Globalisation and Conflict: Evidence from sub Saharan Africa

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This study contributes to the conflict literature by investigating Stephen Pinker's (2011) theory on the evolving factors that have contributed to less violence in humanity. He advances that various forms of violence such as homicide, rape, torture and conflict have decreased over time because of the following historical shifts in society: i) pacification process which has seen societies transition from hunter-gatherer to state-run societies based on agriculture, ii) civilising process which has seen an increase in urbanisation and industrialisation, iii) humanitarian and rights revolutions which have seen a reduction in violent practices against humans, and iv) extended periods of peace after World War II and the Cold War which have seen decreases in both interstate and intrastate wars.

We regard these shifts as processes encompassed in globalisation and investigate the effects of globalisation on conflict in sub-Saharan Africa. Although Pinker (2011) covers broad categories of violence, we focus this paper on conflict because comprehensive measures of conflict that cover the period under review are readily available for sub-Saharan Africa than data on homicide rates, rape, child abuse or hate crimes. Conflict is also one of the forms of violence common to the region given its recent history with decolonisation and subsequent civil wars.

We use panel data from 46 countries dated 1970 to 2013 and find a negative relationship between globalisation and conflict, suggesting that the processes that come with globalisation create incentives that increase the opportunity cost of conflict. Countries have more to lose in terms of political allies, social gains and trade benefits. Furthermore, we disaggregate globalisation into its three key components (social, political and economic openness). We find that social globalisation is a stronger predictor for decreasing conflict than the other two components, suggesting that social interactions through migration and dissemination of information play a beneficial role as a pacifying agent by fostering tolerance and empathy. We also disaggregate conflict into intrastate and inter-state and find that the severity of intrastate conflict is significantly reduced by the globalisation processes compared to interstate conflict.

The inclusion of conflict-related control variables, the use of different conflict variables and a different globalisation variable, and accounting for the post-cold war period and persistence in the conflict variable do not alter the results significantly. Globalisation emerges as the most robust and stronger predictor for lowering severity of conflict. We also find that this result is driven to a large extent by the high income countries

Although policy inferences based on these results may be premature, the study does suggest that creating incentives that put greater value on mutual prosperity and advance economic development can contribute to lower conflict in the region. Although we realise that global processes are volatile and the trend of conflict can shift at any time, we contend that today's peace-promoting global forces are dominant enough to offset the negative effects that may arise from globalisation.