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HOW CONFLICT LEGACIES SHAPE GREEN, DIGITAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS IN AFRICA

The effect of green, digital and political transitions depends on how they redistribute power and resources within political orders shaped by conflict.

Transitions are usually presented as a movement between orders: from fossil fuels to renewable energy, analogue to digital technologies, unipolarity to geopolitical competition, or authoritarianism to democracy. In conflict-affected societies, however, transitions rarely replace one settled order with another. They enter political fields already organised by violence, fragmented authority, external intervention and unequal access to resources.

KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PRACTITIONERS

- **Analyse transitions collectively.** Examine green, technological, geopolitical and governance pressures together where they intersect in practice.
- **Treat conflict legacies as ongoing realities.** Conflict legacies shape the institutions, networks and claims that political actors mobilise in response to new pressures.
- **Assess instruments politically.** Assess whether their assumptions fit the political setting, how they redistribute resources and authority, and whose interests they serve.

This matters across Africa, where green investment, digitalisation, geopolitical realignment and contested governance unfold simultaneously. These dynamics are often analysed separately, even when they converge in the same places and affect the same institutions and populations.

It is important, therefore, not to simply identify transitions that are taking place; it is also a question of how the pressures they generate redistribute resources and authority, and how political and armed actors respond through existing institutions, identities and networks. Seeking to protect their positions or capture new opportunities, these actors may reproduce, fragment or reconfigure the political order. Similar pressures can therefore produce very different effects across conflict settings.

TRANSITION IS NOT NECESSARILY PROGRESS

Green investment is associated with sustainable development, technological change with connectivity and efficiency, geopolitical diversification with greater choice, and political transition with democratisation.

Transitions can create new resources, infrastructures and political opportunities. But they can also change the value of land, alter access to information, strengthen particular institutions and enable new forms of coercion. Their consequences depend on which actors gain or lose from these resources and capabilities, and how these shifts affect political competition.

Their political consequences are not predetermined but depend on how actors respond to shifts in resources and authority through existing institutions, networks and political settlements.

TRANSITIONS DO NOT DETERMINE TRANSFORMATIONS

Renewable energy investment may expand services and strengthen accountability where affected groups can challenge decisions on land allocation and benefit-sharing through institutions able to uphold their claims. However, where land and authority remain concentrated among political elites or armed actors, the same investment may instead reinforce exclusion and elite capture. The difference lies not in the investment but in the political order through which it operates.

These relationships are recursive rather than sequential. Conflict legacies shape how actors interpret and respond to transition pressures by structuring the institutions, identities, inequalities and networks through which power is exercised. As pressures redistribute resources and authority, political and armed actors draw on these legacies to protect their positions or capture new opportunities. They may thereby reactivate, reproduce or transform inherited arrangements, generating new actor configurations and forms of contestation.

BOX 1: GREEN TRANSITION: RENEWABLE ENERGY IN ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia's expansion of hydropower, wind and solar energy promises wider electricity access and new export revenues. Major projects such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam also affect relations with neighbouring states and regional geopolitics. Moreover, large energy projects redistribute control over land, water and revenue. Where decisions on location, compensation and benefit-sharing pass through contested state institutions, political actors may capture new resources while transferring costs to affected communities. Conflict risk therefore lies not in renewable energy itself, but in how its benefits and burdens are allocated through an already contested political order.[1]

BOX 2: GOVERNANCE TRANSITION: MILITARY RULE IN NIGER

Niger's 2023 coup transferred authority from elected institutions to a military establishment, operating amid prolonged insecurity. Regional sanctions and the rupture with the Economic Community of West African States encouraged Niger to deepen cooperation with the military governments of Burkina Faso and Mali through the Alliance of Sahel States. The transition thus redistributed authority and reoriented regional partnerships while producing greater authoritarianism.[2]

CONFLICT LEGACIES ARE ACTIVE POLITICAL RESOURCES

Conflict legacies are sometimes treated as residual problems of earlier violence. In practice, institutions, relationships and political claims formed through violence remain embedded in contemporary political orders. Wartime authority survives inside formal governance structures, while past interventions may leave state and non-state organisations dependent on external funding.

Experiences of violence and displacement can shape trust in public institutions, and earlier peacebuilding programmes influence which actors are recognised as legitimate representatives. These legacies matter not because they determine outcomes, but because they shape the resources, networks and claims that actors can mobilise when transition pressures alter distributions of power.

A transition pressure analysis must therefore ask more than whether a new technology, investment or partnership is beneficial. It must examine which inherited arrangements the pressure activates, which actors gain new capabilities or become marginalised, and how these shifts affect violence, authority, legitimacy and participation.

WHEN RECONSTRUCTION INSTRUMENTS LOSE THEIR FIT

Many contemporary peacebuilding and democratic reconstruction instruments emerged from the post-Cold War response to civil wars. Designed to address problems of state effectiveness, institutional fragility and political legitimacy, they assumed identifiable state counterparts, broadly aligned international coalitions, and a gradual movement from conflict to democratic governance. These assumptions fit poorly where violence is protracted, authority dispersed, and competing external partnerships reshape political order.

This does not necessarily make existing instruments obsolete. Their effectiveness depends on whether their assumptions fit the political configuration in which they are applied. An instrument designed to strengthen formal state institutions may deepen exclusion where those institutions embody unresolved wartime hierarchies. Support for digital governance may widen access while strengthening coercive surveillance. Stabilisation assistance may reduce immediate violence while consolidating authorities with little democratic legitimacy.

Instrument failure therefore does not always result from inadequate funding, implementation or coordination. It may result from a deeper mismatch between an instrument's assumptions about political order and the conditions under which it operates. It may also reflect the interests of actors who have the

BOX 3: DIGITAL TRANSITION: ELECTORAL POLITICS IN SIERRA LEONE

Social media widened opportunities to participate in Sierra Leone's 2023 elections, but it entered a media landscape long polarised between the country's two largest political parties. Bloggers and political actors aligned with both parties used digital platforms to circulate partisan attacks, hate speech and false claims, extending established political competition online. Digitalisation thus activated rather than displaced an inherited political divide: it expanded access to political communication while amplifying distrust and narrowing space for dialogue.[3]

BOX 4: GEOPOLITICAL TRANSITION: CRITICAL MINERALS IN THE DRC

Competition over the DRC's copper and cobalt is intensifying as the US and its partners seek alternatives to Chinese-dominated supply chains. New investment creates infrastructure and revenue but also rents, over which Congolese elites and external actors compete. Whether geopolitical diversification strengthens public institutions or reinforces existing patronage networks depends on who controls contracts, access, revenues and the regulatory environment.[4]

power to implement reform but benefit from the arrangements it is intended to change. Applying an established instrument more intensively will not overcome these political constraints and may reinforce the very dynamics it seeks to change.

FROM SECTORAL RESPONSES TO ADAPTIVE POLICY

A renewable energy investment may also advance geopolitical objectives, introduce digital infrastructure and challenge governance arrangements. A change of government may simultaneously alter security partnerships, access to strategic resources and the regulation of digital information. Treating these dimensions separately obscures their combined effects and makes consequences harder to predict.

Policy design should therefore begin with diagnosis rather than instrument selection. Policymakers must first identify the transition pressures affecting a conflict setting, then examine the legacies through which those pressures are refracted, the interests and capabilities of actors positioned to redirect them, and the consequences for violence, authority, legitimacy and participation.

Rather than a universal model for managing transitions, this requires a common analytical method for examining how pressures enter conflict settings and interact with political orders. These questions must be revisited as conditions change, and they need to be asked before beginning an intervention.

Transition mapping, conflict diagnostics and participatory validation can support this process. They should neither generate predictive rankings nor replace political judgement. Nor can they overcome resistance from actors who benefit from existing arrangements. They can, however, expose assumptions, identify distributional and political risks, and indicate where instruments may need adaptation.

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2 Nina Kurt (2024). *Security and Economic Implications of the Exit of the AES Countries from ECOWAS*, West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 30 October. Available at: https://wanep.org/wanep/security-and-economic-implications-of-the-exit-of-the-aes-countries-from-ecowas/

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