Transforming the Conflict Trap: From Theory to Practice

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Extended Abstract

Even as the threat of international conflict between great powers re-emerges, violent civil conflict remains one of the greatest threats to human security and global stability. Persistent conflicts – those that have been active for twenty years or more with repeated cycles of violence and recurring civil wars– are the dominant form of armed conflict in the world today and resulted in 65 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide at the end of 2017. This record high is an increase of 20 percent from the previous year. In Africa alone, more than 35 such conflicts continue to pose the utmost challenge for conflict resolution despite investments of over a trillion dollars in peacebuilding and foreign aid by the international community, and the engagement of over 100,000 uniformed personnel in peace operations.

These conflicts raise difficult policy questions of when and how third-party interventions achieve their objectives -- considering normative, material, economic, and political factors. Creating the right balance and coordination among security assistance, military peace operations, humanitarian relief aid, and long-term peacebuilding remains an elusive goal. Are these intervention failures due to insufficient theorizing, to unsuitable policies and practices, to the fundamental intractability of the conflicts, or some combination of all? Academics, practitioners and policy makers increasingly recognize that lifting social and political systems out of conflict traps requires a systems approach. Such an approach must consider not only the nature and context of the conflict, but also the scope, timing, and dynamic interactions among different modes and types of interventions.

This research combines comparative statistical analysis of dynamic reference behaviors of 35 persistent conflicts in Africa, with qualitative causal loop modeling based on field research on the Somalia conflict to (1) examine the relationship between conflict persistence and factors associated with conflict contexts, peacekeeping and aid interventions, and (2) identify the underlying theory, principles and practices for those conflict interventions most likely to result in conflict transformation that increases human security, and those most likely to sustain conflict. Specific findings are that:

 (1) Violence in persistent armed conflicts in Africa over the past 25 years display one of four types of archetypal reference behaviors: Exponential Growth; Sustained Oscillations; repeated episodes of Overshoot-and-Collapse; or Damped Impulse (an intense but limited stimulus followed by gradual decline). The Somalia case study suggests that these behaviors scale from local to state level. Once established, the behavioral dynamics

become self-reinforcing and dictate the likelihood of conflict persistence or transformation through interventions. To interrupt these dynamics, one must understand the systemic drivers of, and limits to, conflict growth and the combined, interactive effect of interventions with these drivers and limits.

(2) Regression analysis of the reference behaviors shows that the prospect of conflict transformation is strongly correlated with two endogenous factors, opportunity costs of conflict and gender equality, in combination with processes by which external interventions are implemented. Specifically, the likelihood of successful conflict transformation is highest when accompanied by gender empowerment and implemented through transparent, inclusive mechanisms at the local level that provide accountability, that scale from local to national levels, and that ensure coordination between security and humanitarian operations. Absent such process mechanisms, the resources provided through interventions are more likely to prolong conflict and human suffering than provide pathways for transformation.

(3) Causal Loop Modeling, based on narratives from field interviews and previous research, shows that security and aid interventions interact at local levels to reinforce conflict structures and capacities. In so doing, they are "fixes that fail", as they become endogenous to the conflict and contribute to the resilience of combatants. Conflict transformation must account for, and interrupt, these dependencies. For example, humanitarian aid delivery in conflict settings often requires security measures to protect aid workers and prevent cooptation of aid by combatants. Unintended consequences are:
   a. The local economy becomes dependent on the conflict-driven demand for security measures. The creation of "security-entrepreneurs" among local populaces by the aid community has been a repeated programming challenge for NGOs and peacekeeping operations alike in East Africa.
   b. Competing war lords are created to oversee aid distribution. Empowerment of rival warlords in Somalia, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo to help with UN aid delivery significantly increased the intensity and duration of violence in those conflicts.
   c. Communities become isolated and vulnerable in humanitarian deserts in the wake of limited peacemaking operations that may drive combatants out, but not away. The combatants profit by imposing road taxes ("zaqat") where they control access of aid workers to the communities. This is a common practice by Al Shabaab in Somalia and various combatants in Syria.

These findings show that expectations of interventions in persistent conflicts must be tempered by realities of the conflict setting and *appropriately* resourced and managed (not too much nor too little). Delivery of security and aid interventions must be coordinated and employ mechanisms that are inclusive, transparent, and accountable at the local level. Moreover, conflict transformation cannot occur without structural changes to break cycles of dependency on conflict resources. In short, intervention failures have as much to do with the dynamics of how they are implemented (e.g., verbs) as what they are (e.g., nouns).

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