

## Mobilising Individuals to Collective Political Violence



Militants from the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta with hostages. The militia have relentlessly attacked the oil industry in Nigeria. © Dulue Mbachu/IRSN

### •What causes individuals to embrace collective political violence?

**Summary:** In collective political violence, the processes through which the entrepreneurs of violence and their followers seal temporary loyalties around a violent enterprise need to be explored, recognising the complex heterogeneity of drivers of violent engagement. These include identity production, socio-economic factors and the activation of horizontal and vertical networks. A variety of factors shape armed groups' behaviours over time, including explicit training, collective learning and violent socialisation. However, the evolution of armed groups also depends on outside influences, including civilians' attitudes, and agencies' and states' actions. This implies there is room for intervention, but only if it is contextually informed.

### Introduction

An important lesson from MICROCON research is that processes of violent engagement are often endogenous to violent conflict. War produces the fighters rather than the opposite. Early cross-country statistical analyses of conflicts overlooked the reality that the magnitude of violence can only be understood dynamically and cannot be inferred from pre-conflict conditions.

Collective violence is generally perpetrated by organised outfits whose leaders self-consciously recruit followers. For non-state combat organisations, choosing the right 'applicant' is vital. Careless open entry recruitment policies pose a men-

ace to groups' logistical viability. Recruitment is costly. Practically, rebel aspirants need to be reached and, once enlisted, their physical and mental fitness for combat must be tested.

### Political entrepreneurs

It is important to establish a distinction between entrepreneurs of violence and their followers. Firstly, entrepreneurs of violence use carefully crafted narratives in the hope of gaining sympathy, and, possibly, funding. Secondly, they activate horizontal networks of potential allies as well as vertical bonds to gather following among agents disposed to use violence. Finally, the techniques they employ are likely

to change over time due to the volatile environment in which they take place.

Rebel recruitment is the encounter of at least two agencies. Hiring new fighters is a trickier operation than just tapping into a reserve army of serviceable and obedient soldiers, whether 'opportunist' (driven by immediate prospects of profit) or 'activist' (recruits mobilised through social bonds and who are less attracted by quick material rewards). Therefore, it is useful to portray recruitment as a matching process whereby the strategic needs of the combat organisation are met with the aspirations of would-be fighters. As a result, the fighters' observable

traits should be seen as the outcome of a temporary and mutable match between their leaders' recruitment policies, organisational constraints and individual expectations.

### **Individual motivations**

The logic of followers generally differs from that of their leaders, and behaviours observed in the course of war are endogenously produced, not only within armed groups but also under the influence of civilians' attitudes and agencies and, crucially, state's actions. Collective violence is never strictly produced by actors alien to the social world they live in. Individual trajectories of radicalisation or collective drifts toward violence generally result from a combination of intra-group interactions and external interventions.

For instance, among followers, horizontal networks, made of friends, immediate relatives or neighbours may be at play again and help violence percolate. Comparing the profiles of Nigerian rioters and non-rioters in Kaduna and Jos, Scacco (2010) suggests that strong social connectedness at ward level (the smallest urban unit in Nigeria) is a significant predictor of participation in riots.

Agents may join irregular armed groups voluntarily or be coerced to do so. However, many authors have challenged pure coercion models and argue that people submitted to intense oppressive orders may still mobilise agentive capacities to alleviate the abuses they suffer or simply survive (Bjørkhaug 2010). Forced recruitment, researchers argue, is often a category constructed by non-governmental organisations dealing with ex-combatants, and children in particular,

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based on the assumption that they do not have adaptive resources.

In circumstances of extreme asymmetries of power between the rulers and the ruled, avoidance tactics are elaborated and reciprocal brutalisation emerges as a valid survival strategy. 'Choiceless choices' abound in civil wars yet one may consider that the decision to join an armed group can, in most cases, be weighed against alternative options. For instance, when civilians feel at risk of indiscriminate repression by armed opposition, then armed groups may constitute safe refuges. Bøås and Hatløy (2008) find similar results in Liberia. While analyses of participation generally insist on 'pull' factors as perceived by combatants, here, 'push' factors are central.

Many studies have also explored the relationship between poverty and violence on the individual

level. Their findings are equivocal. Krueger and Maleckova (2003) research the profiles of suicide bombers in the Middle East and come to the conclusion that terrorism 'is more accurately viewed as a response to political conditions and long-standing feelings of indignity and frustration that have little to do with economics' (p. 119). Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) do find a significant relationship between poverty and individual enlistment in Sierra Leone's

Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in the 1990s. But their econometric analysis yields much richer results: lack of access to education; material incentives to join; pre-existing social connections within the armed factions; or the search for safety under the auspices of armed groups all are significant predictors of enlistment. The authors therefore stress the coexistence

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Libyan rebel fighters on their way to battle against pro-Gaddafi forces.  
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of multiple 'logics of participation... in a single civil war' (p. 437).

### **Policy implications**

Processes of collective violent mobilisation are complex, contingent and highly diverse. They derive from combinations of loyalty-sealing activities between heterogeneous agents disposed to take up arms. This gives room for policy action preventing violence to break up or resume. Preventing violent initiatives from percolating might be key. MICROCON's evidence suggests that only contextually informed actions may help, taking on board local characteristics such as the history of violence, the profiles of the combatants, and the personal inclinations of the leaders, their local popularity and their social and political connections. This does not guarantee success but it minimises the sure loss attached to decisions based on false assumptions.

### **Credits**

This Policy Briefing was written by Yvan Guichaoua, Researcher on MICROCON's Project 2, 'Motives for fighting and group mobilisation' and Lecturer in Politics and International Development at the University of East Anglia.

The views expressed in this briefing are the author's alone.

### **Further reading**

Bjørkhaug, I., 2010. Child Soldiers in Colombia: The Recruitment of Children into Non-state Violent Armed Groups. MICROCON Research Working Paper 27, Brighton: MICROCON. [http://www.microconflict.eu/publications/RWP27\\_IB.pdf](http://www.microconflict.eu/publications/RWP27_IB.pdf)

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Scacco, A., 2010. *Who Riots? Explaining Individual Participation in Ethnic Violence*. New York: Columbia University.

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