



Journal Homepage: - www.journalijar.com

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/20248

DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/20248>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

UNRAVELING THE COMPLEX NEXUS: EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY OF CONFLICT, DEVELOPMENT, AND INJUSTICE

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Manuscript Info

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Abstract

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Manuscript History

Received: 14 November 2024

Final Accepted: 16 December 2024

Published: January 2025

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Introduction:-

For a long time, the discussion of the relationship between conflict and development has been a major issue in area studies. Classical theorists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber framed their conflict theories based on society and social groups. For instance, Marx centers on the competition among social groups over inadequate resources; and Weber focuses on inequalities in the economy, social structure, as well as political power. Also, many case studies from conflict-affected regions prove that violent conflicts can undermine economic and social development, as well as abuse human rights, and increase refugees and IDPs. Therefore, it is important to understand the way how violent conflict makes an impact on individuals and social groups, and how to realize development especially economic development such as by reducing poverty and equally distributing social resources. In terms of the regional violent conflict and different forms of violence such as structural violence, according to Mercy Corps, the major drivers of political violence are injustice, such as discrimination, corruption, and abuse by security forces, rather than poverty (Mercy Corps 2015, 2); in the article, *Terrorism and Development: Using Social and Economic Development to Inhibit a Resurgence of Terrorism*, Kim Craigin and Peter Chalk argue that poverty can only magnify existing grievances, rather than essentially cause violent conflict and terrorism (Craigin and Chalk 2003, 31). Although both of the articles state that there is no direct relationship between poverty and conflict, is this conclusion convincing enough? From my perspective, these two pieces of research can further trigger an interesting question, that is, is conflict a cause, an effect, or a failure of development?

In this research, I will start by looking critically at two major notions of conflict and development with an emphasis on what is conflict and its roots, what is development and its characteristics. Also, I will explore the relationship between poverty and conflict, and what are the reforms to deal with the causes of the conflict, such as considering the importance of pro-poverty growth, and how it can help in building positive peace. At last, I will explore how poverty and injustice can interact with processes of conflict, and how can development come about.

The Clarification of Terms

In this research, the first is to identify two terms: conflict and development. There are two categories of conflict: external and internal conflict. In this paper, I will mainly discuss internal conflict, which is the conflict against civil war, such as terrorism. As an extreme instance of conflict, terrorism can reflect a certain level of organized groups of conflict. It is operated by rebel groups or unrest in civil wars of non-state actors. Also, conflict is an external and internal deficiency caused by development and governance, internal deficiencies such as lacking economic opportunity, unequal distribution of gains from development, and political marginalization; external impacts such as economic blows, violent insurgencies and rebellions, terrorism, genocide, political repression, and civil war. Therefore, conflicts can occur in underdevelopment, developing, and developed regions. The only difference is that

developed regions can handle the conflict better due to rapid and stable economic growth, job opportunity, and better political and social institutions. However, the adverse effects of conflict are more severe in regions with weak states, bad geography, and weakly integrated economic markets, which can limit their pace of economic growth and poverty reduction in underdevelopment regions. The word “development” has broad dimensions in the aspect of economic, social, and political. For instance, economic development aims at improving the living standard, involving growth and poverty reduction. Political development can be implemented by means of democratic governance and the emergence of liberal civil societies.

Is Poverty a Main Cause of Conflict?

According to Craig and Chalk, poverty does not actually cause conflict or terrorism; rather, it only contributes to and magnifies underlying grievances that already exist (Craig and Chalk 2003, 35). Although there is no statistical effect of joblessness rates on conflict overall, after studying the incentives of conflict, I reckon that it is important to examine the relationship between poverty, the lack of opportunities for youth and the intensity of the conflict. In other words, there is a certain linkage between increasing conflict intensity and growing unemployment. Although the link between poverty and conflict/terrorism may not be perceivable immediately, it remains essentially consequential. For instance, terrorists can capitalize on poverty to lead to conflict, such as by exploiting the lack of social security and welfare that characterizes impoverished states. By expanding the assistance of social services and providing opportunities for youth, terrorists can expand their influence in such states and regions. For instance, the so-called “welfare terrorism” can serve from Hezbollah establishing schools, medical facilities, and agricultural schemes, to Hamas investing in educational, healthcare, and social infrastructures. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Taliban have also adopted such strategies by financing madrassas and educating the impoverished youth. In fact, such forms of “Islamist social welfare (Cammett and Pauline 2022, 769)” have played a key role in the growth of terrorist groups in poor states or regions. In sum, a lack of social opportunity, poverty, and the inequalities of resource distribution can create an environment in which terrorists can take advantage of. Therefore, if the authors broaden the understanding of poverty, it will show some of the links that bind different manifestations of poverty with conflict.

As a global humanitarian agency, Mercy Corps aimed at saving and improving lives in the toughest places around the world. In the report *Youth and Consequences*, the main argument of Mercy Corps is that there is no relationship between unemployment and a youth’s willingness to engage in and support political violence (Mercy Corps 2015, 2). Through doing interviews and surveys with youth in Afghanistan, Colombia, and Somalia, they find that the major drivers of political violence are not poverty, but experiences of injustice, such as discrimination, corruption, and abuse by security forces. For many youths, narratives of grievance are triggered by weak and violent states. In other words, youths take up the gun because they feel grievance rather than living in poverty.

Although the report presents that in some cases, economic incentives may induce someone to join an armed group, it is uncommon due to further analysis. It is true that joblessness is often emblematic of frustration and marginalization, yet employment alone cannot be a determinant factor in whether a youth is likely to be a part of an insurgency. In other words, violence can make youth poor, but poverty doesn’t seem to make them become violent (Mercy Corps 2015, 17). However, based on previous pieces of literature, hunger, and poverty are two major factors of structural violence, that is, poor and unjust economic structures do harm youths’ physical and psychological conditions, and lead to violence. For instance, youth lack access to get adequate educations, which further limits their access to decent jobs with good salaries when they grow older. In turn, this also limits their access to healthcare, legal protections, political power, and other important social resources. Therefore, this cycle of poverty leads to an entire society subject to regular political violence and conflict.

Muhsin Hassan in his article *Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism* discusses two driving elements for conflict: push and pull factors (Hassan 2012). In his opinion, push factors refer to the negative economic, cultural, and political features of a social environment that drive vulnerable groups into violent conflict. In other words, push factors can be regarded as root causes, such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and political or economic marginalization. While the pull factors refer to the extremist group’s stake advantage of positive features and benefits to pull vulnerable individuals to join. Benefits such as the group’s ideology, sense of belonging and achievement, the bright prospect, and other socialization advantages (Hassan 2012). According to Hassan, five of the fifteen youths regard al-Shabab as a form of employment, because they can get paid well, and all they need to do is just carry around a gun and patrol the streets. Consequently, some youths joined al-Shabab because it enabled them to raise

themselves and their families. Although poverty is not the only reason for joining violent groups, these cases show that there is indeed a relationship between poverty and political violence.

Is Development the Only Way to Address Conflict?

Firstly, Craigin and Chalkpoint out that development alone can not eliminate the threat posed by conflict/ terrorism. In addition to economic and social development, measures such as political negotiations, military operations, and community relations building, can be developed as part of wider approaches to address the violent conflict as well. I agree development is not the only way to address the conflict, however, I argue that the authors did not further explain its reason. Moreover, their opinions about political negotiations, military actions, and community dialogue can be categorized as development aid yet they did not illustrate how these measures work in detail. As a supplement to this limitation in Craigin and Chalk's article, Olympio Barbanti, Jr. in his article *Development and Conflict Theory*, shows that most development does not try to make social structural change across the society (Barbanti 2004, "Development and Structural Change"), yet political negotiations and community relations building can be viewed as strategies for bringing about social change. Hence, such disconnect causes a vicious cycle, that is, development leads to conflict, and the lack of conflict resolution influences development to make a further step. Also, the relationship between development and conflict theory emphasizes the provision of development aid in cases of violent conflict. Peacebuilding after conflicts reflects the same concerns as development interventions. Evidently, development and its aid play an important role in post-conflict building, yet development aid does not directly address conflict (Barbanti 2004, "Development and Conflict"). Therefore, Craigin and Chalk need to provide more evidence to prove why development is not the only way to address the conflict, and what are the alternatives to the solutions of the conflicts.

Furthermore, the efforts of development should be rooted in peace-building dialogues, rather than merely within communities, where there can be a consensus of grievance, but also between those with differing views, which reflects the importance of community relations building in addressing conflict. However, although some NGOs understand the local context and can navigate stateless spaces, some of the difficulties of effective development are rooted in the development architecture itself since it is long and hard work to build local trust. For example, local ownership can be a victim of bureaucratic and administrative constraints, and the political push for quick results (Mercy Corps 2015, 3). Also, some resolutions provided by humanitarian agencies show how economic, social, and political development plays a major role in addressing conflict. For instance, in Afghanistan, Mercy Corps implemented the INVEST program, which aims at increasing youth employment in Helmand province, which proves that rapid and sustained economic growth aids in poverty reduction and reduces the potential occurrence of conflict. In Colombia, Mercy Corps implemented European Commission-funded reintegration programs for former youth fighters. In Somalia, Mercy Corps leads the "Somali Youth Learners Initiative" funded by the U.S. Agency. Moreover, it is important to solve the sources of violence, not merely the symptoms, which requires development to explicitly and systematically address drivers of violence. Therefore, I argue that it is important to figure out how to make development become the solution to the source of conflict.

How Injustice Can Interact with Conflict and Development?

Craigin and Chalk argue that all members of the communities involved in the study regarded conflict/ terrorism and its relevant activities as a viable response to political, economic, and social injustices, which sustains a group of willing recruits (Craigin and Chalk 2003, 34). Although development aid itself is not necessary to hinder conflict/ terrorism, it does have positive benefits in two respects: stopping the flow of potential recruits and facilitating the rise of a new middle class.

Similarly, based on the report of Mercy Corps, the drivers of political violence are rooted in the social structure of weak states, such as routine injustice, corruption, normalized violence, and legitimate narratives of grievance (Mercy Corps 2015, 24). In other words, fragile states are places of routine injustice. For instance, the children of elites study in foreign universities and can easily get access to government jobs, while most youths struggle to survive. Also, the most marginalized are usually cheated by employers or harassed by police, with no way to appeal. For example, in rural Colombia, youths lack significant opportunities for employment or education, and are subject to daily offenses, which means child abuse and gender-based violence are common. According to Mercy Corps and the International Organization of Migration (IOM), women especially young women are living under the daily humiliations of misogyny. Therefore, youths joining armed groups or terrorist groups can capitalize on the failure of fragile states to provide alternative sources of meaning. Although youths are important to the future of their societies, and to reform political institutions, in some cases, civically engaged youths seem to be more supportive of political

violence, not less. Also, civic engagement programs are unlikely to mitigate political violence, which is isolated from meaningful governance reforms. Also, such civic engagement programs can be priming a confrontation between elites and these youths.

Therefore, it is important to combine economic development and meaningful improvements in governance to improve social injustice, and further reduce and even eliminate conflict. These have been part of the discussion of development for a long time. However, why are people still getting it wrong? There are two reasons. First is the architecture of development, that is, how programs are funded, administered, and designed, which is not a way to address the appeal of violent conflicts. Second, different sectoral teams may lack coordination (Mercy Corps 2015, 50). Therefore, there are two kinds of intervention: a single approach such as job skills training, and an integrated approach (Mercy Corps 2015, 45). Mercy Corps suggests that an integrated approach should be adopted to break cycles of violent conflict. Moreover, the United Nations and multilateral donors need to enhance coordination across political, institutional, and development initiatives. Host governments and bilateral donor governments should develop democracy and governance and countering violent extremism (CVE) strategies to better analyze the political, social, and economic factors that drive political violence. NGOs should cultivate local communities, such as bringing youths together to transform their attitudes, enhance linkages, and harness local expertise.

However, those who feel they have been the victims of injustice or discrimination may feel justified in seeking revenge, which can lead to further injustice and cause conflict. Also, injustice can be dangerously exploited. For instance, the feeling of anger can motivate people to challenge injustice and make them more prone to manipulation by corrupt or extremist leaders. That is why conflict can easily develop when people become convinced that waging war is the only way to rectify social injustice. Therefore, to reduce violent conflict, it is necessary to take concerted international action to address systemic injustice. For example, states need to develop institutions of fair governance, help provide health care and education, and establish an inclusive society. In sum, addressing injustice is core to the resolution of violent conflicts.

Therefore, how can societies effectively address feelings of injustice and discrimination without inadvertently fueling further conflict or exploitation by extremist or corrupt entities? More specifically, how to equitably satisfy the legitimate needs of various groups of the community since the lack of fair distribution of resources, as well as rights can lead to conflict. In general, the solution needs to prioritize inclusive governance by fostering transparent, participatory institutions that uphold human rights and the rule of law. Economic disparities must be addressed through targeted welfare programs, and initiatives promoting economic development and opportunity for marginalized groups. Investing in accessible and quality education, along with healthcare services, is crucial to empower individuals and enhance community well-being. Promoting social cohesion through dialogue and community engagement, supporting civil society organizations, and combating corruption are also vital components. By implementing these measures collectively, societies can build resilience, reduce intergroup tensions, and prevent conflicts driven by grievances related to inequitable resource distribution and rights.

Conclusion:-

In conclusion, this research examines the relationship between conflict and development, especially discussing the possibility of realizing development by reducing poverty and equally distributing social resources. Also, the relationship between conflict and development highlighted in this research underscores the multifaceted nature of violent upheavals within societies. While poverty is recognized as a contributing factor that amplifies existing grievances, scholars like Craig and Chalk challenge the notion that poverty alone directly causes conflict or terrorism. Instead, deeper-rooted issues such as injustice, discrimination, and political marginalization emerge as critical drivers that fuel resentment and violent responses from marginalized groups. This nuanced understanding emphasizes the importance of addressing structural inequalities and systemic injustices as fundamental steps toward mitigating conflict and fostering sustainable peace.

Moreover, the research emphasizes that development interventions alone are insufficient to resolve conflicts. Although economic and social development initiatives play a crucial role, they should be accompanied by political negotiations, community engagement, and governance reforms to address the underlying causes of violence effectively. Also, an integrated approach that combines economic empowerment with meaningful improvements in governance and social justice is essential for breaking cycles of violence and promoting long-term stability. By prioritizing inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, and empowerment of marginalized communities, societies can build resilience, reduce intergroup tensions, and pave the way for sustainable development and peace.

What and how we should do next? In my view, reducing conflict and realizing development need collaboration from every part such as individuals, civil groups, enterprises, communities, legal institutions, local and national governments, NGOs, and so forth. Together, people can reduce poverty, put an end to social injustice and inequality, to restrain conflict to enable much-needed political economic, and social development.

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