



Natural Resources and Armed Conflicts in Africa: An Analytical Study of Conflict Hotspots and Their Contributing Factors

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Abstract:

This article addresses conflicts associated with natural resources in Africa. It considers these conflicts to be among the most significant issues affecting political, social and economic stability in the region since the end of the colonial era. The study focuses on the most significant causes and motivating factors behind these conflicts. The importance of this topic lies in its direct link to vital resources such as energy, minerals, water and arable land, all of which have become central to many internal and cross-border disputes among African states. The study concludes that these conflicts are not solely related to resource scarcity or competition; rather, other factors are intertwined, including the colonial legacy, weak state institutions, mismanagement of wealth, ethnic pluralism, and the impact of climate change and external interventions. The findings further emphasise that addressing these conflicts requires institutional reforms, strengthened good governance and fair, equitable resource distribution to achieve development and stability.

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Introduction:

Since ancient times, competition and conflict over access to resources have been among the most defining features of human life. In light of the growing demand for resources alongside the persistent rise in population, the scarcity of resources and their uneven geographic distribution, as well as the impact of various factors on these resources — including climate change, depletion and misuse or mismanagement by governments — this struggle has escalated to the level of war and armed conflict in many regions.

Conflicts and wars over natural resources are nothing new to the African continent, particularly given that it occupies leading positions globally in the production of many resources and contains substantial reserves of them. This has made these resources a focal point of interest and competition for major economic powers. At the same time, these resources have caused internal and inter-border wars to erupt in many African regions, with the main objective being to gain control of natural resources. Consequently, numerous problems and challenges have emerged in various domains, including economic, political, social and environmental.

While the pursuit of natural resources may be the apparent cause of many wars in Africa, it is also linked to factors and drivers that directly or indirectly generate tensions and conflicts between African groups and states in various regions of the continent. This study will examine a range of conflicts related to natural resources in Africa, whether associated with energy and mineral resources or water, agricultural land and pastoral/rangeland areas, in order to identify these factors.

Thus, the study addresses the following research problem: What are the underlying causes and drivers of wars over natural resources in different regions of Africa?

To answer this question, the study adopts three key axes.

1. A conceptual approach to natural resources in Africa.
2. Wars over natural resources in Africa: definition and drivers.
3. Types and hotspots of conflicts over resources in Africa.

First Axis: A Conceptual Approach to Natural Resources in Africa

The term 'natural resources' refers to all resources found on Earth that exist without human intervention. Some are essential for human life, while others have economic value and contribute to industry, such as fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas), minerals and forests. This means that human beings do not create natural resources; rather, they use and modify them through processes that benefit them¹.

Natural resources may also be defined as raw materials supplied by nature that can be extracted and utilised either directly or after processing and integration into production to generate benefits for humans. Consequently, they carry both use and market value².

Natural resources can be divided into two main categories:

- Non-renewable resources, such as minerals and fossil fuels.
- Renewable resources (also described as non-depleting or not exhaustible under normal conditions) regenerate themselves and include soil, water, plants and solar radiation³.

Africa is endowed with immense natural wealth, including energy and oil resources, minerals, as well as agricultural, water and animal resources⁴. Historically, it has ranked among the top producers globally in terms of both production rates and reserves. For this reason, it has long been referred to as the "World's Reservoir" and the "Food Basket of the World"⁵.

It holds around 10% of the world's oil reserves and ranks third worldwide in terms of oil potential. The African reserve is estimated at 125.6 billion barrels, and the estimated lifespan of African oil reserves is 33.4 years based on global production rates⁶. Accordingly, Africa is one of the few regions globally with vast oil reserves, with oil fields distributed across many countries, most notably in North and West Africa, where extraction is generally considered easier and faster. Oil can also be transported quickly from surface wells to offshore vessels for refining, ready for loading and direct export.

Africa is divided in terms of oil into four regions: North Africa, East and Central Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa, as follows:

- North Africa: This region includes two OPEC member countries: Libya and Algeria. Libya's oil reserves are estimated at around 40 billion barrels, and it produces around 1.6 million barrels per day. Algeria's daily production is around 1.3 million barrels, and its reserves are estimated at 12.4 billion barrels. There are other oil-producing countries in this region, albeit at a lower level. These include Morocco, which produces around 300,000 barrels per day with reserves of approximately 100 million barrels, and Tunisia, which produces 777,000 barrels per day with estimated reserves of 1.7 billion barrels⁷.

- East and Central Africa: The most prominent oil-producing countries in this region are Sudan, which began exporting oil in 1999, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

- West Africa's most important producers include Nigeria, Togo, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin and São Tomé and Príncipe. West Africa is considered the most promising oil region in Africa following major discoveries in the Gulf of Guinea area — the coastal belt located between Nigeria and Angola. Reports indicate that these are among the most significant oil discoveries in the world in recent years. The region currently accounts for around 70% of Africa's oil production, with total production reaching approximately 9.5 million barrels per day. Nigeria leads West Africa. It is the 11th largest oil producer globally. Its production reached approximately 3 million barrels per day in 2008, and its oil reserves are estimated at 2.35 billion barrels. The region is significant because it has grown faster than

other producing regions, with production growth averaging around 30% over ten years, compared with 16% in other regions⁸.

- Southern Africa: The most prominent producers in this region are Angola, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Angola has recently become a focal point for global oil companies, particularly after doubling its oil output to reach two million barrels per day, which ranks it second in Africa after Nigeria. Angola exports 40% of its production to the United States, making it the eighth largest supplier of crude oil to America worldwide. Its reserves are estimated at around 25 billion barrels. Zambia produces around 120,000 barrels per day, while Madagascar produces approximately 90,000⁹.

In this context, Africa accounts for 8% of the world's natural gas reserves. The continent also has substantial quantities of uranium, a key raw material in the nuclear industry. It produces more than 18% of the world's total uranium output and studies suggest it possesses around one-third of the world's uranium reserves¹⁰.

Furthermore, Africa accounts for 95% of the world's diamond reserves and produces half of the global output of this precious mineral. Regarding gold, Africa holds around 40% of global reserves and produces approximately 70% of the worldwide output. It also has 90% of the world's platinum reserves and produces around 75% of this metal. As for copper, Africa holds 33% of global reserves, while cobalt accounts for 76%.

Africa also produces around 9% of the world's iron output. Its reserves of minerals and resources, such as manganese and phosphates, range between 15% and 30% of total global reserves¹¹.

The continent is also characterised by the scale of its hydropower potential. Its hydropower capacity is estimated at 1,750 terawatt-hours per year. Despite the potential to ensure energy security through hydropower generation, Africa exploits only around 5% of this immense potential, despite representing 12% of the global total.

With regard to solar energy, many African countries have favourable conditions for generating electricity from this source due to the intense sunlight. Greenpeace has reported that establishing solar power plants covering just 2% of the Sahara Desert would be sufficient to meet global electricity needs¹².

In addition, Africa has approximately 25% of the world's forests. These cover around 650 million hectares, accounting for approximately 21.8% of the continent's land area¹³. Therefore, Africa possesses high-quality timber resources, contributing around 6% of the continent's total GDP. These resources are concentrated in Central Africa, particularly in Gabon, the Republic of the Congo, and Cameroon¹⁴.

Additionally, the proportion of agricultural land in Africa is about 35% of the continent's total area; of this, around 7% is cultivated, while the remainder consists of grasslands and rangelands. Agricultural crops in Africa vary according to the diversity of the prevailing climatic conditions across its regions.¹⁵ In equatorial areas, coffee, pineapples, cocoa, and palm trees are grown; in the savanna regions, watermelons, groundnuts (peanuts), and peppers are produced; in desert areas, dates, palm fruit, and cotton are cultivated; and in the Mediterranean basin, tomatoes, citrus fruits, olives, and a variety of vegetables are grown. It is worth noting that Africa ranks among the top countries globally in both the volume and quality of its production, particularly for crops with commercial and industrial characteristics¹⁶.

Africa also possesses enormous livestock wealth. It accounts for two-thirds of the world's camels (80.3%), one-third of its goats (31.6%), seven heads of cattle and sheep (24.5%), 4.45% of poultry, 9% of horses and 2% of cattle¹⁷.

Finally, Africa's water resources are likewise diverse and can be classified as follows:

- **Rivers:** Africa's geographic location divides the continent into two parts in terms of rivers. The southern part is bordered by the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, which has led to an abundance of rivers and river basins due to heavy rainfall. By contrast, the northern part lies under the influence of the Sahara Desert and has limited river flow due to the scarcity of running water¹⁸. Approximately 63 shared international river basins exist in Africa, covering 64% of the continent's area. 93% of Africa's total surface water flows within them.

The most important of these are the Congo River (3.7 million km²), the deepest river in the world at about 230 m, which runs through 11 African countries, and the Nile River (6,800 km), the longest river in the world. The Nile (3 million km²) is the world's longest river at around 6,800 km and flows through 11 countries.

The Niger River is located in West Africa and runs through approximately 11 countries, including Nigeria, Mali, and Niger. Another important river is the Zambezi, which originates in the Kalene highlands in eastern Angola and extends through eight countries, including Zambia, Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Malawi. Finally, the Orange River begins in the south-easternmost part of the African continent, near the coast of the Indian Ocean, and flows into the Atlantic Ocean in the south-westernmost part after a journey of approximately 2,300 km across four countries: South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Lesotho¹⁹.

- **Lakes:** In Africa, there are approximately 677 lakes, including 88 major lakes²⁰. The most notable of these are Lake Victoria, the largest lake in Africa, from which the Nile originates, and Lake Malawi, the third largest lake in Africa. Lake Tanganyika, which lies across Tanzania, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Zambia, is the longest freshwater lake in the world. Other notable lakes include Lake Tana, Lake Chad and Lake Malawi²¹.

Groundwater constitutes around 15% of the continent's total renewable water resources. Despite their arid landscapes, large quantities of water are found in the Sahara Desert in North Africa, particularly in Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, and Libya²².

However, despite the many advantages that the African continent possesses, these do not reflect the economic reality of African countries. Although it ranks among the world's leading countries in terms of natural wealth production and reserves, Africa is still considered one of the world's most economically underdeveloped regions. It is also one of the most fragile regions socially, politically and environmentally.

Natural resources have long been a driver of growth in many parts of the world. Yet experience has shown that countries rich in such resources often fall within the category of persistently fragile states, characterised by ongoing conflicts. This is the case for many African countries, where the probability of conflict remains high. Moreover, the diversity and abundance of natural resources tend to prolong conflicts and make them more difficult to resolve, whether they are internal or between African states. Such conditions also increase the ambitions of major powers worldwide, who aim to obtain these resources and exert control over the areas in which they are located.

Accordingly, just as it is for major powers, the importance of natural resources for African states has made the need to possess and benefit from these resources a fundamental factor in triggering and escalating conflicts and wars across the African continent. This is precisely what the following section of the study will clarify.

Second: Natural Resource Wars in Africa Definition and factors

Based on the modern political economic perspective of armed conflict and the economic perspective of natural resources, much of the international legal and academic scholarship since the late twentieth century has tended to view natural resources as a principal cause of armed conflict or a factor that exacerbates and perpetuates it. The term 'natural resource wars' (or 'natural resource conflicts') has emerged from this²³.

These are defined as conflicts over access to, control of, and use or exploitation of natural resources. In recent years, conflicts over natural resources have increased in scope and intensity, often occurring across multiple spatial levels ranging from the local to the national and regional or international levels.

Natural resource conflicts can be classified according to either the type of resource involved in the conflict or the principal driver of the conflict. Resources can be divided into three types: (1) extractive resources, such as oil, gas, minerals and precious stones; (2) land; and (3) water. Many conflicts involve the interaction of more than one type of resource. In most cases, the drivers of conflict revolve around one or more of the following: conflict over ownership of resources; conflict over access to resources; conflict over

decision-making related to the management of resources; and conflict over the distribution of returns generated by resource exploitation²⁴.

Accordingly, we conclude that natural resource wars in Africa are numerous and complex. Their causes can be summarised as follows:

- **Competition over local resources:** Conflicts in Africa are often driven by the scarcity of vital natural resources, such as oil, minerals, agricultural land and water. These resources are key to gaining power or financing rival parties. As competition for control of these resources intensifies, it can escalate into armed conflict.

- **Climate change and pressure on natural resources:** Climate change acts as a cumulative factor. Environmental stress phenomena, such as desertification, drought and floods, often intensify the scarcity of natural resources, particularly water and agricultural land. This increases competition among local groups and even between states, thereby fuelling conflicts such as clashes between farmers and herders and the displacement of populations due to environmental disasters²⁵.

- **Sharing of resources among groups and states:** The presence of shared borders between neighbouring groups and states exacerbates conflicts in Africa, often due to poor governance and competition. An example of this is the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam crisis between Ethiopia and Egypt.

- **Political corruption and the state-building crisis:** Weak state institutions and the monopolisation of power — often through dictatorial systems that are unable to organise and manage resources fairly — lead to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small elite. This widens the social and economic gap, causing conflicts to erupt and intensify rapidly, especially in the absence of effective mediation and dispute resolution mechanisms²⁶.

- **Ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism:** In many cases, ethnic and cultural diversity can lead to conflict, particularly when it is not managed well and distributive justice is absent. This can result in insurgent movements and political and social tensions.

- **Deteriorating security conditions:** The state's limited ability to provide security and stability to its citizens due to the spread of organised crime, terrorism and extremist ideologies, the proliferation of rebellions, and the lack of control over illegal activities such as arms smuggling has led to the emergence of non-state armed groups. These groups operate as an alternative or parallel force, insisting on achieving gains through violence. This, in turn, leads to long-lasting armed conflicts. All of these factors intensify conflict and perpetuate cycles of ongoing violence, as armed groups are able to obtain funding by exploiting resources, creating a vicious cycle between conflict and resource depletion²⁷.

- **Economic and social challenges:** Poverty, unemployment, weak infrastructure and social and political marginalisation can all contribute to the escalation of insurgencies and armed conflicts.

- **International or regional interventions:** Whether through supporting a particular party or external actors exploiting existing conflicts, such interventions complicate the situation and deepen tensions, particularly by arming groups or supporting policies that fragment national unity. Foreign powers have often competed for control of African resources by backing certain parties or investing in resource sectors, thereby increasing the intensity of conflicts and causing tensions between governments and local armed groups. Examples of this can be seen in the Sahel and the broader Sahara-Sahel region, where foreign companies and governments compete over uranium and other minerals. External involvement through arms exports, support for armed groups and direct or indirect military operations has helped to prolong conflicts and undermine efforts towards stabilisation and development²⁸.

- **Weak African regional political and economic cooperation and coordination:** This has played a major role in limiting the capacity to confront shared challenges.

- **The negative effects of colonial policies on African societies and states:** Colonial rule resulted in the arbitrary drawing of borders, creating fragile political entities that did not reflect underlying tribal or ethnic

realities. This produced internal conflicts over sovereignty and fostered persistent border disputes, which were often linked to control over resources or differences in influence among states after independence. Furthermore, repressive colonial policies and prolonged colonial rule led to the absence of democratic institutions and weakened governance bodies and political systems, resulting in a lack of political awareness. Consequently, modern states were often unable to manage conflicts effectively, opening the door to fragmentation and recurring conflicts²⁹.

Based on the above, it can be concluded that natural resource wars in Africa arise from the interaction of local, regional and international factors, including intense competition over valuable resources, weak governance, deteriorating security, foreign intervention, environmental challenges and social and political divisions. Taken together, these factors generate conflicts that are difficult to resolve, requiring integrated efforts to manage natural resources fairly and achieve political and internal stability.

Third: Types and Hotspots of Conflicts over Natural Resources in Africa

On the African continent, environmental factors and competition for scarce natural resources are key triggers and intensifiers of conflict. Studies have shown that the availability of natural resources in Africa has significantly contributed to the escalation and persistence of this phenomenon, due to intense competition among multiple actors, most of whom seek to control natural and economic resources³⁰. Accordingly, conflicts over resources in Africa can be categorised by the type of natural resource involved. Conflicts often concern contested ownership or attempts to control valuable resources such as oil and minerals, as well as water and fertile agricultural land³¹.

Ross and Philippe Billon distinguish between lootable resources, such as precious minerals and timber, which are relatively easy for rebel groups to extract and transport, and therefore often give rise to non-secessionist rebellions. In contrast, non-lootable resources, such as oil and natural gas, often lead to secessionist conflicts, particularly in regions where ethnic groups are marginalised. Exploiting this type of resource requires advanced technology, skilled labour and high extraction costs, so exploitation often favours exclusionary, corrupt governments. This can be a strong driver for secessionist movements, especially when they receive support from major powers³².

Such conflicts can occur at different levels: Locally, within a single state, or they can extend to regional and even international levels. Internal conflicts take place within a state's national territory—for example, between the government and opposition groups—and the struggle over resources is often one of the main causes of the conflict. However, conflicts between African states involve two or more states across the African continent and revolve around contested border areas characterised by the availability of economic resources. The conflict may expand into the international arena if major powers become involved. These powers often play a significant role in the outbreak and escalation of resource-related conflicts in Africa, although the extent of their involvement varies depending on the strategic importance of the geographic location and the scale of the natural resources³³.

Of the 41 ongoing conflicts worldwide, 23 occur in Africa, representing 56% of global conflicts. Once the cradle of civilisation and rich in scarce resources, Africa has today become a source of conflict and armed confrontation over diamonds, land, oil, water and other resources. It is also the setting for external interventions that drew administrative borders for African states without taking into account tribal or religious distributions. Consequently, Africa is the continent with the highest number of ongoing conflicts in the world³⁴.

What follows is a presentation of the most significant examples of these cases, based on the aforementioned classification of resource conflicts.

1. Conflicts over oil, timber and precious minerals in Africa

Africa has witnessed numerous wars and conflicts linked to oil and various valuable minerals, most notably gold and diamonds, whether in the form of civil wars, gang wars or border disputes between two or more African states. The following examples illustrate this.

- **The Angolan Civil War (1975–2002)** is a clear example of the dangers posed by an abundance of natural resources, particularly during the period from 1975 to 2002. In many respects, it can be considered a 'natural resource war'.

On the one hand was the 'Angolan government', dominated by the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). The other side was the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), whose operations were firmly established in the north of the country, a region rich in diamonds, which served as a key pillar for UNITA's leadership. In contrast, the Angolan government's war effort relied mainly on oil revenues. Consequently, the trajectory of the conflict appears to be closely connected to changes in the oil price compared with the diamond price. Additionally, there has been a dispute over the oil-rich territory of Cabinda between the Angolan government and the armed groups of the Cabinda Liberation Front³⁵, who seek the right to self-determination, since 1975 — the year Angola gained independence — and continuing to the present³⁶.

- Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002)

Sierra Leone also experienced one of the most severe conflicts in Africa: a civil war lasting 11 years from 1991 to 2002. The rebels financed their activities through diamond mining and the illicit trafficking of other resources. The substantial profits generated from these activities prolonged the war because the parties to the conflict benefited economically from its continuation; therefore, they had little incentive to end it³⁷.

- Conflict over Resources in Nigeria

Nigeria was also caught up in a conflict over resources, particularly in the Niger Delta region, which is rich in oil and natural gas. This was largely driven by protests from local residents against their marginalisation due to the perceived unfair distribution of oil and gas revenues compared to other states.

- Conflict in Rwanda

The earlier conflict in Rwanda, between the Tutsi and Hutu groups, which escalated to genocide, was linked to a struggle over economic resources between these two ethnic communities³⁸.

- Conflict in Liberia

The situation in Liberia is similar. The diversity and geographic distribution of its resources, including diamonds, rubber, iron and timber, contributed to the emergence of 'warlords'. This phenomenon is characterised by highly fragmented clashes between a weak central government and numerous militias that control internal resources. This is because any rebel organisation requires financial support to sustain its activities³⁹.

- Conflict in Mali

In Mali, conflict over mineral wealth, particularly gold, is one of the most prominent types of intensified dispute. Industrial gold production increased by 4% in 2022, reaching 66.2 tons, compared with 63.4 tons in 2021. Among the main contenders for this wealth are groups affiliated with the terrorist organisation al-Qaeda, such as Jama'at Nasr al-Islam, and other groups affiliated with ISIS, such as the Saharaoui group. These organisations compete with local authorities that secure the areas where these resources are located⁴⁰.

- Conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the countries richest in natural resources, especially diamonds, which it produces in greater quantities than any other country worldwide. In addition to diamonds, the DRC also has oil, gold and cobalt, among other resources. These resources are widely regarded as a key cause of civil war, particularly in the Kivu province, which has experienced conflict since gaining independence in 1960⁴¹.

- War in Libya

The civil war in Libya began with the outbreak of the Libyan Revolution on 17 February 2011, influenced by the Arab Spring. This resulted in a large stockpile of weapons circulating among different rebel tribes. Intense internal fighting began in mid-2014, largely resulting from competition to control territory and oil-producing regions⁴².

- conflicts between Tanzania and Malawi

In some cases, conflicts over resources can escalate into interstate or regional conflicts due to competition for resources in border areas or regions where there are disagreements about ownership or use. A case in point is Lake Nyasa (Lake Malawi), which is shared by Tanzania and Malawi. In this case, Malawian investors have been accused of prospecting for oil and fishing on the Tanzanian side of the lake. Another example is the dispute between Sudan and South Sudan over the Abyei area⁴³. This conflict was previously part of internal struggles prior to South Sudan's secession, but following the separation it transformed into a dispute between two states over economic resource⁴⁴s. The region is distinguished by its agricultural lands and oil reserves. Similarly, the dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the Bakassi Peninsula can be included in this context. This dispute lasted for fifteen years, from 1993 to 2008, when the International Court of Justice ruled in favour of Cameroon⁴⁵.

- Dispute between Western Sahara and Morocco

The dispute between Western Sahara and Morocco is one of the oldest conflicts in Africa left behind by Spanish colonial rule, which controlled Western Sahara. However, after Western Sahara gained independence in 1976, Morocco initiated the 'Green March' towards Western Sahara. The Polisario Front regards the conflict as involving a territory that is not terra nullius (i.e. land belonging to no one). The Polisario Front subsequently announced the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Nevertheless, Morocco seized the opportunity without relinquishing its control over the Western Sahara region, enabling it to exert greater control over some of the world's richest fishing grounds. Morocco is also the world's leading producer of phosphate and possesses diverse underground resources, including potential natural gas and oil reserves. Additionally, its strategic location is important for European security. For these reasons, Morocco constructed a security wall intended to deter attacks by the Polisario Front on areas under its control, known as the 'Useful Triangle' (Smara, El Aaiún and Boujdour), as this area hosts the world's largest phosphate deposit. Accordingly, this dispute is considered the most significant example of a resource-related dispute in Africa and beyond, and it remains ongoing to this day⁴⁶.

2. Disputes Over Water and Natural Pastures

Approximately 85% of water sources in Africa are shared across river basins, and around one-third of the continent's freshwater resources lie across boundaries between more than one country. Furthermore, more than one state has access to 106 transboundary groundwater aquifers. Despite this, the United Nations indicates that the relevant states are unable to cooperate sufficiently to manage these aquifers effectively, making water one of the most dangerous sources of tension.

The crisis has escalated beyond mere resource management and has become a critical test of state stability and sovereignty. This also indicates that Africa's national security is threatened not only by coups and traditional armed conflicts, but also by the drying up of rivers and the death of lakes, which is perhaps an even more serious threat. In this regard, clashes between herders and farmers, as well as competition over grazing lands and water rights, are some of the most prominent examples.

Such disputes may occur on a narrow internal scale, for example conflicts between neighbouring landowners over irrigation and grazing rights, or they may take the form of external armed confrontations between the governments of two or more countries disputing each state's share of the flow of water from a shared river basin⁴⁷.

According to the United Nations Science and Environment Centre, Africa recorded a 34% increase in incidents of violence linked to water resources between 2022 and 2023. According to the State of the

Environment in Africa (2024) report, Africa also ranked first among the world's continents in the number of disputes and conflicts related to water sources. Furthermore, the continent experienced 1,800 internal water-related disputes between 1989 and 2011. These alarming figures are compounded by the fact that approximately 340 million people in Africa lack access to safe drinking water⁴⁸.

Reports indicate that all of the continent's vital water basins are experiencing disruptions driven by causes ranging from unsustainable resource use to climate change. These disruptions are turning the basins into "hotspots" for competition over water. These basins include Lake Chad, shared by Chad, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Niger; the Nile River, shared by Egypt, Uganda, Sudan, and Ethiopia; Lake Victoria, shared by Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania; and the Niger River, on which local communities in Niger, Mali, and Nigeria depend. Other basins of concern include the Congo River basin, shared by Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon; the Lake Malawi basin, shared by Tanzania and Malawi; and the Lake Turkana basin, shared by Kenya and Ethiopia⁴⁹.

The following are among the most prominent African disputes involving water resources, agricultural land, and pastoral areas:

- The dispute in the Nile Basin region: the Nile Basin states are the countries through which the Nile River flows and which share its water resources. These states include the upstream states where the river's tributaries originate, the downstream states where the river's course ends, and states through which the river passes or is fed by rivers that originate there. These countries can be grouped into eleven states: Ethiopia, Uganda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Rwanda, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Burundi, Egypt and Sudan, with Egypt and Sudan representing the downstream states of the Nile.

The dispute over the Nile is considered one of the most prominent international and regional conflicts concerning shared water resources, and one of the most complex and intertwined disputes, among the basin states. This complexity stems from the intersection of legal, political, economic and security factors. The dispute primarily emerged from each basin state's attempt to secure its share of the Nile's waters, which are an essential source of water and economic prosperity in the region, particularly given the heavy reliance on agriculture, hydropower generation and other water-dependent economic activities.

The roots of the dispute lie in colonial agreements concluded between British and Italian authorities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These agreements allocated Nile waters in a way that ensured Egypt a larger share, despite opposition from countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, who have called for those agreements to be reassessed on the grounds that they are unjust and do not reflect their current needs. Moreover, they are colonial arrangements that do not express their national will.

Currently, the central focus of the dispute is development projects on the Nile River, particularly the Ethiopian Grand Renaissance Dam. Ethiopia began constructing the dam in 2011 to achieve its development goals and manage its water resources more efficiently. This has raised concerns for both Egypt and Sudan regarding the impact of filling and operating the dam on their respective shares of Nile waters. The countries disagree on the duration of the filling period: Egypt considers it too long and fears it will reduce the amount of water it receives, whereas Ethiopia insists on rapid filling in order to achieve a faster economic return.

Additionally, the dispute is characterised by the absence of a binding legal framework. Although several historical agreements exist, such as those of 1902, 1929 and 1959, as well as the 2010 Entebbe Agreement, these accords no longer meet the requirements of the current phase. Instead, they have become sources of contention between the upstream and downstream states. The latter view them as unjust and call for them to be revised or repealed, while the former reject them and demand a fair and binding legal framework that guarantees equitable water rights for all parties.

Against this backdrop, the informal Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), established in 1999, aims to foster collaboration among Nile Basin countries and promote the fair and equitable distribution of water.

However, persistent political instability, regional competition and international pressures continue to pose significant challenges to the initiative's effectiveness.

- The Chad Basin dispute (also known as the dispute over Lake Chad):

Lake Chad is located in the central and western parts of Africa and is one of the continent's largest drainage basins. The basin covers around 8% of Africa's total land area⁵⁰.

Lake Chad is the primary source of life for over 47 million people in Chad, Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon. The lake is also an important economic resource, contributing to higher rates of agricultural production, supporting livestock activities, and providing a significant basis for fishing and crop cultivation. It also supplies water for domestic use, such as drinking, and for other economic activities. However, over the past six decades, climate change has had a substantial impact on the size of the lake and its natural resources. In the 1960s, Lake Chad covered an area of over 26,000 square kilometres; by 1997, this had shrunk to less than 1,500 square kilometres. It has since diminished further to approximately 1,350 square kilometres. If the retreat of the waters continues at this rate, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that the lake will disappear entirely within the next twenty years, particularly given the population explosion in the region⁵¹, which has also contributed to the lake drying up through excessive exploitation of its waters.

The drying up of the Lake Chad basin and the decline in water levels has led to a reduction in fish stocks and agricultural output, as well as the deterioration of pastoral activities. This is due to increased desertification and a severe decline in the quality of agricultural land along the shores, which has lowered productivity. As a result, tensions have intensified between herders, farmers and fishermen in the four African countries that border the lake.

The Lake Chad dispute is one of the most prominent border and diplomatic conflicts in West Africa. It is characterised by a complex, interdependent dynamic in which geography, history, national sovereignty and the management of water resources intersect. This is largely because the lake's surface area varies seasonally due to floods and droughts, creating islands that are not shown on traditional maps, such as "Dark" Island and "Sidodo/Kasikili" Island. This alters the boundaries of sovereignty between the affected states: Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Chad.

From the beginning of the 1980s onwards, numerous disputes arose among the states bordering Lake Chad over the region's resources. Climate change was the primary driver of these disputes. As the drought intensified and the lake's surface area declined, islands with fertile land for grazing and agriculture emerged. This prompted increasingly intense competition over those islands, which became the central issue in the border conflict between Cameroon and Nigeria in the "Dar'k" area. Nigerian residents began occupying some of the islands that emerged after the drought, extending their control over them⁵². Furthermore, the drought also damaged fishing livelihoods in Nigeria, prompting fishermen to move to Cameroon in search of fishing opportunities⁵³.

The fish trade on the island of "Dar'k" expanded rapidly until it became the economic hub of the area. In turn, this led Nigeria to establish a military administration there and raise its flag over the island in May 1987. Further seizures of numerous Cameroonian islands followed, accompanied by the replacement of their inhabitants with Nigerian settlers, particularly from the Hausa and Kanuri communities. The dispute between Nigeria and Cameroon over the region persisted until the International Court of Justice issued a ruling in 1999. Implementation of the ruling was assigned to a Cameroon-Nigeria joint commission, convened at the request of the then UN Secretary-General. It included provisions allowing the return of Cameroonian lands and the withdrawal of Nigerian forces from 'Dar'k'⁵⁴.

Despite attempts to resolve the disputes through international legal frameworks, most notably the ICJ ruling which affirmed each state's rights within its borders, tensions remain ongoing. This is particularly pertinent given the increasing demand for water resources, coupled with the pressures arising from population growth and climate change. These dynamics continue to make the region vulnerable to further conflicts concerning the ownership and distribution of water and related resources.

Conclusion:

Based on the foregoing, it is clear that conflicts are a deeply rooted phenomenon within the social and political fabric of Africa. They are one of the region's most prominent features, particularly in the period following the colonial era. Examining resource-related conflicts in Africa reveals that they vary according to the type of resource at the centre of contention. These include conflicts over energy resources, minerals, forests, water resources, agricultural land and grazing areas. The parties involved in these conflicts are also diverse, ranging from internal conflicts to conflicts between neighbouring states.

While natural resources are the primary trigger for these conflicts, other factors have contributed to their escalation. The legacy of colonialism and the policies it left behind are foremost among these factors, leading to political instability and social fragmentation. Other factors include the weakness of political institutions, the spread of corruption, and the mismanagement of wealth, particularly with regard to ensuring fair distribution within societies. Furthermore, ethnic pluralism and the significant influence of tribal factors dominate the political landscape, thereby increasing the likelihood of conflict. Furthermore, the intensity of these conflicts has been exacerbated by the negative impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. Finally, various international powers play a significant role by contributing to the escalation of tension through political and economic interventions, often using resources as a means to achieve their strategic interests. This, in turn, helps to expand and intensify disputes across multiple regions of the continent.

Overall, it can be concluded that conflicts over resources in Africa are not just economic disputes. Rather, they reflect deep-seated structural crises relating to identity, power, justice and stability. Addressing these crises requires comprehensive solutions that go beyond superficial approaches. Such solutions must rebuild institutional capacity, ensure justice and transparency, and manage resources in a way that guarantees the meaningful participation of all stakeholders in development and stability.

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Footnotes:

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