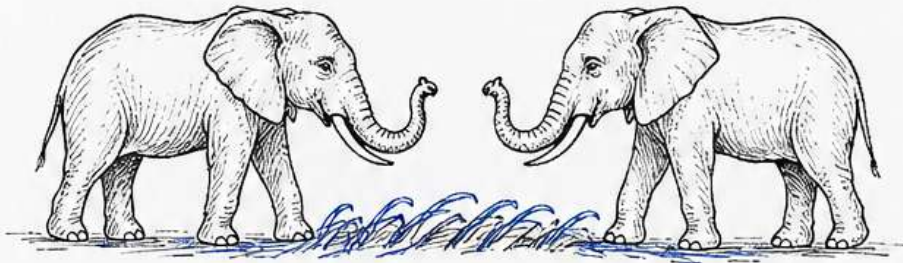


WHEN TWO ELEPHANTS FIGHT, IT IS THE GRASS THAT GETS TRAMPLED



On a quiet grassland, two elephants may begin a fight over space or authority. Their strength makes the struggle spectacular, but the grass beneath them has neither caused the quarrel nor chosen a side. Yet it receives every blow. This African proverb therefore contains a serious truth about public life: when powerful states, leaders, institutions or companies clash, the greatest cost is often paid by ordinary people and nature.

The “elephants” in the proverb are not necessarily evil. They may have genuine fears, interests and disagreements. The problem begins when power protects them from the consequences of their choices. The “grass” represents civilians, workers, small farmers, weaker countries, children, refugees and the environment. Unlike the powerful, they possess little bargaining power and few places of safety. Thus, the proverb is not merely against conflict. It asks a deeper ethical question: who pays for conflict?

This question has troubled political philosophy for centuries. In the Melian Dialogue, Thucydides presents the harsh logic that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." It describes a world where strength becomes its own justification. John Rawls offers the opposite moral test: "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions." If rules were made without knowing whether we would be strong or weak, rich or poor, we would surely design them to protect those most exposed to harm. Justice, therefore, begins when society looks at events from the level of the grass.

History repeatedly proves the proverb. Ancient wars between expanding powers destroyed villages that had little role in royal ambitions. Colonial rivalries converted distant lands into battlefields and treated local people as labour, resources or strategic numbers. During the two World Wars, decisions made in capitals led to hunger, displacement and death across continents. In the Cold War, major powers often avoided direct war but supported rival sides in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The elephants preserved their own territories while smaller societies experienced coups, proxy wars and prolonged instability.

Contemporary conflicts show the same pattern. Missiles may be directed at strategic targets, but families lose homes, schools close and hospitals run short of medicine. By the end of 2025, around 117.8 million people worldwide remained forcibly displaced, according to the United Nations refugee agency. Most did not shape the geopolitical disputes that uprooted them. Women face greater risks of exploitation, children lose years of education, and elderly people find flight especially difficult. A map shows borders and military positions; human life reveals broken routines, separated families and silent fear.

Economics also has its elephants. A trade conflict between large economies may be announced as a defence of national interest, yet higher tariffs can raise prices for consumers and reduce orders for small exporters. Sanctions can pressure governments, but poorly designed sanctions may also make food, fuel and medicines costlier for ordinary citizens. When large companies fight for market control, they may squeeze small suppliers, reduce workers to temporary contracts or use personal data without meaningful consent. Competition can improve products, but competition without fair rules transfers risk downward and profit upward.

The proverb is equally visible in domestic governance. When political parties remain locked in permanent confrontation, legislation, public appointments and welfare programmes can be delayed. When departments protect their authority instead of cooperating, the citizen must visit many offices for one service. Disputes between different levels of government may be constitutionally valid, but they should not interrupt health care, pensions or disaster relief. In a democracy, disagreement is necessary; making the citizen suffer for that disagreement is not.

Nature is perhaps the quietest grass. Armed conflict pollutes rivers, destroys forests, leaves toxic remains in soil and drives people into fragile ecosystems. Large development projects can create energy and employment, but a contest among governments, contractors and investors may ignore displaced communities and ecological limits. Climate change presents an even larger irony. Powerful economies debate finance, technology and responsibility, while small island communities, coastal families and rain-dependent farmers face risks they did little to create. Environmental justice requires those with greater historical contribution and capacity to carry a greater share of repair.

Geography explains why harm is unequal. Borderlands, sea routes, mineral-rich regions and river basins often become spaces of strategic competition. Their location gives them importance but not necessarily power. A village near a contested border cannot relocate as easily as capital can move. A country dependent on one commodity suffers when distant powers disrupt markets. Geography may place the grass under the elephants' feet; good institutions must prevent geography from becoming destiny.

At the personal level, too, the proverb is familiar. In a bitter family dispute, adults may believe that victory proves justice, while children absorb anxiety and insecurity. In an organisation, rivalry between senior officers can divide junior employees. On social media, conflicts among influential voices can turn ordinary citizens into hostile camps. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Harm pushed onto the weak does not remain isolated; it eventually weakens trust throughout society.

However, the proverb should not be read as an argument against every rivalry. States must sometimes defend citizens. Political opposition checks authority. Firms compete and thereby innovate. Social movements confront entrenched power. Even the grass is not always passive: small states form coalitions, workers organise, citizens vote, and vulnerable groups use law and public opinion. The real issue is whether competition follows rules, respects limits and gives affected people a voice.

The ethical response must operate at several levels. Internationally, diplomacy, mediation and reliable multilateral institutions should reduce the chance of direct or proxy war. Humanitarian law must protect civilians through distinction, proportionality and access to relief. Arms control is also essential: world military expenditure reached about 2.9 trillion dollars in 2025, showing how rapidly resources can move toward rivalry while human development needs remain immense.

Nationally, legislatures and courts must examine executive power, while transparent federal consultation can keep disputes from damaging services. Economic policy should protect workers and small enterprises through competition law, social security and fair transition support. Sanctions should contain humanitarian safeguards. Environmental decisions should include impact assessment, local participation, restoration and compensation. In technology, innovation must be joined with privacy, safety and reskilling.

Most importantly, those who bear the risk must sit at the decision-making table. Peace talks need the voices of affected communities and women. Development planning must listen to residents, not merely compensate them after decisions are complete. Climate negotiations must recognise the special vulnerability of poorer countries. This is not charity. It is democratic justice, because people are citizens and moral equals, not grass to be sacrificed.

The proverb finally teaches restraint. Power is not proved by the ability to crush opposition; it is proved by the ability to protect life even during disagreement. A mature state, institution or leader asks not only, "Can we win?" but also, "Who may be harmed, and how can that harm be prevented?" Conflicts may not disappear from human life, but their costs need not always fall on the least powerful. When elephants learn responsibility and the grass gains voice, strength and justice can stand on the same ground.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War, Book V — especially the Melian Dialogue, for the classical debate between power and justice.
2. John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, Harvard University Press — for fairness, equal liberty and institutions designed to protect the least advantaged.
3. Amartya Sen, The Idea of Justice, Harvard University Press — for public reasoning, human capability and the removal of visible injustice.
4. Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail — for the moral interdependence of people and the social consequences of injustice.
5. UNHCR, Global Trends 2025 and Figures at a Glance — for recent evidence on refugees, internal displacement and forced migration.
6. SIPRI, Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2025 — for contemporary data on global defence spending and international insecurity.
7. United Nations Environment Programme, From Conflict to Peacebuilding: The Role of Natural Resources and the Environment — for the environmental consequences of conflict and the importance of ecological recovery.