



Three strands of explanations on root causes of civil war in low-income and weak states in sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for education



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ABSTRACT

This paper is a theoretical exploration of the relationship between schooling and the root causes of contemporary conflicts in low-income and weak states in sub-Saharan Africa. It does so by exploring three predominant theoretical strands on contemporary intrastate conflict and their implications to education: (1) the 'grievance' explanation; (2) an alternative economic explanation, focusing on the idea of the 'opportunity cost of rebellion'; and (3) a political explanation that shows the role of the ruling elites and the state. The article suggests some theoretical and conceptual insights on examining the ways in which education fuels into the root causes of conflict in low-income and weak states.

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1. Introduction

Most of contemporary internal conflict takes the form of a civil war where the government of a state is one of the warring parties, and it has primarily emerged in low-income and 'weak' states in sub-Saharan Africa. Collier et al. (2003) show that low-income countries (defined as having a *per capita* annual income below US\$745) face 15 times higher risk of civil war than the countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which face only a negligible risk of civil war. Many contemporary civil wars also have taken place in 'weak' states (Berdal and Malone, 2000; World Bank, 2011). Measuring governance with general rule of law and government effectiveness, low corruption, and strong protection of human rights, Fearon (2010) finds that countries with above average governance indicators for their income level have between 30 and 45 percent lower risk of civil conflict outbreaking within the next 5–10 years. Although the number of major conflicts are in a decline since the early 1990s (World Bank, 2011), there is a high risk for re-occurrence in countries once affected by conflict. The World Development Report 2011 states that 90% of the civil wars during

the last decade took place in countries that had already experienced a civil war in the past 30 years (World Bank, 2011). The article focuses on the link between such conflicts and education, more specifically, the formal schooling provided by the state.¹ Knowing how formal schooling can contribute to conflict in such contexts is the first step to avoid education augmenting the already high risk of (re)lapsing into conflict.

It is widely acknowledged that the nature of conflict in Africa has been changing since the end of the Cold War (e.g. Cilliers and Schunemann, 2013; Straus, 2012; World Bank, 2011). Although civil wars remain the predominant form of conflicts in Africa, the lines between criminal violence, political violence, and conflict are becoming increasingly ambiguous (Cilliers and Schunemann, 2013; World Bank, 2011). In Sierra Leone, for instance, rebels and the government army had increasingly recruited a fluid but essentially the same group of marginalised youth, who switched sides at their convenience (see Keen, 2005; SLTRC, 2004). Straus (2012) summarises the nature of today's conflict as "Today's wars are typically fought on the peripheries of states, and insurgents

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¹ By 'education' in this article, I only refer to the form of formal schooling provided by the state in this review, although this does not mean by any means that other forms of education and training are relevant to conflict (see, for example, Brock, 2011; Pagen, 2011; Hammond, 1998). It is simply that there is no scope for the article to deal with other forms of education.

tend to be militarily weak and factionalized” (p. 181). The end of the Cold War also meant the loss of external funding from superpower rivalries. For armed groups, accessing and controlling high value natural resources becomes an important part of securing funding for themselves and perpetuating the conflict (e.g. UNEP, 2006). This also relates to the downscaling of conflicts, because the fighting groups do not have the strength to launch a large-scale fight nor to challenge the dominant party in capital. The ‘resource-based insurgencies’ also have strong transnational characteristics economically, politically and in terms of fighting forces. They rely on illicit trade of resources and arms (Cilliers and Schunemann, 2013; Berdal and Malone, 2000) and the fighters move around countries joining different rebel movements (Hoffman, 2011). As such, even though they are called ‘civil wars’ which by definition means an internal conflict, the current conflicts are often regionalised and internationalised.

There have been lively debates over the root causes and risk factors to contemporary civil conflicts in the last decades to understand the changing nature of conflicts (e.g. Kaplan, 1994; Huntington, 1996; Berdal and Malone, 2000; Collier and Hoeffler, 2000, 2004). It has become clear that these new forms of conflict are not fully comprehensible in the traditional models or under the common assumptions of civil war. Traditionally civil war, for one, has been presented as a contest of two competing professional armies, civilians being bystanders. And these two competing armies are presented as each, homogeneous group, seeking to “win the war” and “defeat the enemy” (Keen, 2000, p. 26). It has also been portrayed to be driven by political grievances and aim, which is to take control of the state (Keen, 2000). However, civil wars in low-income and weak states were not in many cases a simple contest between two sides, either rebels versus government forces or between two rival ethnic groups, as discussed above. It has also come to be recognised that economic dimensions of conflict ‘war economies’ are essential in fully understanding the nature – as well as political ideologies and grievances – (see Keen, 1998; Reno, 1998; Collier and Hoeffler, 1998; Berdal and Malone, 2000).²

Education has an important role to play in such conflicts. On the one hand, education or training is seen as a way to meaningfully engage youth and to reduce the conflict risks. There is a growing concern, evident in the way in which international donor assistance is increasingly tied to security agendas (Novelli, 2010). Youth are often the largest population cohort in weak states or conflict-affected countries and leaving them ‘idle’ by failing to provide them with education or training if not employment may increase the risks of social and political instability (World Bank, 2006, 2009; Matsumoto, 2011). However, education can also be a factor that fuels violent conflict. Education has often appeared as a relevant factor to contemporary conflict (e.g. Collier and Hoeffler, 2000, 2004; Thyne, 2006; Barakat and Urdal, 2009; Stewart, 2002b; Richards, 1996; Keen, 2005). Education is discussed there as a factor that can increase the risk as well as reducing it. There have also been more and more studies in the field of education and conflict focusing on the link of education to the root causes and pathways to contemporary conflict, engaging with the literature above (Smith, 2005; Novelli and Cardozo, 2008; Ostby and Urdal, 2010; Hilker, 2010; Brown, 2010; King, 2014; Burde, 2014). In particular, Ostby and Urdal (2010) identified the theoretical propositions related to levels, expansion and inequality to education and examined the empirical data available for each of the various propositions about connection between education and conflict. In turn King (2014), focusing on Rwanda, identified theoretically the pathways

through which education intertwines with the root causes and development of identity-based conflicts.

Nevertheless, our theoretical and conceptual understanding of how education can play into the root causes of conflicts in low-income and weak states is still limited and the strengthening of this aspect is seen as necessary to further solidify the field (Rappleye and Paulson, 2007; Davies, 2005). Therefore, building on the literature above, this article focuses primarily on two tasks. First, identifying the features of education in relationship to other conditions in society articulated in the available theories on the root causes of conflict. Many agree that education alone does not instigate conflict (e.g. Hilker, 2010; Arlow, 2004; Gurr, 1970), and yet, the existing literature has tended to point out isolated features of the educational system – e.g. curriculum, access issues – treating them as independent indicators (see Matsumoto, 2015). We need to be able to articulate the conditions that ‘activate’ the connection: understand not only what kind of educational provision is relevant to conflict but when it becomes relevant. Second, it suggests the areas or units of analysis that should be examined (in depth) in current theoretical accounts in order to understand more comprehensively the ways in which education might be fuelling the root causes of conflict. The limited available knowledge implies that the provision of education, even if it is seen as a key tool to promote peace, stability and development, might be fuelling a (second) cycle of conflict there without realising this. As mentioned above, low-income and weak states (that have been affected by conflict) are considered to have a high risk of (re)lapsing into a cycle of conflict and we need to understand the role of education in this increased risk.

The article will explore the relationship of formal schooling to the *root causes*, defined as *initial* factors and circumstances that fuel conflict, among all the pathways in which education may contribute to conflict. The article does not cover a whole range of contemporary conflict either, but focuses on civil wars in low-income and weak states in sub-Saharan Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa has been the scene of many civil wars; nearly 20 countries, or about 40 percent of the region, have experienced at least one, between 1960 and 2000 (Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2000). This is not to say that sub-Saharan African has more or longer conflicts compared to other regions of the world. On the contrary, as said above, conflict in this region is reducing and less frequent. However, it is the continent where a significant change in the nature of conflict is being witnessed and thereby many scholarly debates making reference to the region (e.g. Kaplan, 1994; Berdal and Malone, 2000; Keen, 1998; Collier and Hoeffler, 2000, 2004). Also the article focuses on the form of civil war as a ‘discrete category’ although, as recognised above, many of the civil wars are regionalised and internationalised. We still need to deepen our understanding of contemporary internal conflict; there are issues in and about the country that might account for when a civil war not only breaks out but also perpetuates in one country but does not do so in another country. For instance, referring to the case of civil war in Sierra Leone, Keen (2005) states that “[i]f the war sometimes resembled a virus spreading from Liberia, it was the weakness of the Sierra Leonean “body” that allowed it to spread so quickly and widely” (p. 58). Understanding and tackling the issues within the country will help it become more resistant to the external risk factors.

The article explores in depth three major strands of theories on the root causes of contemporary civil war in low-income and weak states. The exploration is deliberately selective focusing on the conceptual discussion of this particular aspect of the education and conflict connection. The first strand of the explanations represents the ‘grievance’ approach, a conventional explanation of conflict, and mainly draws on the idea of ‘horizontal inequalities (HIs)’ by Stewart (e.g. 2008a) and ‘relative deprivation’ by Gurr (1970). While Gurr (1970) is seen as a ‘classic’ approach explaining political

² This is not to say that economic interests implied in conflicts have not been acknowledged in earlier literature or in other types of conflicts.

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