

Abstract

This study aimed to provide more general knowledge about the mechanisms which link natural resources with civil war outbreaks. The theoretical point of departure was the feasibility hypothesis of Collier et al. (2009) in which the authors state that the paramount interest of researchers of civil wars should be directed at the structural conditions within a country. One of their assertions pertained to the role of natural resources. Those provide a potential revenue source for insurgents to finance their rebellion. Hence, the higher the dependence of a state on natural resource exports, the higher should be the probability of civil war outbreak. However, this account was heavily criticized by other researchers. Some claimed that the conceptualization of the Primary Commodity Exports (PCE) variable does not cover relevant natural resources (Fearon 2005), others pointed at the problem of reversed causality and endogeneity (Gleditsch 1998) and also others stressed to differentiate between different natural resources according to their proneness to be looted by rebels (Ross 2003). In order to address these problems, a new variable was conceptualized. The “extraction feasibility” variable measures the degree of extractability of a particular resource. It is composed of two notions, namely “lootability” and “obstructability”. The easier it is to loot a particular natural resource and the more difficult it is to obstruct the extraction process, the higher risks for civil war were expected. Based upon eight different so-called “conflict” resources, their values were calculated and assigned to their respective countries. Sub-Saharan Africa was chosen as a “most-likely” sample in order to (dis)confirm the validity of the newly introduced variable. Using the dataset of Collier et al. (2009) and including the “extraction feasibility” variable led to highly insignificant results. It appears that the mere presence of extractable resources does not per se increase the likelihood of civil war. Two factors were decisive for the insignificant result. First, there are a bulk of countries which possess easily extractable resources, but have not experienced civil wars. Second, it appears that even resources difficult to extract do not lower the amount of civil war incidents. This can be due to following reasons. First, natural resources have an influence on civil war which is different than postulated by proponents of the feasibility hypothesis. Second, the presence of natural resources does not per se determine higher chances of conflict. Intervening variables such as weak institutions might be a better predictor of civil war outbreak. Third, it is also possible that natural resources simply provide too less revenues for rebels to sustain or initiate a large scale civil war. The prominence of Sierra Leone and Angola might have created a selection bias.