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## Natural Resources and the Dynamics of Conflicts in West Africa

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### Introduction

Academic literature and policy documents now seem to be paying considerable attention to conflicts over natural resources, especially in Africa.<sup>54</sup> This in a way is understandable. The devastations often associated with such conflicts, especially their attendant links to the weakening or collapse of state institutions, and the danger, even if somewhat remote, that these conflicts can affect the global flow of vital resources, whilst also reducing the revenue coming to the affected countries, have been causes of enormous concerns to many within and outside the continent. West Africa has been of particular interest on matters concerning conflicts over natural resources. Indeed, the sub-region witnessed its most difficult phase since independence in the 1990s, with some of the consequences extending into the first half of the 2000 decade. Civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire, and inter-group tensions in Nigeria's Niger Delta and northern Ghana are some of the conflicts which, while sometimes linked to political governance, are also deeply rooted in natural resource politics. But having pointed out the difficulties of the period, it is also worthy of note that the 1990s and early 2000s also witnessed some positive developments, some linked, ironically to conflict and instability enumerated above.

For example, civil society gained considerable strength in the region, while the regional organisation, ECOWAS, was able to use the experience of violence to develop a mechanism for handling conflicts, including those linked to natural resources. Again, from the ravages of the Liberian civil war came an election that has won considerable global respect. All these developments, positive and negative, have major links to the politics of natural resources management in the sub-region.

In this chapter, I take a look at natural resources and the dynamics of Conflicts in West Africa. The central argument I advance in the chapter is that natural resources have entered the dynamics of conflicts in the region because the mechanisms for governing these resources in most countries in the region are deplorably weak,<sup>55</sup> and the sub-regional organisation overlooking the affairs of the region, ECOWAS, still has considerable amount of work to do in order to manage the complexities of natural resource governance at the sub-regional level. By natural resource governance, I mean the complex structures of considerations, internal and external, which come to play in the management (i.e. the ownership, extraction, processing, distribution and control) of natural resources. This include the role of constitution in natural resource management, the politics of revenue allocation, the process of distribution, indigenisation policies and the politics of expatriate involvement in the ownership, management and control of natural resources, property rights, human rights concerns, the relationship with global market demands, and the complexities of managing environmental issues relating to resource extraction.

The chapter has six substantive sections, the first of which presents an overview of West Africa's natural resource endowment. The primary objective of this section is to investigate the extent to which one can explain the conflicts over natural resources in the region to scarcity, which, regardless of any idiosyncrasies, could predispose any region to conflict. Discussions on natural resources and the dynamics of inter-group conflicts in the West African sub-region comes up in section two, while the third section focuses on how natural resources comes into discussion on the weakness and destruction of state structures.

The objective of the fourth section is to interrogate the dynamics of local claims and national interest in the politics of natural resource conflicts in West Africa. The examination of the role of ECOWAS in natural resource conflicts in West Africa is the pre-occupation of section five, while the sixth section offers a conclusion.

### **West Africa: Overview of Natural Resource Endowment**

Before discussing the geography of natural resource in West Africa, there is the need for the definition of what is meant by 'natural resources'. This is with the view of putting discussions in the chapter within contextual focus. Here, natural resources are taken as 'all non-artificial products situated on or beneath the soil, which can be extracted, harvested or used, and whose extraction, harvest or usage generates income or serve other functional purpose in benefiting mankind'.<sup>56</sup> West Africa is rich in natural resources. Although the extent of this varies from country to country, there is no nation in the sub-region that does not have enough to meet its needs. For ease of discussion, natural resources in West Africa can be categorised into five: land and agricultural products, solid mineral, oil, water and water resources, and animal-stock.<sup>57</sup>

**(a) Land**

The vegetation of West Africa makes agriculture the dominant preoccupation in the region, and a number of agricultural products both for local consumption and for export, come from the region. Crops for subsistence farming include beans, yam, etc., while agricultural products include Cocoa, rubber, timber, etc. Cocoa productions are done mainly in countries like Ghana, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire. Logging from timber is also done across countries in the sub-region but countries like Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria and other coastal countries are leading producers, while rubber is predominant in Liberia, which, indeed, is the world's largest producer.

Many of these commodities are exported to Western Europe, Asia and the United States and some multinational corporations from these foreign countries are based in some of the countries to maximise opportunities created by the existence of these commodities. But apart from the resources, the land on which production is made is in itself, a resource of most profound economic, social and spiritual significance across West Africa. Indeed, as will be shown later, conflicts surrounding land are some of the most devastating in the sub-region.

**(b) Solid Minerals**

Although there are a number of solid minerals found in many West African countries, two minerals are particularly important: gold and diamond. The quantity of these resources, at least in the case of gold, is not as profound as that in some other parts of the continent. Among the countries endowed with gold are Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Mali. On its part, diamonds are found in Ghana, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Of these countries, however, only Sierra Leone has diamonds of appreciable quantity. The main actors involved in West Africa's solid mineral resources are mainly multinational corporations such as De Beers (in the case of diamonds), artisan actors and Lebanese businessmen. Indeed, the role of Lebanese business interest was to be crucial in appreciating the complexities of conflicts over these resources.

**(c) Oil**

Oil is a natural resource that is fast bringing international attention to West Africa and the entire Gulf of Guinea. There can be no doubt that the region has significant amount of oil reserve and recent discoveries, as in the case, for example, of Ghana, seems to be improving the significance of the region in global oil politics. The key oil producing country in the region and also the continent's largest producer is Nigeria. On-going prospecting may yield other discoveries as there are likely to be more off-shore findings in other parts of West Africa. As in the case of solid minerals, the marketing of oil and the conflicts associated with it has brought an array of actors, including oil multinational corporations, especially Shell and Chevron, militant groups in the resource-producing communities and the state. The

importance of West Africa has been further enhanced by the declared intention of the United States to derive 25 per cent of its oil needs from the Gulf of Guinea by 2015.

**(d) Water and Water Resources**

West Africa is endowed with a number of very rich river basins, including Niger, Benue, Volta, Senegal, Mano, Lake Chad and several other small basins. Some of these rivers are among the longest in the world and Lake Chad holds one of the largest areas of wetlands in the Sahelian region. These rivers have served several functions, including provision of hydro-power for some of the countries, and in recent times, a number of countries have come together to form 'unions' around river basins, as in the cases of Mano and Volta rivers. Fishing is another economic activity that is fast gaining prominence in West Africa. Expectedly, the predominance of this is in coastal countries. The region's fishing and other marine resources have brought into some of the coastal countries massive international trailers, especially from Western Europe and Asia. This has provided some revenue for countries such as Senegal, Gambia and Mauritania. It has, however, brought its own complications, as local fishermen have often clashed with international trailers using sophisticated equipments.

**(e) Pastoralism**

The final category of natural resources is Pastoralism. For the purpose of this paper, pastoralism is taken as the trading in animal stock. This is a category of resources that is not as predominant in West Africa as in other parts of Africa, especially east and central Africa. What, however, makes this category of natural resources important in any calculation of conflict is the transhumance nature of the operation. More often than not, many of those participating in this line of business do not respect international boundaries and this has been a major issue in the linkage between this particular natural resource and conflict in West Africa.

The discussion above points us to at least three major conclusions. First is that West Africa has enough resources to meet its needs, and that any conflict over natural resources in the region cannot be attributed to scarcity. Indeed, apart from meeting its needs, South Africa has enough resources to develop and make its impacts felt in global resource politics. Second, many of the resources in the region are inextricably linked to international business corporations, especially as many of the resources are such that can only be mined and sold in global markets. Third – and attendant on the last two – is that what seems central to managing the relatively sufficient resources in the region, especially with its links to external market, is the effective management of these resources at both national and sub-regional levels. Against the above background, this paper now discusses the dynamics of natural resource conflicts at the local level.

### **Natural Resources and the Dynamics of Inter-Group Conflicts**

Because some of the consequences are hardly felt outside national boundaries, there is often the tendency to forget that natural resource conflicts do have significant impact on inter-group relations at the local level, and that many of the resource-centred conflicts that ultimately resulted in more profound national conflicts had their origins at the local base. Countries across West Africa have recorded many resource-centred conflicts that have affected inter-group relations and, quite expectedly, the resource that has been in contention here is land. Broadly, the root causes of this category of conflict can be brought under six headings: disagreements over historical claims, changes in climatic conditions, consequences of changes in the nature of power balance; elite manipulation, youth reactions to vulnerability and exclusion and alterations in boundary structures. While in some cases each one of the listed items has been sole causes of conflicts, in most cases, many of these have come together to explain the causes of acrimonious inter-group relations.

Disagreements over historical claims over land have emerged mainly because of the absence of documentary evidences of historical rights to land. In communities across West Africa, the traditional land ownership structures between communities have been affected by successive legislations by governments, right from the colonial era till the present day. Consequently, land tenure arrangements between communities become violently contestable, as communities come up with claims of ownership rooted to conflicting oral traditions.

While there have been cases in recent times for governments across West Africa to set up ad hoc committees to untangle the web of complexities involved in many of these claims, not much success often attend such efforts as groups that lost out in such adjudication processes often accuse governments of partiality. Consequently, violent conflicts have often emerged as a result of these disagreements. Among some of these conflicts are those between the Amuleri and Aguleri in South East Nigeria, Ife and Modakeke in South West Nigeria, and the Chamba and Kuteb in Northern Nigeria.<sup>58</sup>

Changes in climatic conditions have become a factor in conflict considerations when unanticipated environmental changes emerge to alter existing land-tenure arrangements between local communities. More often than not these changes have resulted in communities encroaching on the land of their neighbours, a tendency that has been violently resisted by the aggrieved communities. Also important in this consideration is when droughts have affected grazing land pastoralists use for their animals and such animals have trespassed on farms. Examples of these have been common, especially in recent years when climatic changes seem to be altering land and water resources available to local communities. These problems have been further aggravated because most West African

countries do not have policies for managing crisis associated with environmental changes. Consequently, slight alterations in the environment have been known to ignite conflict.

The third factor – changes in the nature of balance of power – has become particularly important in explaining recent communal clashes over natural resources. More often than not, problems have emerged when ethnic communities that had been allocated land and had thus been playing second-fiddle positions to their ‘land-lords’ suddenly assume important positions in national politics and they are using such positions to seek greater autonomy from groups that have historically being their ‘landlords’. A recent example of communal clashes of this nature was the case in northern Ghana, with the Nanumba-Kokumba conflicts. The Nanumbas, who had, historically, been considered as ‘tenants’, were able to attain a level of importance in education. Consequently, they challenged the historical dominance of their erstwhile masters over land and chieftaincy rights, and the result was a major conflict that ultimately necessitated the involvement of the Ghanaian military.<sup>59</sup> Another example can be found in South West Nigeria, where the Modakeke, historically referred to (perhaps erroneously) as tenants to Ife landlords, wanted to seek greater control to land and autonomy.

Elite manipulation is another major cause of conflict over natural resources at the local level. The pattern of expression here is not different from other ways through which elites have exploited communal differences to advance selfish interests. However, it needs to be pointed out that very rarely has this been a sole cause of conflict. Rather, the way this often manifests is that, once there are conflicts with major natural resource bearing, elites come into the scene to exploit it to their advantage. Indeed, in all the communal conflicts identified above, prolongations of tension have been linked to elite manipulation.

The importance of youth vulnerability and exclusion to conflicts in Africa is fast assuming academic and policy relevance, especially in West Africa.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the main reason for this is the whole issue of youth bulge that seems to be prevalent in Africa. In West Africa, youths have been at the forefront of many recent communal clashes over natural resources. The best example that comes to mind is in the Niger Delta region, where many of the ethnic conflicts over oil have been fought mainly by youths. Across countries in the region, youths, feeling despondent at the downward plunge of their economic fortune and disappointed at the ways the older generations have handled national affairs, including the management of natural resources, are now increasingly assuming violent dispositions to resource politics. Another example is the case in northern Ghana earlier mentioned, where the cause of the Komkomba for greater access to land and chieftaincy authority was championed by the youths.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, boundary alterations have resulted in communal clashes and examples of this are more prevalent in countries that are constantly adjusting state and provincial boundaries. It is not uncommon among countries in the region to re-adjust boundaries in ways that make communities believe that they are losing out of their land resources. As will be expected, boundary adjustments inevitably bring along with them controversies as where ethnic groups along redefined borders belong and there have, in some cases, been violent clashes. For example, in July 2003, there were conflicts between Edo and Kogi states of Nigeria over boundary land, forcing the Deputy Governors of both states to have a meeting to resolve the crisis.<sup>62</sup> Ebonyi and Benue States also have conflicts of this nature between the Ngbo and Agilla clans respectively.<sup>63</sup> In this as well as many other conflicts over natural resources at the local level, there have been cases of proliferation of arms, which again has been at the roots of crimes and political instability in many of these countries.

In concluding this section there is the need to identify how communal clashes over natural resources have been linked to governance. Indeed, a close look at many of these conflicts will show that they have arisen because there are no adequate structures in place for managing inter-group relations in most West African countries. Consequently, groups and communities have resorted to violent clashes because they realise that their interests cannot be protected by their respective central governments. In most cases also, they do not have recognition and respect for the judiciary and other ad-hoc institutions established to manage communal affairs, especially those over land.

With the enormous importance attached to land across communities in West Africa, ethnic groups have fought violently to protect their respective interests in what they see largely as a zero-sum game. Elements of this too also reflect in conflicts that have resulted in the collapse and weakening of state structures in the region

### **Natural Resources and the Dynamics of Conflicts in 'Failed' and 'Wounded' States**

It may be appropriate to preface discussion in this section with the definition of what is meant by 'failed' and 'wounded' state. For the purpose of this chapter, a 'failed' state is taken as one where the capacity of the central government to control the apparatus of violence was completely eroded, and as a result complete anarchy dominated the affairs of the society, with individuals and armed groups taking laws into their hands and embarking on acts of violence with impunity. An example of this in the West African context was Liberia during the period of its first round of civil wars. On its part, a 'wounded' state is taken in the context of this chapter as a state where there exists only a crude semblance of governance but where the state is considerably weak to manage many of the security chal-

lenges confronting it. Often, central governments in this situation might be facing opposition from an armed group or armed groups that are effectively armed and pose sufficient challenge to wrestle power from the centre. A recent example of this in the West African sub-region was Sierra Leone. In all the countries that have either failed or are wounded, natural resources have come out as issues of major concern, both in the causes of the conflicts, in their prolongation, and in the mechanisms for their resolution. In short, what seems to be the basic difference between the two is the extent to which the state still retains a semblance of authority and control, especially over the mechanisms of security. While it may be somewhat difficult to determine the time a 'wounded' state becomes a 'failed' state, the transition may come if, a wounded state is neglected and events degenerate.

The histories of the conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire have been widely recorded, such that it serves no purpose discussing them here.<sup>64</sup>

What this section thus attempts is a discussion of the role of natural resources in the dynamics of these conflicts. Broadly, natural resources have come into discussions either as causes of these conflicts; explanations for the prolongations; or the reason for their resolution. As it is often the case with major civil conflicts, no single cause can be alluded to the conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire. While there is often the proverbial 'last straw', no singular explanation addresses all the ramifications of the conflicts. Having said this, however, natural resources were core considerations in all the causes. In Liberia, years of mismanagement of vital natural resources was a cause of the war, as populations not benefiting from these resources joined the rebellion that was started by former President Charles Taylor. Before the war, the centuries of Americo-Liberian domination and the near decade of Samuel Doe's dictatorship had already divided the society, and the access of these societies to natural resources. For example, the country's main natural resources – rubber and logging – were being managed by groups that were not taking the interest of the majority of the population into consideration, while the Doe government traded in these resources to acquire weapons to fight insurgent groups when they started the war.

In Sierra Leone, the situation was similar, as the failure of successive governments to develop the country especially the resource-producing province was a factor in causing the war. Indeed, the rebellion took off from the South East region of the country, the province of Sierra Leone where the bulk of the diamonds is located. Analysts of the Sierra Leone conflicts have argued that one of the reasons why the rebel leader, late Foday Sankoh, commenced the rebellion from this region, and not from his region of origin, where one would have naturally expected him to have considerable support to commence a rebellion was that the south-eastern region provided a disenchanting operation base because of the neglect they had suffered, despite providing the main natural resource that is sustaining the national economy.



In Cote d'Ivoire, access to land and natural resources has been a factor in explaining the conflict, especially as it fuelled ethnic violence and underlined tension between those who consider themselves as proper Ivorians and those regarded as foreigners. Indeed, the nature of cocoa production in the country is such that people from many West African countries involved in cocoa production have, over the past several decades, settled in Cote d'Ivoire. Over time, tension began to emerge between these people and the host community and the tension was to be a major issue in explaining aspects of the civil war.

However, where natural resources have become a factor in the dynamics of conflict in West Africa has been through the ways these resources have explained the prolongation of conflicts, and it is this that has brought these resources to global attention. In all the countries that have either 'failed' or have been 'wounded', natural resources have played a key role in prolonging the conflict. In discussing this, however, it needs to be pointed out from the outset that, contrary to what is often assumed; it is not only the rebel factions that have exploited natural resources to prolong civil conflicts in West Africa. Indeed, central governments having to confront these rebel groups have also used natural resources to advance their respective causes in these conflicts. In Liberia, the moment the war was imminent, the Doe government had been battering natural resources for weapons. In an example I have cited elsewhere, Samuel Doe had, as at February 1989, entered into an agreement with a company in London to supply military weapons worth US\$60 million, and as a payment for this, the Liberian government granted timber concessions in the following areas to the company.

- (a) An area of 173,448 acres located in Grand Gedeh County, lying to the north-west of Pyne Town;
- (b) An area of 150,240 acres also located in Grand Gedeh County, lying to the north-west of Zwedru; and
- (c) An area of 24,000 hectares located in Grand Cape Mount County, lying to the east of the town of Congo and immediately bordering the Mano River.<sup>65</sup>

Once the war became full-blown, all other factions began exploiting natural resources under their control to advance their respective interests in the war. Undoubtedly, the faction that exploited this opportunity most was Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). Because of the extent of the resources under its control and the complex structures Taylor had succeeded in developing across the region,<sup>66</sup> the NPFL was able to market these resources to countries in Europe and Asia.<sup>67</sup> It can also be assumed that Taylor used his knowledge and experience as the former Procurement Chief of the country to access multinational corporations. With the revenues coming from these natural resources, Taylor was able to procure weapons to prosecute the war. It can also be argued that one

of the reasons why he was able to win the immediate post-war election was that he was able to use the money accruing from these resources to browbeat his opponents and rivals into conformity and to embark on the most expensive campaign for the election. The access other factions too had to natural resources was used both for individual benefits and for weapon procurement. Expectedly, the financial opportunities coming from these resources were sufficient motivations for the armed factions to continue the war.

In Cote d'Ivoire, natural resources have been a major factor in financing the conflict, and once again, both the government and the rebels have used these resources to their advantage. It is now widely recognised that the rebels are illegally exploiting mineral resources and cocoa to finance the war. Global Witness – an international NGO widely recognised and respected for the authenticity of its information – pointed out in September 2005, that diamonds mined in rebel-held *Forces Nouvelles* areas were smuggled into Mali and Guinea, from where they were transferred to the international market.

Apart from this, the UN Panel of Experts report also indicted the rebels for using cocoa, cotton and diamonds to fund their war and for personal benefits. This was to account for the ban subsequently imposed by the United Nations on Cote d'Ivoire's exports of rough diamonds to the international market in December 2005. But the Cote d'Ivoire government has also used natural resources for its own benefits in the war. The same UN Panel of Experts report also pointed out that about 20 per cent of government military spending had come directly from the cocoa industry in the form of contributions, loans and grants. This is in addition to the routine contributions made by the industry via taxes to the treasury. This calculation was given an implicit confirmation in August 2003 by the chairman of one of the cocoa industry's regulating bodies, when he admitted giving large sums of the institution's money to President Gbagbo to enable him to 'defend Ivorian people'.

But undoubtedly the country where natural resources have been known to fuel conflict was Sierra Leone. The nature of the dynamics here was quite complex, as the fuelling of the conflict was not limited only to the government and the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF), but also involved a complex string of external actors. The resource that was exploited here were mainly diamonds, the alluvial deposit of which the country has in considerable abundance. Diamonds have been used by successive governments both to fight the war and to line the pockets of key politicians. The governments – especially that of Tejan Kabah – procured weapons to fight the rebel force. More importantly, however, the government used money from diamonds to engage mercenaries to fight the rebel force. While all the details of the deal with the mercenaries, especially the Executive Outcomes from South Africa, are not known, it is believed that the

government agreed to pay the mercenaries in diamonds. The extent to which opportunities for politicians to benefit personally from the diamond was a factor in prolonging the war is also a matter of controversy. A Western news agency had alleged that former leader, Valentine Strasser, profited from diamonds. The RUF also benefited from diamonds, and this was a major factor in the provision of arms for the rebels. Foday Sankoh was able to sell diamonds to his sub-regional allies and he was also able, through the same channels, to acquire weapons with which he was able to fight the war. But it has also been established that RUF rebels wanting to continue benefiting from the diamonds deposit encouraged intransigence and consequently prolonged the war.

The involvement of sub-regional interference is complex, especially as it involves unravelling between allegations, denials and suspicions. The category of external actors whose names have been mentioned in the controversies over diamonds and the prolongation of conflicts have included Regional and United Nations Peacekeepers and neighbouring countries. Again, allegations against the peacekeepers have come from three different sources: Sierra Leoneans, external observers and the Military head of the United Nations Peacekeeping force. While most Sierra Leoneans are grateful to the regional Peacekeeping force that came to address the conflict, there are some who felt that many of the soldiers who came violated their rules of engagement and participated in illegal activities involving natural resources. Specifically, they were alleged to have acquired and exported diamonds. It is important to point out that many of the peacekeepers have denied this allegation, it persists and it has gained considerable adherents. The allegations of external analysts have followed a similar line, with these analysts alleging that peacekeepers, especially those sent by the regional organisation, ECOWAS, have illegally engaged in diamond looting. These analysts have claimed that the regional peacekeepers extended to Sierra Leone the negative reputation they had acquired in Liberia, where their acronym of ECOMOG bastardised as 'Every Car of Moveable Object Gone'. The reaction of ECOMOG to this allegation has been to dismiss it as a mischievous misrepresentation of their sacrifice in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Of all the allegations against the peacekeepers, however, the one that was most contentious was the one levelled by the Commander of the UN force (UNASIL), Major General Vijay Jetley, against key Nigerian actors in the peacekeeping effort in Sierra Leone, including Brigadier General Muhammad Garba, Major General Gabriel Kpamba, the late Major General Maxwell Khobe and Ambassador Olu Adeniji,<sup>68</sup> Jetley accused these officials of collaborating with the RUF in diamond mining and of sabotaging his military efforts. This was emphatically denied by the accused and they were supported by the Nigerian government. The allegation was also received at the UN office in New York with

a level of doubt as the UN Secretary General's Special Representative who was indicted in Jetley's report was widely respected in the organisation for his integrity.

At the end, Jetley left, as there were irreconcilable differences between him and those with whom he would have to work closely if he were to continue with his command of the operation. The final layer of regional consideration that was a factor in appreciating the dynamics of regional conflicts in Sierra Leone's conflict vis-à-vis natural resources was the involvement of the former Liberian President, Charles Taylor. It was alleged that Taylor exploited Sierra Leone's diamond to fund conflicts in the sub-region. It is worth noting that this remains an issue before the international criminal court.

But just as natural resources have been a key factor in causing and prolonging some of the wars that have resulted in the collapse of state institutions in West Africa, they have also been an issue in the resolution of at least one of these conflicts. In Sierra Leone, attempts to pacify the rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, and in the process put an end to the wilful mismanagement of diamonds forced one of the peace agreements – the Lomé Peace agreements – to concede the Chairmanship of the Commission for Strategic Mineral Resources and Development to the rebel leader, Foday Sankor. This was a position, which gave him the control of the country's diamond resources also came with the status of Vice President and an amnesty for all the crimes he had committed before the peace deal. Although this gesture did not achieve the intended result, as there was another outbreak of conflict in the country.

In concluding this section, it needs to be pointed out that the link between conflicts and natural resources in states that collapsed or were wounded is inextricably linked to governance, as many of the conflicts that later drew from natural resource endowment were, in their origins, conflicts rooted in political governance. Indeed, if there had been proper management of political, economic and social affairs, many of these conflicts would not have emerged in the first instance. But apart from the countries that had experienced considerable weakening of its governance structure, there are still several others where central governments are facing challenges from groups that believe that they are not having the best deal from the natural resource endowments beneath their soil, and this is the topic for discussion in the next section.

### **Local Claim, National Interest and the Dynamics of Natural Resources Conflict**

In recent times, a tendency that is becoming common in West Africa's natural resource politics is the clash between 'Local claim' and 'national Interest'. Two actors, each with different sets of arguments, are in contention here. At the one end here are local communities producing natural resources that are crucial to the

economic development of the country, while on the other are the central governments of the affected countries. The main argument of the resource-producing communities has often been that since they produce the natural resource that is central to the economic power of the nation, they should be treated with special attention and that certain special concessions ought to be given to the development of their communities. The producing communities also base their argument for better consideration on the fact that they bear the environmental brunt of extracting these resources. On its part central government has argued that the hosting of these resources was a geographical accident which the producing communities should not blow out of realistic proportions. While governments might claim that it is willing to recognise and treat the resource producing communities with consideration, they have also claimed that they would not allow themselves to be blackmailed by the communities. Also important in the arguments of governments is that there are constitutional stipulations for handling the situation and that the refusal of resource-producing communities to recognise these stipulations was at the roots of the problem.

The conflict that clearly expresses this is the controversy in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, where communities of the oil-bearing states have accused successive governments in the country of not according the oil-producing regions special consideration. Apart from arguing for better considerations, these communities have also argued that successive governments in the country have tried to forcefully suppress their agitations. Indeed, the controversies here are quite profound. At the root of it all is the nature of revenue allocation in the country. Although it had varied over time,<sup>69</sup> the current nature of revenue allocation in the country gives 13 per cent to the resource producing region. However, the region has complained that this is not only insufficient. Complaints of insufficiency – as well as a number of related issues – have underlined the nature of conflict in the region.

While there are many layers of conflict in the Niger Delta, a central one has been between the Niger Delta militants and the Nigerian Federal Government. This problem, which has been going on for some time, reached nihilistic dimensions in the last few years. While more coherent protests began with the emergence of Ken Saro Wiwa, the militant protests that brought the crisis to international attention began after the Abacha regime hanged Saro Wiwa and other Ogoni leaders. From this time, youths in the Niger delta became more determined in their response. Indeed, by the time a new civilian administration came to power in the country in May 1999, the line seems to have been drawn between the militants in the Niger Delta and the Nigerian government. After waiting for what they expected would be a better dispensation under a civilian regime, the youth took to more organised violence against the organisation and the multinational oil com-

panies operating in the region. The situation was first aggravated by the unleashing of the Nigerian army on the village of Odi in December 1999 by the Obasanjo administration. This action, which saw many people killed and the village reduced to the ground, was one of the most negative political actions of the Obasanjo administration. It is small wonder that the action did mark a turning point for the worse in the conflict between the Nigerian government and the Niger Deltans.

In the last few years, the nature of the problem has intensified, especially with the emergence of the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND). Since its inception, the organisation has presented the Nigerian government with its most serious security challenge in the Niger Delta, as the group has taken on the military and has adopted the strategy of kidnapping foreign oil workers, both to embarrass the government and to obtain ransom. The attempt by the government to incarcerate the leader of the group, Mojihad Asari Dokubo, did not work, and for the remaining part of the Obasanjo administration, militant activities in the Niger Delta continued to challenge the Nigerian state over the management of oil in the region.

President Shehu Umaru Yar'Adua had no choice but to take the situation in the Niger Delta seriously from the outset of his administration. Apparently with the desire to placate the region, the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) selected an indigene of the region, Goodluck Jonathan, as Yar'Adua's deputy, and one of the early steps taken by the administration was to release Asari Dokubo from jail. It is early days yet to find out whether there will be a lasting solution to the problem during his administration, especially as many countries in the region, including the regional organisation, ECOWAS looks up to the country for leadership and direction on a number of issues.

### **ECOWAS and the Dynamics of Natural Resource Conflicts in West Africa**

It has to be admitted from the outset that, until recently, ECOWAS hardly accorded any special attention to addressing the complexities of natural resource conflicts in the region. This may be understandable, as many of the conflicts have not clearly manifested as resource wars but as political conflicts. For example, major regional conflicts as those in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire which, as noted above have had strong natural resource contents and which attracted significant interest from the regional organisation, were at origin, political conflicts that later assumed resource dimensions. Consequently, it can be said that ECOWAS has an active role to play in key political conflicts that have attained natural resource dimensions. But there is an aspect of natural resource management on which ECOWAS has a clearly stated initiative is on the issue of transhumance on which the organisation has developed a certificate. Efforts are now in progress

by the ECOWAS Commission to undertake a comprehensive assessment of natural resource management in the sub-region. Another area where the Commission seems to be making considerable effort is Conflict Prevention, where there is now a Mechanism that pays special attention to the management of natural resources and their links with conflicts.

But despite this remarkable progress, there are major gaps which the ECOWAS Commission is either reluctant or unable to address. These are those conflicts that border on the politics of addressing local conflicts involving natural resources and in those cases where there are dichotomies between local claims and national interest.

This explains why ECOWAS has not been able to impact on the situation in the Niger Delta and in other conflicts which member states insist fall within the remit of their national sovereignty. Indeed, in the years ahead, ECOWAS may find itself in a situation where the Commission may need to develop mechanisms to compel its members to address the peculiar needs of its members in the managing of their natural resources.

To assist ECOWAS' on-going efforts at developing concrete initiatives on natural resource management, this chapter identifies some of the key issues that the organisation has to take into consideration in its efforts in this direction:

- Need for a careful auditing of sub-regional natural resource endowment
- Formulation of policy over property rights
- Harmonisation of laws governing land tenure
- Incorporation of gender sensitivity in the management of land
- Formulation of policy on natural resources that cut across national boundaries
- Development of policy to meet the peculiar demands of resource producing communities
- Coming up with concrete policy on key natural resources that are currently attracting global interests, especially oil
- Looking into the activities and drawing lessons from the performances of countries that have formed unions around river basins, especially Mano River Union and Volta River Union
- Formulation of policy for a Code of Conduct to be followed by Multi-national Corporations operating in the region.

Having recommended the establishment of a regional initiative on natural resource management, this chapter also recognises that there are factors militating against this, the most profound of which is the inability of the organisation to impose decisions on members on the management of their natural resource endowment. However, it can also be argued that if the organisation has established

its stand on other crucial issues such as democracy and good governance, it can also take a similar stand on the issue of natural resource management. Even if it cannot impose conditions, it can, at least, ensure that the organisation has a policy that forces its members to better manage their natural resource endowment.

### **Conclusion**

The management of West Africa's natural resources has been central to the politics of conflict in West Africa and it is most likely to remain so for quite some time to come. What seems to be at the centre of the whole controversy is the inability of the population to derive benefit from their natural resource endowment and the failure of governments across the region to meet the expectations of the population. What seems to be central to the prevention of conflicts in West Africa is credible democracy that will give allowance for the proper governance of the natural resource sector.