Climate Change, Environment Insecurity, Migration, and Conflict in Africa: Policy Options for Enduring Peace and Sustainable Development

Mersie Ejigu

Background. In natural resource dependent economies, like those in Africa, environmental degradation (land, water, vegetation cover, and ecosystems) is pervasive. Severe competition over these resources has been fueled by rapid population growth, low technological intake, unequal access to resources, and policy/institutional weaknesses. Often, climate change and frequency of severe drought amplify the burden on households- easily exhausting traditional in situ coping mechanisms only to be left with migration to areas perceived to be more fertile/ encroachment into land owned by others, which means conflict.

Under the leadership of this author, four country case studies (Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda) were conducted to capture community and household perceptions of environmental insecurity and armed conflicts through utilizing triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data. The studies concluded that there is indeed growing and widening prevalence of environmental insecurity induced conflicts driven by severe competition over scarce agricultural land and grazing area, but heavily influenced by wide-ranging factors (governance failures, social cleavages, inequality [perceived and actual], cultural heterogeneity, low technology intake and deficient property rights) that trigger, amplify and/or cause conflict. The experiences of all countries show that where there is prevalence of actual and potential violent conflict, there is state failure. In countries like Ethiopia, which adopted ethnic federalism as a means of governance, these environment insecurity-induced conflicts easily took ethnicity cover.

Objectives. States and the international development community have ample opportunities to reverse trends and pave the ground for enduring peace and sustainable development. This paper proposes a multisectoral and multi-level framework to: (a) make development strategies and policies integrate the causes and consequences of environmental insecurity and conflict; (b) strength and developing state capacity at all levels including crafting policies that enhance biodiversity conserving behavior and improve access of all citizens to resources, social services, and justice; and (c) putting in place and operationalizing an inclusive and sustainable development policy framework.

Approach/Activities. Based on extensive literature review, results of field studies that aimed at capturing community and household perceptions of climate/environment security that the author led and participated in, the paper seeks to establish climate/environmental insecurity, combined with state failure, as the main cause, trigger, and amplifier of population displacement and migration. It concludes by proposing the integration of climate/ environmental security in development policy and planning as a game changer

Results/Lessons Learned. Burundi, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Uganda experience growing and widening prevalence of environmental insecurity induced conflicts driven by severe competition over scarce agricultural land and grazing area, but heavily influenced by wide-ranging factors (governance failures, social cleavages, inequality [perceived and actual], cultural heterogeneity, low technology intake and deficient property rights) that trigger, amplify and/or cause conflict. The experiences of all countries show that where there is prevalence of actual and potential violent conflict, there is state failure. In countries like Ethiopia, which adopted ethnic federalism as a means of governance, these environment insecurity-induced conflicts easily took ethnicity cover.