

Editorial

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Like many African countries, East African countries – namely Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda – are endowed with a variety of rich natural resources, in particular, natural gas, oil and different types of minerals, such as gold, Tanzanite and diamonds. Specifically, the discovery and exploitation of natural gas and oil in East Africa is a new development. For Kenya, oil exploitation in Turkana area is at an early stage as is Ugandan oil exploitation in the Albertine region. In recent years Tanzania has seen the extensive exploration for natural gas in several areas in Mtwara and Lindi regions along the Indian Ocean, with projects for its commercial exploitation starting to come on line. There are expectations that oil may also be discovered in the near future in Tanzania raising the possibility of an East African oil boom.

The discovery of oil and natural gas should be a blessing bringing in new resources to spur socio-economic development and political stability in the region. But for many countries in Africa the discovery and exploitation of primary resources has been a curse rather than a blessing. Natural resource-rich countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan, which border East Africa, have been hot-beds of deadly civil wars arising from contestation by different groups to control political power and natural resources. Also, natural resources turned out to be a curse in other African countries, such as Angola, Liberia and Sierra Leone. In Angola, Jonas Savimbi financed and sustained his war against the government by looting natural resources, while Charles Taylor did the same in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Central to the resource curse thesis is the view that primary natural resources are a curse because ‘they make countries perform worse economically than they would otherwise, and lead them to be more autocratic, civil war prone and more badly off politically than they would be otherwise’ (Marrison, 2013; Ross, 2004; Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Fearon, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). According to this view, therefore, countries with natural resources, especially oil and other high value resources, have a potential risk for civil

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war, political violence, and governance problems because the exploitation of natural resources can weaken institutions of the state. Fearon extended this argument by positing that the presence of high value natural resources prolongs civil wars and make it difficult to resolve them. Also, central to the resource curse thesis is the view that natural rich countries tend to have limited economic development because of tax aversion and corruption coupled with illegal transfer of funds generated from natural resources into foreign countries (Global Financial Integrity, 2008).

Even so, an alternative argument is sceptical about a simplistic correlation between resources leading to corruption, violence, and civil war. This view posits that the extent to which primary resources can be a curse is dependent on certain contextual circumstances (Robinson, *et al.*, 2006; Hodler, 2006). In particular, primary resources can be a curse in situations when there is an absence of strong institutional, legal and policy frameworks. Thus, according to this view, primary resources tend to be a curse in countries with weak institutional, legal and policy frameworks, a condition that many observers associate with African states.

Responding to the expected oil boom and other forms of resource extractions taking place in East Africa, the alumnae of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in Tanzania organized an academic conference bringing together academics and practitioners in East Africa and outside the region. The conference was hosted by the University of Dar es Salaam in May 2016. Based on empirical evidence drawn from cases in East Africa, conference participants deliberated on politico-legal, social and economic issues regarding the natural gas and oil boom in the region. Case studies presented and discussed during the conference allowed participants to compare experiences and learn from different countries in and outside East Africa. This special issue is the product of the conference.

References

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