

Introducing

Catlan Reardon

Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at UC Berkeley and a Research Associate at the Center on the Politics of Development

Catlan Reardon is a Ph.D. Candidate in Political Science at UC Berkeley and a Research Associate at the Center on the Politics of Development. Her research interests include ethnic and political violence, leader political behavior, climate politics, and local development and governance in the developing world. In this piece, Catlan tells us where her interest in political science comes from, about her current work from Nigeria, and what she learned from working with Innovations for Poverty Action

Hi Catlan! You are currently a PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. You will complete your dissertation, which explores ethnic and political violence in Nigeria, in August 2022 (fingers crossed). What sparked your interest in studying political science in the first place?

My interest in political science—and ethnic/political violence, more specifically—began as an undergrad after taking a course on “Ethnonationalism” at Wake Forest. We were assigned a country to research where there had been conflict—mine ended up being the armed conflict between the Maoists and the then Nepalese Monarchy. Spurred by learning about the violence perpetrated during the conflict, I became very interested in what motivates people to participate in violence and in understanding how distinct these motivations were across different “types” (e.g. religious, ethnic, civil, rebellion, etc.) of conflict. Soon after graduating, I travelled to India for an internship with a small human rights organization in Raipur state, during which I travelled all over India and Nepal. This experience, coupled with completing a master’s in the Netherlands – during which I examined the extent to which Stathis Kalyvas’ theory of civil war applied to the



Chechen conflict – was formative in my understanding of the complex and often interlinked relationship between violence, politics, and development. After my master’s, I moved to Karamoja, Uganda, to work on a peacebuilding project between conflicting pastoralists, which set the stage for my work on farmer-herder violence in Nigeria today. I now focus on questions centered around what drives local responses to governance, climate change, and violence-related challenges.

Your current research explores the role of local leaders on ethnic and political violence in Nigeria. How would you explain ethnic and political violence occurring in Nigeria for someone unfamiliar with it?

”I think that the small insights you gain from day-to-day interactions can be incredibly helpful in developing research questions and understanding the specific quirks of the context you are studying.”

This is a question better suited for a book! But, the extremely abridged version is that violence in Nigeria is increasingly complex and multidimensional, all of which is exacerbated by weak governance, rapid population growth, and increasing climate-related environmental degradation. Nigeria faces multiple security and violence-related challenges across the country, some of which gain more traction in the news than others. The most prominent (in the news) include the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East and continued militancy in the Niger Delta in Southern Nigeria. However, there is also increased violence between farmers and herders, sporadic election-related violence, Biafran separatist discontent in the South-East, and general criminality that threatens the livelihoods of millions of Nigerians daily. My work is predominantly focused on violence between farmers and herders in the Middle Belt region (in North-Central Nigeria). Disputes and clashes over access to land and water often lead to tit-for-tat violence between the predominantly Muslim herders and Christian farmers. Violence, often spurred by resource competition, takes on a more communal dimension between different ethnic and religious groups. Further complicating the conflict situation is an increase in organized crime, including kidnappings, targeted killings, and cattle rustling—with more established groups such as Boko Haram increasingly stepping in to exploit the insecurity to their own ends.

For over three years, you worked for Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) in Uganda and Kenya. Considering that IPA is a very action-based organization, what was your biggest takeaway from working there?

I began my career working primarily in the practitioner/NGO space, but I soon realized that I was much more drawn toward the intersection of research and implementation. So, I transitioned from Mercy Corps to working with IPA on a micro-savings project led by several development economists. IPA offered me the opportunity to put my academic skills to practice in understanding which types of projects are most effective and why—focusing primarily on evaluating the effect of various development projects. I gained so much from working at IPA and living in East Africa for nearly four years. I got to work with amazing economists and manage several large-scale, on-the-ground fieldwork projects across two countries. Working on projects around micro-savings, technology adoption, and local health services broadened my perspectives and helped shape how I think about research problems more broadly. My biggest takeaways then have been two-fold. First, I credit my experience working with development economists (most notably, Pascaline Dupas) for the interdisciplinary approach I take, drawing on development economics and political science to tackle important theoretical and substantive problems in sub-Saharan Africa. Second, I strongly believe in the importance of spending significant time in your country of study. I think the small insights you gain from normal day-to-day interactions are incredibly helpful in developing research questions and understanding the specific quirks of the context you are studying.



Young fulani boy grazing cattle---a common source of disputes in North-Central Nigeria. Photo Credit: Catlan Reardon

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