

Conflicts caused by shortages

The most frequently cited examples are **Easter Island in the 17th century** and **the 1994 Rwandan genocide**, during which some 800,000 people (11% of the population) were massacred in one month. It is classic to say that this genocide was caused by an ethnic conflict between Hutus and Tutsis. The first to question this interpretation was Jared Diamond, an American geographer who wrote *Collapses* published in France in 2006, a book that analyses the disasters of past civilizations due to a failure to manage their environment.



Figure 1: Rapa nuI, symbol of Easter Island

It first deals with the well-known case of **Easter Island**, discovered in 1722 by the Dutch; this totally isolated civilization, without contact for several centuries with the outside world and believing itself alone in the world, destroyed its environment between the 15th and 17th centuries by felling all its trees to make logs to move these huge well-known stone statues, the Moai, which served as symbols of domination by priests or the powerful; soil erosion and the resulting loss of food production resources no longer made it possible to maintain a society initially estimated at between 6,000 and 30,000 people; in about 1680, revolts against the elites, a civil war and massacres including cannibalism reduced this population to some 30% of its initial population.

In Rwanda, according to Diamond, it was the country's disproportionate population growth of about 3% per year and the continuous reduction in the means available *per capita* to produce food that led to the massacre. All the cultivable land was exploited; the population had reached a density of 760 inhabitants per km², close to that of Great Britain, and was no longer able to feed itself given the agricultural methods used. In 1985, per capita food production, after increasing from 1966 to 1981, had fallen back to the 1960 level. It is the **shortage** that is said to have been the primary cause of the massacres, which is partly

confirmed by the massacre of Hutus by Hutus in areas where Tutsis were in a minority or absent. An ethnic conflict is indeed present, there are historically ancestral conflicts between the two communities, but Diamond's hypothesis is that the primary cause of the conflict is the scarcity of the resource, and that only then does the conflict become an ethnic, religious or cultural conflict, or is deliberately directed towards such a conflict through propaganda. In Rwanda, the scarcity of the resource was not water, it is a very humid country, but the availability of agricultural land on which to cultivate for food. This risk of shortage had been anticipated by Belgian agronomists (Wils et al., 1986), without any action being taken to avoid the crisis. But the same can happen with water-related conflicts, which can often be the primary cause of resource scarcity. It can then serve as a spark to revive ancestral conflicts linked to ethnicity, nomadism and religion.

Another similar case can be proposed: **that of Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso**. The civil war that broke out in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002-2011 is generally attributed to a political or ethnic conflict between supporters of President Gbagbo, referring to his Ivorian identity, against candidate Ouattara, of Burkinabe origin, who immigrated to Côte d'Ivoire with a large number of his fellow citizens. This is not a conflict between these two countries, but why did the Burkinabe come to Côte d'Ivoire so massively? It is certain that the scarcity of resources in Burkina, a Sahelian country with low water resources, due to population growth, adjacent to a more prosperous and water-rich wetland country, has certainly played a role (although not the only one) in these population migrations, which are actually quite common in Africa, depending on climate fluctuations. Here again, there is a risk of misunderstanding the root cause of conflicts, by limiting oneself to the political, ethnic or xenophobic nature of the clashes.

But **this type of conflict is not restricted to Africa**; for example, the immigration of Scandinavians and Irish to the United States in the 19th century, pushed out of their homes by famine, which indirectly led to the massacre of indigenous populations in North America. What about the current denominational conflict in **Central Africa**? Is it only denominational, or initiated by a scarcity of resources? The conflict in **Darfur** is also said to be a conflict caused by the lack of resources for the appropriation of means of production between sedentary farmers and nomadic herders, with ethnic or religious affiliation being only secondary. Are the current conflicts in **South Sudan**, which have been going on since 1955, of the same nature? They have been linked to two periods of severe drought (1967-1973 and 1980-2000) that caused widespread population displacements during which thousands of people died of hunger (Welzer, 2012). What about the current civil war in **Syria**? A recent study by Peter Gleick (2014) focuses on the droughts that hit Syria hard from 2006 to 2011, shortly before the start of the civil war. The lack of water has led to catastrophic harvests and rural immigration that has increased unemployment in cities and is said to have been the cause of the rebellion. The author shows that climate change is not the only cause: the construction of major upstream infrastructure by Turkey would have contributed to worsening the situation.

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