

THE LONG-RUN EFFECTS OF SLAVE TRADE ON CIVIL CONFLICT IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

May 2019 | The Center on Conflict and Development at Texas A&M University

Many modern states in Sub-Saharan Africa are plagued with perpetual cycles of instability and civil conflict. The historical impact of slave trade has increased volatility and stunted economic development, resulting in poverty and unrest. Of the 199 African civil wars that have occurred since 1997, 198 have occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa and adversely harmed regions historically affected by slave trade.

RESEARCH FOCUS

The Center on Conflict and Development at Texas A&M University conducted an investigation into the factors that increase the likelihood of civil conflict. By focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa (hereinafter SSA) researchers were better able to examine the characteristics of conflict that are distinct to this region. Research questions included:

- Why do some ethnic homelands in SSA experience civil conflict more frequently than others?
- What impact do certain historical events have on present day violence?
- What are the possible channels through which slave trade affects present day conflict?

These questions will help ascertain what role slave trade has had on contemporary civil conflict in SSA.

BACKGROUND

Approximately 80% of those affected by conflict are amongst the most underdeveloped nations and poorest people. Previous research has found that civil conflict and economic development are negatively related and is commonly referred to as “development in reverse”. The probability of an outbreak in civil war is directly correlated to economic conditions, such as income per capita. As a result, civil conflict is often studied alongside African economic development due to its high pervasiveness across the continent.

Africa’s slave trade unfolded over five centuries. Millions of men, women, and children were captured and exported as slaves to build the wealth of other nations. The largest slave trade route, the transatlantic, was responsible for the shipment of approximately 12 million people. The consequences have been devastating and continue today.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Strengthen local institutions

Conditions in a country’s capital and surrounding cities are generally much better than that of rural communities further away. These people receive very little government support and do not feel represented within their local government. Donors should focus on programs that foster democracy and allow all citizens equal access. Working with local governments rather than around them can help to reach forgotten citizens and donors can therefore help legitimize governments.

2. Community trading programs

High levels of mistrust within countries creates an, “us vs. them” atmosphere. Safe and neutral trade posts could be established for different communities to meet and trade crops and livestock. This creates co-dependence and a greater sense of familiarity with different groups. Policies can be coupled with an existing broadcasting program that relays commodity prices to rural communities.

HOW SLAVE TRADE AFFECTS CONFLICT

Slave trade was found to influence conflict through decreases in wealth level, alterations of cultural norms, and weakening institutions. The people in SSA were commonly captured by force, through raids or war, and put on ships to be enslaved half a world away. The captors however, were not entirely strangers but other Africans. Tensions were very high as rival villages and ethnicities often raided and sold each other. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for friends or family to be captured and sold by someone they trusted.

The practice continued for centuries and created an environment of hostility, mistrust, and insecurity. This lack of trust among individuals and groups strengthened ethnic identity and weakened national identity, and diminished local governance. Lack of strong central leadership created a power void and allowed periods of unpredictable chaos to continue unchecked. The ripple effects caused by this behavior continue to influence the domestic economy and politics of SSA countries to the present day.

DATA AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The data set was compiled at the ethnic level into 813 regions, spanning 601 ethnic homelands and 28 countries, in SSA. The empirical analysis was conducted on an ethnic level, rather than by country, in order to facilitate certain limitations of the data caused by ambiguous country borders and primacy of ethnic identity. The statistics on slave exports were gathered from the transatlantic and Indian Ocean trade routes between 1400-1900 since they were the most prominent in the region. Information on geography, ethnic identity, and historical context was accounted for, such as, distance from trade routes, number of slave exports, and past conflicts.

The study found the long-term effects of slave trade on modern risk of conflict statistically significant and economically meaningful. Descriptive statistics from the empirical analysis show that the prevalence and intensity of civil conflict is 96% greater in areas affected by slave trade versus those not affected. An Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimate shows that one per cent increase in slave exports corresponds to an increase of 14% on predicted prevalence of civil conflict. This demonstrates the significant impact that slave trade, as a historical event, has had on present day SSA conflict. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the history of slave trade in SSA has caused certain regions to have a far greater likelihood of experiencing contemporary civil conflict.

The investigation into possible channels of causality cites a 2005 Afrobarometer survey that collected individual data based on self-ascribed identity, trust, and local government performance. An Instrumental Variable (IV) was used to examine these potential channels and if a causal relationship exists. OLS estimates report a positive correlation, at a 90% confidence interval, between slave exports and contemporary conflict. The IV approach further concludes the relationship is a casual one. A qualitative analysis further explained the relationship between economic and non-economic factors, such as, trust, local institutions, and ethnic identity. Variable analysis show areas engaged in slave trade are more likely to experience contemporary civil conflict.

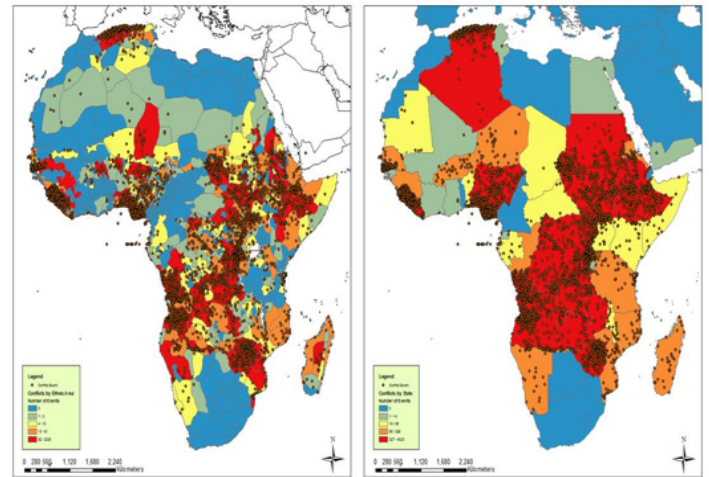
RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study found the long-term effects of slave trade on modern risk of conflict statistically significant and economically meaningful. Furthermore, the IV estimation established a causal relationship between a history of slave trade and civil conflict. As the number of slaves exported increase so does the probability of civil conflict. This occurs through two channels: economic development and non-economic development. Endless cycles of unrest and instability create what is now referred to as the “conflict trap”. These results show the importance of slave trade, as a historic

event, in development throughout SSA. Policy makers should recognize the effects of historical slavery when framing approaches to contemporary socio-economic development. Problems cannot be solved without recognizing how and why they arise.

Donors should focus on supporting policies and programs that strengthen local institutions and counteract distrust within countries. Policies should be proactive, rather than reactive, and focus on communities farther away from a country’s capital. Education, infrastructure, and health care are desperately needed in these communities and are the responsibility of governments. The current neglect of such programs anger citizens and weaken the government in their view. Donors should work with governments to oversee distribution of funds in order to minimize corruption.

The creation of a community trading program, for example might reduce conflict in a number of different ways. Resources are scarce and opportunity cost are high; therefore, it may not be in the best interest of a community to produce a wide variety of different crops and livestock. Much like international trade between countries creates mutualistic relationships, so will trade between communities in SSA. Enterprise productivity and profitability tend to vary, depending on environmental conditions. By specializing in the most productive enterprises and trading the surplus for products in shortage, communities will find a greater supply of food and begin to depend on each other for food security. Familiarity and trust between groups will grow as a result of trading and engaging with one another. Furthermore, specialized production and crop trade will decrease the potential effects of weather shock, another known variable that incites conflict.



Conflicts in Africa by ethnic border (left) country border (right)

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