

Sources of Rebellion in Bottom Billion Countries

PATRICIA JUSTINO and DAVID LEONARD, IDS

Are civil wars caused by real grievances or by greed and the opportunity to profit? Paul Collier's assertion of the greed hypothesis, restated in *The Bottom Billion*, has generated impassioned denunciations, based on the many case studies attributing civil wars and rebellions to abuses, inequalities and injustices. This In Focus brief examines the role that these grievances play in conflict and highlights the work of a range of authors. It also explores how state weakness is a major contributor to civil war, and assesses the merits and shortcomings of Collier's contribution to the contentious conflict debate.

Universality of grievance

Various recent analyses have challenged Collier's thesis, emphasising the importance of between-group inequalities, classified by ethnicity, religion and other cultural characteristics, as sources of conflict (Mancini 2005; Østby 2006). The importance of related phenomena has also been advanced, including polarisation of society (Esteban and Ray 1991, 1994) and ethnic fragmentation (Easterly and Levine 1997). How can these suggestions be reconciled with cross-national evidence? A key part of the attack on the Collier-Hoeffler thesis (2000) was that the inequalities they measured were only 'vertical' – those between individuals in the society as a whole. It was argued

that instead the most potent sources of conflict were 'horizontal' inequalities – those between identity-based groups rather than between individuals (Mkandawire 2002; Stewart 2002). On the other hand, the work of James Fearon and David Laitin (2003) supports Collier's argument and refutes the proposition that horizontal inequalities are a *determinant* of conflict. Their article found that state discrimination against a minority religion or language didn't show any statistical effects on the likelihood of conflict. In their earlier work they had used Minorities at Risk data at the level of groups *within* countries in order to examine what factors distinguish groups that have been involved in violent conflict with the state from those that have not (Fearon and

Collier on conflict and rebellion

In 2000 Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler caused a sensation by arguing that civil war and rebellion were more frequently caused by 'greed' than 'grievance'. In *The Bottom Billion* Collier remains strongly committed to the idea that rebels are motivated more by the opportunities for preying on attachable resources, than they are by genuine social grievances.

Laitin 1999). Here too they did not find any evidence that measures of relative economic disadvantage of the group predicted higher rebellion scores, nor did

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measures of cultural or religious difference from the dominant group.

Although confirming the outlines of Collier's thesis, Fearon and Laitin (2003) put a subtly different interpretation on the results, which helps to resolve the conflict with the case study literature. Instead of arguing that grievances play a minor role in the outbreak of civil war – and by implication in its conduct – they instead suggest that all societies have within them sources of inequality and abuse that could be used to motivate a civil war.

Both the ideas of 'greed rather than grievance' and 'the universality of grievance' predict that variation in the degree of grievance is not associated statistically with the likelihood of civil war. But the 'universality' proposition allows the possibility that the leaders are themselves motivated by a sincere concern for certain grievances and, even more important, that the social bases for mobilisation once war has begun may be based on forms of inter-group inequality and perceptions of injustice.

The mobilisation of grievance

The question then is not the existence of grievances but the conditions under which those grievances are likely to be incorporated into a civil war or rebellion. In the words of Ted Gurr in his seminal work *Why Men Rebel* the 'primary causal sequence in political violence is first the development of discontent, second the

politicization of the discontent, and finally its actualization in violent action against political objects and actors' (Gurr 1970: 13). It is their mobilisation, not the grievances themselves, that is critical. These grievances are most likely to be embodied in a violent rebellion when the resources to sustain it are readily available (Collier and Sambanis 2005: 309).

Certainly a wide range of scholars using different methods agree that there are cases where predatory greed, rather than grievance, seems to have motivated a rebellion (Reno 1998). Many have used conflict and violence as a means to try to improve their position and to take advantage of potential opportunities offered by conflict. Mancur Olson (1965) lists the main selective (i.e. individually targetable) incentives for participation in forms of collective action, such as armed conflict, as: coercion, monetary incentives, insurance and price discounts. Jeremy Weinstein (2006) points out that where readily lootable resources are available even rebellions that were initiated by grievances are likely to be transformed into organisational forms and practices that are more consistent with greed, but he also makes clear that there are groups that do persist without predation.

Interweaving greed and grievance

Even where rebels themselves become motivated by 'greed' the social groups they have mobilised are likely to have a heightened sense of identity-based grievances as a result of the conflict. Other studies have shown that socio-emotional motivations (e.g. doing the right thing, following community social norms, sense of justice) may matter as much or more than selective incentives in explaining individual participation in collective acts of violence (Petersen 2001; Wood 2003). This has not ruled out strong evidence for individual responses to incentives in armed conflict, particularly when selective incentives act as a form of coping with economic, social and political insecurity, and of protecting those who join acts of violence and their families (Kalyvas and Kocher 2006). For instance, the Humphreys and Weinstein analysis (2004) of fighters' profiles in Sierra Leone shows that more than 60 per cent of fighters belonging to both the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) said that improving the situation in Sierra Leone was their main motivation to join the militias, followed by the improved prospects of getting a job, more money and food in the case of RUF, and protecting their families, jobs and money in the case of CDF. It would be counter-productive to ignore these grievances

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when seeking to de-escalate conflict and guarantee sustainable peace in the post-conflict period.

The driving force behind this sometimes conflicting literature is a significant disconnection between discussions that focus on aggregate variables at the state level and processes of local competition between armed groups, and the strategies followed by both state and non-state armed actors during a conflict in order to guarantee the control of resources, territories and population support. This touches upon important issues of relative strengths and weaknesses of the state and rebel groups.

State weakness contributes to civil war

It is often useful to cut both sides of a civil war off from access to the resources that are sustaining their war machines. The access of armed groups to local resources such as oil, minerals and precious stones – as well as the appropriation of land and local assets – not only finances fighting and recruitment of combatants, but also provides armed groups with resources to provide local public goods and security to local communities. This guarantees their support even in the post-conflict period. This is particularly true in areas where state presence was weak or non-existent to start with, or where rebel groups won stronger control over

resources and populations (Kalyvas 2006; Weinstein 2006). Obscured by the ‘greed’ versus ‘grievance’ debate is the fact that state weakness also is an important cause of conflict (Leonard and Straus 2003). Weak states cannot defend themselves. More importantly, they lack well institutionalised methods of political succession, conflict resolution, and guaranteeing settlements. At the same time, weak state presence in certain territorial areas facilitates the control of resources and population by rebel groups in those areas, as well as the establishment of alternative forms of local governance that may sustain the initial conflict for a very long time (Kalyvas 2006).

Tackling the ‘conflict trap’

Collier proposes some sensible options to break what he calls the Bottom Billion’s ‘conflict trap’. These include: state-building, financial support (through well-timed aid instruments), increased security (through external military intervention) and changes in norms of governance (through new international charters). The real challenge lies in implementing these options and thinking preventatively. What Collier fails to address is how these options might be implemented on the ground and how pragmatic and durable systems of local development and governance can be built to prevent the outbreak of conflict. The international development

community has largely focused its attention on reactive, damage-limiting policies in post-conflict settings. The instruments proposed by Collier do much to address this, but significant further theoretical and empirical advances in the micro-level analysis of conflict processes are needed.

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This In Focus was written by **Patricia Justino**, a Research Fellow in the Vulnerability and Poverty Reduction (VPR) Team at IDS, and **David Leonard**, a Professorial Fellow in the Governance Team at IDS.

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Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex Brighton BN1 9RE
T +44 (0) 1273 606261 F +44 (0) 1273 621202 E ids@ids.ac.uk W www.ids.ac.uk