

Celeste Bean  
May 3, 2020  
Final Paper

---

# THE CASAMANCE CONFLICT: A PROTOTYPICAL CIVIL WAR OF ATYPICAL IRRESOLUTION

---

## Introduction

The separatist movement in the Casamance province of Senegal, led by the Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC), has spawned low-intensity conflict for forty years. Although the death toll for the entire Casamance conflict has been relatively low with fewer than 5,000 total deaths, the social upheaval, economic malaise, and environmental degradation have been monumental. The duration of four decades might appear to render the conflict exceptional, but under inspection, the roles of natural resources, international intervention, costs of conflict, and women-led activities very neatly substantiate research into the dynamics of civil wars. In this view, the Casamance conflict and its forty-year-long duration demonstrate the importance of addressing conflicts before they become endemic – without attention, new motives can entrench conflicts and create incentives opposing peace.

## Background

The MFDC first initiated violent protests in 1982 because of justifiable complaints about negligent infrastructural investment, “insufficiently compensated land expropriation,

environmental degradation, inadequate job opportunities, and labor migration” in the Casamance province of Senegal (Ross 2004, 41). The separatist movement adheres to three theories of civil war onset: legitimate grievances against the government; economic disenfranchisement of locals in a resource-rich peripheral territory; and an abnormally heavy-handed response from an otherwise democratic government. Despite legitimate complaints, separatist misgivings certainly featured an additional economic element, following assertions that resource extraction may exacerbate grievances of ethnic minorities in resource-rich peripheral territories (Ross, 41). Peace treaties in 1991, 1993, 1999, 2001, and 2004 failed to resolve contention between the rebels and the Senegalese government (Minorities at Risk), despite efforts from various Senegalese political parties, student-organized groups, women-led collectives, the Roman Catholic Church, and the governments of The Gambia and Guinea-Bissau (De Jong, 2005b, 392). Notably, though the Senegalese government has certainly violated human rights, its otherwise democratic nature may have contributed to the conflict’s relatively low intensity and low casualty rate, aligning with propositions about democratic governments decreasing conflict severity (Lacina 2006). The continued failures to negotiate a universally satisfactory ceasefire has generated a preponderant skepticism among the local Casamançais and undermines more recent efforts to resolve the conflict (Evans 2007, 72).

## Natural Resources and a War Economy

The Casamance conflict epitomizes “rebellion as a business:” the MFDC initially asserted legitimate grievances, but fighting continued because rebels recognized that they could profit from exploiting local natural resources (Collier 2004). The resources available

for cultivation in the Casamance are primarily timber, tree crops, and cannabis. Notably, marijuana does not appear to prompt the violence seen in the production of drugs like cocaine or heroin and instead appears to act as a typical agricultural product (Collier 2003, 43). These “high-volume, low-value natural resources” (Evans 2003) have different dynamics than do high-value oil or diamonds (Ross 2004), but the commodity prices have remained stable and lucrative enough to keep the MFDC in business for forty years. This defies literature suggesting that low yields on natural resources might shorten the duration of conflict (Collier 2004) but substantiates research suggesting that easily smuggled, “lootable” resources provide a relatively secure stream of funding for rebel activities (DeRouen 2015, 8). One possible explanation is that even though rent from the agricultural products was low, the opportunities available in villages littered with landmines were even lower. In a pernicious feedback loop, the MFDC established a war economy in which rebels “with vested interests [profited] from ongoing, low-level conflict” (Evans 2003, 2).

However, because the agricultural products were not especially lucrative, much of the rebel organizational structure started to dissolve in the mid-1990s because the leadership couldn’t pay its soldiers. As order among the MFDC rebels devolved and separatist ideology gave way to profit, violence shifted from a relatively selective use of force against military personnel to a generalized, indiscriminate use against civilians. Earlier targeted attacks reflected the MFDC’s calculated efforts to silence potential governmental supporters and control territory, but rebels could only enact this logic when there was clear leadership to identify who should be attacked. While the phase of selective attacks adheres to research into the logic of violence (Kalyvas 2000), the devolution to indiscriminate violence reflects profit-seeking behavior of individual participants in the absence of organizational

leadership, rather than a coordinated policy of indiscriminate violence in an attempt to control territory.

As the fighting stretched into its second decade, conflict became a normalized way of life for aging veterans and especially second-generation soldiers, many of whom were illiterate, “grew up in violent conditions, and were not socialized in any way that provided cultural or social values” (Gehrold 2010, 92). The combatants recognized that they had few skills to reintegrate into a peaceful economy and instead would benefit most by continuing to operate in a military capacity. This has ended up “encourag[ing] cross-border trafficking, feed[ing] the informal economy, weaken[ing] the legitimate economy, and erod[ing] customs revenues and hence the state’s ability to provide public services or pay public servants” (DeRouen 2010, 42). The rebels’ predatory albeit logical response substantiates research suggesting that “resource wealth tends to increase the duration of civil wars by offering combatants a financial incentive to oppose a peace settlement” (Ross 2004, 44).

## International Intervention and Rebel Fractionalization

International intervention from Guinea Bissau and The Gambia, ostensibly on the basis of cultural similarity to the rebels, has strengthened the rebels and benefitted their counterparts. Embodying the hypothesis that “resource wealth [increases] the likelihood of a civil war by increasing the probability of foreign intervention to support a rebel movement,” the chronic destabilizing influence from parasitic neighbors parallels the quagmire seen in the DRC (Ross 2004, 67). The “Casamance’s porous, forested southern border with Guinea-Bissau” has provided operating bases for the most militarily active separatist groups, and rebel groups collect young troops from across the border (Evans

2003, 5). Easy transit between Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia has also ensured that the rebels have access to markets to which they can smuggle their resources, and Gambians and Guinea-Bissauans benefited from rebels' low selling prices of agricultural products and timber.

By supporting rebel factions that might have otherwise recognized that they were outmatched by the government, international intervention from Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia propped up multiple fragmented, ineffective, well-armed rebel groups. This likely contributed to the longevity of the conflict by delaying “capability exhaustion, ... [which describes] when parties [have] reached economic, military, and moral exhaustion” (DeRouen 2015, 167). Without international intervention, the Senegalese military likely would have beaten the MFDC much earlier, potentially preventing the rebel splintering that has undermined peace negotiations. The myriad factions have been able to act as veto players during recent rounds of peace negotiations and undermine the staying power of ceasefires (Cunningham, 2006). As recently as 2010, three leaders—Ansoumana Badji, Jean-Marie Biagui, and Nkrumah Sané—all claimed the title of MFDC Secretary General, but none have “the complete allegiance of the military wing” and thus could not universally enforce a ceasefire (Clark 2011, 158). Further, because both the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau supported the rebel groups, the existence of multiple state principles allowed rebels to operate without reproach or accountability because there was “no single state [to] effectively restrain the organization” (Salehyan 2014).

The fractionalization and noncooperation of NGOs has also been a recent and surprisingly pernicious development since peace talks in 2010. International watch organizations have reported that groups active in peacebuilding are “compet[ing] with other

for consultancies, and even for the prestige of being seen as an expert or as vital to resolving the conflict” (Clark 2011, 167). Thus in an analog to the rebels who benefit from a war economy, there is concern that some “resolution ‘experts’ do not have an interest in seeing the conflict resolved because their expertise, at times financially remunerated, would be less valuable” (Clark 2011, 167).

## Costs of the Civil War

In total, an estimated 3,000 – 5,000 people have died, with “at least 652 killed or wounded by [remaining] landmines” as of 2010 and with almost 70,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees (Fall, 29). The vast majority of deaths have been noncombatants, aligning with the rising trend of civilian casualties that began in the 1990s (Collier 2003, 17). These numbers fail to reflect how extensively the conflict has crippled the development of the Casamance region, resulting in widely-felt environmental degradation, internal displacement, and economic malaise.

Both the MFDC and the Senegalese government began laying landmines in earnest in 1997 (Fall 2010, 30). Some estimates suggest that as of 2008, “93 villages [were] mined, affecting 90,000 villagers... and a further 149 villages [were] suspected to have mines” (IRIN 2008). Surveys suggest that almost every member of society in the Casamance participated in primary product cultivation before the conflict (Evans 2007, 67), but “80 percent of the farmland in the region [has been rendered] unusable” because of unexploded ordinances (Oppong 2005, 21). Landmines “accelerate environmental damage through forcing populations to live in marginal and fragile environments to avoid minefields,” meaning that more farmers are concentrated in less territory (DeRouen 2015, 49). Locals cannot safely

tend to their crops, and the few combatants who do have skills appropriate for a peace-time economy have nothing to which they can return.

Although the conflict has refuted expectations anticipating more battle deaths in longer conflicts (Lacina 2006), the separatist movement has severely disrupted life for an estimated “62,638 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees” in a region of approximately 675,000 (Fall, 29). Of Casamancois IDPs who relocate, most stay with family members in more urbanized towns and “often carry minimal possessions and must survive with these” (DeRouen 2015, 38). Fewer engage in agriculture than likely would have in their home territory and instead work in artisanal trades, unskilled labor, or domestic activities (Evans 2007, 74). In practice this means that IDPs lose the material wealth concentrated in their abandoned homes as well as the professional capital generated from their experience working in farming. Research into IDPs suggests that the inattention paid to them is largely attributable to the “relative invisibility of the self-settled displaced in the urban environment that makes it harder to quantify and address their needs” (Sommers 2011). Surveys of Casamancois IDPs adhere to these findings (Evans 2007, 75), with respondents reporting that external support tends to be “inconsistent, ad hoc aid from the government or humanitarian community, if anything at all” (Bascom 1993).

Lastly, while the conflict has been low intensity, it has certainly demonstrated the concept of civil war as development in reverse, wherein resources are not only diverted from productive engagement but are also channeled into actively destructive activities (Collier 2003, 13). Firstly, underinvestment in infrastructure has entrenched unequal delivery of public services like hospitals and schools. As a result, the “already limited government services declined as qualified staff left or refused to work in insecure areas and [as] schools

and other public buildings were requisitioned as army posts” (Evans 2004, 4). The failing infrastructure has made villages even less attractive options to which to return, ensuring that the opportunity cost of continuing to fight remains low for combatants. Secondly, several major donors started to leave when both the Senegalese government and MFDC rebels began to lay landmines in 1997 (Fall 2010, 30). This has resulted in even less international attention or oversight for the conflict, further marginalizing the conflict’s resolution, and the resurgence of violence in 2009 has continued to repulse interested NGOs. Thirdly, instability has undermined the development of a potentially lucrative sector for the Casamance’s beautiful coastlines: tourism. Hospitality was beginning to thrive in the Casamance before violence started in earnest in the 1990s, but naturally, tourists have remained highly sensitive to any potentials for insecurity.

## Women as Agents of Conflict and of Peace

Women have been atypically visible actors for both violence and resolution. Casamance women were very involved in supporting roles during the first fifteen years of the conflict, from 1983-1998, though no evidence exists to prove that they acted in a combatant capacity. Logistically, women “have supported (and continue to support) the military wing of the MFDC by providing information and food, transporting landmines and weapons, and selling cannabis to fund the rebellion” (Stam, 343). Perhaps more saliently, though, priestesses supported the MFDC in a spiritual capacity, including “using the threat of cursing to oblige others to support or join the MFDC” and “cursing individuals who are active opponents of the MFDC” (Stam, 343). Many members of the MFDC are highly spiritual, so the priestesses’ support was seen as vital for success.

Attempted peace treaties in 1991, 1993, 1999, and 2001 failed for myriad reasons, and it wasn't until 2004 that women were officially included in the peace process. Women-led initiatives have explicitly rejected liberal feminism's assumption "that the participation of women in conflict would essentially change nothing about the way conflict happens" (Henshaw 2016) and instead "style themselves as 'indispensable' to the peace process, drawing on rhetoric of the inherent peacefulness of women and the motherly profession of care" (Stam, 339). This aligns with critiques of rational actor theory and asserts that women can offer valuable "irrational" perspectives absent of economic calculus and instead emphasizing emotional and familial considerations (Henshaw, 42).

Politicians only really began to accept women's contributions after 2000 under internal pressure (Hughes, 2015), such as that applied by Amnesty International and RADDHO, a Senegalese human rights organization (Stam 2009, 346). Although organizations have "succeeded in mobilizing an overwhelming number of women using a cultural and gendered approach," with participants estimated between four and fifteen thousand women, there has been some skepticism of politicians' motives (Stam 2009, 355). Some feel that women's inclusion is "merely lip-service, [with] women's activities are used as cultural decoration" (Stam 2009, 348). In practice, women have been very successful in galvanizing local support of peace but have yet to be fully included as members of the negotiation process.

The involvement of women in both rebel and peace efforts did not appear to protect women from gender-based victimization, aligning with research that the presence of female combatants does not reduce the likelihood of wartime sexual violence by rebel groups (Cohen 2013). In Diola culture, women and children are obligated to "resolve conflict by

placing themselves between the disputing parties and, in the worst case, covering them with their bodies to protect them” (Gehrold 2010, 99). Casamance women “describe in detail the mutilation of their bodies and the psychological effects of the often-brutal rape attacks” (Amnesty International 2003), and others report that they had “everything taken from them to force their husbands to join the [MFDC]” (Gehrold 2010, 97).

## Conclusion

Because the conflict has “not disrupted sub-regional stability in a way comparable to other conflicts on the continent,” the Casamance has not garnered the attention of international intervention or detailed research (D’Orsi 2015, 13). This is unfortunate because the Casamance conflict adheres to many theories governing the dynamics of civil war, ranging from onset to predatory war economies to the role of international intervention. Given that the conflict has been so predictable, the failure to conclusively resolve it is all the more egregious. The four decades of conflict demonstrate that peacebuilding cannot be an idle process – rather it must be actively pursued before individual actors’ economic interests become entrenched.

## Bibliography

- Amnesty International (2003). Casamance Women Speak Out. (2003, AI Index: AFR 49/002/2003).
- Bascom, J. (1993) “‘Internal Refugees’: the Case of the Displaced’, in Black, R and Robinson, V. (eds) *Geography and Refugees: Patterns and Processes of Change*. London: Belhaven Press, pp. 33–46.
- Clark, K. (2011). Ripe or Rotting: Civil Society in the Casamance Conflict. *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review*, 1(2), 153-172. doi:10.2979/africonfpeacrevi.1.2.153
- Collier, Paul et al. (2003). *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy*. World Bank Publications.
- Collier, P., Hoeffler, A., & Söderbom, M. (2004). On the Duration of Civil War. *Journal of Peace Research*, 41(3), 253–273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304043769>
- Cunningham, D. (2006). Veto Players and Civil War Duration. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(4), 875-892. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/4122921](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4122921)
- D’Orsi, C. (2015). An Outlook on the Conflict in Casamance with a Focus on the Legal Situation of the Mouvement des Forces Democratiques and Its Members. *Willamette Journal of International Law and Dispute Resolution*, 23(1), 1-60. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/26210439](http://www.jstor.org/stable/26210439)
- DeRouen, Karl. (2015). *An Introduction to Civil Wars*. Congressional Quarterly Press.
- De Jong, F., & Gasser, G. (2005a). Contested Casamance: Introduction. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 39(2), 213-229. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/25067482](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067482)
- De Jong, F. (2005b). A Joking Nation: Conflict Resolution in Senegal. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 39(2), 389-413. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/25067489](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067489)
- Evans, M. (2000). Briefing: Senegal: Wade and the Casamance Dossier. *African Affairs*, 99(397), 649-658. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/723320](http://www.jstor.org/stable/723320)
- Evans, M., (2003), ‘Ni Paix ni Guerre: the political economy of low-level conflict in the Casamance’, *Background research for HPG Report 13*, Department of Geography: King’s College London, pp. 1-22

- Evans, M. (2005). Insecurity or Isolation? Natural Resources and Livelihoods in Lower Casamance. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 39(2), 282-312. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/25067485](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067485)
- Evans, M. (2007). 'The Suffering is Too Great': Urban Internally Displaced Persons in the Casamance Conflict, Senegal. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(1), 60-85. <https://doi-org.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/10.1093/jrs/fel026>
- Evans, M. (2009). Flexibility in return, reconstruction and livelihoods in displaced villages in Casamance, Senegal. *GeoJournal*, 74(6), 507-524. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/41148362](http://www.jstor.org/stable/41148362)
- Fall, A. (2010). Understanding the Casamance Conflict: A Background.
- Gehrold, S., & Neu, I. (2010). (Rep.). Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09980](http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep09980)
- Henshaw, A. (2016). Why Women Rebel: Understanding Women's Participation in Armed Rebel Groups.
- Hughes, M. M., & Tripp, A. M. (2015). Civil War and Trajectories of Change in Women's Political Representation in Africa, 1985-2010. *Social Forces*, 93(4), 1513-1540. <https://doi-org.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/10.1093/sf/sov003>
- Human Rights Watch, *New U.S. Landmine Policy: Questions and Answers* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004), 13.
- IRIN, Senegal: Lack of peace accord hampers demining in Casamance, 9 May 2008, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/482959aa1e.html> [accessed 29 March 2020]
- IRIN, *Senegal: Casamance recovers more land lost to landmines*, 27 December 2012, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/50eab5042.html> [accessed 12 April 2020]
- Kalyvas, S. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511818462
- Lacina, B. (2006). Explaining the Severity of Civil Wars. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 50(2), 276-289. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002705284828>
- Lambert, M. (1998). Violence and the War of Words: Ethnicity v. Nationalism in the Casamance. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 68(4), 585-602. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/1161167](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1161167)

- Minorities at Risk Project, *Chronology for Diolas in Casamance in Senegal*, 2004, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/469f38d7c.html> [accessed 29 March 2020]
- Nixon, Rob. (2011) *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.
- Oppong, J., & Kalipeni, E. (2005). The Geography of Landmines and Implications for Health and Disease in Africa: A Political Ecology Approach. *Africa Today*, 52(1), 3-25. Retrieved March 22, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/4187842](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4187842)
- Ross, M.L. (2004). How do natural resources influence civil war? Evidence from thirteen cases. *International Organization*, 58(1). pp. 35-67.
- Salehyan, I., Siroky, D., & Wood, R. (2014). External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse: A Principal-Agent Analysis of Wartime Atrocities. *International Organization*, 68(3), 633-661. doi:10.1017/S002081831400006X
- SOMMERS, M. (2001) 'Young, Male and Pentecostal: Urban Refugees in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14(4): 347-370.
- Stam, V. (2009). Women's Agency and Collective Action: Peace Politics in the Casamance. *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines*, 43(2), 337-366. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/20743821](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20743821)
- WOOCHER, L. (2000). The 'Casamance Question': An Examination of the Legitimacy of Self-Determination in Southern Senegal. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 7(4), 341-379. Retrieved March 29, 2020, from [www.jstor.org/stable/24675077](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24675077)
- Wood, R. M., & Thomas, J. L. (2017). Women on the frontline: Rebel group ideology and women's participation in violent rebellion. *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(1), 31-46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316675025>