Social Movements and Political Culture in Africa (SMPC):

Introduction: A review of the CPI theme group

The new research programme of the Social Movements and Political Culture in Africa (SMPC) theme group is primarily based on work undertaken by the Culture, Politics and Inequality in Africa (CPI) theme group, which will round off its research in 2007. Since 2002, this theme group – with six core members and five associate members – has been concentrating on the dynamics of formations of power and cultural repertoires in Africa and their relationship with politics, political culture, collective identities, social inequality and conflict in African societies. Members have paid specific attention to the role that cultural resources, as repertoires and as patterns of behaviour invested with meanings widely shared and recognized in a given region or population, have played in the formation of new power relations and conflicts. Africa in the past four years has experienced continuing problems in political stability, the public sphere, economic life and social organizational structures. CPI members have tried to understand the historical and socio-cultural background for this and have contributed to major studies of religion and power, the problems of state survival, ethnicity and its political role, the changing role of youth, historical patterns of revolt and resistance, current conflicts, and the importance of religious movements and actors in the public and ideological sphere in various African countries. The theoretical location of most CPI research was thus in the study of the interplay between history, structure and agency.

Over past few years, the CPI group has operationalized key aspects of its research programme by addressing in more detail some of the historical, cultural and religious arenas and actors in the changing power and identity formations in African societies. One key assumption was that specific historical and cultural factors decisively contribute to the (re)shaping of contemporary social structure and power formations. They also define and constrain the scope of individual agency. In addition, the contested nature of the cultural, especially in relation to ethnic identity as applied to politics, was increasingly recognized. It became clearer that analysis of the manifest spheres of politics, international relations and development, in contrast to that of the informal and ideational spheres, does not usually suffice to explain the facts on the ground.

Set within the theoretical orientation of the theme group’s programme, empirical research was carried out in archives and through fieldwork, interviews and direct observation. Based on the realization that long-term structural processes affect many current developments and aspects of African societies, considerable attention was devoted to the historical dimension, sometimes extending into the pre-colonial period in Africa.¹

This emphasis on the importance of historical research was also concretized with regard to a continuing central concern of the theme group: the study of violent conflict. While ‘conflict studies’ have become an extremely important part of the social sciences in general, as well as of policy-makers’ agendas, CPI has been calling urgent attention to the understudied dimension of long-term causative factors shaping the manifestations and traits of current violent political formations – the longue durée – of violence in contemporary African societies.

Additional points of interest were the following: processes of political transition and reform (South Africa’s democratization process, Ethiopia); conflict in Africa (West Africa, the Horn of Africa); civil society and politics (Cameroon); and religion and society (Mali).

¹ The domain of social and economic inequalities was not a major thrust in our research although it had been expected to be so when the programme was initially drawn up in 2002. This was due to one of the CPI members (human geographer Dr D.F. Bryceson) taking up a position in the UK in 2004.
The international dimension of Africa’s problems – the nature of its relations to the rest of the world – was recognized as crucial, as evident in donor-country pressure, global regimes of development and the human rights discourse (e.g. via the UN), and religious expansionism. Studies of the African present are increasingly drawing attention to the importance of the religious and, more generally, the ideological sphere in the construction of power and identity in contemporary African societies. CPI members contributed significantly to this field of study.

Finally, the study of conflict and contentious political and cultural formations in contemporary Africa cannot be seen in isolation from the usually problematic role of youth. They often play a key role in the mobilization of political support, in the emergence of conflict in some of Africa’s most volatile regions and, more specifically, in the formation of ethnic militias, vigilante groups or the youth movement branches of existing political forces. The CPI theme group devoted a conference and a book to this subject in 2003 and 2004 respectively.
**Introduction to the new SMPC theme group**

This research programme aims to address new social movements and organizational forms in Africa against the background of the continent’s changing political cultures. It will provide a general, open-ended framework for research aimed at answering a number of questions:

- why and how people seek modes of social, cultural and political expression in new organizational forms;
- what the new developments are in the political cultures and governance structures of the continent, and, more specifically, why democratization processes have not been very successful;
- how insecurity takes on new forms and why certain violent conflicts persist; and
- why ‘traditional’ ideologies and social mechanisms of mediation and tolerance seem to diminish in force, be reinvented, or become problematic in new contexts; how African populations struggle to keep their inherited socio-cultural and survival mechanisms, and how and why they redefine ideals of modernity, development and belonging in their own terms.

The programme considers conditions of international flows of people, resources and capital, Africa’s place in the global system, and the dynamics of local ideologies, emerging social networks, political struggles and cultural change. The research perspective is multi-disciplinary and the approach interactionist: viewing history, structure and human agency as interlocking factors. While the execution of the programme is based on empirical academic research, cooperation is sought with policy-making institutions and persons (NGOs, international organizations, ministries) to develop specific research questions and approaches that may yield insights that could be used in improving policy plans and initiatives. As to academic exchange, the theme group’s programme will connect with African visiting scholars and our existing partners in Africa.

Africa is a highly diverse and pluralist continent defying unitary approaches, but we depart from the observation that most Sub-Saharan countries are experiencing continued changes and challenges in the political, social, ecological-economic and psychological sphere that produce both new insecurities and opportunities. The extensive literature on the ‘problems of Africa’ testifies to this. States are claimed to be failing, large numbers of people are affected by, and agents in, long-lasting and often violent conflicts, economies and livelihoods are faltering and cannot keep up with demographic change or demands from the large majority of people, and last but not least, the scars of conflict and humiliation have marked people’s psychological states and bruised cultural values. The other side of the coin is the wide range of innovative answers to enhance survival and the creation of wealth, ranging from the new use of political and technical means, global flows (i.e. migration, circulation, resources, money) and modernist images and strategies applied on the basis of social and cultural resources, such as kinship, social networking, application and the use of new technologies, popular culture or religion. Research should also address African problems and phenomena as defined both by Africans and by outsiders, as well as the dominant images of and frequent misperceptions about the continent.

Africa in the past few years has seen continued insecurities and struggles in the domains of economic life, politics, governance and the public sphere. It is important to understand the historical and socio-cultural background of this, making use of recently gained cumulative insights, and to chart the ways that phenomena like power struggles, problems of state survival, religiously based activism or militancy, ethnicity and its political role, the

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2 See the research programme of the ASC’s Connection and Transformations theme group.
changing role of youth, and patterns of popular revolt and resistance play in the public and ideological sphere in African countries. In addition, it has become clear that analysis of the manifest or formal institutional spheres of politics in Africa, in contrast to that of the informal and ideational spheres, usually does not suffice to explain the facts. Related to this there is the need to continuously reassess the interactions of Africa with the rest of the world.\(^3\) Considering the international dimension of Africa’s position and political future is crucial for the debates on the socio-political, not only economic, foundations of the global system as it is (re)shaped by donor-country pressure, global regimes of development policies/ideals, human rights discourses and religious expansionism.

**Defining political culture, new social movements and profiles**

The general focus of the new theme group will be on social movements, emerging new (groups of) actors and their profiles, as well as changing political cultures in Africa, with research being done on a selected number of countries. Movements in many instances appear to be the significant social actors in current conditions of change. Attention is to be paid to individual action, collective movements, and cultural and historical patterns shaping behaviour. Political and economic liberalization processes have had a profound impact and indeed a certain causative influence on the emergence of new – or the transformation of existing – social movements and profiles. These wider global processes have since interacted with the evolution of different social movements and profiles in ways that remain largely unclear. Studying the impact of these politico-economic and social processes – liberalization for short – is therefore closely bound up with the essence of the social movements/profiles the new theme group aims to study.

The central concept of social movements is taken as a general term referring to movements of contestation, resistance or protest, or alternatively forming social orders at a local level, that may coalesce into more organized movements with political claims or socio-cultural ideals and programmes. A more specific definition of social movements could be adopted: networks of groups, individuals and organizations prepared to mobilize for collective aims or protest actions to promote or resist social change, opposed to state authorities of institutions, and formulating alternative social and political practices/trajectories. In some projects, this means following a ‘down-up’ research approach. Social movements have a variety of origins and are characterized by a quest for new frames of meaning that refer to social and cultural characteristics and which can have implicit or explicit political dimensions.\(^4\)

The concept does not exclusively refer here to trade unions, associations, liberation movements or civil society organizations (although they are part of the broader, established spectrum of social movements), but primarily to new, emerging forms of collective social action and mobilization initiated by either individuals, marginalized groups, occupational or religious groups, ethnic revival groups, popular culture movements or even social or political elites.\(^5\) It is a dynamic concept indicating the formation and development of social agents and their careers or their claims to power, authority or relevance, and which (re)define political

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\(^4\) We here extend the definition given by D. McAdam *et al.* in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 186).

arenas, networks and ideological or cultural repertoires. The background against which they emerge is not only formed by long-term domestic socio-political problems but also by contemporary aspects of globalization, which in Africa also entails the rapidly growing role of China (and other Asian countries) on the African continent, and often evokes counter-responses by ordinary Africans.

Social movements have been well studied in the European and Latin American context but only sporadically in African contexts, mainly in South Africa. We feel that current developments across African societies invite researchers: to try and explain their dynamics through the lens of social movements and actor profiles, as these show new and often surprising aspects, and to apply insights from the social movements literature as developed in non-African contexts. In combination with the concept of political culture, a broad and heuristically useful framework can be created to research African complexities.

The concept of political culture is taken to refer to the sphere of governance, politics, power and the state in specific countries, as set in historical and social conditions marked by certain ideologies, values and practices present among the general population and relating to the construction of the political sphere. Political culture thus reflects the nature and extent of the values and representations concerning politics and the public sphere that are present in a certain society or population. It is no doubt a contested concept and may not be taken a priori as explanatory but for these very reasons is useful in generating debate and seeking better accounts of political action in its material and cultural-ideological settings.

This programme hopes to address the implications of processes of change and of the adoption of new organizational forms, social ‘technologies’ and power strategies that are currently visible in Africa. These unfold against the backdrop of states, societies and ideational/conceptual systems that are in upheaval and are unlikely to return to their previous semblance of social and cultural cohesion. We intend to pay close attention to African political philosophies and practices which have deep roots in the past but were often seen as irrelevant or disappearing. What has happened is their transformation and reassertion in the political process, thus changing political cultures and the public sphere in African societies, i.e. the arenas of decision-making, the exercise of power, and public debates or contestation.

Attention also needs to be paid to the growing impact of diasporic African communities in the political sphere and their indirect role in the construction of social movements and political debate. The persistent critiques by these transnational communities of the politics of their home country, for example via Internet sites, are having a domestic impact. They also aim to influence the agenda of donor countries. Furthermore, these communities are becoming an economic force due to their transfer of remittances and their contributions to investment, tourism, etc. in the home country. Some states are, in effect, a kind of ‘diaspora state’, a prime example being Eritrea, while others are feeling obliged to adapt or rhetorically justify their policies towards the critical diaspora.

International relations are also becoming more important in defining African realities and power politics. The international community has not yet found the answers to the changes and problems in the African postcolonial order, and ways of dealing with them and with the political elites in place are highly problematic. In addition, the collapse of the outward, formal political order in several areas of Africa in the past few years (e.g. in Somalia, DR Congo or Ivory Coast) raises concerns as to regional and global security. This process makes it all the
more necessary to see how socio-cultural orders, or what remains of them, are locally reconstituted through the actions of individuals and groups pursuing their interests, or how new ‘trust networks’ are achieved and made politically relevant. The role of trust networks is essential among, for example, criminal groups, religious militants, and autocratic ethnic and political elites.

A central concern in the research of political culture and social movements is charting the multiple aspects of insecurity (human, existential, cognitive, political and ecological-economic) that seem to characterize contemporary African societies in new and often dramatic forms (cf. Somalia, Darfur, Chad). Relevant conditions here are the transformations of the state, the informalization of the economy after economic and political liberalization, including the fragmentation of authority and the growth of transnational crime networks, resource contestation, the conflict sensitivity of African societies, the demographic crisis upsetting the population pyramid (especially as a result of HIV/AIDS deaths in a crucial age range, but against the background of rapid numerical growth), which is resulting in deepening poverty and limiting chances of recovery, and the dissonance between externally induced/imported political ideas and practices vis-à-vis indigenous or neo-traditionalist political ideologies.

The theme group follows a multi-disciplinary approach, based on work within various participating disciplines that reflect the expertise of the theme-group members (political science, human geography, anthropology/sociology and contemporary history). The aim is to work closely with African research partners in the countries where we do research as well as with visiting fellows from Africa. Projects with PhD students working on SMPC topics will continue, and new ones discussed. Research into the overarching topic of political culture and social movements and their interaction will culminate in an edited book by members of the new theme group.

**Outline of future research domains**

In outlining the SMPC group, we come to a description of research interests in three domains that can be addressed in a common approach and integrated into a general theoretical and epistemological framework shared by theme-group members. A group devoted to these themes should be characterized by a solid empirical research interest, a focus on the constitutive processes of social and political life, and on relevance with regard to policy and global academic debates. An inventory of proposed themes of research, though not of projects, is given below based on a coherent set of organizing ideas on the linkages of the phenomena indicated above, and on shared historical and social-science research methods. Further elaboration of members’ projects will proceed at a later stage, with reference to the framework of this text.

*Changes in political culture and the emergence of new social profiles/movements*

Within the contours of African political culture, we consider how new social movements and actors form in the current African postcolonial conditions shaped by liberalization and globalization. Who and what are these new actors and what is their social profile? For instance, what do activists and political actors of a previous generation – revolutionaries, reformers, youth activists, guerrilla fighters, criminalized political elites – do after their ‘projects’ have ended in success or failure, or after they have been co-opted or neutralized?

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11 Disciplines are, in our view, no more than evolved traditions of asking questions or addressing research problems in a certain way, guided by shared core concepts and approaches.
What is the shape and role of new collective ideological/religious identities? How do new actors emerge from situational contexts, shaped by changing social and political factors, and new global conditions (e.g. post-9/11)? How do they mobilize support or adherence, coalesce into new social profiles and power bases, and how do they contribute to reshaping political culture and the socio-political order?

Examples here are the evolution of the former leaders and membership of anti-apartheid movements (the UDF and the ANC) and their changing careers, or the emergence of new ethnic elites/entrepreneurs redefining state and governance, and perhaps the changing vicissitudes of the former guerrilla or insurgent movements now in power (as in Uganda, Ethiopia or Eritrea). These political actors emanated from social movements and have transformed them. Religious public intellectuals or community leaders in divided countries with a failing political order (e.g. Nigeria) could be another important focus of attention, as they might form an alternative route for public influence and mobilization. Emerging religious identifications can form alternatives or parallel orders to the political arena. Studies of organized crime and criminal/illegal entrepreneurs in Africa and their growing international ramifications would also fall under this heading, although there is some overlap with the theme mentioned below. While crime and corruption are not unique to Africa, their direct political impact there is probably greater than elsewhere, inhibiting institution-building, development and fair social redistribution.

This overarching research theme of new social profiles/movements will be by far the most important focus of the new theme group. Discussed below are examples of themes that will be elaborated as research projects.

**Topic 1:** When studying new social movements and profiles in South Africa since the end of apartheid, one could ask how people have interpreted the changes in society and in their lives. Around 1990, Marxism was commonly used as the preferred frame of reference to analyse South African society. Contending social forces were locked in an epic class struggle. Apartheid was characterized as racial capitalism. The goal of the struggle was not to deracialize capitalism but to do away with both apartheid and capitalism. Political activists envisaged an egalitarian, participatory society, with participation rather than pluralism being seen as the defining characteristic of democracy. However a decade after the introduction of South Africa’s democratic constitution, South Africa remains a highly stratified, capitalist society: racial stratification is no longer the guiding principle of its social and political institutions but social stratification remains as stark as before. The ‘buppy class’ seems to have forgotten, or has de-emphasized, many of their previous egalitarian ideals. Political participation is on the decline. One central question is how the concept of change has acquired a different meaning in post-apartheid South Africa: from the ideal of a democratic, non-racial, egalitarian society to a new goal of black empowerment and black nationalism? Such questions relate to the transformation of social movements and their elites. (Researcher: Ineke van Kessel)

**Topic 2:** An example of the increasing role of religion in society are countries in the Horn of Africa, a region that has attracted the attention of both militants as well as regional and global concerns about security (War on Terror). Religion has also had a tenuous relationship with politics and ethnic group relations. Religious mobilization can be seen in two ways: a grassroots social process of revivalism

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and articulation against political threats and the loss of livelihood, as well as an evolving counter-discourse against perceived hegemonism by governments and powerful non-African actors. Religious reorientation and mobilization in Ethiopia, Eritrea and, most recently, Somalia with the rapid rise of the politically driven Islamic Courts Union, is occurring in the face of enduring political crisis and economic insecurity. With no dramatic improvements in sight regarding livelihoods, political freedom and democratic rights, many people refer back to religious culture – not only to the religions dogmas and rituals as prescribed by religious authorities but also to the ritual, social and, to some extent, cultural contexts associated with them. Access to psychological and social security is enhanced through institutions and networks defined by religious adherence that can also marshal support from other countries. The role of Muslim organizations and new Christian churches, enhanced by conditions of economic and political liberalization (see below), will be a fruitful subject of research as they often take over the societal roles of more classic civil-society organizations such as labour, peasant, student, teacher and ethno-regional organizations. Research will examine whether they have entered into alliances with any of these groups.

**Topic 3:** A second example of religion’s growing role is that of the current impact of Muslim public intellectuals in many African countries, for example, Nigeria. By Muslim public intellectuals, we mean those persons who communicate about Islam or as Muslims to the public or various publics and sometimes beyond. This communication can be oral and/or written, and might be face-to-face communication (sermons, teaching) or mass-mediated or mass-mediated (via television, radio, audiocassette, video, DVD, and/or internet). They can be traditional Muslim intellectuals (‘ulama in Arabic), as well as the newer Muslim intellectuals, such as secular-educated-turned-Islamist newspaper columnists, Muslim media stars, youth activists and women preachers/activists. Muslim public intellectuals’ understandings and practices of Islam and the kinds of social and political agendas they might seek to advance have varied considerably. While some have been concerned with taking control of the state and Islamizing its institutions (particularly law and education), others have been involved in personal piety, reform and extirpating the allegedly unIslamic. Still others have focused their attention on questions of poverty, justice and corruption. New forms of associational life, the spread of mass education, increased transnational and global interconnections and the use of new media technologies have had an enormous influence on religious expression and public intellectuals in recent years. A comparative study of Christian (Evangelical) public intellectuals would be interesting as well. (Researcher: Benjamin Soares)

**Topic 4:** Examples of new social profiles and movements are less obvious as examples of new informal or illegal international networks of trade and crime, which have an obvious political relevance. While criminal networks or syndicates are not social movements in the sense of aiming towards a new social order (the narrower definition), they are certainly movements with a large impact on social and political relations, and can significantly (re)shape local political cultures. There is increasing concern about the supposed growth of African mafias and the expansion of their activities overseas, for example, in West Africa, with forms of advance-fee fraud such as the so-called ‘419’ letters and emails that many people receive, soliciting contacts with a promise of transferring money to the reader’s
bank account. There is also concern about the activities of Nigerian criminals, particularly in the drug trade, in prostitution and people-smuggling, and in identity theft. In other parts of Africa (e.g. East Africa in people smuggling and the drugs trade) these activities are also emerging. Research into the extent of West African involvement in smuggling and fraud and tracing the history of such activities can tell us a lot about the history of international business activity and the history of development aid in West Africa. The meaning of crime – as activities that are sometimes not considered immoral or illicit by large numbers of people - in a context where state actors themselves often break the laws that they themselves are pledged to uphold, as well as its political impact, also needs to be explored. (Researcher: Stephen Ellis)

**Liberalization and the remaking of the socio-political order**

New social movements and actors are emerging in the context of political and economic liberalization, which has accelerated since about 1990 and marks contemporary globalization. Liberalization processes are having an impact in Africa which is still not fully understood. Liberalization refers to the demise of state-led economies, all-encompassing ideologies and monolithic state regimes – current in the 1970s-1980s – and their dissolution into ideologies and models of market-oriented and pluralist systems of governance, usually fuelled by globalization processes and international institutions and corporations. There is a large body of literature attesting to the crisis of the state in Africa. While this is a paradigm that can easily lead to defeatism and analytical paralysis, and to some may seem to reflect undue Afro-pessimism, some obvious facts of state crisis or government deficit are hard to ignore. Most ordinary Africans have no confidence or trust in their state or the ruling elites. While the state cannot be expected to offer full public service provisions, it is not performing well in the basics of security maintenance or legal accountability, and often hinders and sabotages rather than supports and stimulates people to survive and fulfil their aspirations. The recent political record of African states shows a return to autocratic governance and is feeding despair among many citizens.

There is a continued need to understand not only the great economic and political realignments but also the social and cultural ones going on in Africa,\footnote{Cf. J. Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).} especially in local-level societies, in the fast-growing urban centres and in neglected, marginalized sectors such as pastoral groups outside the core centres of power. Western impact on the global discourse of liberalization is still paramount (notably in the political sphere) but no one knows for how long and how this will transform. Especially in the economic sphere, others are taking over. The growing role of China as a trade, development and political partner of many African countries is conspicuous\footnote{See the official document ‘China’s Africa Policy’ at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/zxxx/t230615.htm.} – not least due to its ultra-neoliberal approach of *laissez faire, laissez passer* in the classical sense – and poses challenges. China’s unscrupulous role in Sudan’s oil production and the adverse consequences of its economic involvement for local populations are one example.\footnote{See: R. Dixon, ‘Africans Lash Out at Chinese Employers’, *Los Angeles Times*, 6 October 2006. Other aspects are discussed in: J. Giles, ‘Tide of Censure for African Dams’, *Nature*, 22 March 2006.} Liberalization is not the prerogative of the West but a general trend of which the social and cultural implications are yet not fully appreciated. In African societies, liberalization and democracy\footnote{See for African contributions to the debate: T. Lumumba-Kasongo (ed.), *Liberal Democracy and its Critics in Africa* (Dakar: CODESRIA Books & London-New York: Zed Books. 2005).} have often come to be associated with chaos, a free-for-all and disarray. This has effects in the world of African politics and power, but also in
media and communications. The term liberalization thus invites wider conceptual reflections, as it is nowadays usually adopted or rejected on primarily ideological grounds.

**Topic 5:** An obvious topic for research would therefore be the relationship between China and Africa and the role of China in Africa, based on its rapid economic growth and need for resources. This topic has huge relevance in the contemporary study of Africa and cannot be ignored. China has one foot in the developing world and another in the developed one, with a seat on the UN Security Council. What factors are behind Beijing’s renewed interest in Africa and what is their social, economic and political impact on the continent? A major question is how African political elites and other social groups are reacting to deepening Chinese involvement. How are they responding to the presence of these new foreign economic actors and how are they interacting with them? What makes a study of Sino-African relations particularly interesting is that, for African elites, China appears to offer an alternative development strategy to Africa: non-interference in state sovereignty, freedom from western hegemony and an absence of economic and political conditions to aid-giving. In conjunction with this, the responses of ordinary Africans to the often quite competitive Chinese presence are important. Market practices and labour relations are evoking discontent and local tensions. These interactions are giving rise to new expressions of social movements of protest and rivalry. The China project, which started in the CPI theme group, will notably address developments in Cameroon and Ghana. (Researcher: Piet Konings)

**Topic 6:** Other subjects for research are studies of liberalization and social movements in individual countries. One project will address Niger where, under military rule in the late 1970s, the sudden appearance of mining-induced wealth (in the north) fundamentally affected the economic and social relations of the country’s pre-industrial society: urbanization, the emergence of a proletariat, and changes in socio-economic and elite power due to this newly acquired wealth. But it did not lead to the alleviation of poverty, dependence and debt, nor was Niger’s political culture conducive to durable political reform or social development under the impact of economic growth. This has an important bearing on and provides deeper historical insight into the significance of contemporary neo-liberal reform agendas that emphasize liberalization as the sole possible advent for social improvement. Such research also pertains to contemporary perspectives on international relations in West Africa and elsewhere. (Researcher: Klaas van Walraven).

**Topic 7:** The issue of oil and social development has wide relevance in Africa. One example to be studied in the new theme group is Chad, a poor country but one that is a new player in the global oil market. The riches of oil wealth can often produce harrowing economic and political problems that reproduce poverty and these problems, in turn, generate economic and social shocks that threaten global stability. The World Bank has devised a petroleum development strategy for Chad that it believes may avoid or mitigate such problems. Previous studies of oil’s negative impact come from a number of disciplines, especially economics and political science. This research proposes four explanations – the ‘Dutch disease’ (distorted growth in the oil-related sector and stagnation or decline in parts of the agricultural and industrial sectors), neo-patrimonialism, rent capture, and
deconstructive cultural representation – that may account for why Chad, or any other developing country, can be transformed into a country plagued by the curse of oil. The impact of oil exploitation on Chadian society will be investigated and an examination of social movements (the NGO sector, political parties, and civil society) will be part of this project. (Researcher: Han van Dijk)

Insecurity and conflict production

Conflict in Africa is still widespread and tenacious. The persistence of conflicting narratives of politics, culture and social groups/classes in African societies is remarkable and is often rooted in material poverty, scarcity, ecological decline and inequality. The antagonisms are partly related to international entanglements in Africa but also emanate from local tensions and the workings of unequal, non-redistributive socio-political systems. They are often internalized and (re)produced as social templates in daily life. The impact and persistence of conflicts in Africa (and some other parts of the globe) seem to be of a larger scale and more disruptive. There is a continued need to study the generative processes producing and transforming conflict based on a proper assessment of historical, political and cultural factors. Why are current conflicts seldom ‘solved’? How do they transform? What is the role of political culture? And what actors and factors determine this? One cannot study African societies and ignore the material and ideological-cultural conditions producing (violent) conflict. Also, patterns of humiliation and abuse – grievance next to greed – shape the habitus of both individuals and groups, and have long-term effects that fuel conflict in new forms.

The deep insecurities of life in many African countries – ecological, material, social, political and health-wise (notably due to HIV/AIDS) – have a direct impact on conflict behaviour and need to be studied in their political manifestations, especially at the local level where they are initially produced. Apart from assessing pervasive mal-governance and gross abuse of state power (the record of the Sudanese government in Darfur is a case in point), we also have to understand the nature and role of ‘ungoverned political spaces’ across the continent that are enhancing conflict and transnational crime.

The study of new religious identities may also be included in this theme, perhaps with a sub-programme on religious reorientations or, in some forms and settings, radicalization. In many ways, new ideologies or worldviews of a political or religious nature can function as ‘mental retreats’, narrating new forms of insulated certainty that can become socially rooted. This is a global phenomenon (cf. Russia, South East Asia, the Middle East) but also holds for several African societies, and can be reinforced by the workings of the international system.

Studies are envisaged into transformations of social (class) and ethnic conflict, religious confrontations and conflicts around resources (linked to the study of criminal networks).

**Topic 8:** A key project will be devoted to the long-term impact of conflict on food production systems and food security. Recently, conflicts over resources have been placed centre stage in social science research. However, apart from the fact that these conflicts may be based in resource scarcity (or abundance), they also have an impact on systems of natural resource management and food production. This impact has rarely been a subject of research although its influence may have been long-lasting in conflicts, land-tenure systems, infrastructure and knowledge change. Livelihoods are influenced, resources are restricted or removed and people’s physical conditions are endangered. This may have a long-term negative impact on people’s livelihoods and the way in which food production systems

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function. Research in Chad and in central Ethiopia indicates that this is indeed the case. (Researchers: Han van Dijk & Jan Abbink)

In this time of insecurity and conflict, attention will also be paid to local-level conditions generating conflict and their relation to national-political arenas, whereby it is hypothesized that the politicization of rural society by re-emerging authoritarian elites or dominant parties in many African countries is eroding local political-cultural resources, impeding the emergence of equitable governance and enhancing local societies’ conflict sensitivity. It is also hypothesized that, in many but not all cases, an ethnicization of conflicts is visible. While ethnicity is not a predominant explanatory framework for conflict, the phenomenon of ethnic diversity and ethnic politics in Africa has not disappeared. One cannot simply go ‘beyond ethnicity’. Cases in point are the conflict in the DRC with its large-scale inter-ethnic killings, the local ethnicized conflicts in Ethiopia that may not be caused as such by the official ethnic policy of the post-1991 government but certainly relate to it, and Darfur where a new racist discourse of Arabs vs. Africans has emerged, fuelled by the government war on the local population.

**Topic 9**: Transformations of conflict in Ethiopia will be a project that looks into the three-way impact of state policy, globalizing influences (e.g. of tourism, rural development and NGO policy) and local-level identity/resource competition in southwestern Ethiopia on local political cultures and group relations. This project will revisit the topic of inter-ethnic conflict in southwest Ethiopia a decade after previous research to assess the impact of external peace-making and development efforts. (Researcher: Jan Abbink)

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These three domains of research indicate the nature of the process of reconfiguring or ‘remapping’ Africa: an attempt, not primarily in western academia but mostly in Africa itself,\(^\text{18}\) to redefine the factors and values constitutive of the political and social order on the continent. This process itself constitutes an historical and social remapping of African societies. It necessitates new images of what Africa is, and how it is connected to global processes. The focus should be on the loci and contexts of the far-reaching, and often unsettling, changes fuelled by new social actors as they reshape Africa in the political and human-geographical sense. Understanding them has important implications for the rethinking of ‘development’ and of donor policies, as we can find out more about why and how aid, in many instances, undermines economic growth, political reform and the local social fabric,\(^\text{19}\) and why international donor support for political reform and rule-of-law systems is so ambivalent. We intend to respond to the need to grasp the underlying, non-formal processes that locally generate these political, geographical and organizational changes in African societies, which may also allow us to provide policy-relevant views for dialogues with donors and NGOs. We can better understand their dynamics when seeing them as located and expressed in political culture and new social movements.

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