Managing and Resolving African Conflicts
A Critical Review

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1. Introduction

In 1997, the Secretary-General of the United Nations made a report to this international body about the state of affairs in Africa. In his report Mr. Kofi Annan noted that, since 1970, more than 30 wars erupted in Africa with most of them being intra-state. He went on and noted that, in 1996 alone, 14 of the 53 countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, which accounted for more than half of all war-related deaths worldwide and resulting in more than 8 million refugees, returnees and displaced persons (Annan, 1997: 2).

When one looks at the current state of play in the continent, it becomes clear that little has changed since the report was issued. Consider in this regard, the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where there is more than a million internally displaced people, with another 117,000 having taken refuge in neighbouring Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia (Skau, 2000: 1). The war situation in Angola is also threatening as the government intensifies its campaign to wipe out the Union for Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the humanitarian situation is worsening. Recently, the World Food Programme (WFP) in Angola stated that whilst the number of needy people is increasing at alarming rates, the level of donor assistance is becoming lower (Peace Monitor, 2000: 5). These few examples reflect the nature of contemporary conflicts in Africa and the need to deepen our attempts to understand them.

In order to fully understand Africa’s contemporary state of affairs and therefore construct proper analysis, it is important to note the context within which such conflicts are taking place. That is, within the context of a Post-Cold War world where super-power conflict is no longer the order of the day. Whereas the conflicts that occurred in Africa during the Cold War might have been exacerbated by super-power rivalry, the Post Cold War conflicts could be linked to regional instability, political disunity and weak state structures (Miall et al, 2000: 71).

It is equally important to note that although a number of conflicts in Africa might have come to an end following the withdrawal of external super power support; some indeed continued, manifesting themselves in a different character and becoming more chaotic (ibid.). The end of the Cold War also saw the reduction or complete withdrawal of foreign powers in Africa's conflict and only to be replaced by what is better known as private military companies. It is within this context that we would like to focus our attention on a conflict analysis tool referred to as the Protracted Social Conflict (PSC). This approach would enable us to understand the contemporary conflict in Africa from a broader perspective, thus jettisoning the common trend of defining Africa's conflicts as exclusively ethnic or exclusively external (Solomon, 1999: 34-5).

2. Protracted Social Conflict

The theory of protracted social conflict refers to the ‘prolonged and often violent struggle by communal groups for such basic needs as security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation’ (Miall et al 2000:71). The common feature of PSC is that societies or political formations residing within similar borders clash against each other.
It is through the PSC that we can understand that complex processes rather than one singular factor often lead to conflicts in Africa (Solomon, 1999:35). For instance, one could argue that the Angolan conflict is embedded in ethnicity because the Ovimbundu population, which constitutes the majority, feels marginalized by the ruling elite. Or, one could argue that the conflict is a struggle for more openness or democracy in Angola against a repressive government (Baregu, 2000: 35; Solomon, 2000: 4). Lastly, it could be argued that the conflict is as a result of economic greed because of Angola's mineral resources in the form of oil and diamond. All these factors combined instead of a single one of them could go a long way towards offering a deeper understanding of the war.

Within this PSC theory we are able to state that conflicts have been a result of competition over the control of the state machinery, which is a guarantor of access to necessary resources for survival. In most African countries, the state is a powerful institution as it determines who has access to what resources and how. What is often discovered is that, one group's control of the state would hold sway vis-à-vis other groups in society. Therefore, various groups would compete over the control of the state either to secure their political rights or to ensure their access to material resources. In most cases the pursuit of these ends result in the 'aggrieved' party either wanting to assume full control of the state apparatus or separation from that state. Increasingly we have witnessed the emergence of secessionist movements in some parts of Africa. The conflict in Comoros Islands or the Caprivi separatist movement in Namibia could be the cases in point.

Furthermore, the fight for control of the state machinery manifests itself in various forms and this prolongs the conflict. That is, in one state it can take the form of a group of people organizing themselves along ethnic lines in another it could be a coalition of various groups against those in control of the state machinery.

The desire to have these needs met is normally pursued collectively and when such needs are not met the end result is a prolonged conflict. Consider in this regard, the ongoing war in the Sudan between the government in Khartoum and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) or the Angolan civil war between the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) government and UNITA. Both of these conflicts have dragged on because either party thought that none of their interests or grievances have been thus far, served.

Often, intra-state conflicts in Africa have also assumed a regional connotation, which further fuel the conflict. That is, most intra-state conflicts have had spillover effects to other neighbouring countries thus making them more complex. The spill over effects of a conflict manifest themselves in varying ways, inter alia, in the form of massive population movement between borders and proliferation of arms. In some cases, the spill over effects of internal conflicts has resulted in some neighbouring states directly supporting any one of the conflicting parties in that country. The current situation in Angola and the DRC are cases in point. In the Angola conflict, cross border raids into Namibia have resulted in increased insecurity in Namibia where attacks of civilians have been reported. This situation has affected Namibia's internal stability but it also has huge repercussions for the country's standing in the region and indeed internationally.

Having broadly looked at the nature of conflicts in Africa and how these should be understood, the next section of this paper focuses on the 'spectrum' of handling conflicts. This is done through defining the concept from conflict prevention to post-conflict reconstruction whilst simultaneously exploring their relevance to contemporary African conflicts.
3. **Conflict Prevention**

Conflict prevention refers to those actions taken in order to pre-empt, deter and contain conflict. From an operational point of view, the concept refers to planned initiatives to resolve disputes before they arise by using pre-acquired information of the situation and backed up resources to pull through. The main assumption concerning the undertaking of conflict prevention is that political will exists to unleash the necessary resources. Secondly, the more important assumption is that there exists an early warning capability that would give indication of disputes and inform the prevention itself.

It is easy to associate the term with Preventive Diplomacy that refers to the same kind of activities but with an emphasised statistic approach. Conflict prevention activities would encompass both track one and track two initiatives which gives a more wider application than Preventive Diplomacy. For conflict prevention to be fully realised, the assumption would be that there exists a pool of competent resources in the form of active civil society to initiate and undertake second track initiatives. The main motivation for advocating a multi-pronged approach is coined on the belief, based on experience, that the involvement of civil society initiatives can and does reach where statistic initiatives fail.

Appraising the prevention of conflict in Africa reveals that there have been major advances in the detection of conflicts with specific mention of the establishment of an Early Warning capability within the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution of OAU. Whilst there are issues to be resolved on the full and effective operationalization of this capacity it is commendable that there is something to build on. Key issues to be resolved include the working relationship with subregional bodies. On another level of concern is the minimal recognition of civil society initiatives for conflict prevention on the continent. Whilst there is truth in the justification that civil society has not fully developed to possess the credibility and competence to undertake such initiatives there is concern at the slow pace of which this track two option seems to have permeated conflict prevention thinking and practice.

4. **Conflict Management**

Conflict management refers to the containment of a conflict that has already broken out in the form of searching for solutions that would reduce the levels of violence and prevent its escalation. This refers to all activities associated with the temporary addressing of the causes of the conflict with the main objective being the creation of space for the long-term resolution of the root causes of the conflict. Principal amongst these is peacekeeping which provides a cessation of hostilities whilst more profound means are sought to bring a comprehensive framework to address social, political and economic disputes. For this to happen, an array of peacemaking initiatives must be taken to bring the parties to the conflict to the point where they agree to the temporary "peace".

Peacemaking in Africa is taken very seriously as can be testified by the existence of many structures that can be called upon to play such a role. Of the many structures that exist, from OAU to sub-regional arrangements, peacemaking is besieged by the inability to translate such initiatives with appropriate further commitment. Whilst peacemaking activities are always undertaken by regional and sub-regional initiative there is general failure to complete the cycle by failing to lend the necessary resources to peacekeeping. This compromises the conflict management efforts although this cannot be said in isolation of the non-availability of
resources for such operations and the general expectation of not forthcoming co-operation from UN in this regard.

5. **Conflict Resolution**

Conflict resolution refers to a plethora of activities aimed at addressing the root causes of a dispute that led to the conflict. As the causes may vary and be drawn from different sources the operational resolution of conflict calls upon a multi-faceted response from different components if not approaches. In short this alludes to calling upon different expertise to address the economic, social and political causes of the conflict as they manifest themselves. Resolution of conflict, as presented here above, gives the correct impression that it can only succeed with the intense involvement of the polity in question. This means that ideas of solutions to the conflict must be conceived or at least agreed upon by the locals. The role of outsiders must be a benevolent one informed by the willingness to support the process of conceiving of these ideas and providing resources to translate them into solutions. Conflict resolution, as any components in the conflict spectrum, must be viewed as dynamic and therefore not in isolation from the other activities aimed at continuously containing the conflict and finding solutions.

An evaluation of resolution of conflicts on the continent shows that very little success has been achieved with some problems more prominent than others. Principal amongst these is the dominant trend of outsiders, including from within the region, to attempt to influence the process of resolution to their interests sidelining and or worse ignoring local ideals. This is done through withholding support for initiatives that may result in undesired outcomes but that are supported by a majority of the polity in question. The dominant and logical thinking around this matter and effective resolution of conflicts is the development and utilization of internal, country wise and continental, intellectual capacity to engage in the full activities of the conflict spectrum to reinforce the importance of local values and ideas. This means that for effective resolution to work, Africans must be able to act as peacemakers, peacekeepers, and all other necessary role players guided by affording these activities an informed outlook to address the conflicts in the image that would be acceptable to the majority of the locals.

6. **Post-conflict Reconstruction**

Post-conflict reconstruction refers to activities undertaken to rehabilitate the social, political and economic infrastructures of the country coming out of conflict. These activities also call upon the variety of expertise to rebuild structures destroyed by the conflict. Other than overseeing the rebuilding of the physical infrastructure these activities must go beyond rescucitating old structures to initiating new ones in line with the stipulations of the resolution of the conflict. By their very nature post-conflict reconstruction activities demand a sustained and resource taxing commitment and as such calls upon the existence of political will to see the process through.

Lack of resources or political will, or the mixture of the two has seen shoddy reconstruction projects undertaken that operationally put emphasis on suppressing instead of addressing conflicts. In most part this can be attributed to the great need to balance what is desirable with what is possible. On one part, this can be blamed on bad planning, prioritization, coordination and sequencing more than anything else, on the other it exposes the inappropriate tackling of causes of conflict in the resolution phase. Effective monitoring and resource sponsoring of these activities is a matter in need of attention so as to refine implementation. Due to lack of
an indigenous resource base regional and subregional organizations must refine their approach to this by finding creative means to engage those with resources.

7. Views on Conflict Management Approaches in Africa

The crux of the debate on conflict management activities in Africa is the same as anywhere in the world. Conflict management assumes that there is a constituency that can act as an intervening agent in response to conflict by undertaking the activities discussed above. Debate emanates from discussion of the real or perceived motives of the unit that intervenes. Economic dominance, security consideration and other reasons have accounted for motives for intervening. Progressive thinking around the management of conflict has evolved towards the advocacy of regional institutions, structures and arrangements to regulate the decision-making process to intervene. It is believed that by setting up structures, the varying interests and or motivations are not shied away from, but are confronted in a transparent manner that renders the final product of the process support from all quarters.

The belief in structured responses to conflict and undertaking of its management seems to have entrenched itself on the thinking on the continent. Regionalization as a dominant trend on the continent has meant that countries would identify themselves as regions and as such commit themselves to undertake collective action. Regional security arrangements and structures have been established in each region of the Continent. The expanded and adapted definition of the concept of security has also meant that there has to be some reconfiguration of the security arrangements to reflect the new thinking. It should be borne in mind that most of these structures and arrangements emanated from non-security backgrounds with most from development and regional integration persuasions. This certainly made the process of embracing the new conceptualization of security more difficult than one would imagine.

A common feature of all treaties establishing regional security arrangements is that they all envision a role in the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts. This in no way means that there has never been structures to contain and manage conflict in one way or the other. A range of factors have contributed to making conflict management structures less successful and engrossed in struggles far from their mandates. The highlight of the failure of these structures to effectively function is the paradox of not seeking to violate the sovereignty of member States.

Whilst regional security arrangements have shown significant maturity by moving away from obsession with sovereignty, there are still some lingering problems. Leading these is the issue of agreement on the methodology for operationalizing or re-juvinating these security arrangements to the level where they are competent for effectively dealing with conflicts. One may point to some operational success stories where regional arrangements have undertaken ground breaking activities to manage conflicts. These successes bode well for the work towards consolidating regional responses to conflict but at issue is the need to have structures that are consistent and operate transparently and through consensus.

One of the major debates on conflict management structures in Africa is the one on the relationship between subregional organizations and UN. Whilst the relationship/s is outlined in the agreements/treaties as that of cooperation, in reality it is difficult to fully work out. UN, together with regional and subregional organizations are supposed to collaborate on prevention, management and reconstruction activities. What should be done when member States within these organizations abrogate their duty to enable them to effectively perform
their functions? The latest thinking advocates delegation of functions informed by the availability of resources and chances of success, however there is confusion on what methodology is to be followed on this project.

Delving on the problems that need to be resolved or tackled before conflict is a thing of the past in Africa; it is worthwhile to reflect on the institutional mechanism both at states level (track one) and non-state level (track two), set up to handle conflicts in Africa. At a continental level, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) set up in 1993 its Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution. The setting up of this mechanism meant that for the first time, OAU made conflict management and resolution its central focus (Solomon & de Coning, 2000: 17).

At a regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Inter-Governmental Agency for Development (IGAD) are among the regional institutions which are meant to assist OAU in dealing with conflicts (ibid.). Indeed some of these regional bodies have been and are still involved in conflict resolution initiatives. For example, IGAD is involved in mediating the end of the civil war in Sudan (Adar, 1999: 1).

Apart from the intergovernmental institutions, in the recent past, we have witnessed the emergence of non-state structures as actors in conflict resolution. In various conflict spots on the continent, civil society has been involved in mediating initiatives. The problem though, and this is one of the things which need to be resolved, is that there is a lack of proper institutionalization of this type of involvement. That is, it is necessary to initiate mechanisms that would ensure that there is a visible role of track two diplomacy in Africa. This leads to the second observation and that is, it is necessary to find a way that would bring about coordination between these two tracks in order to ensure that they complement each other. Lastly, at a regional level, there is a need to come up with a comprehensive framework aimed at entrenching cooperation and confidence building among countries in various regions.
Bibliography


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