

Executive Summary

Major findings of the research project 'Causes of Conflict in the Third World'

Research objectives and questions

The goals of the research project included the contribution to a better understanding of the causes and nature of intrastate conflict in the Third World and the formulation of policy options on how to deal with such conflicts. Questions that were addressed related to the mechanisms that moved conflicts in stages with a higher level of armed violence and to the reasons as why certain countries seemed more susceptible to the escalation of conflict than others.

The research approach has been empirical. Findings were not based on the prevailing literature alone, but on about twenty case studies carried out in the countries themselves, mostly by experts from these areas, taking into account specific historic circumstances of individual cases, or episodes of internal conflict. The specific research questions were as follows:

1. Which conflict histories can be identified in the countries under study and how can the course of these conflicts be described?
2. Which actors were involved in the conflict and how can their behavior be explained?
3. Which factors or clusters of interrelated factors and circumstances (political-military, socioeconomic and external) account for the origin and development of violent conflict in those countries or the absence or de-escalation thereof?
4. Which policy options or recommendations with regard to early warning, conflict prevention and mitigation, and conflict resolution can be derived from the conflict studies and the analysis of the origins and development of conflict in the countries under study?

One of the valuable results of the studies carried out are the detailed descriptions of the conflicts studied. The findings of these studies confirm the point that conflicts usually have roots far beyond the present day or yesterday, and that we may have to go back to colonial times or earlier, to put all factors involved into their proper context. They also show an, at times, bewildering variety of factors and circumstances that conspire to make a situation conflict-prone. It was clear that nearly each conflict investigated was complex and locally and historically specific, but at a higher level of abstraction there were relevant common elements when formulating policies aimed at dealing with conflict situations.

Explanatory factors and methodological aspects

The cases that were investigated stood out in the sense that they addressed a fairly large number of explanatory factors that were ordered in three clusters.

The first cluster entailed *political-military factors* including the processes of state-formation and nation building, the role of governance, as well as of democratization and human rights.

Also the position of minorities and the role of ethnic and cultural factors were investigated. The centralization or monopolization of state power, mechanisms of power transition and the role of the army and arms in society were also looked into. In the cluster of *socioeconomic factors* attention was paid to economic growth, poverty and socioeconomic inequality. The discriminatory nature of many government policies and the uneven (geographical) patterns of economic growth presumably would lead to the alienation and of certain groups in society and particular regions and marginalize them. In the cluster *external factors* the regional security setting and external military as well as economic interventions were studied.

To arrive at a certain level of comparability between the case studies a common conceptual and analytical framework and checklists were used for the collection, description and analysis of data. In order to focus the discussion of the results a number of tentative working hypotheses were formulated. Causal relationships were pre-supposed between the outbreak of violent conflict and factors that were thought to be instrumental in this connection. A set of nine hypotheses was formulated in this connection, focusing on the institutional capacity of a regime, power sharing and transition, economic factors (poverty, economic growth and inequality) and external interventions and the regional security setting.

As regards the role of these factors in the different phases of the conflict (such as the *tensing, escalating, de-escalating* and *settlement* phases), four different categories were distinguished. First, *triggers*, i.e. events that indeed trigger off a conflict but are neither necessary nor sufficient to explain it. Second *pivotal factors*, which lay at the root of a conflict and appear in almost all phases of the conflict. These factors need to be addressed in order to solve the conflict eventually. The third set of factors concerns issues around which individuals or groups are mobilized into violent action, so-called *mobilizing factors*. The role of leaders and political entrepreneurs is always important in this connection. Finally, we have *aggravating factors*. These factors add to the weight of mobilizing or pivotal factors but are not sufficient on their own to cause conflict. An example is the proliferation of small arms.

Regarding the regions and countries selected there were salient differences in history, present-day politics and circumstances. The historical and actual characteristics of those regions and countries are dealt with in the regional analysis and the country chapters of the research documentation. In chapter 2 of the synthesis document a brief, synoptic history of each region is presented as well as an overview of the conflicts studied in each country. At the start of the project a limited number of countries in these regions were supposed to have had a comparatively peaceful, recent past in which there had been no intrastate conflict. They were included in the study as a type of control case. Costa Rica is an example, as is Ghana. Bangladesh was originally also put into this category, but did -on closer scrutiny- better qualify as a state characterized by intrastate conflict, though of a very diversified nature.

Types of conflict

Whether and how conflicts should be labeled is still an issue of debate. Most of the existing typologies of conflict show weaknesses in the field of exhaustiveness, mutual exclusiveness of categories, semantic consistency, and neutrality. These weaknesses apply especially for attempts to construct a typology according to causes of conflict. Due to the complexity and the dynamic of conflicts they are hardly ever mono-causal. It would thus in most cases be incorrect to speak of, for example, ethnic, religious, ideological or economic conflict. Especially since conflicts in the course of time may center on successive issues. From a policy

point of view, static labeling of conflicts could result in inadequate measures in the field of management or resolution. Even obviously simple classifications are hard to apply.

As regards the research project, the descriptive overview of the conflicts investigated reveals a variety of different 'types' of conflict. This variety notwithstanding, a few general remarks can be made. Most of the conflicts were intrastate in the sense that there was no officially declared war between two states, but this is not to say there was no external (overt or covert) interference by other countries. In some cases they were a spillover effect of intrastate conflict. Based on the research findings it is concluded that the borderline between intrastate and interstate conflict is not as precise as the words would suggest. This calls for a re-conceptualization of this dichotomy.

On the intrastate level the findings indicate that most countries have problems around minority groups, be they of an ethnic, religious and sectarian, linguistic or regional nature. Sometimes these issues have a long history. In some cases, however, identity was forged artificially. Language needs special mention in this regard since it proved to be a powerful mobilizing factor, culturally as well as politically, in two of the three regions. Yet other cases have to do with regional claims for more autonomy or claims on scarce resources, sometimes exacerbated through the influx of competing groups from elsewhere. Conflict may also be of an ideological nature and again in other parts it is just to do with unchecked criminal and terrorist activity. Repeatedly these conflicts center on the issue of political power and the role of the state. Government policies can play an important role as escalating or de-escalating factors. In some cases identity politics and state discrimination have resulted in movements for autonomy or full independence and even in bloody civil wars.

Dynamics of conflict

In the study a life cycle of conflict model was used, comprising a tensing, escalating, de-escalating and settlement phase. The case studies showed that these four phases neither do necessarily follow upon each other time wise nor does each conflict include all phases. In some cases the threshold of violence was not crossed, while in others no settlements were concluded but outcomes imposed by military defeat of one of the parties. In other cases the conflict passed alternatively through violent and less violent phases, but did not come to a conclusion. In other words the cycle was iterative while not all phases had to be completed in reality.

The studies also showed that the nature of the conflict and of the demands of the warring parties could very well change over time, in many cases leading to more militant and increasingly intransigent positions. This leads easily to a more intensive and intractable form of conflict.

The transition from one to the other phase in a conflict is caused by a variety of historically specific factors, which often have to do with claims for more cultural and political autonomy and the reaction of the state to such demands. These reactions have generally been inadequate refusing ethnic groups or regions more autonomy or other forms of power sharing, and have in turn led to a further escalation of the conflict or of particular group demands on the state. Lack of mobility, exclusionary state policies or outright discrimination, and relative deprivation, have had similar effects. In Central America a particular mixture of repression and reform was seen to prevent the transition from tension to escalation of conflict. However,

repression solely only forestalls the outbreak of conflict, but does evidently not solve the underlying causes.

Settlements may be furthered by military stalemate on the battlefield and through mediation of outside actors although this is more often than not unacceptable to one of the parties involved depending on their perception of the situation and their relative power positions.

Major findings

Political-military aspects

The countries we investigated had different colonial histories. This proved to be an important factor, as well as, in some cases, the relatively short period of independence. Many of the conflicts studied centered around the political problem of creating or sustaining states in a plural ethnic, religious or cultural society. This was nearly always related to the way the governments of the day were functioning. Governments that were initially conceived as secular and non-partisan mediators between the various sectors and groups of society have been favoring certain sectors of society (usually their own groups and allies), while excluding or even repressing other ethnic, religious or political groups. The problems these governments were and are facing are often a result of a lack of institutional capacity. This capacity not only refers to state strength or effective rule, but also to acceptance of the concept and the authority of the state by all groups within it.

The institutional capacity thus encompasses more than just the instrumental machinery to deliver goods and services to the population. But even in this field the governments of some of the countries we investigated seemed unable to perform adequately. The case of Afghanistan can in this regard be referred to as a failed state that nearly has lost its sovereign authority. Others states we investigated also showed serious weaknesses and omissions in this regard. In some countries the state is out of control of areas which are governed by criminal gangs and 'extortion lords', such as in parts of Bangladesh and Pakistan. In other states we find serious shortcomings in the judiciary, while elsewhere the state fails to deliver basic goods and services to particular areas or sometimes even to the population at large. In Guatemala the indigenous population hardly receives any government support, while in West Africa resources are lacking to maintain a minimum delivery of social services. These weaknesses have contributed to the outbreak of conflict, although a more detailed analysis of the performance of the state in e.g. the executive, juridical, security and development sectors may shed extra light on the effects of these factors.

The findings furthermore indicate that institutional presence and strength to control populations, territories, and implement policies are not sufficient. If a political system is characterized by exclusion and lacks fair and equal access to decision-making and resources at the political center, a potential for mobilization among excluded groups as well as for violent opposition movements will be created. Under these circumstances ethnic and related cultural identities can easily become politicized. The easy answer to this problem would seem to be democracy. Our studies, however, provide the sobering insight that both authoritarian states and democratic regimes face internal conflict due to these reasons. Democracy and democratization do not seem to guarantee the absence or prevention of violent conflict, since even in democratic systems populist rhetoric can dominate the political agenda. This applies especially to democracies where majorities can be found for exclusionary policies towards

minority groups in society. This may especially happen in states where democratization takes place along ethno-linguistic or religious fault lines. Policies of power sharing and devolution of power should be strengthened in order to guarantee the rights of minorities within states as well as their access to decision making in the Center. The findings indicate that in cases where these aspects were not taken into account, or implemented in too late a stage, conflict could break out and escalate easily.

The findings indicate that for any regime the aspects of consensus, authority, loyalty and consent are important for regime legitimacy and regime survival. A legitimacy-deficit can result in violent conflict. This also applies to democracies, where the (e.g. ethnic) majority is not prepared to share power with minorities or to form coalitions. The mere fact of having formally a democratic order does not yet imply equal access to resources and opportunities for all to participate effectively in politics. The way democratic governments guarantee rights and opportunities of minority groups is highly significant when it comes to preventing conflict. When democracies become exclusionary democracies –as happened in a number of cases in our research-, minorities may feel that they have no alternatives than violent opposition to voice their discontent. In some cases we investigated attempts were made to prevent these effects. In some African countries it was prohibited in the Constitution to organize political parties along ethnic lines. These cases, however, indicate that neither the suppression of sub-state identities nor types of one-party systems provide an answer to this problem, besides both having other disadvantages from a democratic point of view. The failure of both democratic and authoritarian systems indicates that simple power sharing systems do not suffice. The concept of power sharing at various levels needs to be analyzed more thoroughly in order to transform it into a viable policy instrument for conflict prevention.

The issue of legitimacy is not limited to ethno-linguistic, religious or other types of cultural factors. In again other countries, we have seen military dictatorships or authoritarian regimes that lacked legitimacy and only served the interests of those in power and their immediate friends and allies. In some cases these regimes even turned into so called predatory states that extracted resources and exploited and suppressed their populations. It will be evident that such behavior undermines the legitimacy of the political center, and ultimately even the whole concept of the state itself may be endangered.

As regards the political military factors, the findings also indicate the importance to have a close look at the actors involved. We already indicated the central role of the state and the effect of state policies on the origin of conflict. The state, by consequence, is central to any solution of these problems. The role of the state, however, cannot be separated from the role of non-state actors and that of external actors (neighboring countries, the international community). The state's capacity to deliver seems e.g. to have eroded even further as a consequence of the IMF and World Bank sponsored structural adjustment programs. On the intrastate level, governments are often confronted with more or less evolutionary developments – in the research indicated as power transitions – which might lead to violent conflicts as they fan tensions between groups in society. The way in which these processes develop depends to a large extent on the way in which these groups will be included in the process of policy making in the Center. If gradual and emancipating power transitions are based on exclusionary ideologies and policies, and if power sharing fails, minorities within states will become threatened and may as a result aim for autonomy, violent resistance or secession. In other cases, elites that feel threatened may resort to repression or violent action to defend their position or to react against the relative deprivation they are undergoing.

However, from a policy point of view, especially the gradual, long-term power transitions seem to be amenable to a certain degree of engineering and management.

Socioeconomic aspects

Structural factors in the economies concerned as well as issues of poverty, inequality and economic growth do not directly relate to conflict. In none of the regions or countries investigated a clear and persistent relationship between poverty and conflict could be demonstrated. Violence occurred in poverty-stricken areas, as well as in economically advanced areas such as the Punjab in India. Conflict could also occur among better-off groups as well as less privileged ones. Poverty, however, did seem to function occasionally as a mobilizing factor, especially when poverty coincided with ethnic, linguistic, religious or other characteristics of groups in society, and when the backwardness of these groups was perceived as a result of identity politics and conscious, discriminatory government policies. On the one hand, this seems to indicate that the dynamics of differentiation vis-à-vis other (competing) groups in society matters more than absolute levels of poverty. On the other hand, the dynamics matter even more when they overlap with the political dimension of conflict, i.e. exclusionary policies.

The JVP uprisings in Sri Lanka show that a stagnating economy and a shrinking labor market in combination with the effects of a demographic youth bulge can result in economic deprivation and alienation. In this way economic decline and stagnation provide mobilizing incentives for extremist leadership, something to be recognized in the MQM movement in Karachi, too. In the latter case we find even the formation of a type of ethno-nationalist *mohajir* identity over a few decades only.

Another observation in the socioeconomic realm also relates to a situation of relative deprivation. This process, in which groups that were earlier predominant and that are losing their erstwhile more powerful positions to other contenders for power and resources, creates tensions that can turn violent, as was evidenced in more than one case. Again it is the dynamic element which turns inequality into a risk factor. This also has to be seen in connection with the institutional capacity of the government since the state is often able to distribute social services and jobs. Its performance in the delivery of goods, services and jobs can alter situations of socioeconomic inequality. However, attempts by the government to alleviate inequality between distinct groups in society can also work as a double-edged sword. Those who lagged behind will welcome such measures. Those who perceive this as a zero-sum game will try to wreck such policies, especially when it affects their privileges. The state thus has to strike a delicate balance in dealing with these issues in order to prevent perceptions of forced affirmative action at the cost of other groups.

Another issue is the effect of modernization and the introduction of market oriented production schemes. These initiatives have been seen as threatening particularistic, cultural identities or –otherwise- as unjust in cases where benefits were siphoned off by the center. Modernization also may lead to increased resource competition and be detrimental to the land-less and poorest sections of the rural population as the Naxalite uprisings indicate. The rebellions in the Casamance and by the Tuaregs and Tubu also are related to scarce resources. In Central America government failure to address the issue of land reform has contributed to the mobilization of groups in violent insurgencies.

External dimensions

From a regional perspective, the external dimensions in South Asia have to do with the dominant position of India compared to its neighbors and the fact that South Asia always has been a prime target for major external political powers. In the past this culminated in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and US support to *mujahideen* forces. All neighboring states are at present involved in one way or the other in the Afghanistan imbroglio. This again indicates the problem of classifying conflicts as intrastate or interstate. Another relationship that dominates the region concerns the tension between India and Pakistan. Between the two countries this has resulted in an arms race that has entered a new level with the recent explosion of nuclear devices. This new level of nuclear threat has shifted the formerly interstate tension between these two states to the plane of a global problem. On an all-regional level, the protracted character of many conflicts in the region has created, moreover, new actors. Some of these actors have strategic interests to continue violent confrontations in a bid to acquire power or profit through a whole range of illicit activities. This is a problem that requires not only regional cooperation, but also extra-regional involvement.

The regional security setting in Africa was relatively quiet in the period right after independence, but has witnessed a proliferation of intrastate conflicts in the last decades. The relative peace on the interstate level is remarkable since the interstate borders were largely a result of colonial state formation and the arbitrary delineation of borders in that period. It is even more remarkable as this also resulted in incongruities between ethno-linguistic communities and problems of resource distribution between those communities. The dividing line between interstate and intrastate conflict, however, seems to become totally blurred in Africa by the most recent development in some West African countries and the Congo.

Another factor of importance in the West African regions is France. This former colonial power continues to be heavily involved in the politics and economies of most of the Francophone countries.

The security setting of the Central American region has always been characterized by the continuous political and economic interference of the United States. Its influence in the region increased during the Cold War. Superpower contradictions turned into an all-out proxy war in the region after the Sandinist revolution took place in Nicaragua. Most of the outside military support was generally, however, in response to intrastate conflicts once they had emerged, and not so much preceding and causing them. The region has furthermore suffered from instability as a result of internal conflicts in four countries. The findings indicate strong engagement from neighboring countries in specific conflict situations.

Conclusions

- The research has clearly indicated which factors are important in the study of violent conflict. The nature of the conflicts has been conceptualized and contextualized. Conflicts are historical, dynamic and multi-dimensional, they have multiple causes and consequences of which a number are unexpected and unintended. They also involve a multitude of actors and have to be approached from different levels of analysis and intervention. Though we have not pursued the analysis at the micro-level, we believe that the multiplex nature of conflict at that level is even more difficult to tackle. In summary, it can be concluded that the political dimension studied in the cases was a powerful

determinant or contributor to violence. It was, in contrast, a salient and perhaps surprising result of the study, that socioeconomic factors in and of themselves were not such determinant or pivotal factors as regard to the outbreak of conflict.

- In our attempt at explanation, issues of a 'real' political nature have once again become salient and even seem to relate to present-day development fashions around issues of democracy and good governance as promoted by the international community. However, it was at the same time established that a simple, formal approach to such questions would be insufficient in the circumstances prevailing in the countries studied. The relevance of identity politics was asserted in cases in which states have failed to deal with this issue sensibly. In this connection, the role of political entrepreneurs and the use of different types of discourse should be studied at more depth.
- The political-military aspects are most salient when explaining the outbreak and course of violent conflict in the Third World. The institutional capacity of the state and adequate processes of power sharing and transition are important factors. The cases lend support to the notion that the likelihood of conflict diminishes with an increase of the state's institutional capacity. This not only refers to institutional presence and the instrumental strength of the state to control its populations and territories or to implement policies. This can even be achieved without popular backing and by the use of force and coercion. It rather does mean legitimacy: an evaluation of the state in terms of its performance and acceptance among the groups and areas under its control.
- Power sharing is closely related to institutional capacity and refers to the way in which groups constituting the community of a state are represented and able to participate in politics in all its dimensions, including access to state allocated funds and services and decision-making at the different levels in society. The failure of states to grant rights to minority groups has led in general to violent conflict in all three regions, though in Asia and Africa these were primarily based on identity politics and in Central America more on ideological divisions. Once these violent situations have emerged, however, they are difficult to reverse, even if concessions are made eventually by the state. Although the concrete grievances, tensions and type of conflicts vary, there is a strong support to the notion that a lack of power sharing -or the implementation of conscious policies of marginalization and exclusion by the state-, contribute to violent conflict. When such conflicts are identity-related they become very difficult to handle.
- The studies also support the notion that rapid power transitions or the sudden or gradual loss of power by erstwhile predominant groups may lead to violent reactions.
- Absolute levels of poverty, inequality and lack of economic growth or progress did not show a clear covariance with the prevalence of violent conflict and armed struggle. They certainly became relevant in a number of situations, but this was nearly always in combination with other factors, such as identity politics, discriminatory or exclusionary government policies, or the relative improvement of other groups in society as compared to the relative decline of one's own (i.e. relative deprivation). Such issues also required often an ideological context, leadership or political entrepreneurs before people rallied around them. Poverty and inequality therefore can best be qualified as mobilizing and/or aggravating factors in combination with other factors mainly of a political nature. This raises questions as to the exact relationship between economic factors and conflict, between poverty and conflict and between such an issue as resource scarcity in the future

and chances on conflict. Is there a moment conceivable when economic factors become an issue in themselves or do poverty, inequality, economic decline and resource scarcity always have to be mediated through a process of political mobilization or incensed by identity politics, exclusion and discrimination, before they become conflict-prone?

- The role of external factors has been important in a number of conflicts where there was direct military interference of outside powers, but in most cases the contribution of external factors has been more indirect. Military aid was mostly given once the conflict had started and, at the most, increased the duration and intensity of the conflict. Economic interference has never led to the outbreak of conflict directly, but massive economic aid has propped up the parties involved in conflict and in this manner prolonged the struggle in some cases. An unstable regional and superpower setting has led to proxy wars in some instances. Mostly, however, external meddling was more diffuse, in which outside interventions and covert actions have intensified or prolonged the conflict.
- The dichotomy intrastate and interstate conflict seems to need a re-conceptualization as well as the thinking in categories like local, national, state and sub-state. It seems that interdependencies at all levels and between all actors have to be acknowledged before we will learn how to deal with these intractable and protracted forms of conflict.

Policy recommendations

Political and military dimension

- It was deemed essential that all groups and sections of society be represented in the government and governance of their country. It is needed to promote the establishment of representative democracies in countries where this is not yet the case or where governance still is characterized by authoritarianism and lack of participatory decision-making. A number of measures was proposed on achieving democratic, transparent, representative and honest elections in which all sections of a population could freely participate. The role of electoral commissions such as in India was recommended in this connection. The establishment of a democratic culture is not easily compatible with a number of socio-cultural features in rural, traditionally inegalitarian societies and educational efforts are indicated in these cases. The role of local traditions and elites should be considered here. In addition to formal schemes, other forms of local empowerment (e.g. through NGOs) could contribute to increased representativeness and advocacy. The formal recognition of minority rights was suggested to avoid discrimination of minorities by ethnic majority rule applying the principle of 'winner takes all'. Likewise, it was suggested to design ways for 'polycentric rule' and procedures for the smooth transfer of sitting leaders.
- A second set of recommendations was related to the issue of devolution of central, national state authority to state, provincial and local levels depending on whether there was a federal or unitary state structure in place. Government administration should be made more representative of and responsive to local and ethnic or religious minority groups' needs and aspirations. Also the possibility of other mechanisms of power sharing should be looked into. Besides the sharing of decision-making power, attention has to be focused on the equitable distribution of economic resources and socio-economic services as well.

- The institutional performance of the government administration was seen essential with regard to legitimacy and redistributionary justice. It is necessary to have an effective mutual independence of the different branches of government. The importance of an impartial judiciary was stressed in this connection, accessible to all layers of society. The establishment of an independent ombudsman's office was suggested to check abuse by the government. The provision of law and order, security and essential social services is pivotal for a government's legitimacy as well as the overall level of government service in terms of coverage, effectiveness and efficiency. In many countries historically uneven patterns of service provision have come into being, while presently there is a lack of resources to maintain, let alone extend services to the needy. These trends need to be remedied.
- Another set of recommendations referred to the relationship between the military and civil sectors of society. The establishment of civilian control over the military was seen of essence in Central America. This also implied that all types of other non-military tasks and their lucrative involvement in economic activities would have to be stopped. Reform and training of the police force was deemed necessary, too.

Socioeconomic dimension

- The equitable redistribution of scarce resources and essential socio-economic services was seen as essential to avoid patterns of relative deprivation and situations of extreme poverty that would create tensions and provide fertile breeding grounds for political mobilization and agitation. In this connection, a number sector-wise suggestions were forwarded. Especially for the Central American case the need for a properly implemented land reform policy was stressed, combined with other agricultural support measures.
- Development investments should be made in such a way as to avoid regional imbalances, while strengthening local economies and addressing prevailing disparities, including unchecked urban growth. Local cultures and livelihood strategies should be taken as a point of reference.

External dimension

- Patterns of migration have to be regulated in order to minimize risks on political tensions in border areas of adjacent states. Similarly, attention should be paid to expatriate refugee communities with regard to the funding of secessionist or rebel movements at home.
- In cases such as Afghanistan where all neighboring states have stakes in the type of settlement to be reached, a comprehensive approach seems to be the only solution out of the present political stalemate.
- Geo-political consequences of globalization and the emergence of economies of violence require attention of the international community and multinational companies. Regional economic integration was suggested as a means of limiting potential tensions between countries in the same region, while also reducing conflict potential internally due to better economic prospects of the population at large.

- Development interventions should be subjected to a (simple) conflict impact assessment as a matter of routine.