

MICROCON Policy Briefing 5

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NPA Guerillas in the Philippines © Keith Bacongo

•How do violent conflicts and non-peaceful ways of living and governing become viable strategies?

•What are the vectors and dynamics of mobilisation?

•How can policy tackle some of the major long-term causes, and triggers of, violence?

How Can We Prevent Violence Becoming a Viable Political Strategy?

Summary: A basic issue that conflict analysis investigates is how non-peaceful ways of living and governing become viable political strategies. Macro-level studies provide some important insights but micro-level analysis is vital to understand the mechanisms that make violence possible. This briefing outlines some preliminary findings in this respect from MICROCON, a major research programme analysing violent conflict at the micro level. It also discusses their implications for policies aimed at preventing the (re-)eruption of violent conflicts. An important overall insight is the variety and combination of motives involved in each case. Given this complexity, policy strategies need to be based on a micro-level appreciation of people's strategies for coping with vulnerabilities to both poverty and violence.

1. Introduction

One of the most basic questions that conflict analysis asks is how violent conflicts and non-peaceful ways of living and governing become viable strategies. Violent conflicts kill and injure thousands of people every year, and have a number of long-lasting effects that impede economic, political and social development.

Since the mid-1990s macro-level conflict studies have been providing important insights into the causes of violent conflict. However, the underlying top-down approach of macro-level analysis is not equipped

to deal with fundamental individual and group dimensions of violent conflicts. In the past few years the study of violent conflicts at the micro-level has been gaining ground, and the fine-grained analysis of such studies is vital to understand the mechanisms and channels that make violence a possible strategy amongst other forms of group behaviour.

This briefing outlines some of the preliminary findings from a MICROCON, a major research programme analysing violent conflict at the micro level. It also discusses their implications for policies aimed at preventing the (re-)eruption of vi-

olent conflicts.

2. The importance of micro-level analysis

Macro-level conflict analyses have provided some important findings, but have significant limitations that prevent in-depth understanding of the causes of conflicts. For example, low GDP per capita has been found to be a robust determinant of civil war. However this does not tell us anything about the individual behaviour underlying this trend, and it could have at least five different explanations:

1. People are unemployed, and so join a rebel group as an alternative source of income
2. Employment may be possible, but joining rebel groups may lead to increased earnings
3. Grievances against government and societal norms (inequalities, ethnic/religious exclusion)
4. The low capacity of governments in poor countries to protect civilians against violence
5. The low capacity of governments to win battles and defeat rebel groups

Finding the ‘right’ explanation in each case (and there can be more than one at work at the same time), makes a difference for the choice of policy to stop violent conflict: should it be counter-insurgency, employment generation, safety nets or local crime reduction? Micro-level analysis is vital for providing the information to make these choices.

3. Micro-level findings on the eruption of violence

MICROCON is a five year research programme comprising 30 different projects that have been investigat-

malnutrition and more starvation. Our research finds that rain shocks do not just increase malnutrition, they also increase the risk of conflict (though they do not necessarily cause it). For example, local leaders might be angry that the government did not provide food aid and they see their families starve, leading to a violent reaction; another mechanism is that when income goes down, young men may look for another source of income outside agriculture and may join a nascent rebellion: in other words there is a lower ‘opportunity cost’ of conflict.

A second event is price shocks. At the moment of harvest people want to sell their produce, and the income from these sales provide for their families’ welfare. If at the moment of harvest there is a negative price shock and the price of the crop that people have been working on for a whole year is a lot less than they thought, this can also increase conflict risk.

Horizontal inequalities

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ing micro-level conflict processes for the past two and a half years. At this mid-way point a number of preliminary findings are emerging on how violence becomes a viable strategy to change power relations.

Political economy factors

There are a number of factors that can affect poor people’s ability to provide for themselves and their families, which can increase the risk of conflict. Developing countries are highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture, and when rains stop there are smaller harvests than previous years, and there will be more

ally formed groups – ‘horizontal inequalities’ (HIs) – are a significant factor in promoting violence. These inequalities can be multi-dimensional and can encompass economic, social and political aspects.

Research on inequalities experienced by Muslims worldwide has shown that these inequalities can be important both on a national and global basis. There are deep HIs between Muslim populations and others – within European countries and within almost any developing country where there is a Mus-



A wrecked tank in Somalia © Carl Montgomery

lim population which is not in the majority, and also between Islamic and non-Islamic countries, and at a social, economic and political level (Stewart 2009). These inequalities can explain some mobilisation, and there are strong links and shared perceptions between Muslims in different parts of the world, such that inequalities experienced by Muslims in one part of the world can be a source of potential mobilisation in another part of the world.

The role of identity and discourse

The factors above are important underlying causes of mobilisations, which often need some kind of rallying point or vector to become violent mobilisation. This rallying point is often provided by discourses about identity. MICROCON research on Al Qaeda violence in Europe has found that a key factor in individuals’ mobilisation was the rhetoric that the organisation provided (Roy 2008). This allowed ‘rebels without a cause’ to connect with a cause: by detailed examination of the biographies of perpetrators of Al Qaeda’s violence we find that political ideology plays little role in their radicalisation, and they seem, rather, to have been attracted by the organisation’s narrative.

A different but related phenomenon has been observed in violent mobilisation in Africa. Here, the use of ethnic rhetoric has been particularly

powerful when used, often cynically, by politicians to channel people's resentments into violence. The cases of Côte d'Ivoire and Rwanda are particularly clear examples.

The dynamics of group mobilisation

MICROCON research on the dynamics of mobilisation reveals a variety of different motives. Research on an ethnic militia in Nigeria, the Oodua People's Congress has found that the primary motive for joining the organisation was a feeling of danger and the desire for protection against fuzzily defined risks, including criminality, and menace from other ethnic groups. A similar set of motives has been found in research in Côte d'Ivoire, where heavy-handed government repression has played an important role. This is a motivating factor not just because people are angry at the government, but also because they feel more secure within an armed group than as isolated citizens.

Research in Niger, amongst members of the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice has found more complex motives. Exclusion and marginalisation, especially ethnic marginalisation, seem to play an important role. Also, the lack of access to the riches associated with uranium mining and heavy-handed repression by the Nigerien military are significant. A further factor that



The house of a family displaced by violence in Somalia © Anna Lindley

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many analyses often miss is that people enjoyed being members of the organisation, which gave them an idealistic feeling of solidarity, and access to a fulfilling masculinity.

4. Policies to prevent the use of violence as a political strategy

An important overall insight of these preliminary findings is that there is a variety and combination of motives in each conflict – it is not possible to just talk about one that applies across conflicts. There are differences between leaders and followers; and also between individual motives and group motives. There are differences across conflicts, and causal factors also change over the course of conflicts. Given the complex range and combination of factors involved, policy strategies to prevent the (re-)emergence of violence need to be based on a micro-level appreciation of poor people's strategies for coping with vulnerabilities to both poverty and violence (Justino 2008).

Insurance Schemes to Protect Against Livelihood Shocks

In the case of rain shocks and price shocks, governments in poor countries should provide some insurance in the form of compensation for those affected. There is the possible issue of creating dependency through such a scheme, but this can be minimised if the insurance is given only when required. There are a number of ways of assessing need, for example through the Food and Agriculture Organisation's monitoring of harvests.

Multidimensional policies to tackle inequalities

Within the development policy agenda policies should be included to reduce the multidimensional aspects of horizontal inequality, such as educational, employment and cultural policies; and power-sharing arrangements – with the objective of building inclusive societies. To design these policies we need to know about these inequalities, which also means developing analytical and statistical tools to measure them.

Security and Development

There is much evidence to suggest that economic and social factors are major causes of civil unrest. However, governments often resort to the use of police and military to tackle such upheavals, rather than using policies that directly address the causes of discontent. Evidence from India suggests that while policing reduces conflict in the short term, the continued use of police has either inconsequential effects, or even leads to increases in rioting. On the other hand, transfers have a significant effect on the prevention and reduction of civil unrest, particularly in the medium term (Justino 2007).

However, a note of caution should be given: in current policy debates about the development-security nexus there is often the impression that security has become the major goal, and development has become a way of 'winning hearts and minds'. Our observations suggest that development should be a priority in itself, rather than just a part of a counter-insurgency doctrine. Although, as our findings suggest, security is an important priority for poor people, this does not just mean counter-in-

surgency but also the protection of vulnerable populations. This is directly linked to the attitudes of security services.

5. Conclusion

A more general point that has been raised by these preliminary findings is that policymakers often lack the necessary information to make important policy decisions to prevent violence breaking out. It is vital to have a micro-level picture of what is driving individual behaviour, but this is very difficult to come by in conflict-affected contexts. We need to develop better diagnostic tools to assess potentially violent situations, and to find ways to be more creative in how we gather information. These are challenges that MICROCON will be taking up in the second half of its operations.

Credits

This Policy Briefing was written by Patricia Justino, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

It is principally based on the findings of MICROCON Working Papers cited (see opposite), and on presentations and discussions at MICROCON's Third Annual Workshop.

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

Further reading

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http://www.microconflict.eu/publications/RWP13_FS.pdf



MICROCON, or 'A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict' is a five-year research programme funded by the European Commission, which takes an innovative micro level, multidisciplinary approach to the study of the conflict cycle.

Almost one third of the world's population lives in conflict-affected low-income countries. At a fundamental level, conflict originates from people's behaviour and how they interact with society and their environment - from its 'micro' foundations. Yet most conflict research and policy focuses on 'macro' perspectives. MICROCON seeks to redress this balance.

For more information on MICROCON, please visit our website:

<http://www.microconflict.eu>

Or contact us at

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