Introduction

“What prevents us from fighting while we possess the oil that supports us in a battle, even if it lasts for a century?”  
Sudanese cabinet minister

Civil wars have provided many opportunities for political leaders in Africa to take advantage of the prevailing instability and plunder valuable natural resources all over the continent. Resultantly, resource-endowed nations of Africa have found themselves regressing politically, economically, and socially as they have been plunged into never-ending civil strife which has led to the loss of millions of innocent lives. Individual political leaders, on the other hand, have in the process profited enormously from revenues from the exploitation of natural resources, often at the cost of their constituents.

By briefly outlining four ‘diamond-fuelled’ wars in Africa, this paper tries to bring to light Africa’s ‘resource curse’ and ponder on whether Africa really needs its nature.

Whereas other parts of the world have benefited from the abundance of natural resources translating them into economic prosperity, the African story (with the exception of South Africa, Botswana and to a lesser extent Ghana) has been entirely different. Africa has found itself in an entirely differently situation; as the “interplay among a
seemingly endless supply of mineral resources, the greed of multinational corporations desperate to cash in on that wealth, and the provision of arms and military training to political tyrants has helped to produce the spiral of conflicts that have engulfed the continent".1

Mineral resources in Africa, unlike elsewhere world-wide, have led to massive looting, indiscriminate rape, the conscription of thousands of child soldiers across the continent, and the subjection of millions of innocent civilians to misery and hopelessness. The continent’s vast mineral wealth, especially diamonds and oil, has hence been its curse – prolonging, amongst others, the continent’s most vicious wars, in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan. Table 1 lists ten conflicts in Africa that have been fuelled by natural resources.

### Profiting From War

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of at least twenty major conflicts in Africa. Although a variety of reasons, ranging from philosophical differences to ethnic cleansing, have been advanced as the reasons for these conflicts, one common feature stands out in most of these wars, especially after the end of the Cold War: economic factors. Economic factors have had a great influence on “determining the actions of actual and potential belligerents”.2

The end of the Cold War translated into the end of unconditional military support, from both the East and the West, to warring belligerents on the African continent. Warring parties inevitably witnessed a decline in revenue to fund their war campaigns. In the case of Southern Africa, the emergence of a peaceful post-apartheid South Africa, at peace with its neighbours, also saw the further decline in parties willing to fund war and destabilisation on the continent. Faced with no revenue to fund their activities, warring parties in some cases resorted to a negotiated peace, as in Mozambique. In natural-resource-abundant Africa, however, this only saw the escalation of war, as the warring parties now fought for the control of natural resources to fund their activities. More implicit has been the massive profits that the patrons of these warring parties have amassed in the process.

Most of the leaders of these warring parties have amassed enormous wealth at the cost of thousands of innocent lives. As noted earlier, diamonds and oil, in particular, have prolonged vicious wars in Africa. This paper concentrates on ‘diamond-fuelled’ wars in Africa.

### Diamonds are Forever?

Without doubt, diamonds have been the major natural resource ‘responsible’ for fuelling civil strife in Africa. Warring parties in Africa have engaged in vicious cycles of war fighting to control the lucrative illicit trade in ‘blood diamonds’ – a term used to describe diamonds originating from war-torn areas that are used to fund military action by their traders. Control of these diamonds has enabled warring parties to exchange diamonds for weapons to furnish their war campaigns. Middlemen, arms dealers, and corrupt politicians have ultimately ended up as the winners, reaping massive profits from the unfortunate state of affairs. The dreadful abuses of human rights in diamond-rich African countries by both sides of the warring parties have thus been, and continue to be, closely linked to the fight to control the trade in these precious minerals. Such has been the extent to which these minerals have been responsible for prolonging conflicts in Africa that, on 1 December 2000, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution to try to arrest the trade in ‘blood diamonds’. This fight is far from succeeding, and as a result ‘blood diamonds’ continue to fund wars in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Estimated Deaths</th>
<th>Resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>1992-date</td>
<td>71 000</td>
<td>gas, oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>1975-2002</td>
<td>&gt;800 000</td>
<td>diamonds, oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>1980-1994</td>
<td>300 000</td>
<td>oil, uranium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo-Brazzaville</td>
<td>1993-date</td>
<td>9 000</td>
<td>oil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>1993-date</td>
<td>700 000</td>
<td>copper, cobalt, diamonds, gold, uranium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>1989-1996</td>
<td>250 000</td>
<td>diamonds, iron, rubber</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>1991-1999</td>
<td>85 000</td>
<td>bauxite, diamonds, rutile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>1983-date</td>
<td>&gt;1 500 000</td>
<td>oil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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“The continent’s vast mineral wealth, especially diamonds and oil, has been its curse”
Africa. Table 2 summarises the ‘diamond-fuelled’ wars in Africa.

This paper briefly touches on the wars in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone, which have been, to one extent or another, prolonged by illicit diamond trade. These four wars have seen the senseless loss of a total of more than 1.1 million lives since 1975 as well as countless others displaced, raped, maimed, and tortured. Angola has been left with millions of unexploded landmines planted all over the country, thousands have had their limbs hacked off in Sierra Leone and Liberia, while a very fragile peace is taking shape in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

### Table 2: Diamond-Fuelled Wars in Africa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Estimated Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>1975-2002</td>
<td>&gt;500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>1993-date</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>1989-1996</td>
<td>250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>1991-1999</td>
<td>85,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Angola**

The existence of an anxious peace accord signed after the death of rebel leader Jonas Savimbi in Angola notwithstanding, the country, prior to the death of Savimbi in 2001, had experienced over a quarter of a century of civil strife. Although Angola has the potential of being a wealthy African state due to its vast oil and diamond reserves, the country is today a run-down state recovering from 27 years of civil strife, which has torn the country apart and left the country covered with millions of landmines.

Angola is new to peace. The last peace accord in Angola lasted only about one and a half years before the resumption of the armed struggle, so it is yet to be seen how long the current state of peace will last. Strategic analysts nonetheless believe that the death of Jonas Savimbi, former leader of the rebel National Union for the Total Liberation of Angola (UNITA), will bring lasting peace to Angola.

UNITA, in particular, is known to have used diamonds as its chief source of finance during the war.

**Liberia and Sierra Leone**

In the case of Liberia and Sierra Leone, ‘conflict diamonds’ have provided a source of funding for...
the purchase of weapons and other military resources. Charles Taylor, who until very recently was the president of Liberia, has been blamed as the main culprit in the instability of the two countries. Not only did he extract natural resources from Liberia, but Taylor supported the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in neighbouring Sierra Leone, providing them with weapons, training, logistical support, a staging ground for attacks as well as a retreating safe haven—all in exchange for diamonds.

Over 250,000 people died in the civil strife in Liberia and Sierra Leone between 1989 and 1996. Over a million innocent citizens were displaced over the same period in Liberia alone, and half the national population has been driven out of their homes in Sierra Leone. The RUF became known for its use of drugged child soldiers, who were notoriously brutal. In fact, the RUF had the reputation of carrying out deliberate and systematic amputations of the limbs of tens of thousands of innocent civilians.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

"This is all money," says a Western mining executive, his hand sweeping over a geological map toward the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). He is explaining why, in 1997, he and planeloads of other businessmen were flocking to the impoverished country and vying for the attention of then-rebel leader Laurent Kabila. The executive could just as accurately have said, "This is all war."

The abundance of mineral wealth residing beneath its soil has been and continues to be the great curse of the people of the DRC. The country is endowed with many valuable natural resources, including diamonds. So rich is the DRC in natural resources that it is said that the first explorer declared the country a 'geographical scandal'. Yet the DRC has not known peace since the Banyamulenge-led revolt against the dictatorial and unstable Mobutu regime began in October 1996.

"The DRC, according to some sources, is the world's fourth largest diamond producer, others place it as second in the world." It is these diamonds that have fuelled the war, with both the government and rebels fighting for control of the diamond-rich regions of the country. The situation was further complicated by the presence of foreign troops aiding both the rebels and the government. A recent United Nations report singled out the foreign troops, in particular, as being responsible for the wholesale plunder of DRC resources.

The Way Forward

Evident from the four cases touched on above is the fact that in most cases the warring parties relied heavily on revenues from natural resource exploitation to not only fund their wars but also to build up massive personal fortunes, to the extent that economic motives have crowded out any initial political motives. Most of these civil wars have hence been equally driven by their leaders' hunger to cling to the resources that they control as well as the motivation of the prospects of amassing personal wealth.

A crucial fact about these wars is that political and military leaders of the governments and the rebels, traders and businessmen have derived considerable wealth and status from war as opposed to peace. Thus, war has accorded them economic and political opportunities unachievable in times of peace. To make maximum gains from this, governments and rebels alike have skilfully but selfishly manipulated political motives, interspersed with promises of large booty, to fuel conflicts, consequently making it very difficult for any peripheral party to mediate a peaceful settlement.

Does Botswana Hold the Key?

Indeed, while it is recognised that Botswana's development record reflects 'good luck' to a substantial degree, we are also proud of the reputation that has been established for 'good management' on the part of the government... Although the national endowment has for the past 15 years or so been the main element in the 'good luck' factor, it is nevertheless recognised by those who are well acquainted with our country that we have driven with good effect to minimise adverse consequences of the 'mineral led economy' syndrome.

Then Vice President of Botswana, Festus Mogae.

Many debates have come up as to what needs to be done to curb the fuelling of war by diamonds in Africa. It has generally been agreed that governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations, diamond traders, financial institutions, arms manufacturers, social and educational institutions, and other civil society players need to combine their efforts, demand the strict enforcement of sanctions...
and encourage real peace. The United Nations, for its part, has passed several resolutions that have tried to curb the trade in conflict diamonds in each of the nations looked at in this paper. These have not really stopped the trade for a number of reasons, which are out of the context of this paper. It is the opinion of the author that, Africa needs to look at Botswana and learn from this country how to best utilise diamonds for continued development.

Botswana is arguably the only country in Africa with abundant reserves of diamonds that has experienced eternal peace matched by economic prosperity. It has had the highest per capita growth rate of any country in the world in 35 years and has moved from a low-income country to a middle-income African success story. Resource-endowed African nations hence have a lot to learn from Botswana. Although an examination of how Botswana has managed to make it, amidst a jungle in which good economics is bad politics, is a very lengthy exercise requiring a whole academic paper in itself, it can be summarised that Botswana managed to achieve rapid development by “choosing orthodox textbook policies; prudent macroeconomic and exchange rate policies, trading on the basis of comparative advantage, investing in education, health, and infrastructure, nurturing a meritocratic bureaucracy, and enforcing hard budget constraints”.

Botswana managed to avert the root cause of African problems – i.e poor policies benefiting only the ruling elites – despite the uncertain situation in which it found itself after the discovery of diamonds. It managed to do what very few, if any, African countries managed to do. This it did by adopting good institutions and policies and by investing heavily in infrastructure and the educational and health systems, quite clearly elements that the governments of the four countries looked at above have overlooked. Instead, they adopted political strategies that were optimal only for the ruling elite and economic failure was the consequence. Economic failure led to the general disillusionment of the masses, who felt cheated by their leaders, and war resulted as different groups fought for control of resources. Most African political leaders have over the years overlooked the importance of sound, selfless economic policies in the quest for economic prosperity and development. Zimbabwe, for instance, presents a good example of what selfish policies can lead to.

Clearly, from the Botswana example, African leaders need to come to terms with the importance of democratic, selfless, unifying and development-oriented policies that remove the political stakes and vested interests of the ruling elite whilst increasing their legitimacy. The New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) seems to hold the only route through which African leaders can change their old retrogressive tendencies.  

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Endnotes

3. Ibid.
5. UN Report on the Exploitation of Natural Resources in the DRC.