

Kent Academic Repository

Full text document (pdf)

Citation for published version

Hammerstad, Anne (2013) African Agency in a Changing Security Environment: Sources, Opportunities and Challenges. *Conflict, Security and Development*, 13 (5). pp. 1-16. ISSN 1467-8802.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2013.849470>

Link to record in KAR

<http://kar.kent.ac.uk/36255/>

Document Version

Publisher pdf

Copyright & reuse

Content in the Kent Academic Repository is made available for research purposes. Unless otherwise stated all content is protected by copyright and in the absence of an open licence (eg Creative Commons), permissions for further reuse of content should be sought from the publisher, author or other copyright holder.

Versions of research

The version in the Kent Academic Repository may differ from the final published version.

Users are advised to check <http://kar.kent.ac.uk> for the status of the paper. **Users should always cite the published version of record.**

Enquiries

For any further enquiries regarding the licence status of this document, please contact:

researchsupport@kent.ac.uk

If you believe this document infringes copyright then please contact the KAR admin team with the take-down information provided at <http://kar.kent.ac.uk/contact.html>

This article was downloaded by: [Anne Hammerstad]

On: 06 November 2013, At: 23:25

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Conflict, Security & Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccsd20>

African agency in a changing security environment: sources, opportunities and challenges

Danielle Beswick & Anne Hammerstad

Published online: 04 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Danielle Beswick & Anne Hammerstad, Conflict, Security & Development (2013): African agency in a changing security environment: sources, opportunities and challenges, Conflict, Security & Development, DOI: 10.1080/14678802.2013.849470

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2013.849470>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Introduction

African agency in a changing security environment: sources, opportunities and challenges

Danielle Beswick and Anne Hammerstad

Introduction

To what extent do structural factors limit actors' ability to make choices and effect changes to their social, economic or political environments? The structure-versus-agency question is central to all disciplines of social science research, whether sociology, politics or international relations (IR), but the answers provided vary widely both within and between disciplines. One of the ways in which IR traditionally distinguished itself from sociology and politics was its stronger tendency towards structural explanations of behaviour. Whether of a realist, liberal or dependency hue, IR theorists would argue that international politics is an arena of limited agency, and particularly so for the vast majority of state (and other) actors that are not classified as great powers.

Strongly structuralist theories have declined but not disappeared from IR since their heyday in the 1970s and 1980s. The discipline's constructivist turn, starting in the 1990s

Dr **Danielle Beswick** is Lecturer and Director of Research at the International Development Department, University of Birmingham. She has published articles on African security, post-genocide Rwanda and a co-authored textbook with Paul Jackson—*Conflict, Security and Development* (Routledge, 2011). She is principal investigator of a new ESRC Seminar Series (2013–2015) entitled *UK-Africa Policy after Labour: Coalition and Austerity, Continuity and Change*.

Dr **Anne Hammerstad** is Lecturer in International Relations, University of Kent, and Research Associate, South African Institute of International Affairs. She has published on African security integration; refugees, migrants and conflict/insecurity, including Zimbabweans in South Africa; and the politics of displacement. Her book, *The Rise and Decline of a Global Security Actor: UNHCR, Refugee Protection and Security* (Oxford University Press) is forthcoming, February 2014. She currently conducts research in India on migration and regional relations.

and influenced by sociologists such as Anthony Giddens,¹ allowed the structure-agency debate in IR to move away from an either-or perspective to one in which actors are both constrained by and constitutive of (hence at least potentially able to modify) the structures within which they live and operate. But structurally inclined explanations have lingered longer in the study of Africa's and Africans' role in global politics than in most other areas of IR research.

Although the literature on African agency is growing, it remains the case that IR scholarship on Africa tends to concern itself with the way in which marginalised, poor and weak African countries are acted and impacted upon by great powers and international institutions.² Taking the example of conflict analysis, the influential 'new wars' literature initiated by Kaldor focused on outside forces, in collusion with local war-profiting elites, working to perpetuate conflict, war economies and underdevelopment in war-torn regions of the world, Africa prominent among them.³ From this conflict perspective, local/national level agency is a mostly negative concept: the ability of a small local elite to collude in globally-driven processes that are perpetuating conflict and poverty at local levels.

This special issue contributes to the growing debate on the nature and limits of African agency. It does so by focusing on the possibilities of and constraints on agency in the security sphere. This is a sphere traditionally characterised as dominated by existential threats and the imperative of survival. Hence it is often considered to present an especially restrictive environment for agency, particularly of the transformative kind. We do not take this traditional understanding of security for granted, but adopt a constructivist viewpoint. The articles included in this special issue have in common that they all aim to critically explore the way in which security threats and appropriate responses are perceived, defined and pursued by African actors, whether multilateral institutions, states, communities or individuals.

We argue in favour of an understanding of agency which is relational and contextualised, where structures and agency are continuously reproduced over time and co-constitutive, a theme reflected across the studies presented. Through this approach we aim to challenge narrow, structure-dominated and overly restrictive approaches to understanding the responses of African actors to contemporary security challenges. We define security in a broad manner. Some studies are concerned with traditional security threats to states and regions, while others focus on the human security needs of individuals to not just survive on the margins of existence but to exercise their agency to improve, or at least attempt to improve, their lives. Viewed together, the articles provide a

rich and varied source for reflecting on the possibilities, constraints and implications of African agency in a dynamic security environment.

The special issue takes a bottom-up approach to the debate on African agency. It does so in two ways. First, rather than start with the theoretical structure/agency debate, it uses theoretically informed empirical studies to further our understanding of how African agency takes shape in specific conditions and under particular constraints. The existence (or not) and nature of agency is not assumed, but explored through rich empirical analysis. Second, the articles of this special issue do not take for granted that agency is something that only pertains to elites. Three of the contributors explore the possibilities for agency owned by those on the bottom rungs of power hierarchies within African states.

Can the survival tactics and dreams of Somali refugee women in Nairobi or unemployed former child soldiers in Liberia be described as agency? And what do we gain in our understanding from studying such marginalised groups from an agency perspective? The answers provided in this special issue are sobering, in that they highlight the intrinsic relationship between power and agency. Crudely put, the more power an individual or institutional actor enjoys, or can tap into, in a particular setting (whether soft, relational, or hard, material) the greater the chance that the actor is able to display agency that is more than tactical short-term decisions about day-to-day survival.

Africa's changing security environment

2013 marks the 50th anniversary of the creation of the Organisation of African Unity, and 2012 saw the 10th anniversary of its successor the African Union (AU). Scholars have used these milestones to reflect on Africa's position in the world following a half-century of independence, to consider the impact of African institutions, including the emerging peace and security architecture, and to explore the contemporary security challenges facing Africa.⁴ In such reviews a number of key trends are noted. These form an important backdrop for our discussion of African agency in the security arena.

First, analysts have highlighted the growth of multilateral institutions in Africa, at both continental and regional level. The establishment of the AU and development of an African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) has transformed the institutional landscape of African conflict prevention and management.⁵ While the APSA structures remain weak and reliant on donor funding and support,⁶ they have nevertheless facilitated greater

African involvement and leadership on matters of conflict and insecurity on the continent. The development of the APSA structures reflects in part the interests of external actors who do not wish to provide peacekeeping forces for missions in Africa, preferring instead to fund and 'build capacity' of African actors to enable them to provide African solutions to Africa's security problems.

This 'African solutions' narrative could thus be interpreted as primarily benefitting external actors. But it has also been seized upon by many African actors keen to take greater ownership of security on the continent and to access the military training, capacity-building and resources offered to key African security partners. The EU launched its African Peace Facility (APF) in 2003 to fund African-led security efforts—both institution-building and peacekeeping missions. Between 2003 and 2010, €740 million was channelled to African security actors and institutions through the APF alone. Such funding flows have allowed states considered lynchpins in regional security, including Nigeria, South Africa and a range of states in East Africa, to benefit from the 'African Solutions' mantra, though the long-term security implications of large international investments in national military capacity-building are as yet unclear.⁷

The AU has, alone or in concert with the UN and with substantial financial support from the EU now fielded peace support missions in Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia and Burundi, demonstrating political will and growing capacity despite relying on external funding and suffering significant resource, equipment, logistical and other challenges.⁸ It has also sought to play a role in conflict prevention and non-military responses. The process of the OAU's and AU's gradual and sometimes painful learning experience in conflict mediation is documented in this issue by Tiekou's careful analysis of the Burundi peace process.

Secondly, patterns of armed conflict in Africa have changed considerably since the end of the Cold War. Despite the popular media image of Africa as a continent wracked by violent conflict, studies show that the global trend of a significant decline in the number of civil and inter-state wars is also reflected in Africa.⁹ Straus' review of armed conflict data for Africa suggests that such conflicts have been replaced by a growth in low-level insurgencies which, though 'in some cases capable of sowing terror and disruption[,] [...] tend to be small in size, internally divided, poorly structured and trained, and without access to heavy weapons'.¹⁰ Such actors nevertheless present significant challenges to the security forces and citizens of the states in which they operate, as well as for the African peace and security architecture. They also pose legitimacy challenges for governments who

are unable or unwilling to meet the demands or grievances of such groups, nor to decisively defeat them militarily.

The operation of such groups across state borders has fuelled regional insecurity and tensions, perhaps most notably and with most deadly consequences in central Africa.¹¹ Though the quantity and qualitative nature of conflict in Africa may have changed, significant security challenges, both physical and human, remain an everyday reality for citizens of many African states. The civil wars and other forms of violent conflict that remain a feature of African security, continue to result in death, injury, uncertainty and displacement, generating security challenges for national security forces, local communities, neighbouring states and displaced individuals.¹²

Third, over the past two decades there has been an increased emphasis, by the international community and development actors in particular, on human security. A focus on humans as the referent object of security suggests the need to consider different kinds of security threats to those which have dominated traditional IR, and to explore a wider array of tools and the involvement of a greater range of actors in tackling such threats. In a broad reading of this concept, security threats could include conditions prevalent in many states in sub-Saharan Africa, including unemployment, limited access to healthcare and education, displacement and discrimination based on factors including gender or disability. Sceptics point out that defining security in such a way could render it less useful as a concept and basis for action.¹³

While having been labelled both conceptually flawed and a stalled policy initiative,¹⁴ human security has nevertheless retained an important role as a signpost and political rallying cry that security should be more than the study of states and their regimes. The AU and its funding partners have also acknowledged that the last decades' investment in Africa's security architecture has predominately been channelled to traditional security structures, particularly military missions, while 'there are a number of security and related developments that do not fall within the remit of any of the APSA components [including] terrorism, piracy, disaster management, post-conflict reconstruction and broader governance issues'.¹⁵

The intention to view security differently in the case of developing states and regions, though in perhaps more varied ways, is reflected in a fourth and final trend. As Abrahamsen noted almost a decade ago, Africa has become 'securitised', labelled by high-profile politicians, public figures and media in many donor states and at international fora as a source of fear and threat to developed states.¹⁶ This situation is not

however unique to Africa. More broadly, there has been a shift in thinking on development by many of the major bilateral and multilateral donors, leading them to the conclusion that successful development requires an environment of peace and security.¹⁷ This means that conflict and insecurity on the continent, even in the form of low-level insurgencies, cannot be easily ignored by donors. This discourse has also seen a whole range of marginalised and potentially highly-vulnerable groups, including refugees, former combatants and unemployed youth identified as potential security threats.¹⁸

The positing of a 'security-development nexus' has precipitated a renewed focus on building capacity for African solutions, but has also led to an increase in efforts by some donors, notably OECD DAC states and some multilateral donors, to support and promote state-building.¹⁹ Such efforts are often aimed at developing states able to withstand shocks, whether economic or political. However there are potential tensions between building states which are politically stable, resilient and able to contribute to African peace and security, whilst also promoting political settlements within them which are inclusive, representative and responsive to citizens' needs, including those relating to security. As Africa passes this half-century milestone the implications of these trends for peace and security continue to play out in the lives of individuals and communities as well as in the practices and interactions of African states and institutions.

Why agency?

In seeking to understand how African actors are navigating the contemporary security environment, we focus on agency because of its perhaps unique capacity, noted by de Bruijn, van Dijk and Gewalt, to 'explode often victimizing approaches in exchange for a much more balanced understanding of the local processes at work in Africa'.²⁰ A focus on agency allows us 'to challenge narratives of Africa that present the entire continent as perpetual victim and lacking political initiative'.²¹ It is, in this sense, a rejoinder to accounts of African actors which depict their actions as shaped solely by outside actors and discourses over which they have little or no control.

This does not imply that we ignore or seek to minimise the very real constraints faced by African actors in exercising agency, whether the agents in question are state representatives operating at the international level or individuals seeking to increase their security in the face of severe structural constraints in their everyday lives. Rather, the contributors seek to

explore how African actors navigate this arena of constraints and opportunities, considering who acts, how and with what effects.²² These processes, making active choices even where options are limited, and seeking to improve options in future decision-making by accumulating experience and building up resources and repertoires, are key themes of the papers in this collection.

Hurt reminds us that between the two poles of the debate on African agency—those who see a significant improvement in African agency evidenced by increased African activism on the global stage, and those who counter that Africa remains marginalised and that the agency of its actors is entirely structurally determined—there is a middle ground. In his view, ‘structures (both ideational and material) are seen as placing limitations on [African actors], but these outcomes are not predetermined.’²³ In the cases discussed in this special issue, the agency demonstrated by African actors is a product of their interactions with others actors and with structures and processes, both within and outside Africa. In this sense agency is both relational and dynamic.

In adopting this relational understanding of agency, we draw on Brown’s work on African agency in international politics, whereby he argues: ‘a flexible conceptualisation of agency is needed to locate agencies in the “complex dialectical interplay” with the structural contexts from which they arise and in relation to which they operate.’²⁴ Thus, despite myriad challenges and limitations, African actors, whether states, regional organisations, civil society organisations, communities or individuals, are far from passive subjects or voiceless victims of the new security environment. Structures are important, but though they can condition the world of possibilities for African actors, we cannot know exactly how an actor will behave solely by examining the structural dynamics of a given situation. Recognising this, each author in this special issue, in their own way, explores how agency is found and maximised by African actors *despite*, or in some cases *because of*, their perceived weaknesses or lack of capacity.

Agency in the security arena

Attempts to enhance agency *despite* constraints of capacity and external power structures are perhaps most obvious in the use of collective action and multilateral fora by African states. This is reflected in the development of regional security mechanisms over the past two decades and the creation of the African Union, with a much greater role than its

predecessor in African peace and security.²⁵ The AU tries to use its role representing 54 African states to project a pre-eminent African voice on international security matters relating to Africa, including conflict prevention, management and peacekeeping. This mirrors the efforts of African states elsewhere, such as at the World Trade Organisation, to act as a bloc and make Africa's numbers count on the international stage.²⁶

By working collectively, including developing common positions on crises and frameworks for enhancing the emergent African peace and security architecture, African states can present a considerable bloc in international fora and debates on peace and security. Capacity constraints, which have hampered the ability of African actors to respond to security crises on the continent in the past, can also be partially overcome by joint and hybrid initiatives between African states and with outside partners. The transition in African Union operations in Sudan to include a hybrid UN–AU Mission in Darfur is evidence of this potential but also demonstrates some of the limitations. This is explored in detail by Mickler's piece in this collection.

Perceived and actual weaknesses and limitations of capacity can however also be used as a resource by African actors to enhance their agency and to attract external support, including in the security arena.²⁷ At the level of state representatives and African governments, this strategy was captured in Bayart's notion of 'extraversion' two decades ago, in which he argued:

*Far from being the victims of their very real vulnerability, African governments exploit, occasionally skilfully, the resources of a dependence which is, it cannot ever be sufficiently stressed, astutely fabricated as much as predetermined. Both on their political stage and within the world system, they pursue their own objectives, within the margins of failure and success that the implementation of any strategy entails.*²⁸

This highlights the potential for African actors to frame their interactions with the rest of the world by exploiting their own dependence and the features that external actors often identify with them—including political and economic fragility and limited capacity. This is particularly relevant for the security arena, in which, as discussed earlier, 'Africa' and processes and characteristics associated with African underdevelopment, such as insecure borders and ungoverned spaces, have become considered threats to both African and international peace and security.²⁹ This contradicts Brown's suggestion that: '[i]n the area of security and peace keeping the room for manoeuvre is arguably more limited, affected

by the involvement of outside powers and the limits of African military and political capacity'.³⁰

Discourses which seek to link underdevelopment and insecurity may posit Africa as a source of security threats, but they have also underlined a sense of urgency in the drive by outside actors to support African peace and security capacity development: to provide African solutions to African problems. Whether security problems in Africa are indeed solely 'African' in cause or consequence is highly debateable, particularly given the networked and globalised character of many conflict economies in the region. Nevertheless, the emphasis on African solutions provides opportunities for some African states to stress their value as partners in African peace and security initiatives, attracting support to reinforce such roles.

Thus, reflecting Bayart's analysis, African elites are able to use conceptions that others have of African actors' weaknesses and dependencies in order to garner support and resources to pursue their own objectives. These, according to Bayart, follow a historically grounded trajectory which is independent of, but interacts with, external influences. This chimes with Brown's more recent analysis of African agency, which suggests that examples of agency need to be situated 'within a "thicker" historical account'.³¹ Papers in this collection seek to provide this thicker account by situating particular initiatives by African actors, including involvement in conflict mediation and peacekeeping, in a wider context, making links to past experiences as well as contemporary narratives on African peace and security.

Developing this further it is clear that, despite the power and resource asymmetries that African actors face in their encounters with others in the new security environment, agency is not simply a synonym for resistance or opposition to those structures and processes. Instead, agency can be exercised in ways which challenge, support or even alter structures. The establishment of the AU, with its constitutive act departing significantly from that of its predecessor and the advent of the Peace and Security Council, could be considered such an act. It fundamentally altered the environment within which discussions of peace and conflict management in Africa occur, providing a new reference point for discussions, a new collective African voice in international debate and a focal point for international efforts to develop the capacity of African actors to manage peace and security on the continent.³²

This is not to say that there is always agreement between AU members on crises or initiatives, some national government representatives have deviated from AU stated

positions on specific issues and the institution has been used as a platform to play out inter-state rivalries,³³ but the existence of the AU and its determination to ‘speak for Africa’ on matters of peace and security have altered the institutional landscape of African peace and security. The exercise of agency by African actors in this arena can therefore challenge existing structures which influence decision-making of African and external actors. Thus, in exploring agency, as Brown argues, we must be mindful that ‘agency needs to be seen as both creative and reproductive of existing structural relationships, as well as, potentially at least, transformative of them.’³⁴

Levels of analysis: whose agency?

So far we have mostly discussed African agency in progressive terms, as a story of African actors’ ability to carve out a more autonomous and active role in the continent’s security politics, even in the face of global power and resource asymmetries. But until now we have mainly discussed ‘African agency’ as if it belongs to a narrow elite of state actors: those wielding political power within and on behalf of sovereign African states.

The state and international levels are clearly important in a debate on African agency. As Brown argues, sovereignty adds a crucial dimension to the discussion of African agency. Sovereignty bounds agency by delineating an action as being that of the state, or an authorised representative of it, and this lends a degree of legitimacy and authenticity to the action. Thus: ‘not only does sovereignty serve to maintain the inside/outside distinction, it is also the principle through which states themselves perform their agency, exert power, and play roles internationally enacted by their agents.’³⁵ This legitimacy may derive from the state’s claim to represent the interests of its people, on the basis of collective identity or by virtue of the state having undergone a process to authorise those in power, such as democratic elections.³⁶

The assumption of African actors wielding real agency—making decisions based on their own imagination and perceptions of aims and interests—is therefore particularly valid when studying state elites. This is despite the complication created by the fragility and institutional weaknesses of many African states. Whether they can be said to have ‘acted’ in a particular context may be dependent, in large part, on how their state-ness (authority to authorise and perform agency as a state actor) is viewed and represented by outside actors.³⁷ A further complication lies in the fact that even African states with

relatively stable institutions, able to continuously reproduce patterns of authority and control, still represent a complex assemblage rather than a single unitary actor.³⁸

In this collection, Fisher's account engages with this debate by highlighting the complex interplay between the actions of leaders, regimes and states in East Africa and the ways these are perceived and categorised as agency by both the actors themselves and external powers. In the security arena African states are therefore important and complex actors to consider when seeking to understand how the agency of African state elites may be exercised, constrained, captured, portrayed and given meaning by actors within the international system.

State elites do generally possess a larger repertoire of agency than other African actors. As such a division between state and non-state actors is necessary when analysing African agency. In the case of African states' foreign and security policy elites, their potential for transformative agency—agency that changes the boundaries of 'what can be done'—is not hypothetical: it can be seen in processes such as the creation and development of the AU. But what about groups and individuals lower down the ladder of politics and power in African societies? Considering that agency is 'bound up with power, politics and the social hierarchies they produce',³⁹ to what extent can poor and marginalised groups and individuals be said to exercise agency in a meaningful way?

Discussions of African agency cannot leave the question of *whose agency* unanswered. In International Relations terms, this can be framed as a question of levels of analysis. The articles in this special issue encompass perspectives ranging from the international to the individual level. Three of the articles (by Fisher, Mickler and Tiekou) focus on the state level (foreign and security policy, including conflict mediation strategies), coupled with the regional or international level of relations between states. This is the traditional focus of IR literature on African agency: the extent to which African political elites are actors on the world stage, or passive observers in—or even missing from—the political fora in which decisions affecting their countries are being made.

Assumptions are generally more modest and restrictive when studying the possibilities of, and constraints on, agency in the case of groups and individuals who occupy the lower rungs of social hierarchies and who have few if any access points to political power structures—be they local or national ones. Three of the articles in this special issue are concerned with the severe limitations of agency experienced by such groups. Perera focuses on the Rwandan Hutu militia in DR Congo, the FDLR. She argues that the way in which FDLR 'refugee warriors' are marginalised and

securitised contributes to the groups' construction and maintenance of a victimhood identity, and reinforces its limited and destructive repertoire of violence and coercion in its interactions with local host communities and Congolese and Rwandan authorities.

Thomson and Bøås in their contributions both focus on groups at a much looser level of organisation. They focus on the 'survival agency' of some of the poorest, most vulnerable and marginalised of African actors, such as young unmarried Somali refugee women navigating the dangers of Nairobi, former child soldiers in Liberia, young diamond miners in Sierra Leone and youth from across West Africa who hazard the crossing of the Sahara and the Mediterranean in a bid to reach Europe, a mythical paradise of social, not just geographical, mobility.

Sideways mobility and survival agency

De Bruijn, van Dijk and Gewald argue that '[n]o easy assumption can be made about what agency is or about whose hands it is vested in. This can only be demonstrated through detailed empirical research and can never be assumed or taken for granted'.⁴⁰ The articles that make up this special issue are testament to this. There are significant differences in the kinds, and effects, of agency exercised by the different actors discussed, as well as in the analytical tools and methodological approaches which are employed to examine agency of actors at these different levels. Ethnographic methods are prevalent in the studies of individual agency, seeking to understand how individuals in highly constrained circumstances perceive and exercise their agency in relation to the worlds they inhabit, and to consider the meanings they ascribe to their actions, which may be radically different to those posited by outsiders.

In the three studies of individuals and marginalised groups presented here, focused on urban refugee women in Kenya, youth groups in Liberia, Sierra Leone and northern Mali, and Rwandan 'warrior refugees' in North Kivu, the authors challenge assumptions about agency which are often attached to labels associated with those they research. Ethnography, in this regard, is an ideal approach when combined with an analytical focus on agency. It encourages a focus on how individuals make sense of their circumstances and make decisions affecting their security, including their exposure to risk of immediate and future physical harm as well as human security concerns.

These studies bring a new perspective by moving away from a view of Somali refugee women as powerless victims in Nairobi, or underemployed Sierra Leonean youth and Rwandan refugees in Congo as only potential or actual security threats. The studies, to different degrees, do consider how others have depicted, and often securitised, these groups and the ways this affects their options. However, despite, and in the case of the FDLR perhaps because of, powerful discourses at the international level and structural factors which work to exclude and marginalise these groups at the local level, the authors show how greater room for manoeuvre and the exercise of a degree of control over personal circumstances can be achieved—even in the face of extreme constraints of poverty, exclusion and marginalisation.

Bøås and Thomson's studies do, however, pose a challenge to this rather optimistic account of agency as, at least potential, empowerment for the marginalised and weak. Both studies describe agency that is primarily geared towards survival, not transformation. In Thomson's detailed depiction of the lives of young Somali refugee women, she argues that these women's silence and efforts to make themselves invisible should be considered a form of agency. This suggestion that inaction and silence should be considered an active choice, equal to that of speaking or acting out, is not new. However, when considering how agency is found and exercised by individuals in highly constrained circumstances, particularly where the choice of silence, or making the dangerous journey from a home community to a mythical 'better life' in the North, is contrasted with the very real possibility of a life limited by poverty, structural—and direct physical—violence, there remains a question as to whether such choices should be considered a demonstration of agency at all.

Bøås recounts the many ingenious ways in which West African youth from the least auspicious of backgrounds dream and plan for a future of upward mobility, economic success and social recognition, whether by attaching themselves to 'big men', searching for the big diamond, or risking their lives crossing deserts and oceans (if they get that far) to make it big in the developed world. But despite this ingenuity, and the desperation with which such plans are acted on, such agency is seldom transformative. For the vast majority the mobility is sideways, not upwards: the plans and dreams may sustain survival but not prosperity.

In conclusion, focusing the analytical lens on agency yields illuminating insights into the complexities of sub-Saharan Africa's evolving security landscape. On the one hand, the articles making up this special issue reinforce the picture of an African foreign and

security policy elite gaining in confidence, experience, power and autonomy, at least in issue areas relating to the continent's conflicts and security challenges. 'African solutions for Africa's problems' has certainly become a somewhat tired slogan and one which downplays the African security architecture's many weaknesses, including its continued reliance on external funding. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, and reflecting its value for state security and foreign policy elites, the slogan is perhaps more of a reality than most commentators had expected at the launch of the African Union in 2002.

At the level of individual agency the conclusions are more sobering. The articles collected here provide little evidence that increased assertiveness among state elites is somehow 'trickling down' to the many African citizens whose energy, effort and talents remain channelled into survival agency by the seemingly insurmountable structures that continue to hem in their lives and their options.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Will Brown and Sophie Harman for organising an ESRC-funded seminar series on African Agency in International Politics, at which some of the papers included in this collection were first presented. They are also grateful to the BISA Africa and International Studies Working Group and the Universities of Kent and Birmingham for supporting the two security themed seminars in the series, and to the seminar presenters and audience members for their input and feedback.

Endnotes

1. Giddens, *Constitution of Society*.
2. Brown, 'A Question of Agency', 1890.
3. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.
4. Vines, 'A Decade of the APSA'; Straus, 'Wars do End!'; Welz, 'The African Union Beyond Africa'.
5. Klingebiel, 'Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture'.
6. The weaknesses of APSA's institutions are recognised by both AU actors and donors. In 2010, the former commander of the Botswana Defence Force, L.M. Fisher, led an AU evaluation team that noted, among other things, the need to improve staffing levels, the weak coordination between APSA's many components, and that 'the operationalization of the APSA has been largely dependent on partner support'. Fisher et al., 'Moving Africa Forward'. Similar views were presented in an EU-commissioned report on European funding of APSA. See Poulton et al., *Part 1 of the African Peace Facility Evaluation*, 17.
7. Beswick, 'Understanding and Mitigating Risk'. See also Fisher in this volume.
8. Feldman, 'Problems Plaguering'. See also Mickler and Fisher in this volume.
9. Straus, 'Wars do End!'
10. Ibid., 181.
11. See Perera in this volume on the FDLR
12. See Thomson in this volume and Hammerstad, 'Securitisation from Below'.

13. Paris, 'Human Security'.
 14. Suhrke, 'A Stalled Initiative'.
 15. Fisher et al., 'Moving Africa Forward', 9.
 16. Abrahamsen, 'A Breeding Ground for Terrorists?'.
 17. World Bank, *World Development Report 2011*.
 18. See Bøås in this volume.
 19. Beswick and Marquette, 'State-Building, Security & Development'; DfID, 'Building the State'.
 20. de Bruijn et al., 'Social and Historical Trajectories', 9.
 21. Brown, 'A Question of Agency', 1904.
 22. See also Brown and Harman, 'African Agency in International Politics'.
 23. Hurt, 'African Agency', 53.
 24. Brown, 'A Question of Agency', 1890.
 25. Dokken, *African Security Politics*; Engel and Porto, 'Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture'.
 26. Brown, 'A Question of Agency', 1891; Zondi, 'Common Positions'.
 27. Beswick, 'From Weak State to Savvy International Player?'; Fisher, 'Managing Donor Perceptions'.
 28. Bayart, *State in Africa*, 25–26.
 29. Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars*; Abrahamsen, 'A Breeding Ground for Terrorists?'.
 30. Brown, 'A Question of Agency', 1903.
 31. Ibid., 1900.
 32. Vines, 'A Decade of the APSA'.
 33. Ibid., 89–90.
 34. Brown, 'A Question of Agency', 1895.
 35. Ibid., 1898.
 36. Williams, 'State Agency and State Formation'.
 37. Ibid.
 38. See Williams, 'State Agency and State Formation'; Brown, 'A Question of Agency'.
 39. de Bruijn et al., 'Social and Historical Trajectories', 5.
 40. Ibid., 6.
- Lessons of Contemporary Rwanda'. *African Affairs* forthcoming (Accepted August 2013).
- Beswick, D. and H. Marquette, 2011. 'State-Building, Security & Development: State-Building as a New Development Paradigm?'. *Third World Quarterly* 32(10), 1703–1714.
- Brown, W., 2012. 'A Question of Agency: Africa in International Politics'. *Third World Quarterly* 33(12), 1889–1908.
- Brown, W. and S. Harman, 2013. 'African Agency in International Politics'. In *African Agency in International Politics*, eds. W. Brown and S. Harman. Routledge, Oxon, 1–15.
- de Bruijn, M., R. van Dijk and J-B Gewald, 2007. 'Social and Historical Trajectories of Agency in Africa'. In *African Alternatives*, eds. P. Chabal, U. Engel and L. de Haan. Brill, Leiden, 9–20.
- Department for International Development (DfID), 2009. 'Building the State and Securing the Peace'. Emerging Policy Paper. DfID, London.
- Dokken, K., 2008. *African Security Politics Redefined*. Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire.
- Duffield, M., 2001. *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. Zed Books, London.
- Engel, U. and J.G. Porto, 2010. 'Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture: An Introduction'. In *Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture: Promoting Norms, Institutionalising Solutions*, eds. U. Engel and J.G. Porto. Ashgate, London, 1–12.
- Feldman, R., 2008. 'Problems Plaguing the African Union Peacekeeping Forces'. *Defense & Security Analysis* 24(3), 267–279.
- Fisher, J., 2012. 'Managing Donor Perceptions: Contextualizing Uganda's 2007 Intervention in Somalia'. *African Affairs* 111(444), 404–423.
- Fisher, L.M., A.S. Bah, A. Mniema, H.N. Okome, M. Tamba, J. Frederiksen, A. Abdelaziz and R. Reeve, 2010. 'Moving Africa Forward: African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) 2010 Assessment Study'. AU Peace and Security Department, Addis Ababa.
- Giddens, A., 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Hammerstad, A., 2012. 'Securitisation from Below: The Relationship between Immigration and Foreign Policy in South Africa's Approach to the Zimbabwe Crisis'. *Conflict, Security & Development* 12(1), 1–30.
- Hurt, S., 2013. 'African Agency in World Trade Undermined?'. In *African Agency in International Politics*, eds. W. Brown and S. Harman. Routledge, Oxon, 49–64.

References

- Abrahamsen, R., 2004. 'A Breeding Ground for Terrorists? Africa and Britain's "War on Terrorism"'. *Review of African Political Economy* 31(102), 677–684.
- Bayart, J-F., 1993. *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. Longman, London.
- Beswick, D., 2013. 'From Weak State to Savvy International Player? Rwanda's Multi-Level Strategy for Maximising Agency'. In *African Agency in International Politics*, eds. W. Brown and S. Harman. Routledge, Oxon, 158–174.
- Beswick, D., 2014. 'Understanding and Mitigating Risk in African National Military Capacity-Building: The

- Kaldor, M., 2006. *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*. 2nd ed. Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Klingebiel, S., 2004. 'Africa's New Peace and Security Architecture: Converging the Roles of External Actors and African Interests'. *African Security Review* 14(2), 35–44.
- Paris, R., 2001. 'Human Security: Paradigm Shift or Hot Air?'. *International Security* 26(2), 87–102.
- Poulton, R., E. Trillo and L. Kukkuk, 2011. *Part 1 of the African Peace Facility Evaluation: Reviewing the Procedures of the APF and Possibilities of Alternative Future Sources of Funding: Final Report*. The European Union's EDF Programme. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/acp/regional-cooperation/peace/documents/evaluation_apf_i_final_report_en.pdf [Accessed 15 October 2013].
- Straus, S., 2012. 'Wars do End! Changing Patterns of Political Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa'. *African Affairs* 111(443), 179–201.
- Suhrke, A., 2004. 'A Stalled Initiative'. *Security Dialogue* 35(3), 365.
- Vines, A., 2013. 'A Decade of the African Peace and Security Architecture'. *International Affairs* 89(1), 89–109.
- Welz, M., 2013. 'The African Union Beyond Africa: Explaining the Limited Impact of Africa's Continental Organization on Global Governance'. *Global Governance* 19(3), 425–441.
- Williams, D., 2013. 'State Agency and State Formation in Africa'. In *African Agency in International Politics*, eds. W. Brown and S. Harman. Routledge, Oxon, 129–142.
- World Bank, 2011. *World Development Report 2011, Overview: Conflict Security and Development*. World Bank, Washington, DC.
- Zondi, S., 2013. 'Common Positions as African Agency in International Negotiations: An Appraisal'. In *African Agency in International Politics*, eds. W. Brown and S. Harman. Routledge, Oxon, 19–33.