to analyze development as complex process, performed and shaped by a contingent and dynamic assemblage of actors and structures [44,45]. Environmental problems and conflict associated with the extractive industry can be analyzed as an assemblage of transnational, national, local politics and actors, including unresolved grievances and greed [6,40].

Assemblages are notable elements in explaining phenomena since things and events are often interconnected [46–48]. In other words, while things that transpire in specific spaces are imperative in shaping and appreciating events in the particular spaces, other outsider processes and actors can be equally significant. Thus, while a national political economy approach, where interactions among actors and institutions within the state is valuable in understanding natural resources' impacts, it does not unravel all the complex actors outside the state that underpin development outcomes. In order to get the 'bigger picture' about resources-based development, one should scrutinize the network of transnational, state and local actors, and how such complex interactions among them condition resources use and development. Consequently, to grasp how phenomena develop and manifest in spaces, we should focus on networks and connectivities [49–51]. For instance, the environmental degradation and violent conflict that characterized oil exploitation in the Niger Delta in Nigeria can be theorized as the consequence of interactions among transnational, national and local and actors [23,24,52]. Obi and Rustad [53] and Collier [15] maintained that a network approach assists to explore the complex geographies of natural resources impacts – environmental degradation and conflict. Network analysis is vital since it helps to discontinue ascribing matters uniquely to global, national and local actors.

Actor network theory (ANT) problematizes the 'global-national', 'global-local', 'national-local' and 'social-natural' binaries [54]. These a priori categories inherently restrict understanding of complex phenomena such as violent conflicts and the environment. Rigid and reified categories restrict our appreciation of the complex underpinning of issues or events, and there is the need to focus on dynamic, ever-shifting networks, associations, and assemblages that connect events across space and time [55,56]. Phenomena are frequently caught up in web, and interactions within networks shape events [57]. Based on network geographies and assemblages, the hydrocarbon industry that produces and shapes the curse can be analyzed as a 'globalised assemblage' [58]. Globalised assemblage denotes interactions between and among oil exporting and exporting states, transnational companies (TOCs) and actors, environmental discourses, and local politics and actors [59]. Smith [58] viewed the globalised assemblages as the (in)tangible configurations through which global technologies, science, economics and systems gain significance and shape. There are recent works that highlight the networked/assemblage approach to energy-environment conflict [60–62]. Within the assemblage, national economies are influenced and acted upon by external, national and local factors, politics and actors. ANT's network and assemblage [63] therefore help to analyze the impact of oil beyond the national, to include how