Poverty and Conflict in Africa
Agenda

1. The basics about Africa
2. The social origins of conflict
3. The roots of poverty
4. The importance of political reform
5. What can we do to help?
6. Suggestions for further research and action
The basics about Africa
Africa is big

• Over 30 million sq km → almost three times the size of the US
• The Sahara desert is bigger than the US
• Africa is 8,000 km from north to south and 7,400 km from east to west at the widest points
• A direct flight from Chicago to London is 6,375 km
Africa is diverse

- Approx 1 billion people
- 1,100 recognized languages and more than 20,000 dialects
- There are more English speakers in Africa than in the US
- 7 major ethnic groups with more than 100 million members and more than 100,000 tribe and clan divisions
- All major world religions are represented and local traditional beliefs are strong – almost half of all Christians and almost half of all Muslims live in Africa
- All major climatic zones except arctic can be found in Africa
- 53 countries
Africa is complex

• Most countries have a very large Gini coefficient, meaning there is a big gap between rich and poor
• Many countries are rich in natural resources but suffer very high rates of poverty
• So many people are sick or dying of AIDS that GDP is affected in many countries
• Low-intensity warfare is common
Africa is hopeful, above all

• Rich literary and musical traditions
• Seven Nobel Peace Prize winners
  – Wangari Maathai, Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, FW DeKlerk, Desmond Tutu, Anwar Sadat, John Lutuli
• Business and marketing innovations in mobile phone banking, solar power, logistics
The social origins of conflict
Observations about conflict

- People never fight about nothing → this means that the context in which a conflict occurs is important
- Relationships between people involve transactions of power, and since there would be no conflict without people, we can say that conflicts involve power struggles
Peculiarities of the African context

- Colonial governments created artificial divisions between groups competing for access to state resources, and these divisions fuel conflict in Africa today.
- Poorer economies have a hard time absorbing the effects of even low-level corruption and conflict, so even though the conflict might not be that bad by US or European standards, it has a bigger effect on the host country system [you can eat more of a small pie than a big pie with the same size bite]
Important African cases

- Sudan [Darfur]
- Somalia
- Congo
- Zimbabwe
- Rwanda
- Sierra Leone
- Liberia
The roots of poverty
Observations about poverty

- Poverty is a man-made phenomenon, not an accident or only the result of environmental conditions
- The mis-allocation of resources away from equality or sufficiency creates poverty or the conditions under which poverty can develop
- There is always an element of human action present in poverty, so it is a political problem
Peculiarities of the African context

- Colonial regimes deliberately distorted economies of African countries in the 20th century in order to enrich themselves, and these distortions remain in many places today.

- Independent governments keep up the structures and power relations of colonial regimes because it serves their interests just as well.
Important African cases

- Zimbabwe
- Sudan [Darfur]
- Liberia
- Sierra Leone
- Guinea-Bissau
- Chad
- Niger
- Burkina Faso
The importance of political reform
Connect the dots

• Notice how the lists of important centres of conflict and important centres of poverty are similar

• This demonstrates that poverty and conflict are related – but it also is a warning, for places which are very poor but stable are likely to become conflict centres if poverty does not improve
Consequences of poverty and conflict

- If the cycle of poverty and conflict isn’t broken, it is very unlikely that those countries caught in it will be able to address problems which affect their people, like AIDS or malaria or illiteracy.
- When governments are powerless to help their own people, private interests often step in to fill the gap in public services.
- Private interests are not benign, but they can perform valuable functions for the people, e.g. Hamas.
Steps to a solution

- Breaking the cycle of poverty and conflict means addressing both simultaneously
- Violence will not end until poverty is abated, and poverty cannot recede until violence is diminished
- Political reform – democracy or decentralisation or power sharing – will only be effective AFTER the mass of the people have some security for today and confidence for tomorrow → changing faces at the top will do nothing
What can we do to help?
Create indigenous capital

- Aid and disaster relief are important, but Africa does not want your handouts – it wants your business
- Invest in African companies and in ventures which put working capital into the hands of African entrepreneurs
- Buy products of African companies and, where possible, insist that these are fair trade certified
Empower people

- Give money or volunteer time to pressure groups dedicated to increasing the economic, social and political power of marginalised and oppressed groups → women, children, poor people, AIDS sufferers
- Support African organisations which aim to remove barriers to the full participation of women in economic and political life
- Support groups trying to establish co-operative efforts like micro-finance and labour associations
Limit governments

- Support efforts to increase the participation of people in local government in African countries
- Join or support organisations dedicated to restoring or increasing the accountability of governments to their people in African countries
- Support efforts to increase the private sector’s share of the economy and decrease the government’s share in African countries
Further research and action

- Vijay Mahajan, *Africa Rising*
- George Ayittey, *Africa Unchained*
- Ryszard Kapuscinski, *In the Shadow of the Sun*
- African Arguments [http://africanarguments.org](http://africanarguments.org)
- Africa Action [http://www.africaaction.org](http://www.africaaction.org)
- The Africa Fund [http://www.theafricafund.net](http://www.theafricafund.net)
- Nairobi Stock Exchange [http://www.nse.co.ke](http://www.nse.co.ke)
Thank you

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