

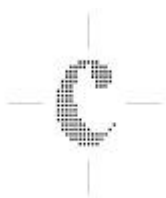
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A Commentary on the World Bank report
'Breaking the Conflict Trap'

Bart Klem

Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'
Conflict Research Unit
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Netherlands Institute of
International Relations
'Clingendael'
Clingendael 7
2597 VH The Hague
P.O. Box 93080
2509 AB The Hague
Phone number: # 31-70-3141950
Telefax: # 31-70-3141960
Email: research@clingendael.nl
Website: <http://www.clingendael.nl/cru>

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Executive Summary

The World Bank report 'Breaking the conflict trap' attracted a lot of attention after its presentation in May 2003. This briefing note summarizes its contents and discusses its weaknesses and strengths.

The argument unfolded in the report can be summarised as: civil wars affect us, the determining causes are largely economic and we can do something about it.

Violent conflicts matter to the international community, because they are breeding grounds for economic instability, drugs, terrorism and AIDS. With regard to the causation of conflict, the report argues that - contrary to common perceptions - ethnic and political factors are not so important. What matters is the opportunity of a rebel organisation to mobilise the people and finances required to stage a war. This is why civil wars are more common in countries with a sluggish economy - people are more easily mobilised - and a large dependence on primary resources: they generate easy financial profits.

These findings are inserted in a simulation model, which is subsequently used to test external interventions. The outcome feeds into an international agenda for action: we need to employ development assistance to stimulate economic growth in low-income countries, we need to block rebels from the international resource market and we need to send military peace missions.

The criticism on the report applies to all levels. The methodology is weak, because indicators are subjective or inadequate. The analysis is flawed, because the jump from correlation to causation is large. Finally, the recommendations are criticised, because they do not appreciate many lessons learnt in the past years of debate. Also, the report does not take case-specific circumstances into account.

Nonetheless, the report may be useful. It is functional as a political agenda-setting document: it puts conflict on the policy map. Secondly, the report raises questions regarding the relevance of political and ethnic factors in conflict. Thirdly, the report transcends a number of entrenched debates, by putting the opportunity of rebellion at the core of the analysis.

Overall it is concluded though, that qualitative analysis remains crucial for policymakers. The diverse and dynamic nature of conflicts demands an appreciation of case specific factors and of the interaction between interventions and conflict contexts. 'Breaking the Conflict Trap' raises relevant questions, but it is ill suited as a basis for policy.

Introduction

'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.'

Mark Twain

'If you torture the data long enough, they will confess.'

Anon

'He uses statistics as a drunken man uses lamp-posts - for support rather than illumination.'

Andrew Lang

This briefing note reflects on the publications of the World Bank in the field of violent conflict. More specifically, it discusses the 'Breaking the Conflict Trap' report that was published in May 2003.¹ This book attracted a lot of attention mainly for two reasons: many see the World Bank as authoritative in any development-related field and the firmly presented conclusions of the report itself are quite remarkable.

The Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, more precisely the unit that deals with peace building and good governance (DMV/VG), requested the Conflict Research Unit (CRU) of the Clingendael Institute to comment on the report. This request belongs to a larger framework of co-operation between the CRU and DMV.

This document will briefly summarize the report, consolidate some criticisms and indicate weaknesses in the analysis. Subsequently, the question is answered what remains of the report having taken its weaknesses into account? What is its value to policymakers and academics in the field of conflict and development?

¹ World Bank (2003) Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy. A World Bank policy report. Washington/Oxford: World Bank/Oxford University Press. The authors of this report were: Paul Collier, Lani Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol and Nicholas Sambanis.

Summary of the Report

The report 'Breaking the Conflict Trap' encompasses an ambitious effort to capture the global causes and consequences of civil war. It argues that intra-state conflict should have a major place on the international policy agenda and it suggests means for interventions. The 200-page document is characterised by the firm presentation of its main argument: we cannot ignore these far-out wars, the determining causes are largely economic and we can do something about it.

The report compiles a few years of research. The authors include earlier research by themselves as well as earlier criticism. For example, the qualitative synthesis of case studies by Sambanis - also executed on request of the World Bank, but quite critical of Collier's earlier work - has been used as an input.² Thus, the authors synthesize a number of discussions in an easily readable and persuasive document.

The methodology underlying the report and preceding documents is largely quantitative. Fifty-two countries with sufficient data were selected and inserted in a database of eight five-year periods (from 1960 - 1964, 1965 - 1969 ... up to 1995 - 1999). Statistical analysis was applied to a number of social, political and economic indicators. These calculations were enriched with qualitative studies. The generated conclusions were merged into a model, which was subsequently used to generate scenarios for the future and assess the relative pay-off of certain interventions. The line of reasoning is presented in six basic steps, the six chapters of the report.

Chapter 1: War as Development in Reverse

The first chapter summarizes the local consequences of civil war. The direct impact consists of economic costs (military spending, destruction, capital flight to foreign countries and declined growth) and social costs (casualties, displacement, oppression). The longer-term impact is also discussed: lack of trust and economic confidence, corruption, bad governance and weak or absent democracy, disability, diseases (most notably AIDS), a disrupted education system, traumas and land mines.

Chapter 2: Let Them Fight it out among Themselves?

'All this is terrible, but it's not our problem,' is the stance that the authors anticipate among sceptical policymakers. But this view is ungrounded, they argue. In the second chapter, the authors argue that the regional and global effects of these wars are so large that we cannot ignore them. Neighbouring countries are affected both economically (increased military costs, restricted economic growth and

2 Sambanis, N. (2003) Using Case Studies to Expand the Theory of Civil War. CPR working paper no 5. Social Development Department, Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Network. <http://www.yale.edu/unsy/civilwars/CPR-WPNo5.pdf>

disrupted trade and investment) and socially (refugees, increased malaria and AIDS, and destabilisation).

More importantly, the world at large is also affected. In fact, some of our major global concerns are fed by civil wars, the authors argue in the second part of this chapter. Wars are a breeding ground for drugs, AIDS and terrorism. Many rebel organisations produce or trade drugs. Large armies, widespread rape and displacement are conducive to the spread of AIDS. Lastly, many countries going through war create opportunities for terrorists to recruit people and gather finances. Thus, the authors conclude: civil war *is* our problem. We need to do something about it.

Chapter 3: What Makes a Country Prone to Civil War?

Having underlined the relevance of civil wars, chapter three moves into an analysis of their causes. Common answers to this question are ethnic or religious hatred (popular among the political right), a lack of democracy (political centre), or economic inequality (the left). These are not the main causes of war, the authors state. Rather, ‘the key root cause of conflict is the failure of economic development’.³ More specifically, lack of economic growth, a small GDP and dependence on primary (natural) resources are best able to explain civil war, according to the authors.

In their statistical analysis, there is no correlation between the regime type (autocracy or democracy) and the occurrence of civil war. Likewise income or land inequality among the population bears no relation with conflict. So-called ‘grievances’ are thus discarded as a generally valid cause of war. In addition, ethnic diversity does not correlate with civil war, the authors find. However, ethnic dominance - a country with various ethnicities and one that forms an absolute majority - *has* a higher risk of violent conflict.

Intra-state war should be understood from the perspective of a rebel organisation, it is argued. Inequality, grievances and oppression may be relevant factors, but they don’t make the difference. There are so many cases where these phenomena do not result in violence. What counts in the end is whether an insurgent movement manages to organise itself effectively. Lack of economic growth and a small GDP matter, because people are more easily mobilised in a harsh economic climate. Dependence on primary resources is relevant, because finances are more easily generated in the presence of resources, that are easily extracted, looted and traded. From this perspective the detected correlations of civil war make sense.

The most evident cause of war, according to the authors, is war itself. Once a country is at war, there is a large chance that it will continue. Even when a peace is signed the risk of relapsing into war remains exceptionally high. This is what the authors call ‘the conflict trap’. War diminishes development, it causes a flight of people and capital, it induces a military lobby and it reinforces hatreds.

Chapter 4: Why is Civil War so Common?

Chapter 4 draws from the findings of the previous chapter and uses them as the basic assumptions of a global model. The model consists of five categories: 32 high-income countries, 64 successful

³ Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 53.

developers (poor countries catching on with - economic - development), 32 marginalised countries (poor countries staying behind) and 12 post conflict countries. All these countries are at peace. The fifth group consists of 17 countries in civil war (at the time the report was written). Having calculated the average conflict risk in each group, global trends (the size of each category) in the future can be simulated. This results in a baseline outcome. The nice thing about the model is that one can change one variable, do the simulation again and see what difference it makes. In this way, the impact of interventions can be predicted.

The baseline simulation identifies two main categories of concern: marginalised countries and post conflict countries. Annually, both are predicted to produce 0,7 country that falls prey to a civil war. At a global level, the number of countries in conflict is slowly declining, but war is increasingly concentrated in the two groups mentioned: marginalised countries and post conflict countries. Thus, the overall developments are positive, but a few countries structurally lag behind. Here, again, the authors observe a conflict trap.

Drawing from these conclusions, the authors draw the first contours of a policy agenda. International priorities should be: economic development in marginalised countries and preventing a relapse into violence in post conflict countries.

Chapter 5: What Works Where?

These views are the overture for a more extensive set of recommendations, which is presented in the fifth chapter. Conform to the rest of the report, the answer to this question is quite decisive. With regard to the group of marginalised countries, military expenses don't work. They cause war, rather than peace, the authors calculate. Instead, economic growth, development assistance, a decrease in corruption, inclusive policymaking and a diversification of the economy (less reliant on primary resources) will result in less civil war, the report argues. It is calculated that an increase in economic growth produces the single biggest impact on the global incidence of conflict. Increasing economic growth with 30 percentage points in marginalised countries almost halves the global occurrence of conflict, according to the simulation.

In current conflict countries, three interventions are suggested. Curbing the finances of rebel organisations - by blocking them from the market and by stopping Diasporas from funding them - will restrict their capacity to fight a war. International military intervention is a point. Finally support and engagement in peace negotiations is a policy option.

In post conflict countries, the presence of military peace forces, economic growth, development assistance, support and investment of Diaspora and DDR (disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of fighters) are successful strategies. It is calculated that a reduction of the risk countries relapsing into war results in a decrease of conflict of about 20 percent.

The researchers acknowledge that there is a potential tension between economic growth and peace. To minimise negative side effects, the benefits of growth must be distributed and diversification (to prevent reliance on primary resources) is advisable. Finally, the report points out that the timing of interventions is essential. Military intervention is required directly after peace starts and should last a few years. Aid is most effective after about four years. Thus, rather than rushing in directly after peace is signed, it should be phased in to provide its optimal impact between four and about seven years after the war. Finally, economic policy reforms are required throughout the entire first decade following the conflict.

Chapter 6: An International Agenda for Action

Having explored a number of policy responses and having calculated their relative impact, the authors conclude their report with an international agenda for action in chapter 6. We need to do something and we can do something, is the main message of this final chapter. The authors underscore that general global growth is hardly effective in diminishing conflict. Specific action is required towards countries caught in the conflict trap (marginalised-, conflict- and post conflict countries).

We must set three priorities, the authors argue. Firstly, we need to employ development assistance. This needs to be well timed (slowly phasing in after conflict); it needs to be focused on marginalised (low income) countries; we should stimulate ‘relatively uncontentious reforms with quick payoffs’⁴; we should give more aid; and carefully reinforce democratic institutions.

Secondly, we need to better manage international trade in natural resources. We should shut out rebels from the market. This can be done through certification, tracking of commodities, monitoring of financial transactions and better transparency regulations. In addition, we should cushion sudden price drops for primary resources. Aid, early warning mechanisms and risk pooling may help here. Also, rich countries should abstain from policies that induce price shocks. Another recommendation is the stimulation of transparent use of profits. Financial transactions between governments and private companies over primary commodities must be monitored in verifiable reports. These reports could be compiled by the Bretton Woods institutions and should be accountable to national institutions. Finally, we should stimulate governments to adopt stricter policies against corruption and work with reliable extraction companies.

Thirdly, there is the military domain. An increase in the national defence budget is counterproductive, but external military intervention works. Adjustment and timing of these interventions *vis-à-vis* development assistance and policy reforms should be adequate.

If the three fields of intervention are employed correctly, this will result in fewer newly emerging conflicts, shorter conflicts and less relapse into conflict. In line with the Millennium Goals, we should aim to halve the incidence of conflict in 2015. With the recommendations suggested this can be done, the authors conclude hopefully.

4 Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 177.

Criticism

Quantitative analysis has an objective feel to it. Combined with firm presentation, the report seems rather convincing at first glance. Nonetheless, the underlying analysis of the report is subject to criticism. The ambition of the researchers to explain the universal underpinnings of civil war throughout the past half century is admirable, but their work is inevitably prone to the numerous pitfalls and complexities of the difficult academic field of conflict studies. This paragraph discusses the weaknesses of the report under three headings: methodology, conclusions and recommendations.

Difficulties of a Quantitative Approach

The great asset of quantitative approaches is that the results are measurable. Unlike qualitative studies, they can quite easily be used to generalise findings and explain or predict phenomena in other situations. Once all the indicators are in place, one can calculate outcomes and simulate interventions. This fits the request of policymakers well, but it conceals the weakness and subjectivity underlying these calculations. The adequacy of definitions, the validity of indicators and the reliability of data are prone to criticism.

The main definition of the report is civil war. According to the authors, this ‘occurs when an identifiable rebel organization challenges the government militarily and the resulting violence results in more than 1,000 combat-related deaths, with at least 5 percent on each side.’⁵ Though, the thresholds of 1,000 and 5 percent are of course rather arbitrary, this definition seems adequate.

On a more fundamental level, it could be questioned whether civil war should be analysed as one phenomenon. Possibly, it is so diverse that no generally applicable characteristics or causes exist.⁶ More specifically, it may be argued that contemporary wars are quite different from violent conflict in the Cold War era. The drop out of direct superpower support, the transformation of global trading networks and increasingly active Diaspora may have a large impact on contemporary conflicts. The World Bank authors draft recommendations on the wars of the coming decades on the analysis of the wars of the past four decades. Arguably, the conflicts of the 1960s are so different from the wars in the 2020s that this approach does not make sense.

Beside these principle questions on the definition of war, the indicators used to examine the causes of civil war require discussion. In this respect, the report explores a number of factors like economic growth and political systems. Because reality does not manifest itself in crystal clear concepts, statistical analysis requires the use of indicators. Often, this methodological step is not highlighted in debate, but it is usually prone to criticism. ‘[...] this work often requires difficult

⁵ Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 54.

⁶ Some authors have suggested specific categories of conflict, like ideological, separatist or faction conflict. Among others, the following publication gives an overview of different categories used. C.A. Crocker, F.O. Hampson and Pamela Aall (2001) *Turbulent Peace: The Challenge of Managing International Conflict*. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press.

judgment calls,' the authors acknowledge.⁷ 'What does an indicator really indicate?' is the question to be asked.

One of the conclusions of the report is that countries are more prone to civil war if rebel organisations can easily make money. The relative economic importance of primary resource exports to is used as an indicator here. Wars are more common in countries depending on primary resources, because these resources can easily be looted and traded by rebels, it is postulated.

Though this line of reasoning in itself seems to be sound, the underlying indicator can be criticised. Not all primary resources are easily extracted and traded. Surely, diamonds, gem stones and in some cases oil and timber may generate quick profits. But agricultural products like maize, coffee or cotton also belong to the primary sector. They are much less profitable for militias. For this reason, some authors talk about obstructable and lootable resources to focus the debate on the resources that really matter.⁸

Other indicators may face similar 'difficult judgment calls'. The authors find that political inequality, political rights and the quality of political institutions do not account for the outbreak of conflict. The question to be asked here is: how are these concepts measured and how is the relative importance of different factors within these concepts quantified?

Some authors respond very critically to these questions and suggest that manipulation may occur. Cramer observes that econometric analysis is 'driven by an apparently arbitrary selection of assumptions.'⁹ He reviews a succession of publications by the lead author Paul Collier and observes that the relation between inequality and conflict follows an interesting sequence of alleged correlations. Initially, Collier and Hoeffler calculated that inequality is inversely related to conflict.¹⁰ The explanation added is that in unequal societies, the elite may be powerful enough to deter potential rebels. However, before publication, they reversed this conclusion and calculated that there is no significant relation between inequality and conflict.¹¹

'Econometric analysis appears capable of supporting completely contrasting causal mechanisms for the same variable through modest changes in the specification of models,' Cramer concludes.¹² He insinuates that there are political interests at stake. Firstly, the authors wanted to disprove the frequently presumed relation between grievance - of which inequality is a central component - and conflict. Secondly, the suggestion that greater equality could contribute to conflict was highly inconvenient within the policy agenda of the World Bank.

The lesson to be learnt here is that statistical analysis involves judgments that may have a large impact on the conclusions. It is hard to make scientifically sound decisions and political incentives may be strong.

7 Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 58, in box 3.1.

8 Ross, M. (2003) Oil, drugs, and diamonds: the varying roles of natural resources and civil war. In Ballentine, K. and Sherman, J. *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance*. London/Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. pp. 47-70.

9 Cramer, C. (no date given) Economic inequalities and civil conflict. CDPR Discussion Paper 1501. London: Centre for Development Policy and Research, School of Oriental and African Studies. p. 11. <http://www.soas.ac.uk/cdprfiles/dp/Dp15cc.pdf>

10 Cramer refers to the following document here: Collier, P and Hoeffler, A. (1996) On economic causes of civil war. Mimeo, Centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford.

11 Cramer refers to the following publication here: Collier, P and Hoeffler, A. (1998) On economic causes of civil war. *Oxford Economic Papers*, Vol 50, pp. 563-573.

12 Ibid. Cramer, C. (no date given) p. 11.

An additional problem of the method used in the report, is that the indicators apply to countries as a whole. Since the research looks into intra state war, this is not always appropriate. Many conflicts occur only within a certain part of the country. Nationwide figures thus cover a much wider area. This may cause phoney correlations. The case of Mali is a good example here. Most qualitative studies related the Tuareg rebellion in the Northeast of the country to drought, land conflict, failing governance and economic issues between the nomadic Tuaregs and sedentary populations in the desert provinces of Timbuktu and Kidal. There is little evidence that these conflicts are related to the discovery of gold in the Southwest of Mali, over a thousand kilometres away. Nonetheless, national indicators do suggest a relation, because the two indicators (primary resources and conflict) correlate. Similarly, Azerbaijan is well endowed with oil extracted from the Caspian Sea, but it could well be that this is unrelated to the conflict regarding Nagorno Karabakh, which is situated land inwards.¹³

The opposite may also occur. Some of the conflicts in Nigeria have a rather clear relation to oil. Exploitation of this resource was a key motive to the Biafra rebellion in 1967. Given the large size of Nigeria, primary commodity exports were relatively low in 1960 (9 percent of the GDP, according to the figures used).¹⁴ Thus, the link between resources and conflict in this case is much stronger than nationwide statistics would suggest. In sum, national figures may be ill suited to explain phenomena that occur only on sub-national level.

Lastly, criticism may be expressed regarding the data used. Though this is nearly impossible to verify, the reliability of data may be questioned. Objective information is a common victim of war. The dominance of propaganda and the common absence of independent channels of information form a considerable problem for research. Basic figures like the number of casualties can vary extensively from source to source. Because these figures are an essential part of the definition of 'civil war', there has been disagreement whether the situation in a certain countries qualifies as war or not.¹⁵ More complex economic and political indicators may also be unreliable. These difficulties affect the research underlying the report.

From Findings to Conclusions

From the previous paragraph we may conclude that the empirical underpinnings of the report are not immaculate. They may be useful nonetheless, given that caution is taken with the interpretation of the data. This paragraph will look into the flaws of the report in that respect.

The fact that two phenomena occur simultaneously does not mean they are related. Correlation does not prove causation. This is the reason that purely quantitative research has little explanatory power. The fact that poor economic growth correlates with conflict does not mean the former causes the latter. *Prima facie*, alternative explanations could be that conflict slows down economic growth or that a third factor (for example, political failure) causes both economic sluggishness and violent conflict.

13 Ibid. Sambanis, N. (2003). p. 24.

14 Ibid. Sambanis, N. (2003). p. 25.

15 Ibid. Sambanis, N. (2003). p. 14-17.

To some extent these explanations can be ruled out. Third factors can be excluded by proving lack of correlation and including a time dimension in the analysis can refute reverse causations. If poor economic growth preceded the conflict, there is no reason to believe that the latter caused the former.

Thus, it seems the problem is solved. However, the dynamics of conflict are more complex. Conflict does not start at one instant. Certainly, it passes the threshold defined by the analyst at one point in time, but the escalation of violent conflict is normally a process. Given the sequence of incidents that feed into each other, the starting point of the dynamics underlying conflict is hard to pin down. Thus, it is very hard to rule out reverse causalities. The early stages of conflict escalation may have caused poor economic growth before evolving into a situation that is officially qualified as ‘civil war’. Cause and consequence cannot be separated so easily.

A second challenge regarding the interpretation of figures regards counterfeiting evidence. Different studies yield different results. One cannot simply push aside other research as false or irrelevant, without indicating the methodological, empirical or theoretical flaws. Though not completely satisfactory, the authors do account for the diverging outcomes of different statistical studies.¹⁶ To a much lesser extent do they explain the different conclusions of many qualitative research efforts.

Many studies indicate the relevance of political factors like inclusive policies, adequate governance, corruption and the rule of law,¹⁷ while others stress the relevance of identity groups, a process of ‘ethnicisation’ or cultural aspects.¹⁸ Socio-economic inequalities also matter when analysing conflict, many authors have argued. Regarding conflict dynamics - presumably a crucial component of the ‘conflict trap’ - cultures of violence and processes of identity formation have been suggested as relevant dimensions of conflict. The report makes a rather firm statement that too much importance is attached to these dimensions. Statistical analysis does not provide any evidence that there is a relation between these factors and the occurrence of conflict.

Why do qualitative studies come to other conclusions than quantitative studies? The authors of the report carefully suggest that qualitative research is less objective. Researchers tend to find the relations they’re looking for. ‘[Statistical patterns can] defend us [...] from the tendency to pick out from the multiplicity of possible causes that which conforms with the beliefs of the researcher,’ the authors state.¹⁹ Discarding the work of academic opponents with a presumed bias in their work, without further reference, is not a very sophisticated way of explaining diverging outcomes of research.

16 In Box 3.1 on page 58, the authors state that ‘[statistical] Approaches, and consequently results, can legitimately differ because of choices of statistical specification and of data, as this work often requires difficult judgment calls [...]’.

17 To mention a recent example: Ballentine, K. (2003). *Beyond greed and grievance: Reconsidering the economic dynamics of armed conflict*. In Ballentine, K. and Sherman, J. *The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance*. London/Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. pp. 259-283.

18 Douma, P. S. (2003) *The Origins of Contemporary Conflict; A Comparison of Violence in Three World Regions*. Working paper 16. The Hague: Clingendael. Also: Kaldor M. (1999) *New & Old Wars, Organized Violence in a Global Era*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

19 Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 54.

From Conclusions to Recommendations

As was discussed before, there are serious questions regarding the analytical conclusions of the report. This erodes the logic underlying the policy recommendations formulated in the last two chapters of the report. In addition, a few points specifically regarding the recommendations need to be made.

The first point of criticism regards the leap from analysis to recommendations. Whereas the analytical section provides a relatively coherent argument centring on economic factors, the recommendations have a much wider scope. Suggestions are made regarding peace mediation, military interventions, demobilisation and disarmament, HIV/AIDS and malaria issues and landmines. Though these things can be related to the analysis of the report, the advice given is not grounded in the earlier analysis. The wide range of recommendations is sensible in face of the complex nature of conflict and it suits the tendency of some policymakers to take a comprehensive approach and to not exclude any issues of importance. The consequence is, however, that the reader is left with recommendations that can hardly be traced to the analysis. This does not imply that the recommendations are not adequate, rather that they are poorly substantiated.

A second point involves the exclusion of case-specific causes of war in the analysis. The authors state that '[s]ome causes of civil war are idiosyncratic and beyond the control of policy.'²⁰ The assumption that case specific factors cannot be influenced seems incorrect. They are just not amenable to global-level recommendations. That brings us to the weakness of macro level policies. The authors acknowledge the limitation of their approach. '[Global] Averages often conceal wide dispersions, and sometimes they also conceal important structural differences,' they state.²¹ Because countries differ, their simulation divides countries into five categories. The problem remains, however. 'Wide dispersions' and 'important structural differences' remain within these categories.

It is a dubious assumption that conflicts are similar throughout time and around the world, that they can be modelled and that the impact of external interventions can similarly be mapped out. Conflicts are highly dynamic. They don't follow the handbook sequence of pre-conflict, escalation, de-escalation and post conflict stages. Actors react to each other's intervention. The international community is no exception here. Thus, it is unrealistic to assume that external intervention in the conflict can be modelled without acknowledging case specific factors and the complex dynamics of conflict.

A final point to be made is that the past decade has witnessed extensive policy debate and research regarding the position of aid in conflict. The concerns and conclusions voiced in these debates are largely ignored in the report. The potential negative side effects of international intervention - manipulation of aid, financing or strengthening of warring parties, reinforcing social cleavages, fortification of war economies, dependency effects, sanctions yielding further criminalisation - create a major dilemma for any external intervention.

The report includes a brief section on the 'trade-offs between growth and peace'.²² In this section, the tension between economic progress and peace is acknowledged, but the issues at stake are presented as operational difficulties that can be accommodated. The fact that the fundamental

20 Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 121.

21 Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 100.

22 Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 166.

difficulties involved here are hardly appreciated may disqualify the report as serious policy formulating document for anyone working with or within conflict countries.

What Remains?

Having discussed the weaknesses of the report, the question rises, what remains of the argument made? What use is the report to policymakers? At first sight the answer would be: not so much. The report presents a very clear argument, but the underlying analysis is weak and the propagated recommendations do not appreciate the numerous lessons learnt in this field. Nonetheless, a few positive remarks need to be made.

As an agenda-setting document, the report has been rather successful. It provides quite a strong argument for the relevance of conflict to the wider realm of development cooperation. The report seems to be aimed at convincing sceptical policymakers (within or outside the World Bank) that conflicts affect us and that we can do something to stop them. This is good news for those who had given up countries struggling with civil war, because the means of the international community to solve internal conflicts are so limited. The last chapter of the report offers an interesting agenda for international action, which is linked with the Millennium Goals. Given the amount of attention the report has received, we may conclude it was quite successful as a political document. The report may thus be of strategic importance to policymakers who wish to put conflict related issues on the agenda. It needs to be mentioned that the analytical underpinnings are rather weak, but that is nothing new. Many policies are not based on extensive research.

For those who already acknowledge the relevance of conflict, the report has less to offer, but it adds something to the discussion. Though there are some inherent problems with quantitative analysis, it adds something to the discussion. It may debunk traditional beliefs, politically biased perceptions and prejudices. Quantification may establish the relative importance of different factors and predictions.

Secondly, the report contests the relevance of political factors, socio-economic inequality and ethnic diversity to violent conflict.²³ Though these factors can often not be isolated completely from economics, the findings raise relevant questions. After all, correlations may not prove causality, but the lack of correlation makes a relation hardly plausible. Possibly, social-political factors are not quite as relevant as many authors have argued or presumed. Additionally, the analysis points to the numerous cases of inequality, political oppression and ethnic diversity that have not fallen prey to conflict. These cases may provide interesting lessons on how these factors can be dealt with in a peaceful manner.

Interestingly, the report does not completely discard social and political factors. Rather, the authors take an approach that puts the relative importance of greed and grievance factors into perspective. They argue that it is not the motivation for rebellion that matters, but the opportunity. This is possibly their main contribution to the debate.

²³ As mentioned on page 7, the relation between inequality and conflict underwent remarkable changes through the analysis. What matters here, is that the authors never detected a positive relation between inequality and conflict.

Motivations - in the form of political or economic inequality or injustice - are not irrelevant. They are just not the determining factor. They are omnipresent and they may or may not lead to war. 'Political grievances and the political conflict they generate are universal,' the authors argue.²⁴ What makes the difference is whether a rebel organisation manages to stage a rebellion. Thus, we must look at their financial and military opportunities. This is an interesting way to transcend the seeming dichotomy between greed and grievance. Arguably, this perspective may have far-reaching consequences for external interventions.

The report's analysis of the opportunity for rebellion has a strong economic focus. Critics have argued that an analysis of opportunities for mobilising people must be broader. Some have argued that emerging patterns of legitimacy are a factor.²⁵ Ballentine argues for the inclusion of 'the military, political, sociological, and economic characteristics associated with weak states.'²⁶ Grievances and injustice matters, she adds. Economic decline is indeed associated with lower opportunity costs of recruiting people, as the World Bank authors argue. They fail to acknowledge that this may aggravate grievances. In addition, patterns of mobilisation are shaped by ethnic and other forms of communal solidarity, especially if they overlap with territorial, social, political and economic cleavages.²⁷

Another asset of the report regards the lesson on the timing of aid. It is a valuable conclusion that aid is less effective when it is rushed in immediately after a peace agreement is signed. The authors argue that assistance sorts out more effect after about four years. The relevance of this lesson may, however, be limited. In many cases the quick rush of aid after peace may not be driven in the first place by effectiveness, but rather by political concerns. Either the signatories to a treaty may be granted a 'peace dividend' or the public 'at home' may call for intervention if the media extensively cover the country at stake.

In summary, the report makes interesting points regarding the economic dimensions of civil war. It is an asset to the debate that the report emphasises the *feasibility* of rebellion, rather than the *motivations* for rebellion, be it greed or grievance. In addition, the report may be useful strategically as a macro level agenda-setting document. It puts conflict on the policy map and provides some sensible arguments for action.

The question remains: what use is the report to policymakers? It is of little use when drafting concrete policies or interventions. Drawing from macro level analysis, the report does not take case specific causes and processes of conflict into account. Since conflicts are highly dynamic and diverse, an analysis of case specific factors remains crucial for external interventions. A qualitative appreciation of conflict dynamics and the interaction with possible external interventions remains indispensable as well. 'Breaking the Conflict Trap' adds some interesting and critical thoughts to the debate, but its macro level statistical analysis and policy simulations are ill suited to serve as a basis for policy.

24 Ibid. World Bank (2003). p. 56.

25 Douma, P. S. (2001) Political Economy of Internal Conflict: A Review of Contemporary Trends and Issues. Working Paper 1. The Hague: Clingendael. Also: Clingendael (2001) Proceedings: International Seminar Political Economy of Internal Conflict. The Hague: Clingendael.

26 Ballentine, K. (2003). Beyond greed and grievance: Reconsidering the economic dynamics of armed conflict. In Ballentine, K. and Sherman, J. The Political Economy of Armed Conflict: Beyond Greed and Grievance. London/Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers. p. 267.

27 Ibid. Ballentine, K and Sherman, J. (2003) pp. 261-264.