

MICROCON Public Launch Seminar Report

Seminar held at the Institute of Development Studies, 29th March 2007

Introduction

MICROCON's public launch took place on the 29th March 2007, and was intended both to provide more information for external stakeholders, and also to gain feedback from external academics, policymakers and NGO staff. This report provides a summary of the four talks that were given, as well as the discussions at the end of the seminar.

Lawrence Haddad, Director of IDS and Head of MICROCON's Advisory Board: Opening remarks

Lawrence discussed MICROCON and conflict related research at IDS. Firstly he talked about how the IDS Fortieth Anniversary roundtable discussions touched on conflict. Some people in developing countries criticised the predominant view of conflict as something that derails development, rather than as something that is integral to development. He went on to talk about IDS' other conflict work – three fellows have recently been recruited to work on security, and there are now five in total working on conflict.

He pointed out that it will be important for MICROCON to ensure a good balance between inductive and deductive, and etic and emic approaches, and to use its work to deliver macro-level insights if it is to be policy relevant.

Patricia Justino, MICROCON Director and IDS Fellow: MICROCON A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict

Patricia explained the rationale behind MICROCON, and discussed its activities and aims. Violent conflict affects millions of people every year across the world, and yet there are some important unanswered questions about them: *Who* are these people? *What* do they do? *Why* do they get affected by violence? *In what way*? *Are they part of the conflict*? *What led them into it*? At a fundamental level, conflict originates from people's behaviour and how they interact with society and their environment, and it is at this level that answers to these questions are to be found.

MICROCON is a European Commission funded research programme, coordinated by IDS. It is to be implemented over 5 years, from 2007 – 2011, by a multidisciplinary consortium based in 22 research institutes in 16 different countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America; comprising 60 named researchers; and 14 disciplines. The programme will be working with datasets from around 40 different countries.

The main purpose of the programme is to advance the field of conflict research through a micro-level, multi-disciplinary approach. It seeks to understand individual and group interactions leading to and resulting from violent conflict, looking at the entire conflict cycle. This understanding is intended to produce better informed domestic, regional and international conflict policy, which places individuals and groups at the centre of interventions.

The programme will build a new multidisciplinary conceptual framework that seeks to find answers to the following questions: *What* does violent mass conflict mean at the micro level? *Who* are the actors involved in violent mass conflicts? *Why* do violent mass conflicts take place? *How* do violent mass conflicts impact on individuals, their families and their social groups? *In which way* can we build conceptual linkages between micro level perspectives on violent mass conflicts and policy-making processes?

The ‘what’ question is tackled by the programme as a whole. The ‘who’ question is answered by research work packages on group formation and mobilisation; conflict and ethnic religious tensions; gender aspects of violent conflicts; and migration, displacement and refugees. The ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions are approached through work packages on risk, security and coping mechanisms; poverty, inequality and social exclusion; violent conflict and health outcomes; and governance and institutions. Finally the conceptual linkages with policy making processes are tackled through work packages on conflict in the European Neighbourhood; and evaluating conflict interventions.

Beyond the research activities, MICROCON has a training and mobility component, which will include the training of new doctoral students, funding for workshop participation and training activities, summer schools and building partnerships beyond the EU. The dissemination and communication component of the programme will seek to reach the policy and research communities, local representatives and civil society organisations and the wider public. It will circulate research and policy paper discussion series, policy briefings and programme newsletters, and annual workshops will be organised.

Further information can be found on the programme website, <http://www.microconflict.eu>, and the programme coordination team can be contacted on info@microconflict.eu.

Stathis Kalyvas, Arnold Wolfers Professor of Political Science and Director of the Program on Order, Conflict and Violence at Yale University – Micro level analysis of civil conflict

Stathis has been studying civil conflicts at the micro level for 10 years and talked about the opportunities presented by micro level analysis, the importance of theory, and made some points about methods, using case studies from Greece and Nepal.

There is a tendency in conflict research to focus at the macro level, but there are a range of problems with this kind of analysis including: data and measurement problems, over-aggregated concepts and problematic or absent micro foundations. Conflict analysis is generally conducted at three levels: the macro level (international and national context); the meso level (organisations and the local level); and the micro level (communities, households and individuals). The big challenge for research is how to connect these three levels. There are several areas that conflict research needs to find out more about including: different types of war and warfare, the organisation of warfare, types of governance during conflict, relations with civilians and the organisation of violence.

Every kind of method can be used in micro level research, and it is important to combine methods. This can be difficult, but MICROCON has a large consortium with different skills, so it could take on this challenge. Geography can also be important in analysis, and it is important to take into account the complex geographical patterns of conflict and control. There are some general problems when studying conflict at the micro level, such as observational equivalence, endogeneity and measurement issues such as selection bias and over- and under-counting.

Kalyvas went on to illustrate some potential problems by looking at three papers analysing the conflict in Nepal, which have a number of common problems, including: Data drives the projects, there is a level of analysis problem; the mobility of both fighters and populations is ignored; there is a lack of theoretical intuitions about the dynamics of the war and the fact that war may have an independent effect on the patterns of violence; lack of direct evidence/direct sources; thin descriptions; lack of recognition that conflict is not war and war is not violence; and it is unclear what violence is proxying for.

He went on to discuss his work, 'The Logic of Violence in Civil War'. The key theoretical concept in this book is control, i.e. the degree of government that organisations exercise on civilian populations. This is often the deciding factor in civil wars, and civilian support is important for the outcome of the conflict. The book is based on his study of the Argolid region of Greece in the civil war of 1943-1944: he undertook 10 months of fieldwork looking at the operationalisation of control and violence, carrying out 215 recorded interviews with 'ordinary' people, and looking at local memoirs and local histories, as well as local, national and international archives.

He discussed this work in order to demonstrate the superiority of self-generated data: If he had relied on off-the-shelf data he would have undercounted selective violence; been unable to distinguish between indiscriminate and selective violence; and been unable to disaggregate by time. He also explained that the micro level study of conflict cannot be reduced to the study of micro level data, and that theoretical and conceptual work is essential and impacts decisively on results.

Joán Esteban, Research Professor at the Institut d'Anàlisi Econòmica CSIC and Coordinator of Polarization and Conflict – The Measurement of Social Polarisation: Using Micro Data to Understand Conflict

Joan's talk was complementary to Stathis', as rather than looking at the dynamics of conflict itself, it focussed on the factors which may lead people from cooperative interaction to a costly non-cooperative interaction. When working with micro data there is masses of information and it is important to have a well defined conceptual framework. The main concept presented in the talk was that of polarisation, which results from a sense of group identification and inter-personal alienation.

Conventional measures of inequality have one aspect in common – they all conform to the 'principle of progressive transfers', which posits that every income transfer from a richer to a poorer person reduces inequality. The concept of polarisation challenges this, because even transfers from richer people to poorer people may serve to create distinct groups with distinct objectives from each other. Hence if we are studying inequality in relation to conflict, the principle of progressive transfers is not necessarily suitable.

There are two main qualities that the measure of polarisation has: Firstly it should be global – it should look at the entire distribution. The principle of progressive transfers is a local measure that only looks at the person losing income, and the person receiving income. Secondly it should take into account non-linearity: the principle of progressive transfers assumes that if income is continuously transferred from richer to poorer people, then inequality decreases continuously. This process is not necessarily progressive with polarisation – for example, if two distinct groups move apart to become more polarised, as this process is taking place, more than two groups may be created, thus decreasing polarisation.

Polarisation is viewed as the sum of interpersonal antagonisms, which have two major driving forces: the sense of identification with one's own group, and the feeling of alienation with respect to other groups. A game theoretical model has been elaborated from this concept, which has been applied in a number of contexts.

Joan went on to demonstrate why the concept of polarisation matters empirically, by looking at the countries of the Mediterranean Basin in the period 1961 – 2000. He also demonstrated how the concept can be useful, using data from the World Value Surveys. We can, for example, get an interesting portrait of societies by plotting the polarisation index along three dimensions – conservatism, political views and religiosity. Using these data and the concept

of polarisation we can answer a number of questions such as: How do personal characteristics influence individual attitudes? Is radicalism in the different dimensions correlated? Which is the most divisive dimension? What is the relation between social polarisation and conflict?

Discussions

Discussions touched on a range of different issues including:

- *Will the programme be innovative methodologically, including making use of participatory methodologies?*
There are many projects in MICROCON, and some of them will be using quantitative methods, some will be using qualitative methods, among them participant observation and participatory techniques. Some projects will combine both sets of methods, and will hopefully be able to learn from each other.
- *How will the programme link micro level insights with macro level policy – what about all the levels in between?*
There is a research Work Package that links the local level with the effectiveness of interventions that are, in the aid context, international in nature. But it's not an idea of a bridge which takes off at one end and comes down at the other end without touching all the things which come underneath – the whole MICROCON programme focuses on the micro level, but also tries to bring in the macro level, and to acknowledge the existence of institutions, groups and the meso level.
- *In 2011, what will the programme have to say to policymakers, and what will they do differently as a result of our work?*
Much of the policy focus after a conflict may be on, for example, the new ministers in a coalition government, but our work will tell donors how poor people are responding to conflict, and how donors can concentrate their efforts on them. For example how poor farmers' investment behaviour is affected by conflict.

However, although this is a big programme by any standards, the 'micro' field is so much bigger and more diverse than the macro one that it may not provide some of the seemingly easy answers that the macro level provided, even if we try to synthesise it. We are not doing 'blue skies' research though, and we are aiming to help policymakers. We are producing knowledge, expertise and capacity, and the programme should encourage more researchers to enter the field. This may not make your work any easier, but it should give you a greater awareness of the difficulties of conflict work and make you more sensitive. It will also provide you with more people who have the knowledge to help you carry out reconstruction programmes in specific post conflict environments, who are aware of the conflict issues in carrying out such programmes.