

BOOK REVIEW

Environment and Conflict in Africa: Reflections on Darfur; UPEACE, Addis Ababa

By M. Leroy (ed.)¹

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Reviewed by Jephias Mapuva²

This book is an academic manual that seeks to contribute to peace initiatives on the African continent, notably in the Darfur region of the Sudan. Authored by Leroy, a peace researcher at the United Nations-mandated University of Peace, the book takes a cue from the United Nations peace initiatives, not only in the Darfur region, but globally, although the thrust revolves around the Darfur. The thrust of the book is informed by the background of the author who has been involved in peace initiatives within the continent's hot spots. The publication seeks to highlight the unprecedented suffering and in some cases insensitivity of protagonists in the conflict as they continue to cause suffering among their own people. In its sincerity, the book explores the Darfur conflict, one of the longest civil strife on the continent that has claimed the list among most civil conflicts on the continent. The book complements existing literature on conflict as it delves into how prevailing environmental factors, notably the scarcity of natural resources such as water and pasture, have evolved into conflict, with specific reference to events and developments in the Darfur. This book historically examines the climate and ecological changes on the continent of Africa and how these relate to conflicts that have manifested themselves in various parts of the continent. Particular

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attention has been paid to the devastating environmental, social and livelihood aspects of the crisis in Darfur, a conflict which has claimed unprecedented casualty figures. Dramatic swings between droughts and floods have been characteristic of the current mode of climate patterns across the globe and the dire consequences of these have not only seen starvation, deaths and destruction of property, but have included adverse environmental effects. Darfur has not been spared by drought and deteriorating weather and climatic conditions. The pastoralists of the region have had to compete for pastoral lands and this has resulted in a fight for land. Climate change and desertification have been among the major contributory factors to the current crisis in Darfur. In its critique of the Darfur conflict, the author draws from similar conflicts in other parts of the African continent based on practical research and mediation efforts.

The contributors to the book present the Darfur crisis as one of the most complex problems on the continent comprising many dimensions and layers. They note that livelihoods in Darfur are closely linked to natural resources, with rural production systems being predominantly based on sedentary cultivation (farming) as well as transhumant and nomadic pastoralism. Household mobility has enabled adaptation to climate variability when core activities come under ecological pressure from drought. This scenario has made the region vulnerable to conflict as various pastoralists seek to protect the scarce resources at their disposal. The contributors also add another layer to the crisis. The migratory trends across regional and national boundaries as people adapt and integrate their livelihoods, with declining resources and the prevailing weak bureaucratic institutions and administrative power further exacerbates the situation. The conflict has had other effects on the livelihoods of the general populace of the region. The conflict has largely impacted the migration and nomadic seasonal mobility, which has further restricted the movement of people and livestock, with awful consequences for livelihoods. The forced displacement and restriction/blocking of physical mobility has directly contributed to the loss of livelihood strategies, assets and properties and sometimes brought death of livestock.

Innovative ways have been used to enrich the discussion. The use of variety of media, including video captions and documentaries to present the conflict in Darfur reiterates the nature of the crisis that requires practical solutions and the intervention of the international community. The effective part transliteration and part interpretation of the film into text and a chapter in the book strengthens the comprehension of the Darfur crisis as revealing and thought-provoking. Victims' revelations and opinions on the crisis have further strengthened the dire need for a solution to the crisis.

From the Darfur, the discussion shifts to the Horn of Africa as the contributors to the book seek to investigate how natural resources scarcity has become a dominant cause of conflict in the region. They note that in the last few decades, the exploitation and expropriation of natural resources and related environmental stresses has become a significant driver of violence in Africa. They cite the civil wars in Liberia, Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as having been propelled by and centred on 'high value' resources like timber

diamonds, gold and oil. However they distinguish these forms of conflict which are centred on access to resources to the one in Darfur whose precincts revolve around the control of scarce of resources such as water and fertile land.

Consequently, drawing from these two premises, the contributors conclude that natural resources can be inspected for their causal role in the onset of conflict as well as for their role in prolonging and sustaining violence. The contributors also cite the state and its mal-functionality as being responsible for the insurgence of conflict situations. They note that through skewed policies, the state is fermenting conflict in its midst and should eventually be held accountable for any casualties thereafter. They argue that resource based conflicts can emanate from structural and systematic factors such as state policies. They further note that the underlying causes of resource conflict can be poverty, the policy choices that the state pursues over time and the failure of institutional frameworks for conflict resolution or prevention. The subsequently recommend that resource-based conflicts should be seen and analyzed within a policy and governance context. Drawing from most of the pastoralists' conflict in the Horn of Africa, the contributors argue that the notion of marginalization both in the political and material sense prevails. In addition to these, they also cite pasture land depletion and water scarcity as important in explaining conflicts in the Horn of Africa.

The contributors do not rule out ethnicity as a factor in conflict. They assert that in contrast to the stereotypes of 'ethnic' conflict in Africa, evidence has shown that Africa's great ethnic diversity reduces rather than increase the chances of conflict eruption. They further note that in particular cases; it seems that where one ethnic group is numerically dominant this may increase the risk of conflict. However, even in these cases, the manipulation of ethnic identity by elites is a major driving force, which explains the background role of ruling elites and those in the corporate world in many conflicts. This has also come to determine the power dynamics of conflicts as it has become increasingly evident that those who control the scarce resources wield much power within the community. Conflict becomes eminent as some players within the concerned communities seek to wrestle the control of the vital (and in most cases scarce) resources from those in control. Conflict resolutions and peace building initiatives have been commenced but without the support of the ruling elites, not much progress has been made towards ceasing conflict. The publication has made explicit impression on the significant role of mediation in conflicts, especially when it comes to natural resources which are fast depleting in most parts of the African continent. From the deliberations in the book, the reviewer has noted the significant contribution of the book as it draws from a reservoir of experience from peace mediation by various players.