Armed Violence in Africa: Reflections on the Costs of Crime and Conflict

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Introduction

African societies are widely perceived to suffer from chronic levels of violent conflict and crime. Since the mid-twentieth century it appears that the majority of the world’s armed conflicts were located on the continent. While conflicts themselves are not new, the levels of armed violence that accompanies them is cause for alarm. There is growing awareness of the contemporary dynamics of armed violence, crime and conflict: the majority of armed conflicts presently occur within states; civilians are increasingly the primary perpetrators and victims of war and crime; and criminality is reaching epidemic rates in rapidly urbanizing environments. In short, armed conflict and both organized and disorganized criminal violence generate lasting consequences for political, social and economic development. These impacts are not evenly distributed; males account for the overwhelming burden of armed violence and marginalized groups – including pastoralists – are also disproportionately at risk.

Table 1  Africa in perspective: Global conflicts between 1946-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Victory</th>
<th>Peace Agreement</th>
<th>Ceasefire</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total terminated</th>
<th>Ongoing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All regions</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


This background paper focuses on the current scale and distribution of armed violence in Africa. Whilst emphasis is on conflict and crime, it signals key themes that are carefully considered in parallel thematic papers on youth, urbanization, pastoralism and gender-based violence. It begins by mapping out constraints to measuring and comparing the scale and distribution of armed conflict and criminal violence. It signals debates over the semantics of concepts such as ‘conflict’ and ‘crime’ as well as the acute stigmas and political sensitivities in discussing their causes and effects. Governments are often reluctant to reveal the true magnitude of armed violence. The paper then reviews the extent of armed violence in relation to conflict and crime and finally, issues a few basic recommendations to prevent and reduce the effects of armed violence and enhance prospects for development.

Nature and Extent of Armed Violence in Africa

By far the greatest constraint to understanding trends in armed violence relates to the weak or non-existent surveillance capacities currently in place in Africa. Data collection on morbidity and mortality are limited with significant under-reporting of events by civilians. With some exceptions, African governments often lack the capacities and resources to collect, analyze and report the demographic and spatial distribution of armed violence – particularly in countries devastated by war. In such circumstances, victims and survivors may themselves be less inclined to report for fear of inaction from police and health officials, stigma from their neighbours or even reprisal by specific perpetrators.

Generating reliable information on the scale and distribution of armed violence is essential. This data can inform national policy and programming decisions, guide regional and relief and development efforts and help plan and finance treatment and prevention for survivors and ultimately hold perpetrators accountable for their actions. But even where such data is collected, it seldom filters up to decision-makers in senior...
positions. In certain cases the collation and dissemination of data on armed violence is willfully obstructed by politicians and bureaucrats alike out of concern with how it might affect foreign investment and tourism, or signal systemic weaknesses in existing policy and practice.

**Conflict and armed violence in Africa**

Given these and other constraints it is difficult to determine accurately the nature and extent of armed violence in Africa. However, several known impacts such as death and injury, disruption of essential services, displacement, and related health impacts, will be further explored in this section. Moreover, there is a growing recognition of the risks that wars can recur and spread across borders if acute violence in the post-conflict period is not adequately addressed.⁵

**Direct and indirect deaths**

Direct and indirect death rates are never constant in the context of armed violence – they frequently change over the duration of a conflict and in the post-conflict period. Specifically, when intense armed violence breaks-out, direct battle-related mortality rates generally increase rapidly. In the absence of preventive measures, this is then swiftly followed by an increase in indirect mortality rates due to the spread of disease such as malaria, tuberculosis and cholera. The rate of HIV infection also increases leading to longer term morbidity and mortality in the area. As the conflict subsides due to peace interventions and violence is nominally brought under control with help from external and internal actors, direct death rates can dramatically decline. Indirect mortality rates will eventually follow the same pattern of decline, but the longer lasting effects of the disease and disability brought on by the conflict can delay this process.

The legacy of acute armed violence on development is pervasive and can yield destructive effects long after wars and severe criminality are brought under control. They have especially harmful effects on the macro and micro-economic environment: it can take decades for a country to recover from a rapid contraction of its GDP or loss of investor confidence. For example, the costs of armed conflicts across Africa between 1990 and 2005 reportedly exceeded USD300 billion – roughly equal to all overseas development assistance received during the same period. On average, civil wars and insurgencies fought principally with small arms and ammunition reduces an African economy by 15 percent.⁶

Both conflict and post-conflict periods generate fragile policy environments owing to a high degree of political uncertainty, the weakening of civil institutions, disruption of line services and infrastructure, the deterioration of arable land and the high burden of ill-health. This in turn limits the capacity of states to govern or adopt and implement effective policy and development plans and undermines civil society thus ensuring continued vulnerability to ongoing armed violence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Reviewing direct and indirect deaths in selected African conflicts⁷</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country</strong></td>
<td><strong>Years</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan (Anya Nya rebellion)</td>
<td>1963-73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria (Biafra rebellion)</td>
<td>1967-70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>1975-2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia (not including Eritrean insurgency)</td>
<td>1976-91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>1976-92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>1981-96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>1983-2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>1989-96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Republic of Congo</td>
<td>1998-2001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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⁷ See Urdal (2004).
The consequences of armed conflict and post-conflict-related violence on population health in Africa, while dramatic are also spatially and demographically segmented. For example, mortality surveys conducted in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between 1998 and 2001 recorded a death toll of 2.5 million – of which fewer than six percent or 145,000 died due to ‘clashes’ in areas where the conflict took place. By way of contrast, death rates from preventable and treatable illness soared in politically unstable eastern provinces, but not in other areas of the country. There also appears to be a relationship to reductions in preventable deaths and associated armed violence. Research in DRC demonstrates that reductions in crude mortality rates were also strongly associated with reductions in levels of armed violence.\textsuperscript{8}

A number of smaller-scale household surveys administered in refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) camps in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Burundi and Guinea-Bissau highlight the variegated impacts of armed violence on population health and wellbeing. These surveys support the hypothesis that sustained levels of excess mortality – including indirect deaths – persist among certain population groups well after conflict has formally come to an end.\textsuperscript{9} As table 2 suggests, the vast majority of people dying during periods of acute armed violence is not due to fighting, but rather to the residual effects of war. Reducing armed violence during and following conflict can potentially reduce overall rates of mortality therefore ultimately allowing development to proceed.

\textit{Displacement}

Armed conflict and other forms of political and social violence often generate large numbers of displaced people. The vast majority of the world’s estimated 9.5 million refugees and 23 million IDPs reside in Africa. In total, there are an estimated 2.7 million refugees and 12.1 million IDPs in Africa – with many millions more African refugees living in Europe, North America and the Middle East. At least three quarters of all African countries have been affected profoundly by forced migration – either as sites of origin or as destinations – in the 1990s with rates remaining constant since. Although major cross-border conflicts steadily decreased during this period, the persistence of armed violence has to varying degrees perpetuated internal displacement, in some cases by inhibiting durable solutions.

Despite recent efforts to promote durable solutions for refugees and IDPs, Africa remains the site of the most acute concentrations of protracted displacement in the world. In 2005 and 2006, Sudan, DRC and Uganda accounted for more than nine million IDPs and the majority of the continent’s refugee flows. More positively, a rash of recent peace processes and ceasefire agreements across the continent yielded some positive dividends, allowing for the return of more than three million African IDPs. More than 500,000 IDPs from southern Sudan were repatriated to their homes in 2005 – though an equal number were forced to flee across borders from Darfur to Chad and Central African Republic (CAR) or seek refuge in the peri-urban slums of the country’s capital, Khartoum. The health of refugees and IDPs involved in repatriation and resettlement is frequently obstructed by persistent insecurity and meager absorption capacities in the areas of return.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Health impacts}

Africa also remains one of the regions most affected by HIV/AIDS and other forms of acute communicable disease. Approximately two thirds of the estimated 38 million people infected with HIV globally are living in Africa – many in situations of prolonged war and conflict. The overall burden of HIV/AIDS is also growing: in 2003, an estimated three million Africans were newly-infected with HIV and some 2.9 million died contributing to an estimated global burden of 84.5 million disability adjusted life years.\textsuperscript{11}

The relationships between extreme armed violence and the distribution and incidence of HIV/AIDS and other infectious disease such as malaria are complex. Many countries affected by, or emerging from internal conflict, exhibit higher-than-average HIV and malaria prevalence rates along with a few other African countries who are not at war. There is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that armed conflicts necessarily contribute to the intensification of HIV/AIDS prevalence and other forms of disease within and between states though this assumption is prevalent.

\textsuperscript{8} For example, average crude mortality rates in ‘health zones’ where a violent death was documented was more than 76 per cent higher than in ‘health zones’ where the effects of violence were eliminated.

\textsuperscript{9} Muggah (2008).

\textsuperscript{10} See Kalpeni and Oppong (1998).

\textsuperscript{11} See WHO (2003).
Crime and armed violence in Africa

Crime perpetrated by organized and unorganized groups or individuals is another major contributor to armed violence in Africa. In certain instances this may include crime perpetrated or supported by formal security structures, while in others it refers to militia, bandits and gangs.

Data limitations and challenges

Available data suggest that Africa is significantly affected by criminal violence when compared to other regions – including violence perpetrated with firearms.\textsuperscript{12} Unlike in the case of armed conflict, many countries in Africa have established a variety of national surveillance systems to record and track various types of criminal indicators. Unfortunately, the majority of these surveillance mechanisms have only limited utility owing to the extremely poor reporting rates and the lack of human and technological capacity to centralize and analyze data. As a result, cross-country comparisons can only be very tentatively rendered.

Reliable time-series data on violent crime and victimization in Africa are especially scarce – particularly in urban slums, shantytowns and rural areas. Whilst many African countries are building and consolidating democratic governance and large cities are in some ways their ‘calling cards’ for attracting large-scale foreign and domestic investment, they seldom collect or tabulate credible time-series socio-economic indicators on crime. Criminal justice statistics are especially weak owing to uneven reporting rates and uneven investment in record-keeping and related capacities. As a result, information on the extent of crime and the surrounding circumstances are scarce. Owing to prominent urban biases in surveillance more generally, even less is known about the rates and distribution of criminal violence in rural areas where most Africans live.

Table 3: Africa’s urban crime rates in perspective\textsuperscript{*13}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>Robbery</th>
<th>Assaults and threats</th>
<th>Sexual offences**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Firearm</td>
<td>Total %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>5.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'New World'***</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>7.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE Europe</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>12.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>24.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Figures represent the percentage of respondents who experienced the stated crime between the early 1990s and 2001. ** Only female respondents were asked about sexual offence victimization. *** The 'New World' is comprised of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States.

From the scarce information that is available, Africa appears to be significantly affected by criminal violence. While there is comparatively limited data in Africa on the distribution or demographic trends of homicidal violence, the continent carries approximately 18 percent of the global burden of firearm deaths – the vast majority of which appear to be homicides and a more modest number of suicides. Military-style weapons – themselves frequently a legacy of armed conflicts – are frequently used in criminal violence: they are reported in more than a third of the region's homicides, over one tenth of its robberies and a considerable proportion of assaults, threats and sexual offences.

In Africa, as in other parts of the world, criminal violence is highly concentrated in cities and urban centres – particularly in areas with high levels of income inequality and structural disparities in service provision. As such, major cities such as Lagos, Johannesburg and Nairobi tend to carry the burden of overall rates of armed violence in relation to the national averages in Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya. Though likely a

\textsuperscript{12} Dependent variables to measure the scale and incidence of criminal violence ranges include homicide rates (per 100,000) and specific forms of victimization such as armed robbery, assault and sexual violence.

\textsuperscript{13} See Small Arms Survey (2007) and UNODC (2007).
function of well-functioning surveillance, South Africa appears to be the country most acutely affected by collective criminal violence, with more than 19,000 homicides (40 per 100,000) in 2006 and at least half of these resulting from firearms.14

**Homicide**

The sex and demographic specific profiles of homicide and criminal violence in Africa appears to be consistent with other regions. Available evidence reveals that males are four to ten times more likely than females to be murdered. There is a possibility that the asymmetric ratio is also due to migration patterns: men migrate to cities for labour opportunities and are thus captured in existing surveillance systems, leaving women behind in rural areas.15 The demographic profile of homicide victims and perpetrators in Africa is also broadly consistent with global patterns. Specifically, the risk of homicide rises sharply in the 15-19 year group, peaks in the 20-29 year group and remains high until 44 whereupon the risk drops dramatically. Both children and the elderly appear to be largely unaffected from homicide deaths, though this could also be a function of low-reporting rates in rural areas where most young and older populations reside or indeed the comparatively low life expectancy in most African countries.

**Victimization and crime**

Current data also shows that urban criminality in specific countries and cities of Africa ranks high when compared to other regions. For example, successive Crime and Victim Surveys (CVS) administered in more than 75 cities from the early 1990s to 2001 determined that both Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa experience the highest rates of robbery and assault: 13 percent of all robberies and 9 percent of assaults and threats are committed with firearms in Africa (Table 3). By way of comparison, the lowest victimization rates were experienced in Western Europe and Asia.

The dynamics of criminal violence in Africa demonstrated some features that were common to trends registered in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as Western Europe. In surveyed African cities, the use of firearms was more likely in the case of property crimes than in violent assault. For example, armed robbery was reportedly committed most often by young males unknown to their victims in approximately two-thirds of the cases in Sub-Saharan Africa. In many cases the offender was not alone and operated in groups of three or more. In the case of assaults and sexual violence, in over half of all reported incidents, the offender and the victim reportedly knew one another, at least by sight. Across all reported cases, women victims were reportedly less frequently attacked with firearms than their male counterparts.

Another major contributor to armed violence in Africa includes predatory gangs, self-defense groups and so-called vigilantes. The comparatively recent expansion of such groups is intimately connected to a crisis of governance, unemployment and the manifest inability of public police forces and the security sectors of African countries to provide adequate protection. As the ‘public good’ of security is not provided by the state, these groups fill the security vacuum and play an increasingly vital role in privatizing community and individual self-defense. Such groups are also becoming politicized – an ominous trend for many governments already suffering a crisis of legitimacy.

**Table 4 City crime: Victimization rates for armed robbery**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>victims of robbery (no firearms mentioned) per 100,000</th>
<th>% victims of robbery at gunpoint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cape Verde</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaborone (Botswana)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maseru (Lesotho)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lusaka (Zambia)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbabane (Swaziland)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dar Es Salaam (Tanzania)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagos (Nigeria)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kampala (Uganda)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windoek (Namibia)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johannesburg (South Africa)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazzaville (Congo)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nairobi (Kenya)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


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14 See SAPS (2007).
15 The adult mortality and morbidity project (AMMP) measured the rates and causes of morbidity and mortality of Tanzanian residents in three communities (one urban n: 64,736 and two rural n: 146,359) from 1992-1998 and showed that the average age adjusted rate of homicide deaths for females was 3.4 per 100,000 as compared to 16.3 per 100,000 for males.
The shortcomings of the security sectors themselves can be measured through impunity and conviction rates. For example, in Senegal, less than two thirds of all criminal cases are prosecuted in Dakar and Kaolack. In the southern province of Zambia, police and court statistics reveal that fewer than a quarter of all reported homicides were eventually prosecuted. In Nigeria’s Kaduna state (1997-2001) less than 20 percent of all cases involving firearms led to a prosecution. Ensuring that criminal armed violence is effectively and legitimately addressed through credible legal and policing mechanisms is a *sine qua non* of restoring law and order.

**Conclusion**

The persistence of high levels of armed violence during and following conflicts, as well as in relation to crime, presents a formidable challenge to African policy-makers and civil society. Many states that have been weakened by long-term violent conflicts lack the resources and capacity to comprehensively address these challenges, but progress can be made. At the very least, adequately resourced and credible security provision and support for public health are critical entry-points to preventing and mitigating the effects of armed violence. There are a range of concrete steps that African governments can take:

*There is an urgent need to enhance and strengthen capacities to survey and measure armed violence.* Enhancing knowledge and awareness of conflict and crime-related armed violence and its associated burden represents an urgent priority for African governments, non-governmental agencies, research institutes and international donors. More consistent and reliable data on the risk factors and outcomes of armed violence – particularly in under-represented rural areas – are required in order to prioritize and effectively target prevention and reduction initiatives and to monitor their impacts over time. Although there continues to be some aversion to investing in evidence generation, it is nevertheless mandated in the *Programme of Action for Africa 2006 – 2010*.

*National and international stakeholders must focus on preventive measures to reduce risk and reduce intentional and unintentional mortality and morbidity in conflict and crime-related situations.* Focused interventions on protecting population health in such circumstances are key to reducing vulnerability and ultimately direct and indirect deaths associated with armed violence. Preventive interventions should emphasize protection of vulnerable populations through education and awareness, safe urban planning and environmental design and enhanced community security – notably for the displaced and children. Likewise, interventions that account for structural risk factors contributing to the onset of armed violence such as income inequality, under- and unemployment and rapid urbanization are also critical preventive measures that can contribute to diminished rates of victimization and feelings of insecurity.

*Efforts should be redoubled to promote physical protection and security to reduce armed violence and its associated negative health outcomes.* Innovative interventions that likely require additional investigation and investment include so-called ‘safe havens’, ‘safe zones’ and ‘gun free’ spaces. Safe havens are described as ‘circumscribed areas’ where the displaced can seek protection and support close to their homes, but not necessarily in them. The model was invoked in Liberia by ECOMOG to mixed effect, while gun free zones were created in South Africa. The safe zone concept is designed to protect populations in their own settings and social environments.

*A need for enhanced long-term victim assistance and robust attention to armed violence in national planning mechanisms.* Many of the victims of armed violence are not recorded in official statistics, and even fewer of those affected are able to access health systems. It is vital that national and international stakeholders provide sustained investment in equitable rehabilitation and integration programmes, including awareness and sensitization, so that survivors of collective violence are provided with long-term treatment and care for physical and psychological effects. Equally vital is the creation of enabling mechanisms within responsible ministries and departments to articulate and invest in inter-sector programmes to proactively reduce armed violence. Ensuring that such priorities feature in national development planning frameworks, including poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSP) and UN development assistance frameworks (UNDAF), can help facilitate policy absorption at senior levels of government.
Increased attention to security promotion activities. There are a host of interventions relating to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR), security system reform (SSR), community-oriented security promotion and weapons collection programmes that have been successfully tested in the African context. From West Africa to the Great Lakes and the Horn there is a generally positive association between early security and recovery activities and diminishing levels of armed violence. Too often, however, resources are not managed and supplied appropriately – as countries lack the oversight and capacity in the long-term. Security promotion therefore must proceed hand in hand with efforts to revitalize a legitimate and accountable security sector.

Suggested Readings


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