



Poverty and Social Violence in Africa: Nigeria as Case Study

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Executive Summary

This policy brief is a product of a larger study that focuses on the connection between poverty and social violence in Africa. Conceptually different from political violence, social violence is a form of violence that neither involves political actors nor necessarily targets the state. Often driven by very few (if any) political objectives, social violence is increasingly becoming a regular occurrence in many states across Africa and other parts of the world. Unfortunately, because of the complex nature of its causal antecedents, social violence attracts less attention from scholars and policy makers. The high incidences of poverty across many African countries -- manifest in high rates of hunger, illiteracy, unemployment and diseases -- generate hopelessness, frustration, anger and lawlessness. Drawing from that, the study forwards the argument that those factors are drivers of the increasing problem of social violence in the continent. Therefore, to address effectively the phenomenon of social violence, African governments need to be more committed to the fight against poverty and other impediments to human development.

What is Social Violence?

Violence is defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (<http://www.who.int/>). Despite that succinct articulation of the idea of violence, there are issues with respect to a clear understanding or definition

of the concept of social violence as scholars and experts on conflict/war struggle to establish the differences between social violence and political violence.

However, it can be deduced from the existing literature that the concept of social violence is developed enough that it does identify a particular type of violence that is different from political violence in terms of the purpose of the purveyors and the target actors involved. What is clear is that the key goal in acts of social violence is not really politically motivated. The study uses the term: “armed social violence”, which is a type of violence that does not have explicit political motivations and clearly involves non-war situations. Within the context of the definition, the following are included in the concept: riots and protests, communal violence, strikes, homicide, kidnapping gang violence, and terrorism.

Poverty: Still on the Rise in Africa

Given its high rates of poverty, hunger and unemployment, Africa lags behind other countries around the globe when it comes its outlook and prospects for development. The statistics presented below from international development agencies demonstrate a worrying trend:

- Between 1990 and 2012, the poor in Africa increased by about 100 million more people.
- Africa will experience in the nearest future the world's largest concentration of the extremely poor.
- Africa has 75% of the world's poorest countries; the Central African Republic was ranked the poorest with a GDP per capita of US\$ 656 as at 2016.
- Africans living in poverty rose to 330 million by 2012 as against 280 million in 1990.

- Sub-Saharan Africa was the least performing region regarding the MDG call to halve extreme poverty by 2015; Botswana and Equatorial Guinea were the only states that achieved the goal.
- While enrolments have noticeably improved in schools, it has been observed that “more than two in five adults are still illiterate, and the quality of schooling is often low.”
- As many as 233 million people in Africa, out of a global total of 795 million, faced hunger or undernourishment between 2014 and 2016. This made sub-Saharan Africa the region with the second largest number of hungry people -- after Asia.
- Approximately about one out of every three people living in sub-Saharan Africa is undernourished.

More worrisome is the fact that Africa remains the region with the least progress towards reducing poverty in the world (<http://www.worldhunger.org/>).

The Poverty-Social Violence Nexus in Africa

Poverty and violence are related in various ways. The first strand of explanations suggests that the linkage between poverty and violence is a question of the prevailing political and socio-economic condition of a group of people. The argument is predicated on several factors:

- 1) The theory that the extent of discrimination against specific groups, especially ethnic and religious groups, and existing social divisions are possible predictors of organized violence against the state or the perceived dominant group.
- 2) The evidence from empirical researches showing that violence is prevalent in countries with poor conditions of living and high rates of unemployment.
- 3) Finally, that poor countries are prone to violence given that they tend to lack the capacity to contain armed uprisings and insurgencies.

Many African countries have characteristics of the phenomena as presented above. These factors cannot be disregarded in analysing the increasing incidences of social violence in the countries. A report released by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) points to a sharp increase in the number of protests and riots since 2010 in the continent, with South Africa recording the highest while Tunisia, Ethiopia and Egypt followed. South Africa's Civic Protests Barometer reported that the years 2009 (204 incidents) and 2014 (218 incidents) saw the highest numbers of incidents of civic protests in the state. These actions are mostly carried out by the poor who see violent protests as a means to communicate their grievances over government failures in addressing glaring socio-economic problems. In South Africa, for example, most of the violent protests are occur in poor communities (otherwise known as townships) and informal

settlements. Similarly, in Nigeria -- which has an estimated 65% poverty rate and youth unemployment rate conservatively placed at 42% -- different agencies have reported that death rates are increasing due to restiveness and social violence. For example, over a ten-year period (1998-2008), it reported: 6,918 deaths (due to sectarian violence); 13,938 deaths (due to terrorism-related violence); and 7,104 casualties (due to state terror/repression).

Policy Recommendations

- Commitment to poverty alleviation strategies: African governments must show more commitment and seriousness in pursuing strategies aimed at ameliorating the sufferings of their people. Presently, despite many social security programs across the continent, most of them are ineffective and inaccessible due to corruption, bureaucratization, and politicization. Governments need effective social intervention schemes to address grinding poverty and stem potential political fault lines for conflict and social instability.
- Anti-corruption strategies: rampant cases of corruption ravaging many African states are not unlinked to the problem of poverty in the continent. Many of the funds intended for social interventions or developmental projects are ending up in private hands. This affects the course of development in the continent. A more radical and courageous anti-corruption system need to be institutionalized to fight corruption. In addition, the judicial system must be reformed and strengthened as a governmental branch equipped to act effectively and autonomously.
- Good governance: Africa's long years of bad governance and poor service delivery have been a major setback in the efforts to achieve development in the continent. The issue of good governance has been a focus of The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (the Democracy Charter), and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). However, not much has been achieved since the instruments were established. That must be reversed!
- Effective socio-economic policy: The lack of direction in many existing government policies is also a major problem in the path of development in Africa. As such, governments must focus their policy frameworks seriously on achieving economic growth and development.
- Regional cooperation on social violence: It is important that social violence is included in the categories of violence and conflicts to be addressed in Africa. The existing regional frameworks focus more on political violence and terrorism. Given the devastating short and long term impacts of social violence on domestic social order and value systems, the problem requires priority attention.

