

BACKGROUND NOTE ON CIVIL STRIFE AND POVERTY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA FOR THE WDR 2000/2001

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This short essay surveys the major approaches taken in the literature, identifying gaps in questions asked and research techniques tried. It goes on to discuss the economic sources of violent civic conflict within African states, relating these to the long-term transition from land-surplus to land-scarcity south of the Sahara, to the fiscal weakness of most African states, and to the historically contingent character of ethnic and class differences as causes of conflict. Finally, it comments on the policy implications, including the need for technological change that takes advantage of the changing factor ratio, and the many specific difficulties on the path to what, in general terms, is the most plausible institutional framework for achieving peaceful solutions to the kinds of conflict that at present not infrequently end in violence: tax-paying democracies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The generic questions

In the context of the *WDR* the generic questions are, surely, what are the causal relationships between civil strife and poverty, and what policies might reduce the contribution of the former to the perpetuation or deepening of the latter. 'Civil strife' is defined here as collective violence internal to a given state (using 'state' in a legal sense: within the sovereign territory).¹ Thus we refer to riots, inter-communal violence generally, and civil wars. Military coups are excluded where the violence involved in the attempted seizure of power does not directly involve large numbers of civilian protagonists.

Civil strife and poverty in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Sahara is an all too appropriate region in which to consider the relationships between such conflicts and poverty because, besides being the poorest major region of the world in terms of average incomes, in the 1980s and 1990s it has been perhaps the most plagued by civil strife. The campaigns against colonial or white-minority regimes are over but the region has recently been characterised by many examples of other kinds of civil strife. A catalogue of such conflicts would take most of the available space and is anyway unnecessary.² What is important, as a basis for the discussion that follows, is to identify and distinguish the main forms of strife in the region, emphasising their variety.

¹Cf. Amii Omara-Otunnu's comment on Uganda, which applies to some - though far from all - other Sub-Saharan countries (and was arguably more true of Uganda before 1986 than since): 'The Ugandan administrative territory can be regarded as a state essentially only in legalistic and diplomatic terms and not in a historical or sociological sense; as far as socio-political struggles are concerned, however, it is indeed a state in the sense that it has become the arena in which social conflicts are played out by various different groups.' (Omara-Otunnu 1995, p. 233).

²A useful partial survey (it covers wars, 1980-c1992) is provided by Copson 1994, ch. 2.

There have been insurrections aimed at taking over the state: the successful prototype being Yoweri Museveni's National Resistance Army which started with 27 armed men and finished by capturing the capital in 1986.³ There have been what were intended as takeovers of the state which remained confined to a particular province or region: such as the rising against Museveni by the Holy Spirit Movement/Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda (Behrend 1998). There have been provincial or local revolts, aimed at separatism: notably those which led to the independence of Eritrea and Tigray from Ethiopia in 1991, though these were only successful when one of the separatist armies actually captured the Ethiopian capital. There have been intra-ethnic struggles at various levels, from genocidal attempts on a national scale organised by the state elite, as in Rwanda in 1994 (Prunier 1995), or apparently more spontaneously in reaction against a coup, as in Burundi the previous year (Lemarchand 1996), down to far more limited conflicts related to local land issues in a range of countries across the continent.

From civil strife to poverty

There is no dispute that civil strife in the sense used here tends to impoverish individuals, households and communities and to hinder or reverse economic growth.⁴ Besides the destruction of life, limbs and capital stock the wholesale displacement of populations is often hugely disruptive of production, while local conflicts over land rights inhibit investment in improving land quality or planting crops. A less obvious but indicative feature of some recent civil wars has been the use of forced labour by guerrillas: the kidnapping of civilians to work on 'state farms', as in Sierra Leone, or to carry loads across country, as in northern Uganda (Abdullah & Muana 1998, pp. 188, 191; Behrend 1998, p. 116).⁵ It must be recognised that occasionally a successful revolution leads to better government policies with respect to economic growth, poverty reduction and other social goals: as with Museveni's victory. But the price is very high and in the majority of violent conflicts of the last twenty years in tropical Africa no such clear improvement resulted. Overall, we can safely assume that collective violence *per se* is generally damaging to the welfare of the poor and to the productivity of the economy as a whole. Accordingly, we will not dwell on this side of the causal interrelationship between civil strife and poverty. Rather, the focus in this Note is on poverty as a source of civil strife.

2. METHODOLOGIES IN THE STUDY OF CIVIL STRIFE AND POVERTY IN AFRICA: WHAT HAS BEEN TRIED AND WHAT MIGHT USEFULLY BE TRIED

The existing literature and the difficulty of documenting a violent present

³A convenient short account of this much-discussed story is Ngoga 1998.

⁴Copson 1994, ch. 4, has a brief survey whose substantive conclusions still apply.

⁵The perpetrators being the Revolutionary United Front and the Lord's Resistance Army respectively.

A distinction should be drawn between studies devoted to conflicts themselves and studies which illuminate the causes and effects of such conflicts as part of enquiries into other (diverse) themes such as sources of economic growth (or the lack of it) or the evolution of social identities or of land tenure systems.

Let us briefly illustrate the variety of the latter category, from which comes much of our understanding of the economic, social, cultural and political contexts, causes and manifestations of civil strife south of the Sahara. Such research has come from range of disciplinary perspectives using a variety of techniques. In particular, there have been long-term studies of the formation of ethnic and other identities in specific localities, drawing on both oral and written primary sources, primarily qualitative (a good example is Peel 1983: for overviews which reflect much of this work see Bayart 1993, Mamdani 1996). More controversially, recently there have been attempts to use cross-country regression analysis to investigate the importance of 'ethnic fragmentation' as an obstacle to economic growth (starting from Easterly and Levine 1997; see further Collier 1998; for some criticisms see Peters 1998). A too-rare genre is the theoretically-situated and empirically-detailed micro-study: examining economic change in relation to civil strife in a particular locality over a relatively substantial period and, ideally, combining different methodologies (an outstanding example is André & Platteau 1996).⁶ Sophisticated case-studies of this kind are particularly valuable for identifying variables and showing how they can interact: albeit, by their nature, they beg the question of how representative the case is.

Turning to studies of civil strife *per se*, it is no surprise to find that much of the most intellectually satisfying work has been done on conflicts that are now some way in the past: there is a very impressive literature, too voluminous to cite here, on the 'Mau Mau' revolt in the 1950s in Kenya, and there is a notable literature on the liberation war that led to Zimbabwean independence in 1979 (e.g. Lan 1985, Ranger 1985).

More recent conflicts are harder to document rigorously. Many of the most fully-contextualised and apparently richly-informed accounts of very recent conflicts offer what is essentially high-quality reportage which, in some though not all cases, is also analysed in relation to debates in political science and history. These accounts necessarily suffer from severe methodological constraints. Not only is scope for reliable quantification very limited, but these studies break the historian's basic rules that a source must be given for every non-banal empirical claim, and that all sources must be capable of being checked by other researchers. To some degree this is often inevitable: because the events described are often very recent, and because it is frequently necessary to preserve the anonymity of informants for their own physical protection. This leaves the reader with difficulties in deciding whether or how far to accept the empirical claims. Even where sources are cited, for example about the social composition of protesting crowds or guerilla bands, the sources are frequently newspaper reports based on individual observations, often necessarily impressionistic, and on the statements of witnesses which may themselves be undocumented. Within these constraints the best that can be hoped for is that researchers establish the professionalism of their approach by documenting whatever can be documented, by demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the local setting and of the broader issues, and - where they put forward initially undocumented or insufficiently documented claims - by turning out to be right in retrospect. By these criteria there are some excellent and highly perceptive studies, representatives of which will be cited in the course of the discussion below. The very sensitivity of the issues at least has

⁶A comparable study in some ways, though not specifically dealing with civil strife, is Tiffen's long-term study of Machakos District in Kenya (Tiffen 1994, 1995).

the advantage that it ensures that key books provoke extensive discussion, which may make it easier for the outsider to assess the arguments. This applies, for example, to both the Sierra Leone and Rwanda cases.⁷

Neglected questions and approaches

I suggest that the most important unanswered, or at least only partly answered, question is what can we learn from the successes. For, amid the depressing news, it is important to note that *not* every major inequality south of the Sahara leads to violent social conflict, and that not all the civil strife that does occur gets worse over time. Let us take the case of Ghana. Considering the depth of the gulf in average incomes and wealth between the south and the north of the country, and taking account of the fact that this division is sharply imprinted on the landscape (roughly, forest zone compared to savanna) and in cultural and historical differences (in the nineteenth slaves were imported to southern societies from the north), it is a striking and significant fact that north-south differences have never become the main fault line in multi-party politics, let alone a source of violent civil conflict. Again, in the 1950s there was a strong political movement demanding the unification of the Ewe-speaking population who had been divided by the colonial border between what became Ghana and Togo. Yet, despite a widespread belief that the government in Accra had rigged the U.N.-supervised referendum that legitimated the continuation of the colonial border after the independence of the two new states, the Ewe unification movement has withered rather than flourished over the first forty years of independence (Nugent 1999; Brown 1980). In seeking to understand the causes of apparently intractable civil strife we might gain by giving much more attention than we have done so far to examining the lessons of those potential or actual conflicts which (at least to date) have had peaceful outcomes.

On research strategies I would highlight two that could be particularly valuable and which are not, or not much, in evidence in the work done so far. First, responding to the cross-country regression literature, it would be useful to have more studies that disaggregated across period and country and went on to ask what can be learned by focussing on ‘genuinely comparable’ cases. In doing so, researchers would ideally use a range of techniques, quantitative and qualitative, and combine different disciplinary perspectives. Such work has been attempted on other issues (e.g. there are comparisons of economic policy between Kenya and Tanzania, Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire) but this approach has not, to my knowledge, been systematically applied to the relationships between civil strife and poverty.

Second, the economic case-study approach exemplified by André & Platteau and by Tiffen could be enhanced, in those cases where the sources were available, by systematic use of archival sources such as unpublished administrative and court records. Source-availability is indeed often a severe problem, but this is by no means always so even for the recent past. Such records can be invaluable in analysing the dynamics of conflicts (illuminating agents’ motives, strategies, and how these constrained or created subsequent options). For example, it may be possible to trace the evolution of a conflict over land via the documentation created by petitions, legal suits, and local government policy decisions. Integrating this with the kinds of statistical and ethnographic data collected by the likes of André & Platteau could in principle permit a depth of insight beyond that achieved so far even by the

⁷The key publications on both cases were widely and fairly intensively reviewed, and some have provoked detailed papers in response: for example in the journals *African Affairs* and *African Development*.

best existing work.

Meanwhile, the existing literature has much to say: so much that I cannot do justice to all disciplinary perspectives. The next two sections summarise one economic historian's take on the findings of, and arguments in, this diverse body of work.

3. ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL-ECONOMY SOURCES OF CIVIL STRIFE

Given that, as noted in the Introduction, civil strife in itself is so damaging to poverty reduction, we need to consider its causes. In the context of the *WDR*, and also reflecting my disciplinary limitations, it is appropriate to concentrate on economic and political economy sources of the origin and scale of civil strife. The focus here is also on domestic rather than international causes. The international aspects of civil wars and other violent conflicts within African states remain complex and important, and involve both other African states and overseas governments and private interests. But they have been well surveyed elsewhere (Clapham 1996; Copson 1994) and my view is that, where international links have contributed to originating or aggravating civil strife south of the Sahara, they have usually been supplementary rather than necessary causes (cf. Copson 1994, p. 103). Even where a guerilla movement was created externally, as in the case of RENAMO (founded by the then white settler regime to destabilize Mozambique) the striking fact is that it acquired a life of its own and long outlived its foreign creators (Hall 1990).

The economic and political-economic categories that occur most frequently in accounts of the causes of civil strife in contemporary Africa are land, underemployed youths, unpaid soldiers, and warlords. They are most usefully discussed in the perspective of what I regard as three fundamental themes in the political economy of Africa: the long-term transition from land-surplus to land-scarcity; the weakness of the state; and the contingent character of both ethnic and class consciousness.

Land and population: the long-term, incomplete, transition to land scarcity

Most Sub-Saharan economies have been historically characterised by a surplus of land, in the strict sense that expansion of output has not been constrained by the supply of cultivable land. There have long been exceptions in various areas at particular periods, and a full analysis would incorporate complications arising from seasonality and capital formation.⁸ But as a generalisation, the proposition applies strongly until recently. Land surpluses were reduced in some areas by the expansion of export agriculture during the twentieth century, and in others the benefits of relatively-abundant land were denied to the majority populations by colonial or white-minority regimes which appropriated land for European settlers. But the major motor of growing pressure on land, and one that is still running, is the rapid growth of population in most areas south of the Sahara since 1918, and especially since 1945. The region is clearly in long-term transition to land scarcity.

At an Africa-wide level it is important not to over-dramatise the implications of this (cf. Iliffe 1995, pp. 266-7). Many countries, most spectacularly Congo-Zaire and Sudan, still have very large areas in which cultivable land is far from scarce. Even in a relatively densely populated area heavily involved in farming for export and domestic markets, southwestern Nigeria, there are apparently still localities in which the supply of cultivable land is not a constraint on expansion of output (Akinola 1995).

⁸I am tackling this in a survey paper on African economic history due for delivery in February 2000.

Moreover, the rate of population growth in Africa generally appears to have started to slacken from the 1980s onwards, though it remains closer to 3% than to 2% per year (World Bank 1998, p. 325). Nor do the implications of a higher labour-land ratio have to be bad: on the contrary, Boserup's famous thesis about demographic pressure being the mother of higher total-factor productivity is borne out in a Kenyan case-study (Tiffen 1994, 1995). Again, Richards has exposed as a myth the claim that the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars were the result of Malthusian pressure. As he puts it, 'Both countries face environmental problems but *not* environmental crises' (Richards 1996, p. 115).

But it is clear that growing pressure on land has been and is an important element in many local disputes which have led to violence over the last quarter-century: ranging geographically from clashes between pastoral Maasai and sedentary Kikuyu settlers in Kenya to the several local wars in the Northern Region of Ghana, and to recent clashes in parts of Nigeria (e.g. Egwu 1998). In the examples just given the conflicting sides formed on ethnic lines. But ethnic identities may themselves be redefined in response to pressure on land. For example, Boni shows that in Sefwi-Wiawso, in the western region of Ghana, growing land scarcity (from the spread of cocoa cultivation as well as population growth) led to profound changes in communal identity during the twentieth century. Whereas previous strangers were assimilated, including being given land and junior political offices, from the 1950s they were defined as 'strangers' (however long they had lived there, and even if they claimed some Sefwi ancestry), were excluded from local office and were made to pay for their lands. In 1986 the local government authorities sent 'Sefwi' villagers to evict 'strangers', resulting in violence. Thus, rather than the fight over land reflecting ancient ethnic divisions, the growing value of land had prompted a redefinition of local ethnic identity to exclude as many as possible of what were now regarded as foreigners. In this case the central government intervened to resolve the issue by legislating to facilitate land title registration and to remove land issues from the jurisdiction of chiefs' courts: giving the stranger-farmers effective security of tenure (Boni, forthcoming). The primacy of land as a source of conflict is also evidenced even in the ethnically-polarised case of Rwanda. The victims of the 1994 Rwandan massacres included not only Tutsi and Hutu members of opposition political parties, but also Hutu peasants apparently killed by fellow-Hutus from the same community. In an admittedly small sample, a third of these seem to have been killed because of resentments related to their possession of relatively large land-holdings (André & Platteau 1996, pp. 33-6). More generally, it is extremely hard to avoid the conclusion that the extremity of the growing pressure on land contributed to the escalation in Hutu-Tutsi conflict in the 1990s in both Rwanda and Burundi.

Youth un/der-employment

Related - in part - to growing land scarcity is youth unemployment and under-employment. It is well known that Africa's rapid population growth rate in recent decades has resulted in a high proportion of the population being in the younger age groups. Much of the academic discussion of the Liberian and, especially, the Sierra Leonean wars has focussed on the role of poor, socially marginal young males. Commentators have debated the significance of an emergent youth culture influenced by various trans-Atlantic imports (Richards 1996, ch.5; Abdullah & Muana 1998). However that may be, the general point is that, in the context of the current age profile of African populations, the quite widespread shortages of opportunities for regular productive employment or self-employment create conditions in which it is hardly surprising if many youths do not need to be coerced (as some have been) to join in civil war. Under-employment and unemployment may lead to a sense of personal frustration that goes

beyond the associated material deprivation.⁹ This may be one reason for the appeal of millenarian, rather than prosaically rational, calls for rebellion among economically and socially-marginal members of urban populations (Zack-Williams 1999). The clearest case of this was the ‘Yan Tatsine movement in northern Nigerian cities in the early 1980s (Lubeck 1985). In many countries part of the problem of youth unemployment can be traced to past government policies that reduced earnings in agriculture without stimulating economic growth in manufacturing or services. The longer-term agricultural constraint and dynamic is - unless and until solutions are found - the transition to land-scarcity discussed above. Outside farming, in most African countries failure of the formal sectors to provide large-scale employment at incomes on which people can afford to live has left the informal sector as the framework within which most urban youths have to survive. We will return to this point later.

Weak states and the problems of warlords and of unpaid soldiers

‘Warlords’ and unpaid (or underpaid) soldiers in government armies may be on opposite sides, but the phenomena can both be related to the long-standing problem of African governance, the weakness of the state. By this is meant, here, the inability of states to raise sufficient revenue to pay enough people well enough to make it realistic to expect those servants or employees to provide the services which the government wishes or purports to offer. Historically, state weakness has been related to land surplus in that the latter made it hard for rulers to extract substantial surpluses from farming populations. This is not the place to trace all the sources of the weakness of most contemporary African states. But state weakness provides conditions within which guerilla movements can flourish (Clapham 1998A, p. 2). Similarly, it helps to account for how ‘warlords’ can exist: in the sense of leaders of armed movements whose actions, and even pretensions, do not suggest that they are motivated by political ambition (‘liberation’) or ideology. How far the term can usefully be applied to contemporary African insurgencies is debated. It does seem to fit RENAMO, once it lost its white-minority regime sponsors. It has been argued plausibly that it applies to virtually all parties in the Liberian civil war (Ellis 1998). It has also been suggested that the RUF in Sierra Leone has no plausible political or ideological motivation, though this is disputed (Abdullah & Muana 1998; Richards 1996; compare Zack-Williams 1999). Much turns on how seriously to take the movement’s scanty offerings by way of ideological justification. My view is that one should be cautious about assuming that, because a political-ideological claim is not formulated particularly cogently, it does not reflect real political motives. Thus, warlordism does appear to be a reasonable description of certain countries’ experiences, though questionable as an account of other cases. What is most significant is that in all the cases where it has been shown, or even seriously argued, to exist, the warlord (or ‘warlordist’ movement) confronted either a non-existent central government or one which could not afford to pay its troops regularly. Even in post-1986 Uganda the inability of central government to pay troops adequately and on time has been a serious hindrance to the suppression of insurgencies. In northern Uganda, as in Sierra Leone, it appears that some government troops acquired an economic interest in the continuation of warfare because it provided them with opportunities to loot and trade (Behrend 1998; Abdullah & Muana 1998).

Ethnic and class divisions

⁹This kind of point was made more than once at the Summer Research Workshop earlier this month.

Finally, in this section, we should consider the role of broad social divisions in these conflicts: vertical divisions like ethnicity and horizontal ones as in class. 'Class' as an economic category, referring to all those with a common relationship to the means of production, exists by definition in any society with a division of labour. The issue is how far, and under what circumstances, class is converted into 'class consciousness'; and whether such consciousness is a major element in contemporary civil strife in Africa. By an 'ethnic' group is here meant one whose members define themselves as members in terms of common origin and/or heritage, whether real or alleged. There is no doubt that Africa is, in this sense, ethnically diverse. But it is important not to conflate diversity with fragmentation:¹⁰ diversity can be harmonious. Rwanda and Burundi are much more ethnically fragmented than Tanzania, but are far less ethnically diverse. The issue is how far, and under what circumstances, an awareness of ethnic difference becomes converted into inter-ethnic hostility; and whether such hostility is a key element in civil strife south of the Sahara.

A major conclusion from the literature is that conflict on ethnic and class lines is historically contingent. The strong consensus in the studies of Africa by anthropologists and historians is that ethnicity is not 'primordial', meaning an original and permanent feature of the societies concerned, but rather a social and historical phenomenon, therefore subject to change.¹¹ Particular ethnic identities have been created and frequently redefined during the last two centuries: and 'ethno-genesis' seems to be as or more active a process in the post-colonial period as before. In Rwanda and Burundi the ethnic dimension of civil strife has been predominant since the late colonial period, and more so as a result of the various episodes of genocide than before. In contrast, ethnic divisions seem to have been a relatively minor element in the Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars. When Charles Taylor launched the Liberian war in 1991 he made instrumental use of ethnicity in that his troops first entered a district occupied by people who had been subjected to ethnic discrimination by the Doe regime. But after an early phase of reciprocal violence between members of different ethnic groups, the conflict became essentially one between rival warlords, with both leaders and soldiers showing no particular loyalties, whether ethnic or ideological (Ellis 1998). Ethnicity seems to have been even less important in the Sierra Leonean case (Zack-Williams 1999). Thus the Western media image that wars in Africa are basically inter-ethnic is, as a generalisation, fundamentally mistaken. On the other hand, it is also a mistake to imagine that, in those cases where ethnic conflicts are conscious and bloody, that they can be accounted for merely as epiphenomena of economic processes. Ethnic conflict is part of the present reality: the question is how to control and get beyond it.

Class is not a fashionable subject of study, and is anyway often assumed to be irrelevant in Sub-Saharan Africa. Yet class divisions have occasionally been the basis of violent political conflict in the region. The Mau Mau insurgency was not only a fight for land against European settlers and for independence from colonial rule: it was also a civil war within Kikuyu society, and one with a real class element (among other elements): landless ex-squatters confronting landowners (cf. Cowen 1981; Bates 1989, ch. 1). Class elements have also been present in some of the conflicts of the 1990s, though not in the forms envisaged in traditional marxist images of aristocracy, bourgeoisie and an organised factory-based working class. In Rwanda on the eve of the 1994 genocide it seems that the economic differences between the Hutu and Tutsi populations were much more of occupation than of income and wealth

¹⁰A point that must be remembered when reading Easterly and Levine 1997 or Collier 1998.

¹¹I made this point in more detail in Austin 1996, Section 2.

(Austin 1996). It is reasonable to regard the above-mentioned readiness of un/der-employed youths to participate in insurrections as a class phenomenon in so far as it is a response to their particularly tenuous relations with the means of production.

It seems likely that the transition to land scarcity, as it proceeds, will create the risk of new or aggravated conflicts along both ethnic and class lines: conflicts which penurious governments are often ill-equipped to resolve before or even after outbreaks of violence. We now turn to the implications for policy.

4. WHAT CAN BE DONE? IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final section is intended to highlight the main implications for policy of the preceding discussion.

On the problem of how to avoid or ameliorate future conflicts, the following points should be made. First, land is not yet scarce everywhere: an Africa-wide prescription about the implications of population pressure on land is no substitute for country- or even provincial-level assessments. Second, where land scarcity is already, or is fast becoming, a reality there are some general implications for economic policy. The objective of raising total factor productivity is insufficient: it is crucial that this be done, as far as possible, through labour-intensive rather than labour-saving technologies. Indeed, a capital-intensive 'green revolution' could be a recipe for even greater concentration of population in the towns, making urban employment the sole means of creating a productive basis for the social integration of most of the propertyless. As it happens the original 'green revolution' methods, Asian or Mexican-style, were rarely successfully applied south of the Sahara partly because they tended to be land-saving in what used to be generally land-surplus areas. This obstacle to diffusion may be less serious in future: though there remains the problem that these technologies have tended to require relatively substantial capital inputs. Third, the need to raise off-farm income opportunities is ever more urgent: partly because of the land transition but also because of the existing widespread urban underemployment. As noted above, the provision of regular employment or self-employment opportunities appears to have benefits in terms of increasing personal satisfaction and reducing the potential for social conflict that go beyond the income effect. How these objectives might best be pursued is (perhaps conveniently) beyond the scope of this Note.

On the problem of how to resolve existing conflicts, donors face a difficult dilemma between maintaining the principle of non-interference in internal politics and the moral argument for helping those governments that have democratic credentials to, for example, pay their own troops as a means of restoring the security and social peace necessary for effective poverty alleviation. When it comes to attempting negotiated settlements of intractable impasses it may well be necessary for governments to adopt policies that are sub-optimal economically, at least in the short term, in order to improve the chances of long-term social and political cohesion. With regard to land titling in Rwanda, for example, the political sensitivities make this enormously difficult: certainly no land registration scheme imposed by a government that is perceived as representing only Tutsis or only Hutus would be stable in the long term - unless maintained by force. But if there is ever to be a peace settlement, property rights will have to be an element in it: otherwise land will recur as a divisive issue. Specifically, such a settlement would need to guarantee that neither side got everything it asked for and that each side got something. In such a context it would be short-sighted to reject land titling purely on the grounds of what, as far as they go, are indeed serious economic objections: namely that in Africa indigenous land tenure systems have

proved generally to be efficient in adapting to changing factor ratios; and that in the specific case of Rwanda and Burundi the very small size of most of the plots means that the transactions costs of the reform itself would exceed the efficiency gains in the short and even medium terms.¹²

¹²The first view is noted, and the second urged, by Jean-Philippe Platteau in various places including Platteau 1996. A case for land registration in Rwanda was put in Austin 1996, Section 4.

Finally, on the problem of devising political mechanisms for solving or preventing such conflicts, the standard recipes offered in the literature are the promotion of democratic rights and of civil society (associations intermediate between individuals or families on the one hand and the state on the other). Starting from the argument sketched above about the chronic fiscal weakness of African states, and conscious that ‘strong’ states (in the sense used here) can be oppressive unless democratic and individual rights are established,¹³ there is a very strong case in principle for the strengthening and creation (as applicable) of tax-paying democracies. But getting there requires careful attention to the specificities of both constitutional technicalities and particular political settings. Not all civic organisations enhance democracy and social cohesion: some promote ethnic exclusivity.¹⁴ The return to competitive electoral politics in many African countries in the 1990s has been seen as exacerbating ethnic competition (e.g. Muigai 1995): ethnicity remains as rational a basis as ever for the winning of elections (cf. Bates 1983). Democratic accountability is essential, but the devil is in the detail.

5. LIST OF BACKGROUND REFERENCES

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¹³The speed, scale and thoroughness of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 owed much to the unusual ‘strength’ of the Rwandan state over several decades: with its culture of disciplined obedience to higher authority (Prunier 1995). Thus ‘strong states’ are only a solution if they have independent judiciaries and respect for human rights. In this respect the ‘human rights agenda’ may be important in securing relatively peaceful conditions for economic growth and specific measures of poverty reduction.

¹⁴For a critique of academic enthusiasm for ‘civil society’ in Africa see Kasfir 1998; also Patterson 1998.

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