CULTIVATING PEACE

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In the report, 'To Cultivate Peace: Agriculture in a World of Conflict' (de Soysa & Gleditsch 1999), my co-authors and I examined the ways in which food production was related to the outbreak of civil violence. We concluded that conditions affecting agriculture were important for understanding how conflicts, which are overwhelmingly located in rural settings, can be generated and sustained. Our conclusions are that an overall policy environment that harms agriculture determines the degree to which the loss of livelihood occurs, which in turn affects the opportunity structure of individuals and groups for engaging in armed conflict which is primarily located among the poorest countries. Food is an important part of the entitlement set of poor people and high food prices are usually associated with urban riots.

In this paper I will focus on the loss of livelihood in rural society as a cause of endemic violence. The basic argument is that the loss of livelihood lowers the opportunity costs of a large segment of the rural population for joining violent movements. In our 1999 report we compiled a list of conflicts that had obvious links to the primary sector around such issues as land distribution. It is clear, however, that such issues are not the sole drivers of all armed conflict.

Our critics argued that conflict is usually a result of a complex of factors and that we unduly vilified poor people in rural communities for being the primary initiators of conflict. I welcome this opportunity to set the record straight. Conflict is most often initiated by elites (rural or otherwise), but the people who actually form the armed groups, and are perhaps the net losers, come from the poorest segments of society. It is this factor that is ultimately important for understanding the endemic nature of conflict in some settings. Poverty and stagnation in the countryside allows

'conflict entrepreneurs' to engage in warfare on the cheap. In other words, the ready availability of manpower (or cannon fodder) is what makes conflict endemic. There are an infinite number of causes around which to organise violence, but such costly actions happen only if they are 'feasible.' Today, I want to reiterate the centrality of the livelihood explanation for understanding conflict from an economics approach to studying the causes of civil war. It is such an understanding that potentially serves policymaking best. First, I will briefly outline the nature of the problem.

During the first decade of the post-Cold War period (1989–1999), intrastate conflicts accounted for the bulk of violence. Out of a total of 108 armed conflicts in 73 locations around the world, 92 were purely domestic conflicts, with 9 classified as 'civil wars with foreign intervention' (Wallensteen and Sollenberg 1999). During the same period there were only 7 interstate conflicts. Most of these conflicts have been at relatively low levels of violence, while many of the intrastate conflicts have been comparatively quite bloody. Of the 92 intrastate conflicts, 47 are classified as having had at least 1000 battle-related deaths, signifying the intensity of fighting. The UNDP (1999) and World Bank (1998), however, estimate that as much as 90% of the casualties in recent conflicts have been civilian, mainly women and children. As we speak, there are more than 35 conflicts going on around the world. These conflicts are taking place within some of the poorest countries.

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It is impossible to tackle the problem of development failure without tackling armed conflict. Conversely, it is quite clear today that we will fail to contain conflict if we do not tackle problems stemming from the failure of development. From this perspective, it becomes clear quite quickly that ignoring the role of agricultural development would in fact be fatal. Let me summarise the changing views on the causes and nature of internal conflict and link some relevant empirical findings on the causes of civil war. These suggest that improving conditions facing agriculture and thereby the livelihood of rural society could help greatly to break the vicious cycle of poverty and violence.

Economic Stagnation and the Viability of Conflict

Armed conflict is not some autonomous process of human interaction, nor is it automatic, but results from individuals making a conscious set of decisions to undertake such a course of action. It is often forgotten that there are agents behind the phenomenon. People who participate in violent action decide on that particular course of action over alternatives. Why may this be so? Conflict as

a strategy requires organisation and is costly, in terms of both materiel and psychological costs. Thus, the pay-off from a strategy of conflict must in fact be greater than alternative courses of action. If one thinks in terms of economic gain, then conflict is one strategy with which individuals seek to be better off. Some (Collier 2000; de Soysa 2000) have framed such thinking in terms of 'loot-seeking', as opposed to 'justice-seeking,' which is selfless and thus occurs regardless of unbearable costs. Conflict may also be a strategy for seeking 'justice', if all other less costly alternatives are unattainable. The problem with justice-seeking conflict is that individuals who are faced with the decision of engaging or not engaging in violence have a strong incentive to free ride, since justice is a public good. Despite this logical problem, the standard wisdom is that conflict is driven purely by grievance and irrational hatreds, not rational expectations.[1] Conflict occurs and recurs because some stand to gain enormously from using violence, often at the expense of the many. It is little wonder that two out of three peace processes in the post-war years have broken down and resulted in continued fighting. War tends to benefit a few (who are well organised) at the expense of the many.

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Recent scholarship finds little evidence that objective grievance generating factors such as ethnicity and income inequality predict conflict. Rather, there is strong evidence to suggest that 'loot-seeking' is the most salient factor generating violent conflict (Berdal and Malone 2000). In the language of business, groups using violence as a strategy have to make this enterprise viable. At the same time, it is in fact in the interests of the largest segment of society to contain costly conflict, but this segment faces the logic of collective action.

'Peace,' like 'justice,' is a public good, thus individuals have an incentive to free ride. It is at this point that economic backwardness and stagnation, low social trust, poverty, and bad policies intersect in the explanation for conflict. Under these circumstances, economic payoffs from 'militarised' conflict rather than from regular civilian activity are more likely to be far greater. In other words, the conditions favour 'predation' over production. Simultaneously, under these conditions, state authorities are weak in terms of legitimacy, finances, military strength, and international reputation, and can only struggle to contain such activity, and the large segment of the population interested in peace face high organisational costs. To use a term in vogue among social scientists nowadays, 'social capital' and normal routine social

[1] I refer here to conflict as organised violence that results in large numbers of battle-related casualties, and not to large-scale protests and riots which happen more spontaneously, although they are often well organised.

defences are bound to be weak or non-existent. The obvious answer to this dilemma in a policy sense is to make peace more 'viable' than war. From this vantage point, rehabilitating the conditions facing agriculture and making the primary activities of the majority of people in poor countries profitable is likely to yield the highest dividends. First, however, how to explain the standard wisdom?

In the past, internal war was discussed almost exclusively in terms of rebellion and insurgency, and as highly orchestrated politico-military action against the superior power of a state. 'War', it was often said (after Carl von Clausewitz) 'was the continuation of politics by other means.' Ordinary peasants became the foot soldiers of collective movements that brought together disparate, disaffected elements by the promise of a revolution of the existing political and economic order. In Mao's words, it was 'a people's war'. Ideology was a potent factor in collective organisation for seeking justice.

The tactics of the insurgents were designed to capture the seat of government according to the principles of guerrilla war to change the 'corrupt' political order to addressing the needs of people. In military terms, therefore, the centre of gravity of guerrilla movements was located in the people, whose passive and active support constituted the lifeblood of these justice-seeking movements. Similarly, counterinsurgency strategies of governments were built on winning the 'hearts and minds' of the populace. For these reasons perhaps, the old insurgencies were relatively moderate in terms of the level of violence against non-combatants, the level of criminality, and the degree to which general injustice against non-combatants was practised by both sides. Both insurgents and counterinsurgent forces in general showed themselves up to the society at large to be the most desirable side to support, which intensified the war of words over deeds. Thus, conflict was 'politics by other means' which of course shaped the discourse of conflict.

The violence that was perpetrated in many instances was explicitly designed to win political support at home and abroad. In fact, one of the primary ways in which political entrepreneurs persuaded peasants to risk their lives for political movements was by providing selective incentives, which included various acts of benevolence and justice within rural communities (Popkin 1979). The old wars, although on the surface they seem to have been qualitatively different, can of course be explained by the same economic rationale. The discourse of ideology and grievance notwithstanding, these conflicts occurred because they were viable—most of them existed because of external funding and were in fact proxy wars of superpowers. For many conflict entre-

preneurs, such as Charles Taylor, Jonas Savimbi, and various Latin American guerilla groups such as the Contras, the payoff from a strategy of violence proved to be quite lucrative.

The end of the Cold War has had two effects on civil war situations around the world. First, they have ended because the cut-off of external funding has made many no longer viable (the largest decline in conflicts taking place in Central America). Secondly, many organisations have been forced to resort to self-financing through the criminalisation of war, which is one of the main factors that explains the appalling level of violence in today's zones of conflict.

The wars today are qualitatively quite different. Restraint in the use of violence has now given way to utter brutality, which is often committed on the most vulnerable of non-combatants (Project Ploughshares 1997; Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict 1997). In fact, violence and the threat of violence are 'business strategies.' Perhaps the long and bloody conflict between *Sendero Luminoso* (the Shining Path) and the Peruvian government foreshadowed what has followed. Although clothed in Marxist jargon and promises of economic and social emancipation for the Indian peasants of the Upper Hualaga valley, the Shining Path seems to have been motivated mainly by the desire to profit from supplying cocaine to the drug cartels in Colombia and Peru. A mixture of threat and rhetoric ensured the compliance of the Indian peasants. A similar pattern of apolitical violence occurs in Colombia between various guerrilla groups and military and paramilitary forces and is certainly the dominant feature of the warlord politics of Afghanistan, the numerous conflicts in Africa, and also of the conflicts that has involved Australia recently, such as East Timor.

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The violence in Sierra Leone and Liberia resembled gang-land warfare where youths armed with automatic weapons terrorised civilian populations and each other over the control of diamond mines and other natural resources that promised quick profit. It is said that organisations such as UNITA control over $4 billion in assets and benefit enormously from the war economies of the region. Resources much greater than that are controlled by warring groups in such disparate war zones as Afghanistan, Angola, Sri Lanka, Colombia etc. In many of these conflicts, violence is viable. The organisational barriers and the costs of war are surmounted because of this viability. If one thinks for a moment of what transpired closer to Australia in East Timor, the politics of the situation notwithstanding, the appalling level of violence was highly organised. It is suggestive of the potential losses that were faced by the criminalised elements who did not want to see an end to their highly profitable activities during the

period of control by the Indonesian military. Only such an analysis can shed light on the reasons for the complicity of some factions of the Indonesian armed forces in the violence there, armed forces that were ostensibly getting orders from civilian authorities in Jakarta.

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Many of the new conflicts persist through pillage, extortion, illicit trade, labour exploitation, land grabbing, illicit resource extraction, and other criminal activities. The mafia-style criminal activities common in most states of the former Soviet Union fit this pattern, as do narco-terrorism, gun-running, hostage-taking, and terrorism for hire by various organisations. While the underlying reasons for peasant dissatisfaction, such as the availability of land and threats to livelihood, may have carried over from the Cold War years, the new conflicts are integrally linked to conditions affecting the rural sectors. The new conflicts may be traced to the loss of livelihood, the hopelessness of surviving at the margins, and the alternative life of crime and banditry. The bulk of the rural population seem to be non-participant victims rather than active and passive supporters of utopian revolution, as has been the case in the past.

As David Keen (1998, 45) has written recently, for many of the unemployed youth, 'it may … be more dangerous to stay out of an armed band than to join one.' Ironically, the foot soldiers of much of the armed violence witnessed today might in fact just be trying to stay alive. Poverty and economic stagnation drive conflict because for many (especially young men), the use of violence ensures a 'pay-check'. In effect, these people are not 'free to choose'.

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Taking advantage of dismal conditions in the countryside, conflict entrepreneurs make war on the cheap. Making agricultural livelihood viable will not only enhance the prospects of bottom-up development, but in the short-term it will raise the costs for 'warlords.' In fact, the South-East Asian region is already beginning to see the effects of the rationality of conflict in many of the conflict areas in this region. The situations in Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines already contain very heavily criminalised movements who consistently use violence in their activities. Australian defence authorities would do well to heed the warning of rational expectations in conflict, despite the heavy discourse of ethnicity and ideology in many of these conflicts. These movements are viable because the terrain is suitable for escaping some of the cost of violence, which is that the likelihood of sanction by government troops is low (after all, piracy is a traditional occupation in the coastal areas in this region). However, the biggest problem is going to be the high

unemployment stemming from economic crises and the youth bulge. Good economic aid policies should be viewed in the long-term as good defence policies.

Amartya Sen (1999) views 'development as freedom,' and he explains freedom as an expanding set of choices for people, but as mentioned earlier, the optimum choice for many is still the use of violence. Clearly, development failure must be blamed for such a choice. I will leave it to those gathered here who are eminently more qualified than myself to explain the importance of agricultural development and food production for the development of other sectors. What many see today as 'bottom up' violence cannot be affected adequately until we address the problems of agricultural development.

Food aid may fill bellies in the short-term, but it is the comprehensive development of livelihoods that prevents aimlessness and rootlessness upon which all kinds of profit-seekers make violence on the cheap. In many respects it is not the handout of food aid that people need, and many have documented the ravages of such policies, but it is the comprehensive assistance that is necessary for self-help, which is the best strategy in the long-run. This is not just true for post-conflict reconstruction but also for pre-emption. The only viable path to peace is to help poor societies develop their own mechanisms of social defence. Australian defence policy will do well to adopt a proactive strategy for prevention, which, in the long run, is far cheaper than the cure. Ensuring viable livelihoods is the surest path to achieving this end. Food production is an obvious place to start.

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