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Helpdesk Research Report

Non-political drivers of violence

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Question

Please identify and summarise recent literature on non-political drivers of violence. Any insights on middle-income country fragility/conflict would be particularly useful.

Contents

1. Overview

Much of the existing research on drivers of violence focuses on political drivers of violence such as ethnicity and ideology. However, a growing body of literature also looks at non-political drivers of violence. These, often inter-related factors, include:

- **Climate change and environmental degradation**: There is limited evidence to suggest that there is a causal link between climate change and environmental degradation and violence. However, climate change can exacerbate existing fragile situations leading to outbreaks of violence.

- **Urbanisation**: Many studies suggest that there is a link between urbanisation and violence. However, the extent of this connection has not been established, as there are many rapidly growing cities, like Tokyo, Japan, that have very low levels of crime and violence.

- **Demographic pressures**: Youth bulges are often associated with increases in violence and conflict. However, population growth alone does not lead to violence and conflict. Rather, associated pressures on health and social services, as well as a lack of opportunities for young people can lead to outbreaks of violence.

- **Organised crime**: In some countries organised crime is responsible for more violent deaths than civil conflict. Organised crime is therefore more directly linked to violence than the other factors discussed in this paper. Political drivers of violence and organised crime sometimes overlap, as a number of rebel groups also engage in criminal activity.

  The evidence on the links between the drug trade and violence is inconclusive. There is some evidence to suggest that violence and conflict are more prevalent in areas where drugs are produced than in countries which are transit points for drug traffickers. However, there is also evidence to suggest that countries that serve as transit points for drug traffickers are particularly vulnerable to violence.

- **Technology:** While new technology is generally associated with positive impacts in fragile states, access to the internet and social media can also lead to violence by making information available that fuels discontent among disaffected citizens. This effect was witnessed during the Arab Spring. However, access to technology alone does not lead to violence, rather it can exacerbate existing political and economic drivers of violence.

This study looks at the above drivers of violence, with a particular focus on Middle Income Countries (MICs), such as Nigeria, Pakistan, and South Sudan. This is because an increasing proportion of fragile states are MICs. However, there appears to be little evidence that certain drivers of violence are particularly prevalent in MICs. The extensive body of literature on drivers of violence suggests that the causes of violence and conflict are always complex, and that fragility and conflict tend to be the result of a combination of political and non-political factors. Non-political drivers of violence often serve as 'threat multipliers' exacerbating existing political and economic drivers of violence. Organised crime may be an exception as it is more directly linked to violence than the other factors discussed in this report.

2. Non-political drivers of violence

Climate change and environmental degradation

Much of the literature on the links between climate change and environmental degradation and violence highlights the limited evidence available on this connection. A USIP report notes that one must be cautious when drawing lines of causation between climate change and conflict, as conflict has many causes (Sayer, 2011, p. 4). However, an OECD report finds that while there is limited evidence that climate change and environmental degradation lead to conflict, they almost always serve as 'threat multipliers' in fragile situations (OECD, 2013, p. 102). This point is also made in an International Alert report, which states that climate change alone will not cause violent conflict. Rather, the interaction between the effects of climate change and factors such as poverty, poor governance, a history of ethno-nationalist politics, and the legacy of previous armed conflicts will increase the risk of violent conflict (Smith and Vivekananda, 2007, p. 13). The same report identifies 46 conflict-affected countries that are likely be affected by a combination of climate change and the above factors to create a high risk of conflict. It also identifies a further 56 countries that are at risk of serious political instability and violent conflict in the long term as a result of the consequences of climate change (Smith and Vivekananda, 2007, p. 17). A significant number of the countries in both categories are MICs.

One of the theories on the connection between climate change and conflict is based on the idea that climate change has a detrimental effect on economic growth thereby increasing the risk of conflict. However, two quantitative studies find that climate variability and climate-related natural disasters do not have an impact on violent conflict via their detrimental effects on economic growth (Koubi et al, 2012; Bergholt and Lujala, 2012). A number of possible reasons for this finding are suggested by the authors. The first is that citizens may not blame a government for the economic consequences of climate-related natural disasters, as these might be viewed as being outside of the government's control (Bergholt and Lujala, 2012, p. 160). Another explanation posited is that people affected by a disaster may view the economic consequences as being temporary, expecting life to return to normal, in economic terms, after a relatively short period of time (Bergholt and Lujala, 2012, p. 160). It is also suggested that disasters can have unifying effects, detracting from other grievances and actually reducing the risks of conflict (Bergholt and Lujala, 2012, p. 160). Finally, the authors suggest that economic growth and income may not be as important sources of conflict as previously thought (Bergholt and Lujala, 2012, p. 160).

One quantitative study finds that climate change related rainfall variability has a significant impact on large- and small-scale incidences of conflict in Africa, with wetter years experiencing more violent events (Hendrix and Salehyan, 2012, p. 36). The authors argue that water shocks may result in conflict for a number of reasons. The first of these is their effect on resource competition (Hendrix and Salehyan, 2012, p. 36). Water shocks may also result in conflict because they can lead to poor macroeconomic outcomes, by causing displacement, loss, and crop failure, which can hurt overall economic productivity (Hendrix and Salehyan, 2012, p. 38). Water shock related increases in food prices led to mass protests and food riots in a number of countries in 2008 and 2011 (Hendrix and Salheyan, 2012, p. 38). Migration as a result of water shock related pressure on livelihoods can also lead to conflict due to changes in ethnic settlement patterns and by increasing pressure on basic services in urban areas (Hendrix and Salheyan, 2012, p. 38).

The findings of Hendrix and Salehyan's study are supported by another quantitative study that looks at the impact of rainfall variations in East Africa on small-scale conflict (Raleigh and Kniveton, 2012). This second study finds that unusually dry periods increase rates of rebel conflict and unusually wet conditions result in higher rates of communal conflict (Raleigh and Kniveton, 2012, p. 51). This is likely to be because in East Africa rainfall provides an indicator of resource availability through its impact on natural and agricultural resources (Raleigh and Kniveton, 2012, p. 62). However, the authors argue that political and economic instabilities are a prerequisite for rainfall variations to lead to conflict (Raleigh and Kniveton, 2012, p. 62).

An International Alert report predicts that MICs making the transition from agricultural production to industry, such as China and India, will be particularly badly affected by water scarcity resulting from climate change (Smith and Vivekananda, 2007, p. 13). This is due to growing demand for already stressed and depleted water resources. Conflict risks are associated with poor management of scarce water resources and with the politicisation of water scarcity by seeking a scapegoat on which to blame water shortages (Smith and Vivekananda, 2007, p. 13). Conflicts also take place when countries share major rivers. Countries and regions that have experienced or are likely to be affected by violent conflict over water rights are China, India, Mexico, the Middle East, Southern Africa, and Central Asia (Smith and Vivekananda, 2007, p. 13).

Nigeria is an example of a middle-income country that is vulnerable to climate change. A USIP report finds that the country is vulnerable to three different types of climate shifts that could potentially contribute to conflict. The first is that Nigeria is likely to experience higher temperatures and less rain. Secondly, the country is likely to experience more severe weather. Thirdly, the southern coastline is likely to experience

significant sea-level rises (Sayer, 2011, p. 3). An example of existing links between climate change and conflict in Nigeria is the farmer-herder conflicts. Desertification and drought have been partly responsible for feed and water shortages, causing nomadic pastoralists to move south beyond their normal grazing routes (Sayer, 2011, p. 3). Weather-related factors have also resulted in farmers having to cultivate more land, leaving less land for nomadic pastoralists to water and graze their stock. Conflict between the two groups may have resulted in the deaths of several hundred people since 1999 (Sayer, 2011, p. 3).

Urbanisation

While many cities experience chronic urban violence, not all cities are equally violent, and violence in cities is not inevitable (Brender, 2012, p. 7). The research summarised below suggests that a multiplicity of factors affect urban violence, and there are no clear trends.

A summary of a baseline study on the nexus between urbanisation, poverty and violence, focusing on Latin America and the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, finds that there is no definite correlation between cities and violence (Brender, 2012, p. 7). Moreover, recent studies find that urban violence is the result of multiple drivers of violence rather than the result of a single factor (Brender, 2012, p. 7).

Many studies have found that it is the pace of urbanisation rather than urbanisation itself which increases the risk of violence. However, this is not always the case as there are fast-growing cities like Tokyo, Japan, which have very low crime rates (Brender, 2012, p. 8).

Cities are not always more violent than rural areas. Densely populated cities like Dhaka and Mumbai, for example, have murder rates that are below national averages (Brender, 2012, p. 8). Moreover, some types of violence are more prevalent in rural areas than in cities. An example is violence against women (World Bank, 2011, p. 17).

Researchers find that while income inequality and inequality across different groups in urban areas appear to promote violence, income does not appear to have a clear impact on levels of violence (Brender, 2012, p. 8). Literature on Pakistan indicates that stark socio-economic disparities are a contributing factor to crime and militancy in rapidly growing urban centres (International Crisis Group 2014). Various factors are identified in the literature on urban violence in Pakistan, including income inequality, ownership of land and property, and uneven access to social services and economic opportunities (Ghani, 2012).

Urbanisation can increase competition for resources, such as land, water and housing. For example, in Karachi, Pakistan, competition for land and real estate has resulted in 'violent turf wars' (Hinds, 2014, pp. 2-3). In a report for the United States Institute for Peace, Yusuf (2012) notes that criminal gangs in Karachi orchestrate land grabs, and organise the division and sale of encroached land. Land grabs have caused clashes between political parties who compete for territorial control of the cities, and between different ethnic groups. In 2011, conflict over land between Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) workers and members of the 'Pashtun land mafia' in Gulzar-e-Hijri lead to city-wide riots in which twenty-three people were killed (Yusuf, 2012).

Urbanisation can also result in increased levels of violence in post-conflict settings (Saferworld, 2011). An NGO article focusing on South Sudan notes that the majority of post-conflict countries experience a rapid rise in both political and non-political urban violence and crime after armed conflict ends (Saferworld, 2011, p. 1). Young men in particular tend to be drawn to cities in the belief that they will find better economic

opportunities there. However, often the reality of urban life does not meet their expectations (Saferworld, 2011, pp. 1-2). The presence of large numbers of unemployed young men in urban areas can result in the formation of gangs. In the case of South Sudan, urban areas have experienced rapid population growth and cities like Juba and Torit have experienced a marked increase in urban gangs both with and without a political agenda. These gangs are believed to be responsible for a significant rise in urban violence and crime in South Sudan (Saferworld, 2011, p. 2).

One journal article focusing on Central America argues that while the changing nature of violence in the region has widely been portrayed as a shift from political to social violence, this is not an accurate portrayal of the situation. Instead, the article argues that urban violence in Central America is in many ways a continuation of past rural political conflicts set in new spatial contexts (Rodgers, 2009, p. 18). The article notes that the majority of urban violence in Central America takes place between the poor inhabitants of slums (Rodgers, 2009, p. 18).

Demographic pressures

High population growth rates, youth bulges, and the resulting burden on health and social services, as well as the resulting lack of socioeconomic and political opportunities have the potential to lead to violence (OECD, 2013). However the evidence on the links between demographic pressures and violence is inconclusive, with some studies finding that a causal link between the two does exist, while others find that this is not the case. Moreover, it seems clear that demographic pressures alone do not cause conflict, but rather that they can contribute to conflict when combined with a range of other factors, such as lack of economic opportunity or environmental degradation.

A briefing paper by the Population and Sustainability Network notes that demographic pressures are used as an indicator of conflict risk in a number of early warning systems and indicators of state capacity, such as Foreign Policy and the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index (PSN, 2012, p. 4). One of the population related factors that can contribute to conflict is demographic and environmental stress (PSN, 2012, p. 7). This is the idea that a combination of population pressures, environmental degradation, and poverty can result in competition over scarce natural resources that can lead to violence and conflict (PSN, 2012, p. 7). Sudan is an example of a country that has experienced this phenomenon. In Darfur, a combination of increasing population density and drought have increased ethnic tensions and have led to violent competition for land and water between agriculturalists, nomads, and pastoralists (PSN, 2012, p. 9).

One working paper finds that there does not appear to be a link between high population growth and armed conflict resulting from population pressures on productive land and natural resources at the country level (Urdal, 2011, p. 9). However, there does appear to be a link between these factors at a local level (Urdal, 2011, p. 10). The same study finds that there is a link between youth bulges and an increased risk of armed conflict when young people have limited access to education and to participation in governance, and when there are low levels of economic development (Urdal, 2011). Youth bulges are believed to have been one of the factors behind the Arab Spring uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. In Egypt for example, unemployment amongst the country's large youth population was a significant cause of discontent (PSN, 2012, p. 7). There is also some evidence that youth bulges explain some forms of organised violence in cities (Brender, 2012, p. 8).

Organised crime

A report by the International Peace Institute notes that while violent deaths as a result of civil conflict have been reducing since the end of the Cold War, some countries face higher murder rates due to crime than those experienced during conflict (Locke, 2012, p. 2).

About half of the illicit transactions taking place around the world take place in countries that have weak law enforcement mechanisms, low levels of economic well-being, insufficient government capacity, and that are experiencing significant societal divisions (Locke, 2012, p. 1). In these contexts transnational criminal networks often exacerbate these weaknesses and erode state legitimacy by incentivising corruption, infiltrating state structures, and competing with the state in service provision (Locke, 2012, p. 1).

According to one UNODC report that looks specifically at the drug trade, large-scale cultivation of coca or opium requires territorial control and is therefore often linked with insurgency (2012, p. 17). However, the report argues that in drug transit areas the quickest way to profit is to avoid conflict (UNODC, 2012, p. 17). The report argues that as a result, transit areas such as Southeast Europe and West Africa have not experienced an increase in violence as a result of drug trafficking (UNODC, 2012, p. 17). However, another UNODC report focusing on West Africa states that while conflict and the drugs trade are not directly linked, the latter does contribute to insecurity in the region thereby creating conditions that can lead to conflict (UNODC, 2008).

The line between political and non-political drivers of violence is not always clear-cut. This is particularly apparent in the case of organised crime, as many armed rebel groups also engage in criminal activity. In Eastern DRC for example, many rebel groups are engaged in the trafficking of illicit goods (Locke, 2012, p. 5).

Technology

The Arab Spring highlighted the role that technology can play as a driver of violence. While the effects of technology, and the internet in particular, are generally positive, access to the internet and social media is already changing the balance of power between the state and civil society in fragile situations (OECD, 2013, p. 101). The Arab uprisings were initially non-violent leading some to suggest that the use of ICTs is connected to non-violent revolutions (Aday et al, 2012, pp. 19-20). However, the countries affected by the Arab Spring all experienced varying degrees of violence suggesting that the use of ICTs during protests and revolutions does not prevent the onset of violence, and can contribute to unrest (Aday et al, 2012, pp. 19-20). There appears to be limited evidence on the relationship between technology and violence, beyond that relating to the Arab Spring.

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