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RESEARCH REPORT

Peacemaking, Precarity, and Accumulation by Dispossession in the Horn of Africa

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Introduction

Within the Horn of Africa (HoA), there is a large body of literature on the ways in which war renders people precarious by displacing them, and by depriving them of their livelihoods, shelter, and food. Existing conditions of precarity also shape war, the tactics of elites, and the strategies adopted by people for their survival. With notable exceptions (see for instance, de Waal & Boswell, 2020), far less explicit attention has been paid to the ways in which precarity is related to peace processes and agreements. This is puzzling, because across conflicts-affected countries in the HoA, war and peace are not distinct categories. To borrow the words of Marielle Debos writing on Chad, these countries exist in a state of 'inter-war' even when 'there is no direct fighting between rebel and governmental forces' (Debos, 2016). It is not that one war automatically follows another, or that there is a succession of conflicts in these countries (though there well may be) – instead, war is always emergent.

de Waal (2016) describes these conflicts as 'Hobbesian', a state of generalized insecurity in which all belligerents may and often do engage in hostilities with each other. 'These conflicts have multiple armed actors that coalesce, fragment and shift alliances, and typically do not have a clear ending. They are characterized by multiple tactical deals, and hence an impression of active peacemaking. But instead of victory, defeat, peace agreement or stalemate there is a situation of 'no war, no peace' (de Waal et al., 2023). Hobbesian conflicts are characteristic of 'political markets' (PMs) – subaltern political and economic systems where transactional politics trump institutions and the rule of law (de Waal, 2015; Spatz et al., 2021). In political markets, peace agreements and peace processes often do not lead to an objectively lower level of violence and an improvement in 'everyday indicators' of peace. Instead, peace agreements/processes legitimize certain forms of violence, and certain armed actors, create the conditions for an alliance between former belligerents, bring erstwhile rebels into government, and grant external legitimacy to a deal agreed between warring parties (de Waal et al., 2023). In other words, peace deals in PMs reorganize the conduct of politics rather than bringing an institutionalized peace. If the violence of war contributes to precarity, and peace agreements transform and reorganize violence – it follows that precarity is reconfigured but not ended by peace agreements and processes.

The Marxist geographer David Harvey argued that the fundamental problem of capitalism was 'overaccumulation' – the lack of opportunities for profitable investment, which could be caused by stagnant effective demand (Harvey, 2003, p. 139). However, capitalist accumulation can continue in these conditions if the costs of inputs (land, raw materials, intermediate inputs, labour power) continue to decline, or through the opening up of new markets. Harvey called this 'accumulation by dispossession' – the reduction of input costs through methods such as commodification and privatization of land, the forceful expulsion of populations from that land (what some call 'accumulation-by displacement' (Araghi, 2009)), and the forceful appropriation of assets (including natural resources). Critical to this constant accumulation is state power, which facilitates these processes through violence and notions of legality. Scholars have long argued that war-making is integral to the processes of capitalist accumulation in the HoA. This exploratory paper sketches some of the relationships between peace processes and precarity and argues that the process of peacemaking is equally important.

The paper focuses on the following countries: Ethiopia, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan, each of which has experienced conflict in the recent past. With the exception of Ethiopia, they can all be described as established political markets, and there is a strong case to argue that civil war has transformed Ethiopia's political system and made it more transactional (Berhe & Gebresilassie, 2021; de Waal, 2018; Sarkar & de Waal, 2023). The political economies of each of these countries are predatory and dominated by elites, albeit to different degrees. Again, Ethiopia stands apart, and while its political economy has been dominated by elites, it has not been openly predatory in the past. That too, may be changing.

In each of these contexts, people have to encounter, adapt to, make sensible, and circumvent conflict as well as these predatory political economies. They try to impose some measure of order and stability on their lives, even in the context of acute poverty and various forms of economic, social, or political instability and crises. (Adebanwi, 2017, p. 5). As they do so, they respond to elite strategies for domination of the political economy. The politics of life amidst precarity, and the political economy shape each other through a dialectical process (Fassin, 2009), which is organized by war and peace.

This paper has five sections. The first traces the meaning of the term precarity – a word which is often used in academic literature, but rarely defined. The second briefly examines precarity in the labour markets in the four countries considered in this paper. The third section examines the manner in which the texts of peace agreements deal with (or ignore) precarity and broader questions of exploitative political economies in these countries. The fourth section outlines some of the ways in which peace processes shape and are shaped by precarity. The final section concludes with some policy implications.

This paper is far from conclusive: it is intended to be an open-ended exploration of ideas, and to provide the basis for future discussions and debates among policymakers – especially those working on peace processes across the region.

Precarity in the Horn of Africa

Defining precarity: As condition, category, and experience

The term 'precarity' has proliferated in social sciences in recent years, but it is used to refer to very different concepts and ideas, and appears to have become a synonym for a generalized sense of vulnerability (Millar, 2017). As a result, one can find studies of precarious labour (Kalleberg, 2009), precarious migrants (Banki, 2016), precarious youth (Means, 2017), the precarious old (Allison, 2014), precarious debtors (Ross, 2013), the precariously housed (Dwyer & Phillips Lassus, 2015), precarious academics (Thorkelson, 2016), and even precarious highways (Stewart, 2012), and nuclear reactors (Allison, 2014). This deprives the term of much of its analytical bite. Instead, it may be useful to think of the term as having three 'ideal type' uses: to indicate the emergence of a particular form of non-stable work in the industrialized west, a process resulting in class formation, and in an ontological sense (Millar, 2017). In other words, the term precarity can be used to denote a condition, a category, or an experience.

In labour studies, the popularity of the term seems to mark the transition from a period when capital was striving to ensure that it could extract surplus value from a large and growing – and potentially dangerous – workforce, to a situation in which more and more workers have become unnecessary or disposable (F. Cooper, 2017). Used in this sense, the word precarity then marks the transition from a normative vision of waged employment for all with attendant social security benefits, to a world of uncertain, vulnerable employment, with insecure jobs (Bourdieu, 1998; Ferguson & Li, 2018).

This use of the term, however, has been criticized as being ahistorical and Eurocentric. As many scholars have pointed out, precarity is an inherent characteristic of capitalist labour markets rather than of a particular phase of economic history (F. Cooper, 2017; Harvey, 2003). Within Africa, scholars note that labour precarity is a function of the deeply unequal ways in which African economies have been integrated into the global economic system – rather than a recent crisis or a turning point in the functioning of these economies (F. Cooper, 2017; Guyer, 2016). This is not to say that the nature of emergencies has remained unchanged. As Mark Duffield has pointed out, starting from the 1980s – the expression complex emergency became popular in academic and policy literature to describe major emerging humanitarian crises of a multi-causal nature which required a system-wide response in many African countries (Duffield, 1994).

These protracted crises, which Duffield described as 'permanent emergencies', were essentially political – 'resulting from sectarian or predatory indigenous responses to socioeconomic stress and marginalization.' The state of permanent emergency challenged the basic assumptions underpinning the broader developmental endeavour. They illustrated that 'development' was not going to inevitably lead large numbers of people from poverty and vulnerability to security and well-being.

A second line of critique comes from those advocating for worker's rights, who argue that the term 'precarity' does not mesh well with the statistical categories used to enumerate workers (this also becomes clearer in the section that follows). As a result, they argue that the term 'informal employment' captures the working conditions of these workers more accurately.[1] Notwithstanding this critique, and as noted below – there a crisis of employment in each of the countries that we are interested in, and people (especially youth) tend to be systematically excluded from the labour market. This too should be understood as a form of precarity. As Marxists scholars of labour have long argued, for a capitalist economy to function, its labour force must be maintained; that is, workers must receive a historically determined minimal day-to-day subsistence wage. Where the subsistence wage is less than a living wage, the process of social reproduction of the labour force has to be subsidized either by emergency relief, state welfare, or (most often) over-employment in informal jobs, including by children or by adults at the expense of essential tasks of social reproduction (Burawoy, 1976; Wolpe, 1972).

The second meaning of the term precarity is to denote a socio-economic class – the precariat, rather than a labour condition (Standing, 2011). Used in this sense, precarity is an attribute of a class defined by the absence of labour security. Waged-work-for-all was supposed to (and sometimes did) foster forms of 'modern' social membership. The consequence of its disappearance is a crisis (whether real or imagined) of social membership (Muehlebach, 2011). On this reading, the precariat comprises heterogeneous groups of people ranging from migrants to self-employed textile workers to youth working part-time jobs. Standing (2011) argues that the precariat is a 'dangerous' class – characterized by deep anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation. As in the first sense of the term, this use of the word precarity is ahistorical and Eurocentric.

In most parts of the world, most people never had these labour securities, and it was only in some that they could even aspire to a form of modernity predicated on waged work. Social membership was constructed based on other logics: family, caste, race, ethnicity, tribe, etc. Further, treating the extremely heterogenous group of informal workers as the precariat also has the effect of collapsing very disparate categories into a monolithic mass. Consultants working for the United Nations are lumped into the same category as daily wage workers.

The third sense in which the term precarity is used is to denote an ontological condition – the feeling of being precarious. This comes closest to the dictionary meaning of the term, which refers to (a) a right which is 'held or enjoyed by the favour of and at the pleasure of another person; vulnerable to the will or decision of others' or (b) the state of being 'dependent on chance or circumstance; uncertain; liable to fail; exposed to risk, hazardous; insecure, unstable'.[2] Butler (2015, p. 33) defines precarity as a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social economic networks of support more than others and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death'. In the same vein, Anna Tsing understands 'precarity' as 'life without the promise of stability' (Tsing, 2015, p. 2).

Used in this third sense, the term precarity seems to encompass much more than the specific labour conditions or class formations alluded to above, but also captures something fundamental about contemporary life in many parts of Africa, and indeed, the developing world. Contemporary life for many is both 'objectively risky and uncertain', and 'uncertainty has become a dominant trope… in the subjective experience of life in contemporary African societies' (E. Cooper & Pratten, 2015). If, as some argue, people are increasingly having to weave their existence around 'incoherence, uncertainty, and instability', in a context in which uncertainty 'is not always and exclusively a problem to be faced and solved', then the concept of precarity retains salience, even if it is difficult to define.[3]

This paper uses the expression precarity to refer to the widespread uncertainty and instability experienced by people as it becomes harder for them to earn a livelihood and sustain themselves. What is of particular interest to this paper, is the relationship between existential precarity and the long-term structural crises and predatory political economies which characterize the countries considered in this paper.[4] This is best illustrated with an example. In Nigeria, the Islamist Boko Haram and the modernist Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) appear to be radically different organizations. Yet, both their roots can arguably be traced to the political and economic exclusion of the Nigerian petro-state, and the transactional political settlement among elites. The consequences of the operations of these twin logics, always locally and regionally specific, was to create a youth crisis, a generation living radically precarious lives excluded not simply from the market but from all forms of state, customary and religious authority (Watts, 2017). The consequence was the emergence of these movements in the frontier regions of the Nigerian state.

Of course, charting the entirety of these relationships across Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan in an open-ended way in a short paper is not feasible. The focus in this paper is the nature of the relationship between existential precarity and structural crises, *when filtered through the sieve of peace processes and agreements.* One methodological caveat is important at this point. This report draws predominantly on secondary sources and cannot accurately capture the interplay between the experience of precarity and people's political choices – which is left open for a future paper.

Precarity in the labour markets of Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan

This section provides a brief stylized summary of the types of precarity which seem to exist in the four countries of interest to this paper. As touched on above, the term precarity does not fit neatly with standard labour market indicators. It is common to use the deficit of productive jobs as a proxy for precarity. This is calculated by adding up the numbers of those who are unemployed and the working poor (see for example, Ronnås & Sarkar, 2019). This is because the issue of precarity in Ethiopia, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan (as with all other low income countries) is predominantly one of low productivity and earnings, rather than an absolute lack of employment – and the issue of working poverty is concentrated among informal and self-employed workers (Campbell, 2013).[5]

But this definition is deficient in two senses. First, it does not capture the sense of vulnerability and uncertainty around livelihoods which characterises the experience of precarity. The second objection to this definition is more technical. It does not capture those who have left the job market entirely – that is, people who are not employed and are not looking for employment, as a result of which they do not fall into the category of either the working poor or the unemployed. This category has been rapidly increasing in the study countries (Farole et al., 2021). Instead of attempting a definition, therefore, this paper describes some of the characteristics of precarity – poverty, food insecurity, and job market challenges.

Measuring precarity, or any kind of employment measure, remains extremely challenging in the HoA. The state of labour market data in each of these countries is poor, and labour market data are often outdated. The indicators to describe labour markets and job outcomes are relatively well-defined, but the way indicators are collected and computed for individual countries are often idiosyncratic, making it extremely difficult to compare across the countries, and even different labour force surveys in the same country. In the absence of regular statistical data collection by governments, development agencies have stepped in to fill the gap – but with mixed results. Take the case of Somalia. Somalia's last published census was conducted in 1975. A labour force survey (LFS) was conducted in 2014 (with ILO support), and a Population Estimation Survey was conducted by UNFPA in the same year. In addition, two rounds of high-frequency poverty surveys were conducted by the World Bank in 2017. Finally, another labour force survey was conducted in 2019 (again, with ILO support), and published in 2021, which did not cover the nomadic population, and had limited coverage of IDPs (Somalia National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Given that the population of IDPs in Somalia is between three to four million, depending on when they are counted,[6] this means that more than a quarter of Somalia's population was not properly counted during the survey.

The result is a proliferation of reports, but with development institutions unwilling to trust surveys commissioned by other agencies, there is disagreement on the actual extent of poverty, unemployment, etc. The story in Ethiopia is similar where the first LFS after 2013 was conducted in 2021, and did not include Tigray (Maskaant et al., 2023). South Sudan has not had a single LFS post-independence, and its 2022 Household Budgets Survey interviewed only 719 households and cannot be used to calculate employment indicators.[7] Sudan, too, published little statistical data – even prior to the outbreak of civil war. It last conducted a labour force survey in 2011, and prior to that in 1990, and 1996.[8] Estimating precarity 'accurately' in these countries remains challenging, but we can get a broad sense of the challenge of livelihoods from the stylized facts that follow.

One point to bear in mind – Ethiopia is qualitatively different from the other countries considered in this paper. As many have shown, Ethiopia has made rapid progress in reducing levels of poverty, especially during the developmental state era of the EPRDF – and the discussion below should not be taken to mean that the states are comparable.

Three key points illustrate the widespread precarity present in these countries.

First, and despite significant progress in some countries, notably Ethiopia – overall rates of poverty remain high.

Table 1 sets out the respective rates of extreme poverty in each country. These numbers should be treated with caution – particularly for Sudan, since they were collected prior to the outbreak of civil war in the country, which has exacerbated extreme poverty.

Table 1: Rates of poverty

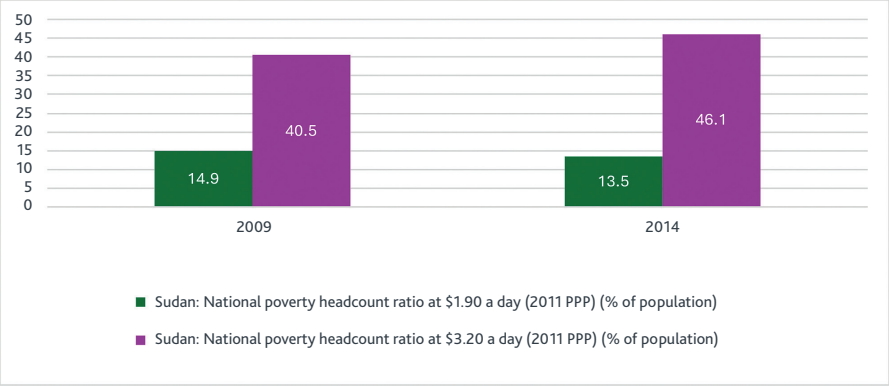
Country	Rates of poverty (at USD 1.90 pp) in %	Source
Ethiopia	27	Household Consumption Expenditure Surveys 2015/16
Somalia	69	Wave 2 of the Somali High Frequency Survey (World Bank)
Sudan	36.1	2014/15 National Household Budget and Poverty Survey
South Sudan	71.5	Household Budget Survey (2022) combined with Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring System-Plus (administered by the World Food Programme)

Sources: (Farole et al., 2021; World Bank, 2019, 2020, 2024)

Even in countries where the rates of poverty are relatively low – such as Ethiopia, or Sudan, prior to the outbreak of war in 2023, significant regional disparities concentrate precarity spatially. In Ethiopia, for instance, the economy grew at a rate of over 9% per year, resulting in a 38% increase in per capita GDP levels between 2011 and 2016 (World Bank, 2020). This resulted in a significant reduction in overall poverty rates as well. But these increases were concentrated in urban areas, and economic growth did not transform the structure of the labour market, nor did it reduce rural poverty (World Bank, 2022). Given that 80% of Ethiopia's population lives in rural areas, and around 75% work in agriculture which has remained stagnant for some time, the overall growth story masks the concentration of precarity in rural areas, and among youth and women (Maskaant et al., 2023). Finally, war (both in Tigray, and the ongoing conflicts in Oromia and Amhara) and an attendant macro-economic crisis have triggered a sharp increase in inflation, and drop in living standards across the country ("Africa's Tiger Economy Is Shot," 2024).

In Sudan, on the other hand, the overall rates of poverty disguise significant changes after the secession of South Sudan in 2011. As the existing system of subsidies began to be dismantled in Sudan between 2009-2014 (after the loss of oil fields to the South) inflation rose, affecting formal sector workers or even civil servants with salary incomes that are vulnerable to inflation (as opposed to the poor who are more likely to be producers of staple foods or agricultural laborers). As a result, the moderate rates of poverty increased substantially, even as extreme poverty rates fell (see Fig. 1). This only tells part of the story – as Thomas and de Waal (2022) have demonstrated, currency devaluations and removal of subsidies after 2016 pushed large numbers into poverty. Rates of poverty have skyrocketed further after the onset of civil war, with 24.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance as of May 2024.

Table 2: Sudan poverty rates 2009-2014



Source: NHBS 2009; NHBPS 2014/15

Rates of poverty in Somalia and South Sudan remain extraordinarily high. In South Sudan, poverty is concentrated in rural areas: while more than half of urban population is poor, about eight in ten among the rural population are poor. Conditions have markedly worsened between the last bout of serious fighting in 2016, and 2022, when the last set of data were collected. During this period, the average household consumption in South Sudan declined by 15%, at all levels of consumption, suggesting a widespread impoverishment of South Sudanese families over the 2016-2022 period (World Bank, 2024).

A large number of people in these countries are facing acute food insecurity.

These four countries have experienced acute food insecurity in recent years, even though the effects have dissipated to an extent in some parts of Ethiopia and Somalia. This has been caused by a combination of war, the use of starvation as a weapon of war, aid diversion, and recurrent climatic crises which have been politically manipulated or ignored.[9] In Ethiopia, starvation was used as a weapon of war in Tigray and severe drought led to people going hungry in the southern parts of the country (de Waal, 2021). Though no IPC assessment has been completed in Ethiopia since 2021 (largely because the federal government did not like the famine review committee findings), the most recent FEWSNET report on Ethiopia notes that the north, east, and southern parts of the country remain highly food insecure, with some regions experiencing IPC Phase IV (Emergency), which usually begins to result in excess mortality (FEWS NET, 2024; D. Maxwell & Hailey, 2021).

Rural Sudanese have long been hungry due to the operation of a political economy where the needs of Sudanese living in cities, and especially those in areas within a day's drive of Khartoum were prioritized over the needs of those living in peripheral regions. This deeply inequitable political economy rested on the exploitation of the land and labour of the peripheries for the benefit of the centre (Thomas, 2017). That system was always unsustainable, but when Sudanese governments were flush with money – most recently during the oil boom years from 1999-2011 – they intensified the underlying crisis rather than trying to address its root causes. After South Sudan's independence, the al-Bashir government refused to implement austerity measures because of the fear of urban unrest, while the plan for transitional financial assistance to buffer the country after the loss of oil revenue fell apart due to South Sudanese bellicosity, Sudan's own warmongering, and US refusal to lift the state sponsor of terror designation. The Sudanese government resorted to printing money, driving up inflation and intensifying the economic crisis. The civilian-led government of 2019-21 implemented painful reforms with modest international aid to cushion the people from hardship, but ended up presiding over escalating urban hunger (Thomas & de Waal, 2022). Food insecurity spread to Sudan's cities and started affecting the salaried classes by 2017, and was a contributory cause of the uprising against the al-Bashir regime.

Acute food insecurity has only increased since then. The effects of civil war – especially fighting in the primary crop-producing areas, looting, widespread displacement, and diversion of humanitarian aid – has meant that, as of March 2024, a total of 4.86 million people were estimated to be acutely malnourished.[10] Thirty-seven percent of the population were estimated to be in IPC Phase 3 (Crisis), of whom ten percent were thought to be in IPC Phase IV (Emergency).

Both South Sudan and Somalia have experienced famine/near-famine conditions recently, but also have a long history of famine. Successive rounds of warfare between the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA, which was in government) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army – In Opposition (SPLA-IO) led to famine being declared in 2017 – specifically due to denial of humanitarian access, asset-stripping by militia, and forced displacement (Newton, 2022). Somalia experienced a massive famine in 2011 which killed 244,000-273,000 people (Checchi & Robinson, 2013; D. G. Maxwell & Majid, 2016), and came close to experiencing famine in 2022-23, which was only averted through massive mobilization of aid, both within and outside Somalia (Hailey et al., 2023).

These economies are not creating enough productive jobs for those entering the labour market.

An estimated 1.83 million youth enter the labour market in Ethiopia every year. To meet their employment needs, and to lift the existing working poor out of poverty – Ethiopia would need to create about 2.8 million jobs a year, more than double the number of jobs it managed to create between 2005-2015, when growth was at its fastest (Farole et al., 2021; Ronnås & Sarkar, 2019). In reality, Ethiopia is actually losing jobs in agriculture and manufacturing and the only jobs to be had are in the urban service economy (Maskaant et al., 2023). Immediately prior to the outbreak of war, Sudan needed to create about 875,000 productive jobs per year, but was, in fact, creating only about 475,000.[11] Somalia needed to create something like 161,000 productive jobs per year (Farole et al., 2021), while South Sudan needed to create around 250,000 (UNDP, 2020). Needless to say, neither country seemed likely to succeed.

The jobs which do exist in these countries are often of poor quality. Unemployment generally tends to be low (especially in rural areas), because most people simply cannot afford to do nothing. It is higher in urban areas. Despite the lower incidence of open unemployment in rural areas, employment is clearly more precarious there, characterized by risky own-account agriculture and unpaid work (mainly for women and youth), and poverty rates are higher, while consumption levels are far lower. More worryingly, recent data suggests that large numbers of people – at least in Ethiopia – are actually exiting the labour market entirely (Farole et al., 2021). Ethiopia's labour market looks most typically like a lower income country's with broad participation, low education levels, and modest gender gaps. At the other end of the spectrum is Somalia – which faces very low income levels alongside low participation and extreme gender gaps and low productivity.[12] Sudan lies somewhere in the middle. We know very little about South Sudan's labour market, other than the fact that production relations in the country have been profoundly reshaped by war, with more people reliant on markets and the cash economy, even as opportunities for paid employment lie largely in the security sector (Kindersley, 2021; Kindersley & Majok, 2019; Thomas, 2019).

The combination of these three stylized facts points to the extraordinary challenges that common people face in earning livelihoods in these countries, even during periods of ostensible peace, and in deeply predatory political economies. How are these accounted for in the text of peace agreements?

Precarity in the text of peace agreements

The picture of precarity that we have presented above is a contemporary one. Examining the historical trajectory of poverty, labour markets and food security is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice to say, however, that precarity is not a new phenomenon in the HoA. People's livelihoods, survival, and political strategies have long been organized around episodes of scarcity and precarity. For instance, the Sudanese economy has been structured around the exploitation of labour for two hundred years. The mode of exploitation, and the labour pool that is exploited has changed – from slavery to the use of migrant workers from West Africa, to people displaced from the wars in Sudan's peripheries, often without residence rights in the areas where commercial agriculture was centred (Duffield, 1983; Thomas, 2015, 2017). The change in more recent years is the ascendancy of the market economy. Given this long history of precarity, it may be useful to examine the extent to which issues of precarity are formally dealt with in peace agreements.

To do so, this paper draws on University of Edinburgh's PA-X Peace Agreements Database (Bell & Badanjak, 2019). PA-X is a repository of peace agreements between 1990-2023, and contains over 2,003 agreements from over 150 peace processes. Agreements are coded as follows: (1) interstate agreements pertaining to interstate conflict *(inter-inter),* (2) intrastate agreements relating to intrastate conflict *(intra-intra),* (3) interstate agreements pertaining to intrastate conflict *(inter-intra),* and finally (4) intra-state agreements pertaining to local conflicts *(intra-local)*. PA-X also includes coding on the right to work – but does not interpret provisions considering their effect on precarity. For instance, an agreement could address issues of precarity through provisions on land restitution, on displacement and mobility (including residence rights as in the case of agreements between Sudan and South Sudan), or through provisions on disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) or security sector reform (SSR). The point is, the bare text of the peace agreements is not necessarily a good guide to how peace processes relate to individual precarity.

PA-X contains 342 peace agreements for Somalia (and Somaliland) Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sudan – of which only a handful contain references to 'work'. Out of 55 peace agreements recorded in Somalia during this period, for instance, 4 include socio-economic provisions. Two of these are foundational documents: the Provisional Constitution of The Federal Republic of Somalia (2012), and the Transitional Federal Charter of the Somali Republic (2004), and apart from the Transitional Federal Charter, only one agreement refers to work – which is the Conciliation and Peace Conference of the Regions of Bari Nugal and Mudug, SNA, SNDU, SSDF Peace Agreement (Mudug Peace Agreement) (1993). Looking at the actual texts of the agreements – one finds that the reference to work is actually part of a contradictory provision which lays out the individual right of Somalis to live everywhere in Somalia at the same time as it underlines the importance of clan-based territorial governance:

"Art. 3: The Somali territory belongs to the Somali state and citizens have the right to live, reside and work anywhere in Somalia. However, clan areas will remain under the jurisdiction of the clans living traditionally in that territory."

A similar pattern is repeated across the countries of interest in this paper. In Ethiopia, 3 out of 25 agreements refer to the socio-economic rights, and only one, the Transitional Period Charter of 1991 (agreed at the point when the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, EPRDF) included a reference to the right to work. Sudan and South Sudan are slightly different in that peace agreements in those countries make more references to the right to work, but again, in passing. Out of 122 peace agreements in Sudan, 20 include references to socio-economic rights, and 5 include references to work or employment. For South Sudan, out of 139 agreements, 22 include references to socio-economic rights, and 3 include references to work or employment.

An assessment of the text of the provisions relating to work suggest that they rarely make the connection between employment and livelihoods on one hand, and the political economy underpinning conflict, on the other – and consist mostly of generic cookie-cutter pronouncements on the importance of socio-economic rights and national economic development. Policymakers need to look behind the peace agreements and to other provisions, which ostensibly have nothing to do with work or precarity, for these connections. This analysis is beyond the scope of this paper – but remains important.

Precarity and peace agreements: a schematic sketch

Wars rarely have neat endings, and armed conflict in PMs has particularly imperfect endings, morphing into other forms of violence, generating precarity (de Waal et al., 2023). A related point is that politics in PMs is, of course, driven by elites, and highly transactional, but elites are not totally immune from all elements of social pressure. This is the primary logic for the creation of precarity through peace processes: because it allows elites to obtain cash and control the means of violence necessary for obtaining and retaining power.

There are limits to the operation of transactional politics – for instance, when egregious violence aimed against a community makes it harder for opposing elites to rent the loyalty of that community. This was the case in South Sudan, when groups of Nuer willing to ally with the government (who were identified with the Dinka) were heavily criticized by the Nuer as well as members of the armed opposition as being the 'Nuer of Dinka money' (Pendle, 2020).

Further, and as many sociologists and anthropologists have demonstrated – money is not merely a store of value, but operates within social contexts to signal and establish social relationships and reciprocal obligations (Björkman, 2014; Mauss, 2000). In other words, common people adapt and respond to predatory political economies by trying to exert some pressure on ruling elites, in any way they can.

In highly gendered ways, precarious work can be a result of war, an essential component of war-making strategies, one of the foundations of exploitative political economies, a consequence of inequitable developmental strategies, the basis of a militarized gig-economy, and a broader structural condition which elites need to respond to. Peace agreements can *respond to precarity, entrench it, create new forms of precarity, and transfer existing forms of precarity from one group to another.* These mechanisms may exist within the same peace agreement and can be organized through some of the following processes.

Militarized livelihoods and the 'payroll peace'.

'Payroll peace' refers to the practice of putting large numbers of soldiers and civil servants on the state payroll as an incentive for them, and the belligerent parties, to accept a peace agreement (de Waal & Boswell, 2020). This has become standard practice in South Sudan, where these mechanisms were built into each of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), 2006 Juba Agreement, 2016 ARCSS and 2018 R-ARCSS. This was also the case in Sudan in the Juba Peace Agreement, signed in 2020 (Craze & Khair, 2023; Thomas, 2023). Even elsewhere (notably in Somalia) it is common for elites to instrumentalize security sector cooperation to extract resources from foreign actors, keep a large proportion of the same, and channel a small proportion to soldiers/men-at-arms (and to a lesser extent, civil servants) as part of patronage networks (Majid et al., 2021; Williams, 2020).

Peace agreements propose a number for the proposed final (reduced) size of the army – but in the meantime they allow for large numbers to be fed, housed and paid. In this process, any final number is ignored by the belligerents, who try to claim every single combatant they can, confidently—and usually correctly—assuming that the downsizing won't actually happen (de Waal & Boswell, 2020). Mechanisms for verifying the numbers claimed are rarely proposed and never utilized. Unfortunately, prior experience of cantonment, force unification and DDR provisions suggests that they lead to massive expansion of troop numbers (for military preparedness, political patronage, and corruption); (b) increased pressure on political processes because they are overshadowed by armed groups; and (c) very high levels of organized violence when peace agreements (almost inevitably) break down. As Craze points out, elites in South Sudan are invested in the initial process and resources of DDR/SSR, not its successful outcome (Craze, 2023). This is exemplified by the lack of progress in implementing Chapter II of the R-ARCSS, which contains provisions on security sector reform. Rebel and government soldiers are supposed to be unified into a single army through the 'Necessary Unified Forces' – but the administrative process remains incomplete, even as troops go without wages, weapons, or health services. Completing the process would inevitably entail leaving some commanders out of the command structure of the unified forces, and likely lead to rebellion.

The elite logic for payroll peace is clear – but what of the rank-and-file soldiers? Why do they (apparently) willingly participate in the militarized political economy? Two possible explanations stand out. First, and most obviously, there are few opportunities for waged labour, and little possibility of opening businesses – in short, little that most South Sudanese can aspire to, beyond a 'bleakly resilient subsistence' (Kindersley, 2021). Youth seek military, security and militia employment, as well as self-arming or working in local auxiliaries and 'self-defence' or raiding groups, as part of personal economic strategies. Leonardi argues that this type of militarized livelihood allows youth to fully participate in the complex family economics of survival – especially as South Sudan's overall economy transitions away from subsistence and kinship based livelihoods to market-based livelihoods (Leonardi, 2007; Thomas, 2019). Civil servants are an important constituency for politicians as well, and decentralization measures undertaken by states are often aimed at ensuring that local employment can be generated through the increase of civil servant positions (De Waal & Pendle, 2018). South Sudan's attempt at decentralization – where President Salva Kiir increased the number of states from 10 to 28, and then 32, by unilateral executive fiat is a classic example of this logic at work.

Second, and as Kindersley points out: 'military work for the government and its political leadership is a South Sudan-specific form of social contract. For many residents, armed service involves government reciprocity and welfare, and is a core political responsibility: as salaries should be paid to old and disabled servicemen, and to widows as compensation for deaths in service. These are established and important forms of state reciprocity' (Kindersley, 2021). Many of these norms around reciprocity have been destroyed by civil war and economic crisis, but residents cling to them in the absence of other sources of livelihoods. In a sense, therefore, payroll peace is simultaneously a form of social contract, a mechanism for elite enrichment and for generating political revenue, and a consequence of precarious livelihoods, all of which are codified in peace agreements.

The evidence from Somalia suggests similar mechanisms at play. The Somali National Army (SNA) is more of a strategically deployed brand than an institution (Majid et al., 2021) and is only one player, and not always the most important one, in a rivalrous security arena (Hills, 2016, 2021). Somali elites have strategically deployed the brand as a tool to capture external rents, enrich themselves, and redistribute some of the captured resources along clan lines (Hagmann, 2016). When this brand is applied to clan militias and other ad hoc forces supporting whomever the current President happens to be, the actions of those militias gain enhanced legitimacy, at least externally. More importantly, when wearing the SNA "brand", these forces (whether real or consisting solely of 'ghost' soldiers) become eligible for training, equipment, and other valuable support from external actors (Williams, 2020). The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan also illustrate some of the same logics. The RSF has historically been run on a business model regarding recruitment, with new recruits getting an upfront payment and then going on to serve in Yemen, Libya or elsewhere (Berridge et al., 2022). It is a system that requires constant (or increasing) financial returns to sustain itself. Since the outbreak of civil war, the RSF appears to have lost key sources of revenue, and has taken to rewarding it soldiers by granting them license to pillage. It is a system which is based on precarity, and generates precarity, even as the elite enrich themselves in the process.

Peace agreements can entrench predatory political economies.

Peace agreements may generate precarity by entrenching and granting legal sanction to predatory political economies. They may also transfer the burden of precarity from one group to another. This can happen even in contexts where agreements are aiming to do precisely the opposite – redress past injustice and inequities. Take the case of Sudan, for instance, where the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005 (CPA) and the Juba Agreement of 2020 both sought to address historical spatial inequities – which had been generated through a racialized system which exploited the land and labour of the Sudanese periphery for the benefit of the centre (Thomas & de Waal, 2022). Both agreements ultimately failed to address the root causes of these inequities and ended up entrenching and expanding existing precarity.

The CPA expressly sought to redress 'historical injustices and inequalities in development between the different regions of Sudan'.[13] It did so in three ways: by disengaging the country's largest (but by no means only) belligerents, by sharing power and wealth according to an explicitly spatial formula, and by outlining the right of self-determination. It created an autonomous government in then southern Sudan, divided oil revenues between the south and north, and established fiscal transfers for Northern states (Thomas, 2020). This ignored Sudan's entrenched social inequities, and through the creation of a provincial salaried class, ended up being a tool for the management rather than the redressing of inequality (Abdalla, 2009). While previous peace agreements – notably the one signed in 1972 attempted (and failed) to transform the political economies of Sudan's peripheries, the CPA extended the existing patronage system to the peripheral regions, creating secondary centres for organizing kleptocracy. Other provisions which created institutions – for instance, those aimed at resolving conflicts around land which were at the root of violence in many parts of the country were never actually implemented (Thomas, 2015, 2020) – against the intent of its architects (Dr John Garang and Ali Osman Taha), one of whom died and the other was politically eclipsed. The CPA ended up papering over but not addressing any of the root causes of Sudan's extractive political economy, though the question of whether it could have succeeded in doing so within the existing global political economy remains open. A similar dynamic can be observed in the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) of 2020.

The JPA continued the formula of the CPA – it rewarded militia leaders with political positions at the centre, and promised to increase the share of national wealth that goes to the peripheries (Thomas, 2023). However, the CPA had been signed in less straitened economic circumstances – and there was simply no money, other than through repressive taxation – which could pay for these transfers (Craze & Khair, 2023). Had the agreement been fully implemented, it would likely have increased the levels of precarity in the margins of Sudan even further.

Peace agreements such as the R-ARCSS in South Sudan sometimes create new forms of precarity, as they provide cover for ostensibly non-political violence such as land-grabbing and forced displacement by armed units associated with political elites in pursuit of commercial objectives (Craze, 2023). In Somalia, the process has been more nuanced. Instead of provisions of a single peace process, multiple more or less successful peace agreements have led to a tenuous and informal elite political compact which averts the most egregious manifestations of crisis – such as food emergencies or famines in the most politically salient locations – but are willing to tolerate a low level of crisis which keeps external funds flowing (Jaspars et al., 2023). Continued insecurity/violence continues to produce a steady stream of displaced persons who move to cities and form a cheap pool of casual labour for the oligopolistic businesses which dominate Somalia's private sector. Post-2012, Somalia is a polity constructed on extraversion of external resources, and on maintaining a permanent state of precarity for many (Hagmann, 2016; Jaspars et al., 2019).

Finally, the implementation of peace agreements (or the way they are not implemented) can leave questions of precarity unresolved. Take, for instance, the Pretoria Agreement and the Nairobi Declaration which ostensibly 'ended' the conflict between the Tigrayan Defence Forces (TDF) and the Ethiopian National Defence Forces (ENDF) in Ethiopia. The only elements of the agreement which have been implemented are the ending of active hostilities between the belligerents and the resumption of essential services, including banking and transport. Key unimplemented provisions include the restoration of Western Tigray (occupied by Amhara forces), the return of IDPs to their places of origin; the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of TDF combatants; issues of transitional justice; resumption of humanitarian assistance at scale, and efforts towards post conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction (Gebrehiwot, 2024). Livelihoods were decimated in Tigray during the war, and households find themselves having to divert limited income to the purchase of inputs for crop cultivation, leaving them with little income for food and heavily reliant on severe coping strategies and humanitarian food assistance.[14]

Ration-book peace.

Ethiopia has been absent in much of the discussion above. This is largely the legacy of its EPRDF-era elite political compact which focused on building a 'developmental state' (Dercon, 2022). The developmental project was not fully dismantled until 2018, when Abiy Ahmed was selected to the position of Prime Minister. Therefore, and although the transformation of Ethiopia's political system and political economy under Abiy Ahmed has been rapid and disastrous for many people in the country, it may still be too early to understand the longer-term effects of the Pretoria peace agreement on patterns of precarity in the country. It is clear however, that the Pretoria peace agreement is essentially a peace agreement built on the weaponization of precarity – or rather the use of starvation as a weapon of war, and the broader impoverishment of Tigray as a result of the war fighting strategies explicitly adopted by the Ethiopian state for that purpose. The rationale for the Tigrayan leadership to sue for peace was the scale of the humanitarian emergency – and the assurance – which has only been partially met – of humanitarian and food assistance into the region, as well as a resumption of the existing social protections and developmental programs (de Waal & Berhe, 2024). The resumption of humanitarian aid allowed elites to benefit, in that federal and Tigrayan authorities are alleged to have diverted humanitarian deliveries to military units, with private grain and flour traders also benefiting (Anyadike, 2023). In other words, a peace agreement founded on artificially created precarity contributed to the maintenance of those very patterns of precariousness.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that peace is as much a contributor to precarity as war and conflict. The core argument is that war and peace are not distinct episodes, and both reflect forms of elite politics. Peace requires addressing precarity of some, usually but not solely through some form of patronage mechanism, and deliberately creating precarity for others as a direct consequence of the types of political economies underlying the political system. But does this matter for peace processes? And why are policymakers engaged on peace, not more attentive to issues of livelihood and precarity?

There are at least two reasons why questions of precarity matter – or should matter – to peace processes. First, and most importantly, if the purpose of peace agreements is the creation of a safe environment for citizens to earn productive livelihoods, live free from poverty, and conduct their lives without fear, then policymakers need to go beyond the stated text of peace agreements and pay more attention to the political-economic implications of peace. They also need to stop treating peace agreements as discrete, self-contained events, and think of them as an element of ongoing political machinations. Second, issues of precarity are closely related to how a peace agreement is actually likely to be implemented – as the examples above demonstrate – where the underlying political economy of a country is exploitative, and depends on making large numbers of people vulnerable, it is unlikely that elites will have an incentive to radically upend it. The current organization of the policy world does not, alas, fill one with optimism. Those working on peace and those working on development remain firmly ensconced within their silos, and there has been little by way of notable effort to work across these silos.

Endnotes

[1] Personal communication with WIEGO, July 28, 2023 attaching Internal Memo from Françoise Carré to the WIEGO team on 'Precarious Employment – WIEGO perspective – For Team Strategic Review', dated April 19, 2012

[2] Oxford English Dictionary, Online Version, available at https://www.oed.com/dictionary/precarious_adj?tl=true&tab=meaning_and_use.

[3] One critical approach to the term 'precarity' borrows from the anthropologist Janet Roitman's assessment of the word 'crisis'. She argues that the condition of 'ongoing crisis' which seems to characterize much of our lives is a kind of analytical blind spot, something that can't itself be observed, and which assumes a norm from which there's a deviation. "How did crisis, once a signifier for a critical, decisive moment, come to be construed as a protracted historical and experiential condition?" she asks (Roitman, 2014, p. 2). Precarity might occupy the same sort of analytical blind spot (I am grateful to Alex de Waal for this suggestion). It is also worth querying why the term precarity acquires political salience at some points and among some people, and not others.

[4] This formulation is adapted from Guyer, 2016.

[5] In fact many of the precariat are over-employed, or at least over-worked, in that they work extremely long hours

[6] https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/somalia/#:~:text=Nearly%203.9%20million%20people%20were,data%20became%20available%20in%202009.

[7] Interview with World Bank poverty team, February 2024.

[8] Interviews with Sudanese Ministry of Labour and Administrative Reform (formerly the Ministry of Labour and Social Development), February 2021.

[9] For a discussion of the relationship between war economies and famine, see Alex de Waal, "Contending Global War Economies: A Framework for Analyzing the Decline and Return of Famines" forthcoming.

[10] IPC Alert, Sudan, March 2024, https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Alert_Sudan_March2024.pdf.

[11] To obtain these estimates I calculate the annual average increase in the working age population between 2011 and 2014, as well as the annual average increase in the number of productive jobs (i.e. labour force – (unemployed + working poor)) in that period. The difference allows us to estimate the deficit in productive jobs.

[12] Aditya Sarkar, Somalia Labour Market Diagnostic, prepared in connection with the preparation of the Somalia National Employment Policy 2019.

[13] Preamble to the 2002 Machakos Protocol, the founding document of the CPA.

[14] FEWS NET, March 2024, "Acute food insecurity remains severe in northern and southern Ethiopia", https://fews.net/east-africa/ethiopia.

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The World Peace Foundation, an operating foundation affiliated solely with the Fletcher School at Tufts University, aims to provide intellectual leadership on issues of peace, justice and security. We believe that innovative research and teaching are critical to the challenges of making peace around the world, and should go hand-in hand with advocacy and practical engagement with the toughest issues. To respond to organized violence today, we not only need new instruments and tools—we need a new vision of peace. Our challenge is to reinvent peace.

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