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FEATURE STORY

Confronting Conflict and Fragility in Africa

July 5, 2015



Internally Displaced People, affected by flooding and clan conflict, wait for a food handout in a camp near the town of Jowhar, Somalia, on November 12, 2013.

AU UN IST Photo / Tobin Jones

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- *On June 8 and 9, more than 100 scholars and policymakers gathered at The University of California at Berkeley for the second edition of the Annual Bank Conference on Africa (ABCA).*
- *Organized jointly by the Center for Effective Global Action (CEGA) and the World Bank's Office of the Chief Economist for the Africa Region, the conference focused on the causes and impacts of conflict and fragility in sub-Saharan Africa.*

- *The Annual Bank Conference on Africa is held each year with a different academic partner and thematic focus.*

WASHINGTON, July 5, 2015 - Over the past two decades, GDP growth in Africa has been impressive. But while the narrative of “Africa rising” seems to have dominated the news, violence and conflict continue to affect many countries on the continent. Consider this: On the most recent list of fragile situations around the world, just over half are in sub-Saharan Africa. And while violent deaths due to conflict decreased markedly in the mid-2000s, the figure has been rising steadily since 2012. The Ebola outbreak in West Africa also served as a strong reminder of the vulnerability of some countries when faced with a shock of this nature.

“Conflict and fragility exact a costly toll on the economies of Africa. As we scale up our operational work in fragile states, a better understanding of the causes and impacts of conflict and fragility can help to prevent some of the deadly conflicts at the community level,” said Makhtar Diop, the World Bank Vice President of the Africa Region, who delivered the conference’s [opening remarks](#).

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Makhtar Diop
Vice President of the Africa Region, The World Bank

The nature of conflict in Africa has changed, with increasingly organized terrorist groups - which do not operate as armies and are targeting civilians - responsible for more than a third of total political violence in 2014. In the same time period, violence between states has fallen.

“The shifts in the nature and geographical distribution of conflict across Africa make identifying both the causes of conflict and the ways to help countries avoid and end these conflicts, ever more challenging. And make this conference even more timely,” said Francisco Ferreira, the World Bank Chief Economist for the Africa Region.

“In addition to its huge human cost, conflict is associated with lower [GDP] growth and can create what we call a ‘poverty trap,’ meaning that a country remains “stuck at a low-level equilibrium. If you look at the distribution of growth rates across Africa between 1995 and 2013, there are a few countries with negative [growth] rates, including Sudan, South Sudan and the Central African Republic - and, not surprisingly, these are all countries which have experienced conflict in recent years,” Ferreira adds.

According to Edward Miguel, CEGA Director and Professor of Economics at UC Berkeley, who gave the [keynote address](#), while conflict is the central issue of politics and people’s lives, it has been ignored as a factor in economic research for too long. “Over the past 10 years, however, there has been an explosion of research in this area, with economists, political scientists, geographers, historians, anthropologists all trying to understand the underlying mechanisms of conflict and tackle the issue together,” he notes. Miguel’s own research, for example, shows strong evidence linking climate change to human conflicts in Africa.

Miguel and other scholars find the Annual Bank Conference on Africa not merely a place for academics to debate their latest research but a forum to help inform policies. Miguel highlighted the research of Thiemo Fetzer, a PhD student at the London School of Economics, on the National Rural Employment Guarantee (NREGA), a public employment program in India that provided an alternative source of income following bad harvests by guaranteeing 100 days of employment at a minimum wage. The NREGA was particularly effective in mitigating the effects of adverse productivity shocks as a

cause of conflict. Says Miguel: "In the case of African development, one of the things that's very discouraging is how few social programs there are which look like an attempt to provide some basic form of income for rural residents, say, in a drought year. Botswana is one of the few countries to have a drought response program and that's a gap in policy."

The recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa was also on everyone's minds. David Evans, a senior economist in the World Bank's Office of the Chief Economist for the Africa Region, talked about the promise and pitfalls of estimating the economic impact of Ebola: "Ebola's impact in sickness and death is accompanied by dramatic economic impacts, which bring their own adverse impact in terms of hunger as well as access to education and health services. These secondary impacts are difficult to predict but key to designing an effective, holistic response," he says.

More than 50 research papers were presented during the two-day event, a number of which were submitted by young scholars and graduate students. Kweku Opoku-Agyemang, a Ghanaian scholar and postdoctoral fellow at the Blum Center for Developing Economies at UC Berkeley, presented compelling evidence - based on surveys of truck drivers on the route linking Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, to Tema, a main port in Ghana - that increasing the salaries of police and customs officials can actually worsen petty corruption. Obviously, this is the opposite effect of the intended policy, which was based on the assumption that doubling the salaries of police overnight would prevent extortion on the highway.

For Rachidi Radji, the World Bank Country Manager for Burundi, a country that has experienced wrenching political turmoil in recent weeks, the topic of the conference was especially timely. "The research that has been presented should inform our work on the ground," he said. "The take-away from this conference is that it's not only fundamental to treat the symptoms of conflict but, first and foremost, to think about its roots."

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