Report

Seeking answers in times of crisis

Navigating current pitfalls of conflict research and practice

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Cover photo: FAO South Sudan and DFID voucher scheme in Nimule. Credit: FAO Emergencies

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Introduction

In March 2016, bombs detonated in Turkey, Belgium and Pakistan. In Côte d'Ivoire, gunmen killed 19 people on a beach. Nigeria experienced a suicide attack.

These events provoked questions and swift analysis: why Brussels? Why Istanbul? Who knew what about developments in Côte d'Ivoire? Could the attack in Nigeria have been prevented? How? Why was it not? What can a European Union (EU)/international response to this violence be – particularly as this violence is now at times happening very close to home? And is what is currently being offered as a response working? And what actually is it that is being responded to?

Moments of crisis and the subsequent search for solutions can be disorienting: crisis takes the long-term perspective out of the equation, focusing questions about causes and solutions in the here and now. This is particularly so if the impact of violence and crisis is acutely felt in Western societies that are experiencing a shift from being distant observers of violence to being victims. The notion of being under attack clouds judgement and shapes responses. Thus the questions asked in the aftermath of violence often seek to identify instant responses to violent conflict: how can one party outsmart the other to prevent further violence? Yet these instant questions after a violent event also take things in a misleading direction, contributing to confusion about the reality of conflict research and practice. Research and practice face acute challenges when violence occurs, and a considered perspective of what these are is necessary.

Questions about violence and its consequences are becoming ever more pressing. Yet, despite increased spending, more sophisticated analysis and information-gathering and an emphasis on better practice to prevent and transform violent conflict, violence seems to be increasing. A future in which gaps between rich and poor are closing, the marginalised have a voice and people live in peace seems increasingly elusive. The annual number of violent conflicts, which stood at 24 in 2005, is now up to 46 (van der Zee, 2015). Last December, the UN asked for $20bn for humanitarian work in 2016, with a particular emphasis on crisis situations in South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen. This was the largest amount ever requested; only 10 years ago, the humanitarian budget was $3.7bn. Violent conflicts drive these increased needs, bringing displacement and other social shifts. Armed violent conflict also means a large number of people go hungry (Anderson, 2015). The recent violence contributes further to the sense of a world in violent crisis and emphasises the pressure to find solutions. Most commonly, the search for solutions focuses on two areas: better knowledge and more sophisticated practice. Two positive developments – if only it was clearer what knowledge is being sought and what practice expected to improve.

Violent conflict, violence and violent extremism may be three distinct phenomena, yet neither are clearly defined. Nonetheless, they are merged into one lens through which the UK defines its relationship with aid-receiving countries, muddying the waters even further. The UK's new aid strategy stipulates that international development will deal with violence more directly than it has in the past (HM Treasury and DFID, 2015: 13). The recent changes to how official development assistance (ODA) is classified reflect the mood of the times: the new rules emphasise the role of conflict, fragility and insecurity as a pressing problem for international development (DFID, 2016). Both aid strategy and ODA rules blur the line between development and war and lock the two into a suggested, yet undefined, cycle of cause and effect. Particularly contentious is the ODA focus on violent extremism, which is quickly becoming the most prominent - and fuzzy - buzzword in policy circles dealing with conflict. The ODA rules connect, somewhat tenuously, the lack of a certain type of development to an increase in violent extremism: weak governance and human rights abuses are considered direct drivers of violent extremism (ibid.).

Securitisation of aid is nothing new; it is reminiscent of the time of the Cold War, when the link between security and aid was so direct it would be more appropriate to speak of the 'aidifying' of security. Attaching conditions to aid – such as expectations of governance – is also established practice. Yet the new assumed direct link between development funds and battling violence, violent conflict and violent extremism sets up a fresh puzzle for knowledge and practice. While violence is a problem, it is uncertain whether the new rules on ODA will adequately address how people in developing countries experience violence and will thus allow for better practice. Whether ultimately the world will be a safer place because development and security are now more tightly linked is unclear.

Linking development and violence creates new challenges for knowledge and practice. It highlights that pressing questions are not yet answered: what exactly are the causes of extremism, and is extremism clearly defined? What is the nature of specific violent conflicts? Can responses simultaneously help in the receiving country while also protecting interests in donor countries? What has been the cumulative effect of years of development and conflict resolution practice on the current situation? What exactly distinguishes different types of violence? Redefining aid as a security tool is a matter of politics and ideology, but it also highlights how important it is that we continue to ask questions and seek answers in times of crisis.

These dilemmas specifically create pitfalls for research and practice.

The current state of research and practice: four pitfalls

Pitfall 1: Imagining simple explanations

Seeking explanations for violent conflict often ends with a curious throwback to another time. In the immediate post-Cold War era, two contentious and yet still silently influential concepts were born: the 'end of history' and the 'clash of civilisations'. Francis Fukuyama famously suggested that history had ended, which in his view meant that the end of the Soviet bloc signified a global consensus on liberal democracy as the superior government system. That he called it the possible 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' and the 'final form of human government', which as such constituted the 'end of history' (1993: 112), highlights that different perspectives – or even more nuanced understandings of the world – had no place in the Western discourse.

Around the same time, Samuel Huntingdon promoted his idea of the 'clash of civilisations' (1993). His argument, that groups that share 'history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion' would be violently pitted against each other, was much debated as a damaging simplification (Rose et al., 2010). The notion of civilisations as predetermined and unchangeable made Huntingdon's argument flimsy. And yet, despite the heated debates and rebuttals, the simplified notion of these 'clashes' still permeates policy discourse and practice today because it presents a memorable slogan that seems to explain what is going on.

The current limited and simplified ways in which violent conflict, and in particular violent extremism, are conceptualised are reminiscent of the heated debates about the 'end of history' and the 'clash'. The 'clash' continues to be readily conjured up to describe the current situation as a shorthand to describe a violent confrontation between what are perceived to be profoundly different ideologies (Brooks-Pollock, 2016). There is little acknowledgement that other systems of governance could be seen as superior and even as worth fighting for. The enduring power of the 'end of history' and the 'clash' reflects how seductive simple explanations are.

Pitfall 2: Being driven by solutions

The search for a simple explanation also shapes how problems are phrased. Conflict policy and practice tend to be viewed through the lens of the solution: what can be done? How can the problem of violent conflict, violence or violent extremism be solved? What is the intervention that will end or transform it?

These questions – implicitly seeking punchy answers – reduce the symptom of violence to something that can, and needs to be, comprehensively solved or permanently prevented. Solutions are thus often imagined as identifiable, clearly demarcated, somewhat one-dimensional injections. Research and evidence in times of crises are often mistakenly assumed to provide an analysis with surgeon-like precision, freezing a moment in time in which a solution can be identified and administered.

The problem of the limiting solution perspective is that it becomes the lens through which we observe the role of research and practice. A violent context becomes an enabling or disabling factor to solution implementation; it is a short step from that to the development of norms that then continue to shape further inquiries. The future is imagined post-solution, created by assumed changes. Focusing on solutions also assumes a promise of prediction that neither research nor practice can fulfil: since research cannot foretell future events and practice cannot foresee the impact of its workings on the situation in which it engages, using insights from either to map out future trajectories is bound to be misleading. The exact impact of development trajectories can simply not be predicted—and even less so when conflict and violence are involved.

Pitfall 3: Over-promising on international development

International development has long recognised the need to engage in conflict countries, further evident by the current emphasis on directing aid flows towards countries that experience conflict or violence. Yet often aid money

has bought a particular type of intervention. In the past, interventions have often been heavily securitized, for example to back US security policy in Afghanistan or to stabilise a situation to prevent a refugee crisis. Other development interventions were too simplistic in how they were conceived: For South Sudan, this has meant that much effort has gone into statebuilding with the assumption that this would ultimately create an accountable government and a country that would be able to control violence—an approach that has informed international development engagement in other contexts, too (Denney et al., 2015). A focus on delivering services and supporting economic growth has been pursued with the assumption that both will prevent future conflict, with little attention being paid to the exact mechanisms of how services were delivered, whether such delivery and growth excluded some while others benefited, or whether services and the economy were also underlying drivers of conflict.

Despite these pitfalls, international development continues to exist as the promised solution not just to economic underdevelopment but also to conflict and violence. Instead of seeking answers in simplified theories or solutions, the failure of past promises on what international development can achieve is a challenge to research and practice. At first, a realisation might be necessary that the promise remains very powerful indeed: Alternative development trajectories, cultures and histories are reduced to mere steps on the imagined linear timeline of international development. This provides, as the recently passed Doreen Massey argued, a prescriptive route for those countries labelled 'developing' as 'following our historical path to become a "developed" country like ours', which in turns denies 'the simultaneity, the multiplicity of space' to project the notion of 'a single historical trajectory' (Edmonds and Warburton, 2016: loc 2209). This is not a benign process, and the idea that all countries can and must achieve this to live up to a particular standard has deep repercussions. Within these prescribed trajectories occurs what Icaza Garza calls the 'epistemic violence of international development' through the labelling of people as 'underdeveloped' as opposed to 'supposedly "normal", "modern", "civilized" and "developed"' (2015: 5).

The conundrum of the disappointed development promise is that development continues to be pursued using the same approaches that reflect simplification or securitisation. Yet few would argue that international development and conflict prevention programmes have been roaring successes. One commentator wrote that, in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, 'traditional ways of programming aid intervention have turned out to be inadequate, not to say disappointing, and seem to do little to help people restore livelihoods or repair torn social relations over the long term' (Finaz, 2015). In South Sudan, a dominant donor narrative on how development was to be achieved obscured underlying conflict dynamics and elite interests that have contributed to the civil war that started in 2013 (Hemmer and Grinstead, 2015).

It is generally highlighted how little has been achieved and how much more of the same type of development programmes that seek to support governance, participation and institutions thus need to be implemented. And usually, the main reason given for the failure of the same approach is the depth of dysfunction in the target country or the need to fine-tune the interventions on offer, rather than the need to rethink the broad approach. Increasing complexity – for example acknowledging the role of natural resources – is viewed as representing more pieces in the puzzle, but the puzzle remains largely the same (Anyangwe, 2016). Others acknowledge that aid in itself can be a divisive factor, but attribute this to the modes of delivering it (Lamb, 2016).

The over-promise on international development limits learning, as better programmes are sought in the refinement of the existing ones. The over-promise also allows little consideration of the possibility that other models of living are also – or to some even more – attractive. This limited imagination of the world does not include that the pursuit of international development by many donor countries and countless individuals employed in the sector as a worthy cause is mirrored by the pursuit of another version of a better society. In relation to debates on what draws people into what is now commonly referred to as violent extremism – specifically Islamic State – the point has been made that the pursuit of something better is seductive. Atran calls this the 'thrilling cause and a call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends' (2015).

Pitfall 4: Ignoring beliefs and values

Pursuing a vision of society as a thrilling cause highlights a crucial link to one of the most profound insights into violent conflict today: explanations of the past that explain motivations have overlooked the crucial element of believing in a cause. Violent actors are not simply driven by greed or grievance; nor are they just rebelling against bad governance. At the heart of violence are profound beliefs and values, yet at the same time, beliefs and values also do not provide the singular simple explanations sought to understand violence. But they complicate things, since beliefs and values are challenging to tackle through existing conflict resolution practices, as Ramsbotham (2010) argues. Atran (2015) also suggests we need to take values held by individuals or societies seriously, without equating them with religious extremism. He argues that 'the term "sacred values" intuitively denotes religious belief, as when land is holy, but can also include the "secularised sacred" such as the "hallowed ground" of Gettysburg or the site of the attacks on New York City of 11 September 2001 (9/11).' The importance of such 'sacred values' has become clearer in the past few years, as attempts to weaken them can create incentives to violently defend them (Rambsbotham, 2010; Sheikh et al., 2013).

Navigating the pitfalls: four approaches

How have policy and practice been able to navigate these pitfalls? Unfortunately, suggestions on how to prevent violence tend to remain formulaic: those who choose violence are often infantilised as having been seduced by 'simplistic appeals and siren songs', as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon phrased it recently. He also highlighted that 'short-sighted policies, failed leadership, heavy-handed approaches, a single-minded focus only on security measures and an utter disregard for human rights have often made things worse' while at the same time suggesting formulaic responses that are reminiscent of over-promising on international development. 'Good governance. The rule of law. Political participation. Quality education and decent jobs. Full respect for human rights' (Ban, 2016)

What is suggested here is that reasons for the failure of these approaches lie primarily in the functionality of institutions rather than with a flaw in the approach. The answer to the problems continues to be sought in simplification and in delivering on the promise of international development. To address this perpetuation of the above-identified pitfalls, it might be useful to consider the following approaches.

Approach 1: Abandoning the search for a unifying theory

It is seductive to imagine simple explanations and use summary descriptive terminology that says little. Addressing this pitfall is necessary, yet often it is done by adding more buzzwords or through finding other unifying theories that provide broad explanations. Theory seeks to establish patterns, to make sense of or suggest what can be observed and to provide an interpretative framework for future observations. Inherent in the pursuit of conflict research is the search for a unified conflict theory – one explanation that fits all – which in itself offers an insight into the limiting perspectives on violent conflict. Yet currently there exists no universally accepted theory on the causes of violent conflict, on the rules of its dynamics or on the pathways in and out of radicalism and violence. The lack of a unified theory highlights why the 'clash' continues to fuel the imagination, suggesting a framing of a complex situation that explains everything.

The absence of a credible theory may seem like a significant gap in conflict research. Yet it is a virtue: it does remind us that whatever universal theory or all-encompassing explanation is proposed is rooted in specific research traditions, policy questions and perspectives and imaginations. Making sense of the world through research and practical experiences means using categories of explanation that are shaped by the perspectives of those wanting to make sense. Conflict theory runs the risk of creating an echo chamber that continues to support its own perspective.

Not seeking a unified theory of conflict, a one-word explanation, is the first step towards acknowledging the limits of perspectives and the limits of theory in itself. This acknowledgement, however, creates an opening for new engagement between different development actors, researchers and those who are expected to benefit from the work the other two groups of people carry out. Instead of making situations fit the explanation, these actors can use the opening to engage across different perspectives, methods, engagements, theories, data, approaches and timeframes in an ongoing process of finding out.

Approach 2: Being driven by problems

Identifying solutions seems a noble achievement. Being attached to the most prominent explanation makes careers; the seductive power of the simple explanation is testament to that. A crucial but necessary shift in understanding conflict is to view research and practice as something that works not on conflict resolution per se but rather on understanding conflict. This shift towards the identification of conflict problems and a better understanding of them is crucial.

Identifying problems and seeing this as a never-ending process in itself is less glamorous. And yet, to use the lens of problems broadens perspectives: it allows the unpacking of cumulative drivers of conflict, experiences or beliefs held. It means developing strands of inquiry that look more closely into the building blocks for a context in which conflict occurs and development is supposed to happen.

Further, it invites an inquisitive mind, including a questioning of the underlying models that often inform the drive for solutions. If a situation continues to occur in a way that has negative impacts on the lives of people – despite numerous solutions having been implemented – then asking about continuing problems can be a way to break through development jargon and template approaches and to invite reflection and tactical shifts.

From such a shift, questions about research methods develop that invite reflection about how the world is examined, information is collected and connections are drawn. A questioning mind can accommodate the contradictions of conflict contexts and admits that reflecting on them through methods is messy.

Approach 3: Challenging existing perspectives on conflict and development

This approach rests in the realisation that international development has over-promised and thus there is a need to challenge the perspective it provides. Such a challenge can best be tackled through new approaches to research. Here, research on the link between conflict and development can take a cue from critical security studies, which has long pioneered an understanding of security not as 'objects to be studied or problems to be solved, but the product of social and political practices' (Aradau et al., 2014: loc 288). This means that, 'rather than treating security as a given object or value, critical security studies has understood security as a practice through which the "securityness" of situations is created' (ibid.: loc 340). Aradau et al. also propose a radical new approach to understanding methods that is helpful for research and practice in conflict situations. They argue that research methods and the scholar as part of the method cannot be separated from practice, that method is in fact an often experimental practice. This means that 'what is important is not the type of actor, their objects of concern or even their political aims, but the workings, effects and implications of the practices themselves' (ibid.: loc 403). Inherent in this approach is the recognition that complexity is not to be overcome, but rather needs to be considered part of the picture. It does not need to be solved, but instead it should be taken as an inspiration to experiment 'with combining theories, concepts, methods, and data in unfamiliar ways to bring out relations that otherwise remain largely invisible' (ibid.: loc 450).

A crucial suggestion for conflict research is Bueger and Mireanu's (2014) notion of 'proximity'. Whereas in the past researchers have generally sought to keep a distance from implementing agencies, 'proximity' suggests instead seeking them out, in order to embed research deeply into practice. This is particularly crucial when we accept that the link between violent conflict and development is also constituted through its practices. To shed light on this link between research and practice it is necessary to challenge existing perspectives through much closer collaborations.

Approach 4: Emphasising agency and individuality

Beliefs and values are important. They are also intensely personal. In taking seriously the fact that personal agency and individual concerns matter, we naturally shift research and practice towards paying more attention to individuals. The image of seduction of those who commit violence, coupled with an emphasis on community-driven approaches, highlights a disconnect in conflict research and conflict prevention programmes when it comes to agency. We overlook that individuals join communities also out of individual agency.

There is a stark difference in approach between those wanting to prevent radicalisation and those wanting to recruit. Development practice tends to work by addressing groups – such as youth, women, children – thus emphasising the strength of community. Programmes that aim to support people in not turning to radicalism and violence also work often through communities. And yet those wanting to push others into violent behaviour seek a different focus: the individual. Atran (2015) outlines that Islamic State 'may spend hundreds of hours trying to enlist a single individual, to learn how their personal problems and grievances fit into a universal theme of persecution against all Muslims'. In recruitment, acknowledgement of the power of a personal decision to pursue a common goal, which in its presentation has been tailored to those individual needs, is much stronger than it is in strategies countering violence: 'the US State Department continues to send off-target tweets through negative mass messaging in its ineffectual "Think Again Turn Away" campaign' (ibid.). Personal contacts and persuasion by peers is by far the most effective way to recruit; public fora play less of a role.

Contrasting this insight with common development and conflict rhetoric highlights this disconnect: the UN Development Programme (UNDP), for example, emphasises the weakening of 'the social tissue in communities and the social contract that links citizens to their government', but does not mention individual motivations beyond a general need for the 'most vulnerable groups' to have jobs and access services and to finding 'community level approaches' (Kristoffersen, 2016). This also potentially creates problems, as finding such approaches requires defining what a community is.

If we take conflict to be a communal enterprise, then the best way to encourage it is to separate people into groups in the first place, which is what development practice often does. Classic social research shows that, for groups to dislike one another, they have to be a member of one group first (Tafjel, 1970). More recent work on the subject has emphasised that, to avoid the negative effects of 'othering', it is crucial that the 'other' does not attempt to break up one's own identity (Christ et al., 2014). Translated to the point made in this paper, trying to convince violent actors of the virtue of the international development promise as a way to reject their own perspectives is likely to increase the chasm. Much more thinking is required on the delicate balance of individual and group motivations.

Ways of working: conflict research and practice in times of crisis

Why is violent conflict spreading? Why are a number of actors emerging so prominently, able to effectively shape quick policy responses and narrow debates in the West? Why have the tools of both international development and military intervention failed? Is the implicit assumption correct that a solution lies with international development and military intervention?

Missing answers to these questions are rooted in the current pitfalls of how violent conflict is perceived, understood and addressed. These pitfalls are located in the knee-jerk reactions of Western powers, which act not only on security fears but also on the bewildered realisation that the promise of bringing development has failed to be a powerful incentive to those who use their individual agency to guide their actions. It is the end of history in reverse: a profound lack of understanding that the governance systems of the West are not the only thing on offer.

This realisation requires a number of considerations for conflict research and practice. One is to find a balance between providing information and employing new ways of seeking to understand unseen connections and individual motivations. Another, closely related, aspect is the need to collapse boundaries between all of those who are actors in conflict. The researcher, the implementer of conflict resolution programmes, the violent actor and the non-violent affected citizen are all part of a bigger picture: in reality, role divisions are often blurry already. Taking agency, belonging, incentives and politics seriously means breaking down the barrier between the developer, the developed and the one reporting on both.

Yet, even when these clear dividing lines are removed, translating research into evidence and into policy is a multifaceted challenge. The pitfalls of practice – and the realisation that violent conflict is also constituted through the practices addressing it – means there is a limit to the influence research and evidence can have. Even if research is able to provide evidence of the highest quality, the way programmes that support development and security are configured will play a crucial role in programming decisions. This bridge between increasing knowledge and evolving practice needs to be continuously built. One suggestion on how to do this is through finding ways to programme in adaptive and politically smart ways (Booth and Unsworth, 2014). This is not a straightforward endeavour – also because the evidence base on whether adaptive programme approaches ultimately do work better still needs to be developed (Booth et al., 2016).

Where, then, does this leave conflict research and practice?

With a weighty assignment. This includes the need to be mindful of the pitfalls identified here – and others.

A pressing task for conflict research is to abandon limiting perspectives, of both how conflict is imagined and how it can be theorised. This means leaving behind a race towards a buzzword explanation of conflict and seeking to identify a solution.

A pressing task for conflict practice is to consider the extent to which it is driven by the over-promise of international development and by ignoring individual beliefs and needs.

Together, research and practice need to find ways of linking the inner workings of development institutions, including the principles that drive them, and research practices to the experiences of individuals and their motivations. A better approach requires accepting that complexity cannot be reduced and that learning from failures is not just helpful, but necessary. This means understanding that problems are evolving and questioning the underlying values of all actors. It takes seriously that beliefs create meaning and that people will act on these meanings.

Researchers and practitioners also need to clearly identify the extent to which their own beliefs, perspectives and ambitions shape what they perceive and do. Without this, it is impossible to see more clearly the experiences and motivations of others in conflict situations; responses are bound to remain formulaic; and the sense of a world in crisis, at a loss when it comes to understanding and addressing violent situations, is likely to continue.

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