African Agency: Transnational Security Challenges. Migration, Health and Climate Change

Executive Summary

African Agency: Transnational Security Challenges. Migration, Health and Climate Change was a one day seminar held at University of Kent as part of the British International Studies Association (BISA) Africa and International Studies working group’s seminar series on African Agency in International Politics. The seminar was sponsored by BISA, University of Kent, the ESRC and its Global Uncertainties Fellowship Programme.

The aim of this seminar was to reflect on the role for African Agency in transnational security challenges, in particular health, migration and climate change. This discussion is part of a larger debate on the widening security agenda from traditional to new security risks. Rather than focus on how such problems pose threats to the West, the aim of this seminar was to focus on sub-Saharan Africa, where these transnational challenges are more directly felt. The main questions posed to the seminar’s participants were therefore: How do African actors themselves deal with the threats caused by diseases such as HIV/AIDS; environmental stress caused by climate change; and migration flows and displacement within the continent? To what extent have outside actors determined African agendas in these areas? What does ‘African agency’ look like, how is it facilitated and to what extent does the enhancement of African agency lead to African countries being better able to deal with these challenges? In addition to these questions about agency, the seminar participants also questioned the degree to which migration/displacement, climate change and health should be viewed as security challenges at all, and whether viewing them through a security prism may not lead to overly simplified and bellicose responses.

This summary provides an overview of the key findings arising from the day’s discussion, followed by a more detailed summary of the contributions from the presenters in each session.

For further information on the African Agency series, see page 8 of this summary.
Summary

The extent and scales of African Agency

- ‘African agency’ needs to be understood in terms of ‘the agencies of African political actors’ at multiple levels rather than as one homogenous entity. In many fields, such as international negotiations and policy formation, governments dominate to the exclusion of civil society actors. However, a proper understanding of all three issues – migration, health and climate – requires a more fine-grained analysis of agency.

- There is a need to appreciate the interconnections between agency at different scales. For example in health, there is a need for the practices of international donors to be attuned to the agency of community-level actors and the constraints on this created by existing social structures, in particular gender relations.

- Potential for the enhancement of political agency at local levels is limited by the disempowerment of non-state actors. For example, Zimbabwean migrants are excluded from participation in efforts to resolve the crisis in Zimbabwe due to the South African government’s silence on this issue.

- At the international level there is considerable potential for an increased voice for Africa, for example through South Africa’s hosting of the climate change negotiations. Yet doubts remain whether South Africa can lead a common African agenda.

Sources and limitations of African agency:

- External and structural factors play an important role in constraining political agency. For example, South Africa immigration policy is constrained by its foreign policy and regional and bilateral relations; civil society actors are limited because they have to operate within fixed western models and in the case of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes; and local communities do not get sufficient opportunity to speak and act as citizens.

- Securitization of all three issues has both positive and negative effects on African agency. Securitization may trigger extreme reactions rather than constructive political debate; it frames international action in a way that overlooks the complexities of issues and disempowers local communities; and it may increase surveillance and a larger role for the military. However, securitization may trigger more awareness and thereby funding and it may provide greater political opportunities for African governments in international arenas.

Implications for future policy and research

- The need to consider the connections and interactions of agency on different scales.

- The need to analyse the impact of structure and how agency can change societal structures.

- The impact of securitization on African political agency and the possibilities of alternative framing of issues to raise awareness and funding without making a link to security?

- The need to assess how civil society actors can become empowered.
• Details of presentations

HIV/AIDS, Gender and International (In)Security: Reflections on Burundi  Hakan Seckinelgin (London School of Economic)

Much framing of HIV/AIDS has presented the disease as a security threat which can create instability. As a result, in some instances interventions can be focused on security issues and HIV/AIDS work directed at combatants and ex-combatants. However, it is important to address the issue in a more nuanced way. Not only should policy and interventions focus more on the re-integration and rebuilding of communities but HIV/AIDS programmes need to be focused on less powerful groups. If we are concerned about HIV/AIDS then we should deal with the issue outside the international security discourse. It is important to understand HIV vulnerabilities during and after the conflict in the light of broader societal structures, in particular gender norms and relations. There is great potential agency of local communities in dealing with the risk of HIV in Burundi and this is not sufficiently used and stimulated by the international community in the process of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). The Burundi DDR process only focused on the ex-combatants rather than on communities as a whole—thereby failing to create a constructive reintegration processes and ignoring structural problems like gender issues. This left many people – and particularly women – marginalized. Seckinelgin further observed from interviews he conducted with ex-combatants in Burundi that people had an overwhelming need to talk and that international actors often had an informal counselor function in addition to the formal aid programme they were administering. Each policy intervention should take this into account and more actively involve local communities and listen to their needs and concerns.

The following questions were raised in response to Hakan Seckinelgin’s presentation:

- Does securitization negatively affect the potential of local agency and does it adequately reflect the concerns of the affected communities?
- How can women be involved in DDR processes in a way that prevents them from becoming even more stigmatized?
- How can DDR processes take wider societal issues better into account? What policies and practices could be set in place which involve local agency?
- Are there different kinds of intervention practices between local, national and regional actors?
- To what extent is HIV/AIDS considered to be a priority by African states?

Virus Alert: Inciting ‘African Agency’ through the Securitization of AIDS  Stefan Elbe (University of Sussex), presented by Hakan Seckinelgin (London School of Economic)
In Stefan Elbe’s absence, Hakan Seckinelgin provided a brief analysis of Elbe’s work. In his book, *Virus Alert: Inciting ‘African Agency’ through the Securitization of AIDS*, Elbe reflects on the securitization of AIDS. He examines how the issue has become securitized, including discussions at the UN Security Council, and how this affects policy and international relations. One of main conclusions is that securitization took place because it served to increase funding for HIV programmes. Elbe suggests that securitization creates an opportunity for African agency, by opening up space for interventions by African politicians at high-level meetings once AIDS became an important issue on the international security agenda. However, it is not clear whether this outweighs the negative consequences of securitization.

The following questions were raised in response to Seckinelgin’s brief presentation of Elbe’s work:

- Is securitization truly providing opportunities for agency? One could also argue that the international security debate it is a top-down process which leaves local African agency powerless.
- To what extent can a parallel be made between the securitization of AIDS, migration and climate change? Does it trigger similar opportunities and limitations? Participants agreed there were many similarities between the way the three challenges have been transformed into security issues in much public discourse.
- How do securitizing actors deal with weak evidence on links between issues like AIDS or climate change and conflict? How do securitization narratives persist, despite such weak evidence? To what extent is securitization a political and a discursive act drawing on emotional images?

*Becoming and Unbecoming Refugee: The case of the Warrior Refugee in the Kivus*  
Suda Perera (University of Kent)

Becoming refers to the process by which a person becomes defined in the international system as a refugee. ‘Unbecoming’ a refugee refers to the process by which refugee status is revoked including action by refugees that is considered ‘unbecoming’. Perera analyzes these processes in the situation of warrior refugees situated in Kivus, in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Those that take part in the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) were for instance initially considered to be refugees when they fled Rwanda and became situated in UNHCR camps. However, this status has been revoked, as these refugees were increasingly seen as criminals rather than as passive victims. This conceptualization of an active agent and a criminal does not fit within the traditional refugee definition. As a result, these people, which Perera refers to as warrior refugees,
face a difficult situation. They are neither protected by the international community, nor are they fully accepted by their Congolese hosts who continue to see them as refugees and aliens rather than as political agents or citizens. Rwanda also continues to see them as a threat to its national security. Now the question arises; how can the FDLR develop agency to overcome its non-refugee/non-citizen status? Here, Perera refers to the pattern whereby the some of FDLR try to move from a warrior refugee status to being a political agent, along similar lines followed in an earlier period by the Banyamulenge refugee group. In this regard, she refers to self-similar behavior repeating itself over time. This has been a difficult path for the FDLR. Yet, in order to prevent and overcome violence, ways to facilitate FDLR access to political agency should be explored.

The following questions were raised in response to Suda Perera’s presentation:

- To what extent is the potential of African agency dependent on external factors? For instance, a shift from a warrior refugee status to citizen depends on support by the Rwandan government which the Banumalenge received but the FDLR do not.
- To what extent does FDLR’s level of integration within the community differ depending on scale: is there a difference between integration as citizens within the DRC compared to integration within the Kivus?
- What is the relation between the Maï Maï and the FDLR?
- Is the construction of the concept warrior refugee not just another refugee category that increases the complexity of the international refugee regime?

**Whose Agency? Zimbabwean immigration and the South African Response.** Anne Hammerstad (University of Kent)

Hammerstad reviews the impact of the mass influx of Zimbabweans into South Africa. One of the most interesting findings is that securitization and active, yet violent, response particularly came from below, namely from the townships and informal settlements, while at the governmental level one could trace a response of neglect. This contrasts with the securitization literature which focuses on action by elite actors, and in many cases African agency seems to come from a governmental level. The strategy of neglect and silence adopted by the South African government towards Zimbabwean migrants had two negative consequences. First, it allowed securitization and activism from below to take a non-democratic and violent turn by denying constructive action at grassroots level. Second, it refused to acknowledge the political dimension of the Zimbabwean Diaspora, which denied them a role in any form of political negotiations, thereby allowing a democratic deficit to continue in South Africa’s mediation efforts to resolve the Zimbabwe crisis.
The following questions were raised in response to Hammerstad’s presentation:

- Why has South Africa adopted this strategy of silence and neglect? What did it try to achieve, in terms of regional and international policy aims?
- To what extent should we identify the connection of different scales of agency? For instance, the actions by South Africa on a governmental level depends on its position in the region while non-violent grassroots level agency depends on more active recognition of the problem by the South African government.
- Why has the African Union (and OAU) been so active in addressing the tensions between migration and security (for instance dating back to the 1969 Convention on Refugee Problems in Africa)?
- Does the South African government try to de-securitize the issue of Zimbabwean immigration and are migrants being used as a convenient scapegoat for South African governmental failures over the economy and service delivery?

Urban and Rural Vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa. Clionadh Raleigh (Trinity College Dublin)

Within the environmental security literature, there is a strong focus on rural vulnerability to climate change. It is assumed that the vulnerable will use violence to vie for control over scarce ecological resources. Yet, this hypothesis is based on the false assumption that the most vulnerable are the rural population and that the most vulnerable are also the perpetrators of violence; the evidence connecting environmental stress and violence is very weak; and the thesis completely denies any agency on the part of African actors – no coping mechanisms or alternative reactions to environmental stress are considered. Furthermore, on average urban dwellers run a higher risk of political violence as opposed to rural dwellers and it is in any case very difficult to separate rural and urban populations, such is the extent of return migration between the two. One of the main coping mechanisms of rural populations to deal with environmental changes is migration into urban areas. In urban areas, migrants face risks that are ecological (and hence an indirect link to climate change) but also economic and political and these are higher risks than those experienced in rural areas.

The following questions were raised in response to Raleigh’s presentation:

- Is this rural-urbanization process which relates to issues of environmental security something particular for Africa, or is this a world-wide trend?
- Does your analysis represent an alternative narrative to securitization? How could this feed into international negotiations?
What is the main driving force for a rural dweller to migrate into an urban area, even though poverty rates are higher?

Towards the Durban climate change Summit: South Africa’s government as an agent of change in Africa. Romy Chevallier (South African Institute of International Affairs)

South Africa has been selected to chair and host the Durban Climate Change Summit in December 2011. The Africa Group consists of 53 countries representing 28% of the UN membership within UNFCCC so it can use this large number to its advantage. However, the challenge remains whether Africa can present unite behind one position, or whether the countries will rather pursue individual or sub-group strategies. Different countries face different climate-change related problems and have diverse emissions reputations, therefore, it will be difficult for South Africa lead a common position. Moreover, South Africa has multiple goals to pursue. As host it seeks to run a successful summit, learning lessons from the failure at Copenhagen and the successes of Cancun. South Africa favours maintaining the ‘twin track’ approach including agreeing a legally binding follow-up the Kyoto Protocol but as the continent’s highest emitter it has a tough task meeting emissions reductions targets. Finally, it has to pay due regard to regional sensibilities as the leading African country. Indeed, South Africa will use this platform both to raise an African voice and profile and also its own position within the regional and international arena as well as pursuing its aims as a member of the BASIC groups of countries.

The following questions were raised in response to Chevallier’s presentation:

- Does South Africa have the capacity to create and lead a common African Agenda?
- Would there be an African alternative to South Africa’s lead role in the next UNFCCC COP?
- How will South Africa’s domestic energy crisis impact on its authority and credibility within UNFCCC negotiations?
- To what extent is climate change considered to be a priority in South Africa and in other African countries and if it is not a priority how can South Africa effectively lead the Durban summit?
- To what extent do local NGOs have a role in the negotiations?
About the ESRC-BISA Seminar Series: African Agency in International Politics

For further information and access to the full papers featured in this seminar, please visit http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/bisa-africa/african-agency/

_African Agency: Transnational Security Challenges. Migration, Health and Climate Change_ was the third of a series of seminars on African Agency. The first two seminars in the series were:

- **Emerging agents of change? Africa in international negotiations** Chatham House, London February 3rd 2011
- **Peace, Conflict and Intervention** University of Birmingham 7th April 2011

The next two seminars in the series are:

- **African Agency: Implications for International Relations Theory** City University 14th September 2011
- **Agency and Southern Africa** University of Stellenbosch November 2011

If you are interested in attending these seminars please contact Sophie Harman sophie.harman@city.ac.uk or Will Brown w.brown@open.ac.uk