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Linking Structural Violence, Conflicts and Ecological Damages

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Abstract

The article examines how imbalances in social, political, economic and cultural systems cause structural conflicts that portend global ramifications. As a global community, we are more interconnected than ever before. National and global social systems that create institutions and policies that marginalize the majority while benefiting the minority are no longer sustainable. Social erosion due to political and economic marginalization lead to protracted conflicts, mass migrations, and environmental degradation which the neo-liberal political order is failing to resolve. Focusing on Africa, the paper discusses the causes of structural violence and suggests how it can be transformed into a harmonious coexistence. Global sustainable peace requires a paradigm shift to: (1) replace state-centric security paradigms with common security, emphasizing integral human development for all people, the ideal of a shared humanity and a common destiny; (2) create economies and political systems that prioritize people and planetary wellbeing above profit.

Keywords: conflicts, living together, structural imbalance, ecological damages

Introduction

Structural injustices are the root cause of many protracted internal and international conflicts. They are embedded in inequitable socio-political and economic systems and subsystems that reinforce exploitation and coercion by political elites, multinational corporations (MNCs), and powerful states (Jeong, 2000). Colonization, globalization, capitalism, and greed have propelled the destruction of traditional cultural institutions and values that safeguarded the environment, and prevented and resolved conflicts. Competition for political, economic, military and technological power deprives the weak of their basic needs, and causes the dehumanization and violation of their dignity and right. Internationally, malfunctioning institutions and policies by core states reinforce the exploitation of periphery nations. At the national level, dictatorship, destructive nationalism, and the politics of the belly, maintained by coercion and policies that benefit only the political elites, breed frustration, leaving the weak with no option except the use of violence as a means to speak truth to power.

Structural injustices and violence are plentiful since every level of conflict involves structural dimensions embedded in systems and subsystems where policies are made. Maire Dugan (1996), a peace researcher and theorist, designed the ‘nested paradigm’ model and identified four levels of conflict: the issues in a conflict; the relationships involved; the subsystems in which a problem is situated; and the systemic structures. Dugan observes:

Subsystem level conflicts often mirror conflicts of the broader system, bringing inequities such as racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia to the offices and factories in which we work, the houses of worship in which we pray, the courts and beaches on which we play, the streets on which we meet our neighbors, even the houses in which we live. Subsystem level problems may also exist on their own, not produced by broader societal realities. (p. 16)

This article covers international and national structural injustices in Africa. Walter Rodney (1981) notes two sources of Africa’s structural violence that curtails the continent’s progress: “the operation of the imperialist system” that drains Africa’s wealth, making it impossible for the continent to develop its resources more rapidly; and “those who manipulate the system and those who serve either as agents or unwitting accomplices of the said system. The capitalists of western Europe were the ones who actively extended their exploitation from inside Europe to cover the whole of Africa” (p. 27).

With this introduction, the paper examines some theories underpinning structural imbalances, followed by an analysis of critical structural violence issues that must be addressed. The paper concludes with suggestions for transforming structural violence.

Theoretical Considerations

The term structural violence was coined by Johan Galtung (1969) in reference to social structures: political, economic, cultural, religious, and legal systems that prevent individuals, communities, and societies from realizing their full potential. Structural violence is the “avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or ...the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible” (Galtung, 1969, p. 58). Perhaps, Galtung (1969) derived the term from the 1960s Latin American liberation theology where “structures of sin” or “social sin” were used to refer to

structures that engendered social injustices and marginalization of the poor. Proponents of liberation theology include Archbishop Oscar Romero and Father Gustavo Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez (1985) wrote: “poverty means death... not only physical but mental and cultural as well” (p. 9).

Unequal structures are the “root causes” of conflicts (Cousens, 2001, p. 8). Sometimes, structural violence is referred to as institutional violence resulting from “social, political, and economic structures” that permit “unequal distribution of power and resources” (Botes, 2003, p. 362). Structural violence benefits the privileged few and oppresses the majority. Burton (1990) associates structural violence with social institutional injustices and policies that prevent people from meeting their ontological needs. Social structures result from “dialectic, or interplay, between structural entities and the human enterprise of producing and shaping new structural realities” (Botes, 2003, p. 360). They are nested in “ubiquitous social structures, normalized by stable institutions and regular experiences” (Galtung, 1969, p. 59). Because such structures appear ordinary and almost non-threatening, they remain almost invisible. Colonialism, the northern hemisphere’s exploitation of Africa’s resources and consequent underdevelopment, environmental degradation, racism, white supremacy, neocolonialism, war industries that profit only when there are wars mostly in the Global South, the exclusion of Africa from international decision-making and 14 West African nations paying colonial taxes to France, are just a few examples. Resource exploitation for example, engenders ecological damage, conflicts and mass migrations. However, the *longue durée* of exploiting Africa’s resources is not considered as a fundamental cause to the prevalent mass migration crisis of people whose lives have been destroyed by the impact of global capitalism. It is important to note that slave trade and colonialism drained Africa’s human capital and natural resources. Therefore, structural violence in Africa is connected to slavery and colonial systemic social injustices, racial capitalism, exploitation, oppression, *thingification* and commodification of Blacks.

Critical Structural Violence Issues

Who gets what and how much they receive have been a source of conflict in human history (Ballard et al., 2005; Burchill et al., 2013). Are there resources to satisfy the needs of the 7.7 billion people on the planet? A quarter of the population in the Global North consume 80 % of energy and metals and emit high volumes of carbon (Trondheim, 2019). For example, the United States, Germany, China, and Japan produce more than half of the planet's economic output, while 75% of the population of the less industrialized nations consume 20%, but are more impacted by global warming (Bretthauer, 2018; Klein, 2014) and resource-based conflicts caused by capitalist exploitation. This includes the exploitation of critical minerals touted as game changers in mitigating climate change (Bretthauer, 2018; Fjelde & Uexkull, 2012). Africa, though the least producer of carbon is most affected by climate change (Basse, 2012), and consequent wars and poverty, leading to mass migrations. The Mediterranean Sea has become a cemetery for millions of African youths. Those benefiting from the structures that degrade the environment and engender wars consider climate change to be a hoax (Klein, 2014). Yet, development, peacebuilding, climate mitigation policies and the research underpinning them are all designed in the Global North without involving African agency, cultures and values that have sustained communities for thousands of years. As Foucault (1982, 1987) argues, structural violence is linked to centers of power-knowledge.

Cultural and value erosion heightened by the ideologies of modernization and

globalization are contributing to structural conflicts (Jeong, 2000). Institutions of modernity supported by capitalism, liberal democratic norms, industrialization and scientific advances create lifestyles and development modeled on the West, but devastate Africa's cultural, political and economic originality. The general understanding of modernity and development are expressed in terms of consumerism, capitalism, urbanization and individualism (Jeong, 2000; Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009).

Political, social, and economic structures create conditions for inequitable distribution of wealth among and within nations (Green, 2008; Jeong, 2000; Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009). Global governance fails to concretize deliberations such as the Paris Agreement on climate change, to make poverty history, to universalize education, or to make the millennium development goals, and sustainable development goals more impactful. Those who benefit from the system hardly recognize it is malfunctioning. Frustration, due to a widening gap between what people have and what they believe they deserve coupled with economic decline and climatic change, is intensifying marginalization, mass migrations, wars, and terrorism. Individuals, groups, and nations want to be on top of the social, economic, political, technological and military power hierarchy, which perpetuates violent competition among nations. Africa, rich with resources coveted by super powers, is also a fertile market for war industries to sell weapons. Paradoxically, no war implies no profit for weapon industries, a situation that they cannot accept. War is the *modus operandi* for accessing Africa's resources. As wars are waged, weapon industries profit. In the process, from Mali to the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, impoverished and unemployed youth are easily lured into creating or joining armed and terrorist groups. Unmet basic needs, coupled with human rights violations and disempowerment, curtail people from actualizing their potential and lead to social conflicts and wars (Cook-Huffman, 2009; Maslow, 1943).

Looting and militarizing Africa started with slave trade and colonialism, and continues to this day. The international economic system and beliefs that the global market, open trade and foreign investment proceed democratically benefit core nations and corporations who exploit peripheral nations' resources, conditioning them to export raw materials and import processed goods (Carmody, 2016; Southall & Melber, 2009). Since the 1980s, under the umbrella of globalization, free market reforms, and integrating Africa into the global economy, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed the 'structural adjustment programs' (SAPs) and obliged African nations to privatize, liberalize and deregulate the mining sector (Carmody, 2016, p. 21). More than 30 African nations were coerced to redesign their mining codes to facilitate foreign direct investment (FDI) and resource extraction. "If previous modes of African integration into the global political economy were detrimental,...it would logically follow that care should be taken in analysing whether or not there is a developmental model of integration into the global economy for Africa, rather than opening it up for further plundering" (Carmody, 2016, p. 24).

Shielded by global policies that coerce African nations toward foreign direct investment and supported by their home governments, the multinational corporations (MNCs) exploiting Africa's mineral, oil and other natural resources do as they plunder resources with impunity. . They bribe indigenous political elites to facilitate tax evasion, cover up their crimes, damage the environment, mis-invoice and falsify information. In 2017, Africa's outflows totaled \$203 billion, where \$32.4 billion were through multinational corporations' fraud (Curtis, 2017). In 2010, multinational corporations avoided \$40 billion and cheated \$11 billion through trade

mispricing (Oxfam, 2015). Levels of environmental degradation created by multinational corporations in the process of exploiting natural resources are exacerbating environmental wars in Africa (Akiwumi & Butler, 2008; Bassey, 2012; Edwards et al., 2014). Multinational corporations also engender poverty through land grabbing, displacement of communities and artisanal miners from their concessional land where for example they exploit the minerals, oil and gas. All these factors are turning Africa into a conflict trap. Disenfranchised people are left with no option except the one of forming or joining armed groups to survive.

In *The Shock Doctrine*, Naomi Klein (2007) exposes how, since the 1950s, free-market policies have dominated the world deploying disaster shocks. Following September 11, the United States global War on Terror led to the invasion of Iraq, culminating in a policy that allowed Shell and BP to monopolize the exploitation of Iraq's oil and for America's war industries to profit from selling their weapons. The same shock doctrine was used in 2007, when the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) was created to fight terrorism and conflicts on the continent. Have terrorism and armed conflicts increased or reduced since 2007? United States allies and foes are all violently racing to control Africa, its resources and market. The Africompublicaffairs (2016) acknowledged China's and Russia's challenge as follows:

Other nations continue to invest in African nations to further their own objectives, China is focused on obtaining natural resources and necessary infrastructure to support manufacturing while both China and Russia sell weapon systems and seek to establish trade and defense agreements in Africa. As China and Russia expand their influence in Africa, both countries are striving to gain 'soft power' in Africa to strengthen their power in international organizations. (p. 12)

The United States competition for Africa's resources was underscored when President Clinton's administration established the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), touted to provide Africa with access to the US market. Realistically, Africa exports oil, minerals and other resources to the US and serves as a market for US products. In 2014, the U.S. labor federation reported that "oil and gas constitute between 80% and 90% of all exports under AGOA" (AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, 2014, p. 2).

The extraction of Africa's resource comes at a high cost. International treaties governing mineral and oil exploration are never applied in developing nations. War, displacement, ecological destruction, and abuse of people's rights and dignity are the modus operandi. Nations rich in natural resources such as Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Mali, and some countries in the Western Sahara are embroiled in wars that are often dubbed 'ethnic' by marauding warlords. The Slovenian philosopher and sociologist, Slavoj Zizek (2010) observed that:

Beneath the façade of ethnic warfare, we ... discern the workings of global capitalism... Each of the warlords has business links to a foreign company or corporation exploiting the mostly mining wealth in the region. This arrangement suits both parties: the corporations get mining rights without taxes and other complications, while the warlords get rich. ... forget about the savage behavior of the local population, just remove the foreign high-tech companies from the equation and the whole edifice of ethnic warfare fueled by old passions falls apart...There is a great deal of darkness in the dense Congolese jungle but its causes lie elsewhere, in the bright executive offices of our banks and high-tech companies. (pp. 163-164)

War and resource exploitation aggravate climate change. The extraction of minerals and oil, military training, and weapon pollutants destroy biodiversity, contaminate water, land and air (Dudka & Adriano, 1997; Lawrence et al., 2015; Le Billon, 2001). Ecological destruction is increasing resource wars and mass migrations as livelihood resources are becoming scarce. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's most recent estimate indicates that 795 million people are starving due to worldwide wars and climate change (World Food Programme, 2019). Global policy makers have never called mining companies and war industries to account. They do not consider resource exploitation as violence. The impact of wars and resource extraction are not even mentioned in the Paris Agreement and the Kyoto Protocol.

Africa is also a dumping place and consumer of western rejects. In 2018, when Rwanda refused to import US second hand clothes a feud ensued (John, 2018). The US claims that AGOA benefits Africa, yet the trade relationship serves US interests and curtails Africa's potential for progress (Melber, 2009). Under AGOA, African nations are obliged not to engage in activities that undermine US interests. Trade deficits and capital outflows lead to economic imbalance and strain the living standards of the poor (Carmody, 2016; Mac Ginty & Williams, 2009). Dictators of trade relations in the Global North do all in their interest and sooth their consciences with foreign aid, dubbed by Easterly (2006) as the white man's burden.

As in the colonial era, capitalism and the economic exploitation of Africa continue to erode indigenous cultures and values. For example, African Ubuntu (humanness) and care for the common good including the environment has been replaced by capitalist greed. Political leaders are after personal aggrandizement and not service to the people (Utas, 2012; Van Wyk, 2007). Ali Mazrui (2007) notes that even the seeds of prevalent wars "lie in the sociological mess which colonialism created in Africa by destroying" cultural values including the "old methods of conflict resolution without creating effective [substitutes] in their place" (p. 480). Similarly, traditional approaches to environmental protection were considered animistic and devilish, and were destroyed in the name of worshipping one God. When cultural institutions and values disintegrate, along with impoverishment, conflict is inevitable.

At the national levels, structural violence in Africa is embedded in what Laurie Nathan (2000) dubbed "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" (p. 189) – authoritarian rule, exclusion of people from governing their countries, socioeconomic impoverishment and inequality reinforced by corruption and nepotism, and ineffective states with poor institutions that fail to reinforce the rule of law. The failure of leadership is culpable for reinforcing the 'Four Horsemen'. In the majority of African nations, public office is a means for personal aggrandizement. National coffers, resources and even foreign aid benefit only the political elites.

The list of critical structural injustices at national and international levels is interminable. Increasing socio-political and economic inequalities will inevitably exacerbate conflicts and ecological damage. No one wants to be on the bottom, and the privileged are unwilling to share the top level of the social hierarchy for the betterment of the common good. The marginalized want to gain more power and reverse the relationship. How can structural violence be transformed to create national and global peace?

Structural Transformation

Conventional approaches to conflict management, peacebuilding, and environmental mitigation at macro- and micro-levels of society are failing because they do not address the

structural forms of violence. Posturing, UN resolutions, international instruments, peace agreements signed, and national constitutions are created with no real change. Structures do not change. Structural transformation (ST) “brings into focus the horizon toward which we journey - the building of healthy relationships and communities, locally and globally. This goal requires real change in our current ways of relationship” (Lederach, 2003, p. 5). Transformation envisions and responds “to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real life-problems in human relationships” (Lederach, 2003, p.14).

Dugan (1996) suggests the nested paradigm model to structural change by addressing issues, relationships, systems, and subsystems. Korppen and Ropers (2011) suggest a “whole systems approach” and “complexity thinking as a meta-framework” (p. 15) to change oppressive and dysfunctional structures and systems. Structural transformation aims at reducing structural violence and increasing justice around issues, relationships, systems and subsystems that engender poverty, inequality, and suffering. It also empowers people to realize their potential.

For Africa, I suggest education as the core of structural transformation (ST). Educating people with analytical skills and knowledge of their rights and dignity will enable them to develop a critical consciousness and awareness of situations of injustice. Oppressed people liberate themselves through conscientization to search for freedom and self-affirmation (Freire, 1998). Structural transformation is not a technique but a paradigm shift “to look and see ... beyond the present problems towards a deeper pattern of relationships, ...underlying patterns and context..., and a conceptual framework (Lederach, 2003, pp. 8-9). For example, Africans need to be conscientized about the oppressive patterns and dependent relationships between the Global North and Global South, colonial and neocolonial exploitation, racism, continued exploitation and marginalization that excludes them from global policy making. If Africans throughout the continent are aware of the dangers of corporate exploitation and militarization by Western powers, and stage continent wide protests, those abuses would stop.

It is important for people at the grassroots to know their rights and responsibilities as members of the global community. Knowledge of the international and continental instruments and institutions such as the United Nations, the African Union, the UN charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) and the African charter on human rights should become general knowledge enabling people to demand their equal application. Similarly, education in leadership and care for the common good should be mandatory. Poor leadership is a reflection of what African societies have become. *Ubuntuism* (humanness) and care for the common good have been replaced by capitalist greed, individualism and the total failure to value and celebrate Africanism and local culture architecture that have enabled societies in Africa to live happily for thousands of years.

It is also crucial to educate the heart, “center of emotions, intuitions, and spiritual life... the place from which we go out and to which we return for guidance, sustenance, and direction” (Lederach, 2003, p. 17). The heart is crucial to transforming relationships, climate change and the scourge of war. People try to change society through violent revolutions and wars as exemplified in incidences of world and civil wars, and uprisings such as in Sudan and Algeria. A combination of head and heart would illustrate the irrelevance of violence not only because it is immoral, but violence begets more violence. Nonviolence springs from a heart driven by compassion and empathy. Great leaders such as Nelson Mandela combined the head and the heart to cause change. However, globally we are facing a vacuum of leadership, good education systems, and role

models. Thus, education should be complemented with restructuring all aspects of life (cultures, social relations, politics, economics, the way we think and live in families and communities).

The quest for peace needs to be prioritized at all levels of society. The building of good human relationships is a prerequisite to peacebuilding in view of institutional and social transformation. Since conflicts occur in human societies, the skills of dialogue, the promotion of mutual understanding and a win-win attitude in managing and resolving conflicts need to be fostered from childhood. Structural change at macro and micro levels of society is urgently needed to address the social ills in dominant institutions and values. “Creating a nonviolent world would depend on the elimination of social and economic injustices and ecological abuse” (Jeong, 2000, p. 370).

Change of structures alone doesn't lead to peace, if not followed or preceded by personal transformation and change of hearts. Only personal change can bring about structural transformation necessary for sustainable national and global peace and security. Changing from capitalist greed, competition, individualism and racism at the heart of policies, systems and subsystems that exploit and dehumanize those at national and internal margins results from sustained and gratifying disciplines of examining the inner self and outer reality. Otherwise, institutions and systems will continue to carry and reinforce our ills.

In conclusion, the quest for global peace and security reverberates in the face of capitalist competition, environmental crisis, wars, multinational corporations' resource looting, and increasing nationalism. The marginalized are left with no option except to migrate, engage in armed conflicts and terrorism. The situation requires social justice movements to demand an end to these horrors. It also demands actions that will ensure that every person's basic needs are met, including equality and empowering all people to realize their potential. In the absence of global and national leadership, the people from below who are impacted by structural violence (SV) need to be educated to lead the transformation process. Uprooting the greed engendered by capitalism and global policies that reinforce Africa's exploitation and marginalization will advance a fight for an alternative world order that cares for the needs and wellbeing of all people and the environment.

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