Community members at the site of a cargo plane chartered for African Union (AU) peacekeepers, which was shot down over Mogadishu, Somalia. © Abdurrahman Warsameh/IRSN

- **How do households respond in situations of conflict and violence?**

- **What coping strategies do they employ?**

Navigating Conflict: Households' Coping Strategies

Summary: Although affected by the shocks of conflict and violence, households are more than impotent victims. Within their own context (assets, motivations, perceptions, capabilities, resources and power relations) they adopt different coping strategies to 'navigate' through conflict. Many of these strategies, however, entail the depletion of assets, resulting in impacts that continue beyond the duration of conflict. Understanding the processes and coping strategies of households in different settings of conflict and tackling the effects of these on the resilience of households is key to an effective peace-building policy.

Introduction

Most conflict analysis and policy has typically looked into political violence from a regional, national or international perspective. This neglects the role households and individuals as either relegating them as impotent victims or places them as part of a collective target of violence. Individual agency is missing.

A dominant strategy in a conflict setting is not to become involved, i.e., trying to become neither a victim nor a perpetrator. Escaping is another. However, navigating the perilous waters of conflict is difficult and requires skills. Sometimes, possible strategies in one setting are not available in others. Staying, forced displacement or the need to choose sides are, given certain conditions, forced upon individuals and households.

The key questions are, therefore:

- What degree/level of choice do people have in conflict situations?

- What are the complex set of strategies and behaviours they may choose and how can they be observed and studied?

- How can research on household coping strategies inform policy-making?

Coping strategies

Rather than impotent victims of violence, households under conflict have some degree of agency. A set of coping strategies is open to households, including preferred neutrality ('sitting on the fence'), the reinforcement of solidarity links and increased altruistic behaviour, making choices on which assets to deplete or sell and which to try and protect, and strategic participation in violence.

However, conflict may cause death

and the disruption of the household, forced displacement, the loss of assets and disruption of social networks. The need to adapt to such shocks may lock households in a poverty trap which will endure even after the conflict.

When typical assets become liabilities

Typical assets in peaceful times may become liabilities during conflict. This may be wealth in one conflict, or education in another. Livestock, a typical traditional substitute of financial assets in rural areas, was targeted for looting in Rwanda, forcing households to reduce the numbers of own animals to a bare minimum. Teachers are often targeted and schools used by fighters for protection, making their use for education impossible. And, by definition, migration away from conflict almost always results in asset depletion.

This makes asset depletion under conflict a likely result, hindering the efforts of post-conflict reconstruction. In the case of protracted conflicts, generations of people may live in a context where certain assets are always viewed as liabilities. In order to avoid being attacked or robbed, certain individuals and households may prefer to stay poor.

Mobility under conflict

The particular case of migrants and people forcibly displaced by violence is one where micro-level research has uncovered important hidden insights. Mobility is not merely the automatic and reactive response to conflict. Even in cases of forced displacement, mobility, as a coping strategy, is produced not only by events and the search for security. Mobility and displacement are also

motivated as strategic household responses and by perceptions of how assets, capabilities, resources and power relations might be best sustained of protected. Understanding this also helps in realising how migration proceeds ('who moves where and how'), the impacts of conflict on migrants ('who copes how') and, finally, the impacts of migration on conflict and conflict-afflicted societies, including those in hosting countries.

Beyond the already known impacts of conflict on displaced households, MICROCON research uncovered the significane impacts which arise from the destruction of risk-sharing mechanisms and the adoption of coping strategies which trade short-term gains for long-term losses, which results in chronic long term poverty.

It also highlighted the increased vulnerability of displaced women. While displacement may potentially provide opportunities for the changing role of women within the household, the higher propensity for domestic violence among the displaced and the reversal of acquired rights at the moment of return, render these gains inconsistent. As the studies show, these opportunities are either misconceived, leading to practical obstacles, or they are neglected.

Improving research

The research promoted by MICROCON has allowed us to learn more about households' behaviour and the limitations of their coping strategies under, after and out of conflict.

It also revealed the difficulties in collecting data under conflict. Under the MICROCON programme, we witnessed the use of increasingly diverse and complementary research methodologies, from anthropological participant observation, to the use of national and local surveys, to field experiments.

There is, however, the need to go deeper. MICROCON proposes a set of advances in questionnaire design so as to capture as many aspects of a conflict as possible by individual and household level interviews in order to obtain detailed data. Who, what, where and when questions can be linked to asset, income, gender, employment, education and health information.

Although academic research has its own logic (driven by scientific methodology and requirements) and runs the risk of becoming removed of the needs of policymakers, MICROCON research of households' coping strategies uncovered relevant key criteria for more effective post-conflict policies:

- Conflict recovery requires much more than short-term livelihood adjustment. It needs sustainable and long term policies to recover assets, social capital and welfare losses as well as programmes to develop sustainable income.

- Conflict and resulting displacement change how personal and household assets are perceived. Policymakers should focus on the resilience of people and, whilst supporting con-

> **In the case of protracted conflicts, generations of people may live in a context where certain assets are always viewed as liabilities.**

sumption needs, must also allocate resources to the recovery of productive capacity – through, for example, financial savings and education – and fostering the recovery and accumulation of these assets.

- Lessons should be learned from those households that have managed to recover. Key aspects of such recovery include additional income sources, allocated to productive capacity, and the reconstruction of social networks.

- Interventions, particularly with respect to young people displaced by violence, must find means of tapping into the constructive agency of individuals in war-affected environments, rather than simply regarding them as conflict risks, social outcasts or welfare assistance dependents.

- Patterns of mobility in conflict situations are complex and improvised but rarely random. This has significant implications for agencies seeking to develop strategies and policies for protecting and assisting forcibly displaced populations.

- Policymakers must be better attuned to the reversing the high social costs of displacement on women in relation to female disempowerment and intergenerational transmission of violence within the household - the latter a significant outcome of conflict.

- Policymakers should better recognise the significant protection gaps which arise for refugees and internally displaced persons in the fast-moving displacement conditions precipitated by conflict. Community-led processes of registration and protection may be more trusted, reliable and inclusive.

- The lived experience and needs of populations and the reality of each conflict is always specific. There is a need to work with and in local existing realities, and the socio-economic dynamics of conflict environments, not simply with pre-existing frameworks and presumed needs of conflict affected populations.

Male elders take stock of damage to their village Maker Abior, alegedly torched by northern Peoples' Defense Forces and Sudan Armed Forces. © Tim Freccia

Further reading
MICROCON Publications on Migration, Displacement and Refugees
http://www.microconflict.eu/projects/migration_displacement.html

MICROCON Publications on Risk, Security and Coping Mechanisms
http://www.microconflict.eu/projects/risk_security_and_coping.html

Verwimp, P., 2011. Household Strategies for Navigating Violent Conflict: Livelihoods and Coping. PowerPoint Presentation, MICROCON Conference 2011 proceedings, Brighton: MICROCON.
http://www.microconflict.eu/events/PVerwimp%20session%203.ppt

Zetter, R. and Purdekova, A., 2011. Violent Conflict and Mobility – A Micro Analysis. Conference Paper, MICROCON Conference proceedings, Brighton: MICROCON.
http://www.microconflict.eu/events/RZetter_Purdekova_MICROCON%20Paper.pdf

MICRO
CON
A MICRO LEVEL ANALYSIS
OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

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

SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME