



**Chronic Poverty**  
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## Violent conflict and the very poorest

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### What is Chronic Poverty?

The distinguishing feature of chronic poverty is extended duration in absolute poverty.

Therefore, chronically poor people always, or usually, live below a poverty line, which is normally defined in terms of a money indicator (e.g. consumption, income, etc.), but could also be defined in terms of wider or subjective aspects of deprivation.

This is different from the transitorily poor, who move in and out of poverty, or only occasionally fall below the poverty line.



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# 1 Introduction

Most so-called civil wars take place in poor countries. Non-war violence is also prevalent in countries with high levels of poverty. Non-war violence includes sexual violence, communal riots and pogroms, high urban homicide rates and gang violence, rural land and labour conflicts, and so on. Such violence is pervasive not just in the 'least developed countries' but also in large middle-income developing countries with high concentrations of extreme poverty: countries like Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa. This much is clear even with a fairly narrow, straightforwardly physical definition of violence.

This paper aims to set out the significance of understanding and addressing the links between violence and extreme poverty. Section 2 discusses the impact of violent conflict on the poor, and on the very poorest, while Section 3 examines the contribution of extreme poverty to the causation of violent conflict. Section 4 draws out conclusions. The paper sustains a fairly 'inclusive' stance on the definition of poverty, while issuing a health warning on virtually any statement that claims to identify a relationship without specifying the precise definition of poverty used and the sources of evidence employed. Extreme poverty has two dimensions: one is the depth of poverty (in terms of those with the very lowest income, the fewest possessions, the worst access to public services, the greatest vulnerability to environmental or political or market shocks); the other is a time dimension, capturing the recycling of poverty between generations. This time dimension overlaps with the term 'chronic poverty', which covers those whose whole lives are spent in poverty, those households where poverty is handed down from generation to generation and those whose lives are cut short by poverty.

The paper applies a physical and intentional definition of violence. This avoids the concept of structural violence and definitions that include accidental physical violence.<sup>1</sup> The paper predominantly discusses linkages between poverty (and extreme poverty) and those kinds of large-scale collective violent conflict typically referred to as 'intra-state conflicts' or 'civil wars'. This is mainly done to contain the discussion within a reasonable space. That does not mean that linkages between poverty and other forms of violence are insignificant. In fact, it is a central proposition of the paper that far more research and policy attention needs to be paid to a much broader range of phenomena under the rubric of violence.

For violent conflict occurs across a continuum: from interpersonal, domestic or sexual violence; through urban gangs fighting each other or the police and rural conflicts pitting peasants or landless rural people against landlords and private militias; to civil and inter-state war and state violence. And violence may involve categories such as 'broken negotiations',

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the pros and cons of a definition of violence that is not strictly physical, see Tilly (2003: 4). One example of the inclusion of accidental death as violent is Brazilian data on the causes of violent deaths, which include deaths in traffic accidents.



coordinated destruction, violent rituals, opportunist violence, brawls or scattered attacks, in the terms of one schema (Tilly, 2003). Calibrating distinctions along this continuum is difficult. For example, the category 'civil war' is particularly ungainly. At one end, civil wars appear distinct from inter-state wars, but often their causes, mode and duration owe a lot to international involvement. At the other end, it is sometimes hard to distinguish civil war from high levels of violent conflict involving state and non-state actors that does not 'fit' formal civil war definitions (Cramer, 2006). Data from participatory urban appraisals in poor communities in Guatemala and Colombia revealed distinctions among, on average, 41 and 25 types of violence, respectively (Moser and McIlwaine, 2006).

Categories of violence slide into one another. Each category is itself heterogeneous: again, civil wars themselves vary hugely in scale, intensity, origin and duration. Furthermore, there are probably links between different 'points' on the continuum. This is most obvious when social conflict – through various mechanisms – becomes violent and when violent conflict escalates or threatens to escalate into full-blown 'war'.<sup>2</sup> Linkages also occur in the war-to-peace transition. In El Salvador, according to some estimates, on average 6250 people died annually from directly war-related causes in the 1980s. After the Chapultepec peace accord in 1992, the average annual level of mortality from violence varied between 8700 and 11,000 in the 1990s.

The basis for assessing the significance of violent conflict is empirical information. Yet the data on violence and war are often not robust. Modest adjustments in the dataset for civil wars, for example, can generate conflicting findings in statistical models (Sambanis, 2002). Data collection organisations often decay in wartime, and the reporting of incidents of violence and numbers of casualties is made uneven by being highly politicised.<sup>3</sup>

A number of datasets exist for the incidence of civil war and other forms of war. There are also datasets on other forms of violence – including international crime victim surveys and international data on homicide rates.<sup>4</sup> Most people working on civil wars, for example, use one or another variant of the Correlates of War project (CoW), although it has been shown that the coding rules for CoW inclusion have not been entirely consistent over time. Researchers at Uppsala have developed an accessible and annually updated dataset on armed conflicts, published annually in the September issue of the *Journal of Peace Research*. The World Health Organization (WHO) draws data on violence-related deaths

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<sup>2</sup> Bourgois (2001) reflects on the way that violence, initially adopted as a means to a political end, infected the values and behaviour of the National Liberation Party (FMLN) and its supporters in El Salvador. Huggins (2000) shows how a technical feature of military dictatorship and ideological struggle in Brazil, the death squad, propagated itself and spread beyond the military regime into the democratic era.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Murray *et al.* (2002); Brockett (1992).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the UN International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP) Seventh United Nations Survey of Crime Trends and Operations of Criminal Justice Systems (<http://www.nplc.lt/stat/int/7sc.pdf>) and also Barclay and Tavares (2002).



from its Global Burden of Disease project for 2000, most of which comes from national data collection on mortality in general and on homicides. National reporting systems collect data on rape although, as is widely known, there is something of an iceberg of sexual violence, and only the tip captures reported cases (Jewkes, 2002).<sup>5</sup>

Violent conflict generally is concentrated in poorer countries. 'Recent quantitative research confirms that violent conflict is most likely to occur within and between poor and economically stagnant states. This is a near universal finding in statistical studies.'<sup>6</sup> Fearon and Laitin (2003) claim: 'Per capita income is strongly significant in both a statistical and a substantive sense [...] Among the (mainly) former colonies of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, we estimate that \$1,000 less in income corresponds to 34 percent greater annual odds of outbreak.'

Clearly, poverty and violence are linked. The authors of a recent report (World Bank, 2003) state that: 'War causes poverty, but [...] poverty increases the likelihood of civil war. Thus our central argument can be stated briefly: the key root cause of conflict is the failure of economic development' (p.53). As Stewart (2002) observes, eight out of ten of the world's poorest countries are suffering from or have recently suffered from large-scale violent conflict. Of the 49 countries qualifying for least developed country status in the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) Least Developed Countries Report 2002, 16 had experienced large-scale collective violence within the past decade. This includes Haiti and Guinea-Bissau as well as more obvious war-affected countries like Angola, Afghanistan and Sudan. But the count excludes other cases where collective violence is or has been an ever-present threat, where the legacy of past collective violence continues to subvert political and economic development and where various forms of collective violence have taken place. These include Cambodia, Bangladesh, Chad and Madagascar.

However, there is some evidence that the very poorest countries overall are *less* susceptible to violent conflict than slightly less poor societies. Gurr *et al.* (2000) show the distribution of violent conflicts broken down by developmental quintiles (measured by energy consumption per capita as a proxy for income levels). The second-bottom quintile of countries (i.e. those next to poorest has had, over the past 50 years or so, a more prevalent experience of violent

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<sup>5</sup> For the Correlates of War, see: [www.umich.edu/~cowproj/dataset.html](http://www.umich.edu/~cowproj/dataset.html). For information on 'ethnic' conflicts, see the Conflict Data Service provided by the International Conflict Research programme (INCORE) ([www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/cds/](http://www.incore.ulst.ac.uk/cds/)). The Uppsala Conflict Data Program has both developed its own dataset – the Uppsala Conflict Database – and built a catalogue of other datasets on conflict – the Conflict Dataset Catalog (see [www.pcr.uu.se/research/UCDP/](http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/UCDP/)). The Uppsala project planned to release, in 2004, the first results of its efforts to incorporate in the larger dataset incidence of 'non-state violence' and 'one-sided violence'. Note, too, that what legally constitutes a rape varies not just between countries but within countries, e.g. from state to state in the US.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from a research proposal from the Christian Michelsen Institute CMI and the International Peace Research Institute (PRIO) (2003) that cited, particularly, Hegre *et al.* (2001), Sambanis (2002), World Bank (2003) and the case studies contained in Hauge (2002).



conflict than the very poorest quintile. 'Evidently', they argue, these countries 'have more surplus for fighting wars, or have more to fight over, than the poorest of countries'

Taking a different tack, according to estimates from World Bank data, the poorest 1 percent of the world's population are those among the poorest 40 percent in Sierra Leone, among the poorest 20 percent in Ethiopia, Niger, Zambia, Central African Republic, Malawi, Nigeria and Tanzania and among the poorest 10 percent in Burundi, Mali, Lesotho, Guinea-Bissau, Burkina Faso, Madagascar and Honduras (Sutcliffe, 2004). Four of these countries have experienced civil war in the past ten to 15 years. Others, like Nigeria and Madagascar, have experienced persistent and sometimes large-scale political violence. Some, like Tanzania and Zambia, have been relatively peaceable.

The relationship between level of development and violent conflict may be contingent on mediating political factors and mechanisms: the operation or not of something like Hirschman's (1973) 'tunnel effect' mediating the political effect of inequality; the presence of collective identity boundaries and the scope for 'boundary activation' (Tilly, 2003); the history of political/ideological mobilisation, e.g. around grievances (including Naxalite mobilisation in Nepal and parts of India, liberation theologians in Central and South America, etc.); the presence and voice of human rights organisations (Moser and McIlwaine, 2006); shifts in the relative costs and benefits of maintaining institutional frameworks like apartheid; variations in 'voice' institutions; or what Newbury (1988) calls a 'cohesion of oppression'.

Middle-income countries with large populations of extremely poor people (Brazil, China, India, South Africa, etc.) are perhaps less prone to civil war, but still prone to widespread violence of a variety of types. National per capita income averages do not, therefore, fully capture the extent to which the poor and poorest are victims or perpetrators of violence. Also, the evidence does not suggest a clear-cut relationship between poverty, let alone extreme poverty, and the kinds of violent action usually categorised as terrorist. Krueger and Maleckova's (2002) data show that support for terrorism does not decrease among those with higher education and higher living standards. Living above the poverty line or having secondary or higher education in Lebanon in the late 1980s, for example, were positively associated with participation in terrorism.

The substantial analytical and empirical challenges reviewed in this introduction mean that any study of linkages between violent conflict and the very poorest must still be rather impressionistic – except where there are nuggets of more precise case information – which is the focus of analysis below. The immediate implications are that one should be wary of generalisations and that there is a great scope for valuable further research work in this field.



## 2 The impact of conflict on the very poorest

### 2.1 Costs of war

A considerable body of work over the past decade and more has developed understanding of the costs of war.<sup>7</sup> This work has produced macroeconomic assessments of the economic consequences of conflict and micro-level assessments of the economic and social impact of conflict on individuals, households and their livelihoods.

Conflict involves resource allocation and expenditure, as well as, often, revenue raising to cover costs and processes of accumulation of assets and capital. It mobilises and reallocates labour power and affects the quality of the labour force as well as labour market participation. All these and other aspects of violent conflict affect the lives of poor people, including the very poorest. Expenditure diversion may reduce capital and recurrent spending on social and economic infrastructure, including transport and communications infrastructure, health and education provision, agricultural marketing facilities and extension services. Infrastructural decay and depreciation can stall poverty-reducing processes. Violent conflict also typically brings direct damage to infrastructure. Damaged roads, railways and bridges, for example, pitch people into deeper poverty (both aggravating the conditions of chronic poverty and increasing the pool of 'transient' poor) by restricting mobility, increasing scarcity of consumption goods and productive inputs and raising their price, making markets less accessible, making it harder to get to schools and health care services and increasing the costs and difficulty of migration. Further, violence often ruins schools and health facilities and even basic housing.

#### 2.1.1 *Attacking the rural poor*

Wartime destruction of the social and economic infrastructure that helps support incomes and livelihoods is not just 'collateral damage' but is typically a strategy of conflict. Attacking the basis of the lives of the poor and poorest may be seen as an assault on people assumed to support insurgency (as, for example, with indiscriminate bombing and attacks in El Salvador by government armed forces); it may be seen as a way of forcing people into extreme poverty or forced displacement, thereby enfeebling the potential support base for the opposition; it may even involve depriving people, including poor people, of their 'wealth' in land or cattle or other assets.

In many conflicts – above all in Afghanistan, Angola and Cambodia – landmines were not just laid on roads and bridges but were littered along the thin paths between villages and

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<sup>7</sup> Cost-of-war exercises stretch back at least to World War I. The recent literature began with assessments of the macroeconomic costs of, respectively, South African destabilisation of Angola and US destabilisation of Nicaragua. Stewart (1993) developed a comprehensive analytical framework for calculating the economic consequences of war in developing countries.





crop fields and strewn in fields. Landmines deepen poverty by raising the risk of production and therefore acting as a disincentive to cultivation; by dispossessing poor people, i.e. forcing them to flee and become either internally displaced people (IDPs) or refugees, often living in conditions of high morbidity and mortality and few income-earning opportunities, depending at best on meagre humanitarian handouts; and by killing and maiming people, therefore raising dependency ratios within households and weakening disabled individuals' capabilities for production or wage labour (FAO, 2001). While these mechanisms are widely acknowledged, there is too little evidence to distinguish precisely between the effect of this on creating poverty and its effect on deepening existing poverty.

At its most egregious, an assault on the poor becomes the wartime creation of famine. As de Waal (1997) argues, in the Wollo region of Ethiopia in the mid-1980s, government military campaigns, including aerial bombardment of marketplaces, turned a drought into a famine, worsened existing poverty, pitched the non-poor into poverty and caused massive mortality. Indeed, most famines in Africa during the twentieth century have been war related, including Rwandan famine during World War II (when trucks were diverted from normal commercial activities to the war effort).

### *2.1.2 Sexual violence and extreme and chronic poverty*

One of the worst practices in conflict that affects poverty is sexual violence. Carballo and Solby (2001) estimate that some 200,000 women were raped during conflict in Rwanda in the early 1990s. There is similar evidence from elsewhere. Further, in Rwanda and Bosnia rape was a tactic of war: not just an opportunist venting of violence but part of the strategy of ethnic cleansing. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (2002), the International Crisis Group (2003) and others suggest that sexual violence has reached astonishing proportions in the conflict in eastern Congo and that this violence is both a tactic of conflict and an end in itself. Sexual violence, extreme poverty and HIV/AIDS are linked. Staggering levels of poverty in the eastern Congo have pushed more and more girls and women to engage in sex as a survival strategy, in exchange for food, shelter, cash or school fees. (In this, as in so much else, violent conflict is an extreme version of what is characteristic of many developing countries not affected by war.) Yet the prevalence of sexual violence in war varies. For example, there has been far less sexual violence in the conflicts in El Salvador, Sri Lanka and Israel/Palestine than in those cases mentioned above (Wood, 2004).

Arguably, it is the poorest, including IDPs, single poor women, unprotected children and older people, who are unable to evade the predations of armed forces. If rape leads to HIV infection, then this itself spreads and deepens poverty: morbidity and mortality not only undermine an individual girl or woman's livelihood but also strain the livelihoods of family members: absorbing time in care and sometimes, therefore, keeping children out of school; absorbing scarce resources in paying for medicines and for trips to health posts; raising dependency ratios and reducing labour power on family farms or in wage employment.





### **2.1.3 Asset destruction**

Asset loss in wartime is widespread and, even when they become refugees, the poor and poorest typically have few options to transfer their wealth abroad as some better-off people succeed in doing during conflict. According to one survey in Uganda, for example (Matovu and Stewart, 2001), two-thirds of interviewees lost all their assets. 'Their houses were bombed or unroofed; their household belongings, such as bicycles and furniture, were looted; and their cattle were stolen by soldiers' (World Bank, 2003: 15). The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) case studies in Collinson (2003) found that 'the majority will see their assets decline and their vulnerability increase' (p.15) and that 'the general picture is of growing vulnerability across most of the population, with a gradual erosion of asset bases, compounded by the weakening or collapse of governance institutions and a range of external shocks to poor communities' coping strategies' (p.16). For all these reasons, where people remain in contested areas during conflict, there is a commonly observed and expected 'retreat to subsistence', which is likely, especially in largely rainfall-dependent agricultural conditions and unpredictable climates, to increase extreme poverty.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.1.3 Labour markets in conflict**

But the idea of a retreat into subsistence gives a misleading picture. There are also, in violent conflicts, complicated but even less understood labour market effects, with implications for the poorest. The poorest people typically depend for their survival on labour market activity, usually poorly regulated and with harsh conditions, even in non-wartime. The Chronic Poverty Report 2004 (CPRC 2004) makes this very clear. For example: 'Households who depend on daily wage labour in the agricultural and urban informal sectors are often chronically poor or at high risk of becoming so. Low wages, job insecurity, poor working conditions and gruelling work combine to create a situation of high vulnerability to shocks' (Section 8).

Violent conflict affects labour markets – and the segments where the very poorest work – in different ways. First, conflict often shrinks the demand for labour. Where investment withdraws from rural areas, say, because of insecurity, and where market activity in general contracts, the direct and indirect knock-on effects are to reduce the availability of labour market opportunities. Recent evidence suggests that political conflict in Zimbabwe is reversing historical patterns of poverty and labour migration, as rural Zimbabweans who have lost wage labour employment on commercial farms have crossed the border into Manica province (Mozambique) in search of work in the nascent commercial agriculture sector there (Sender *et al.*, 2006). This impact also affects those living further afield who depend on labour migration. Thus, during conflict in Sudan, workers from southern Kordofan could no longer migrate to jobs in other regions. And guest workers repatriated to

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<sup>8</sup> On the impact of violent conflict on agriculture, see Cramer and Weeks (2000); Messer *et al.* (1998).



Bangladesh and the Philippines from Iraq during the Gulf War in 1991 became, together with families depending on their remittances, victims of the conflict.

Second, conflict that destroys some labour markets creates others, and typically does so brutally. War economy activities, such as alluvial diamond mining, coltan mining and trade, timber production and so on, as well as other activities that are less directly related to the conflict but that thrive on conflict conditions and take on the characteristics of wartime markets (weak regulation, high risk, high return, high rent), all create a demand for labour.

Such labour market activities may provide desperately needed survival opportunities, but they commonly keep labour in appalling conditions, including slavery.<sup>9</sup> Outside open warfare, in societies characterised by widespread violence, similar conditions may prevail. For example, rural labour markets in parts of Brazil and India are effectively regulated by violence: they are not 'free' labour markets. Violence is common in both countries, where the violence is used both to maintain exploitative relations and to challenge them. In both, the use of private landlord armies has been common, as has been the presence of a biased and blind-eye state.

By removing labour market opportunities, conflict deepens poverty: it is likely to create more chronically poor (in terms increasing the likelihood of spending a long period in extreme poverty, as well as cutting short the lives of those whose survival was guaranteed only by access to poorly paid seasonal/temporary agricultural wage labour). Conflict is also likely to increase the intergenerational transfer of extreme poverty: for where relatively decent labour market opportunities dry up as markets are removed, loosened or replaced by coercive conditions, then the opportunity for women to use the labour market to generate resources to send their children, especially girl children, to school will vanish. At the same time, conflict reinforces and creates extreme poverty where it involves the development of coercive labour markets where remuneration is pitiful (see also Krishnamurti, 2003: 56). The examples of rural Brazil and India show that the problems do not vanish with the formal end of organised armed conflict.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 Asset transfer or accumulation by dispossession

Poor rural people are not just 'in the way' and they are not just the butt of tactics to control or tax the population or weaken the support base for the opposition. They are the victims of the way in which violent conflict is a particular form of 'primitive accumulation', or what one recent author calls 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2003). A number of other labels have been used to describe this kind of phenomenon in the studies on the political economy

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Luckham *et al.* (2001: 31-32) and the examples in the ODI case studies in Collinson (2003).

<sup>10</sup> On Bihar, see Human Rights Watch (1999).



of conflict: what Luckham *et al.* (2001) call ‘reverse entitlements’, what Duffield (1994) and others have called ‘asset transfers’ and what Sen refers to as ‘non-entitlement transfers’ are all more or less the same thing. A good example is the UN Development Program’s (UNDP) argument in its Human Development Report for Somalia 1998 (UNDP 1997: 32) that ‘the civil war and state collapse accelerated this struggle for land, replacing land deeds with semi-automatic weapons as the instrument of choice for appropriating land from weaker groups’. The actual conditions of production, exchange and labour vary hugely in these conditions but often approximate what Chingono (1996) called a ‘vicious market fundamentalism’.

Primitive accumulation is the accumulation of capital (through seizure of land, mineral resources, etc.) by extra-economic coercion, i.e. by force, and it has always been a process that dispossesses and displaces people from their homes and farms. Another perspective on this is to acknowledge that violence often targets people’s wealth rather than particularly aiming at the utterly destitute. Keen (1994), for example, emphasised how the Dinka in southern Sudan have been targeted precisely for their asset wealth (chiefly, cattle) rather than their poverty. This is often the case, although one needs to be cautious with the term ‘wealth’. Many victims of primitive accumulation historically and currently may have possessed some means of production deemed worth appropriating but this does not necessarily mean they are not by normal indicators poor. What it does mean is that typically they are made *poorer* by dint of this appropriation.

There are two implications of these war economy accumulation strategies. First, their immediate effect is typically to constrain and worsen living conditions for many people – displaced and dispossessed, enslaved, working for pitiful wages, or raped, maimed or wounded (aside from those killed) along the way. Second, it is not entirely clear that this activity – however terrible – always represents ‘development in reverse’ (World Bank, 2003). A historical perspective shows that various forms of brutal primitive accumulation – from the enclosures onwards – have provided much of the initial capital impetus for the spread of what has eventually become a more progressive capitalist development (see Byres, 2004; Cramer, 2006). The policy challenges here are immense. It is far from obvious that all or any of these episodes and incidents of brutal accumulation really will allow for an acceleration of capitalist transition. Much will depend on political voice and pressure – both from donors and from within developing countries: for example, appropriations of property in recent years in Zimbabwe appear to many people more like destructive accumulation than any potentially developmental primitive accumulation, while in ‘post-conflict’ Afghanistan it appeared that some warlords had a greater interest in peace than others.

### 2.3 Implications for the very poorest?

‘A recent survey in South Kivu found more malnourished adults than children, which is feared to mean that most malnourished children have already died. Oxfam confirms that in some areas as many as one child in four under the age of five has already



died. A recent Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) survey confirmed that 10 to 30 per cent of the population of eastern Congo suffers from acute malnutrition. This is attributable to massive displacement resulting from ongoing fighting in the region. Mortality rates continue to rise in parts of South Kivu, from indiscriminate and widely dispersed violence by armies and militias, and from communicable disease brought on by the twin effects of violent displacement [...] and agro-economic collapse [...] The extent of the economic collapse can be seen in the recent advent of evening markets in the Kivus. Markets are normally held in the mornings and afternoons. The new evening markets are taking hold because it can take all day for peasants to gain enough ready money to be able to purchase any food at all, so reduced is the margin of survival' (International Crisis Group, 2003).

The evidence above shows that conflict clearly and typically aggravates all forms of chronic poverty. It makes life even worse for those who already would spend the whole of their lives in extreme poverty. In addition, by destroying assets, disabling individuals and forcing people into conditions of bonded labour and inescapable debt, it increases the number of people likely to spend their whole life in extreme poverty. By increasing dependency ratios, crippling adults, spreading HIV/AIDS, destroying schools and health posts, undermining the potential for the progressive development of agricultural productivity and labour markets, making outcasts of raped women and so on, conflict makes more people pass extreme poverty on to their children. Finally, directly through violence and indirectly through the increase in food insecurity and disease that often accompany conflict, conflict cuts lives short.

The mechanisms are multiple and interlocking. For example, violent conflict can damage educational provision and attainment directly, through the destruction of schools, or indirectly, through higher dependency ratios in households. Weaker access to education may, in turn, raise the propensity to pass poverty on between generations.

Violent conflict has highly variegated temporal, spatial as well as socioeconomic effects. The impact of conflict can vary dramatically between nearby villages in Afghanistan (Collinson, 2003). Within Trincomalee district in eastern Sri Lanka, conflict has been sporadic: periods of relative calm interrupted by sudden eruptions of violence, destruction and displacement. And rural areas include those 'uncleared' areas where the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had complete control and 'cleared' areas where this was less true (Korf and Bauer, 2002). While war and forced displacement commit many people to enduring penury, and while others are driven into unspeakable working conditions, others find ways to 'cope' that effectively lift them out of extreme and chronic poverty – often through the same mechanisms of migration and labour. The cliché that there are winners and losers in war applies within the less well off as well as to the whole society.



### 3 The poorest as cause, trigger or sustainer of conflict

#### 3.1 Differences and limitations in the literature on poverty as a cause of conflict

There have been sharp debates about the causes of conflict in developing countries. Some contributions emphasise social injustice and inequality (Nafziger and Auvinen, 2002; Stewart, 2002), environmental scarcity or degradation (Homer-Dixon, 1999), political tension or state weakness (Fearon and Laitin, 2003) or globalisation and the policies associated with it (Duffield, 2001) as the main causes or permissive factors behind violent conflict. Others stress an individualist economic rationality, where the key cause of war lies in an incentive mix that reduces the cost of conflict vis-à-vis cooperation (Hirshleifer, 1994; Collier, 2000). A parallel contrast concerns the role of agency: for some agency is a function of selective, direct material benefits to violence, perhaps tempered by inherited 'preferences' for social association (e.g. ethnicity), whereas for others collective action is driven by relational rationality, by ideology or by powerful social norms. Meanwhile, there are differences of methodology and, indeed, over what constitutes admissible evidence.

Despite these differences, poverty plays a central role in most analyses of the origins of conflict. Poverty (and inequality) is central, for example, to explanations of conflict in Central America, such as Booth (1991) and Wood (2003) and more general models like Nafziger and Auvinen (2002). Poverty is also central both to the more abstract theories of Hirshleifer (1994) and the more empirical models of Collier and Hoeffler (1998) and World Bank (2003). Other studies, e.g. Goodhand (2003) and Collinson (2003), draw on a range of approaches that stress the role of poverty in the origin of conflict. Vaux (2002) stresses how Nepalese Maoists mobilise around 'appalling poverty' in rural villages and the overwhelming concentration of power and resources in Kathmandu; and how in Nigeria government policy has failed to address 'poverty, under-development and unemployment, which are a breeding ground for grievances' (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2002: 26).

But it is striking that there is little information or consensus beyond this, on the precise role that poverty plays in the cause of conflicts or on which groups of poor people (particularly the chronically or more transiently poor? the extreme poor or the more moderately poor?) are more likely to be key causal motivators of and permissive participants in conflict. Among the reasons for this:

It is extremely difficult to conduct fieldwork during conflicts, which might help provide closer detail. It is unusual, for example, to have reliable data on pre-conflict poverty as well as data allowing for some mapping of this pre-war information onto participation rates and the timing



of participation (as well as its propelling forces, whether voluntary or compulsory, for example) during conflict.<sup>11</sup>

To some extent, the question has barely been asked about whether the very poorest, as opposed to the poor more generally, are a significant causal factor in the origin of conflicts.

There is a more general difficulty of identifying causes at all. Paul Collier, for example, has retreated from adamant claims about causes of civil war to a more eclectic and reticent analytical stance, stressing the multiple causes of conflict and seeking to identify probabilistic 'proneness' correlates (World Bank, 2003).

### 3.2 Principal mechanisms through which poverty may lead to conflict

There are two main mechanisms by which poverty might be claimed to operate as a significant cause of conflict. First, poverty may generate bitterness and rage which, in turn, may cause poor people to protest. Protest may provoke repression and tensions may escalate into open armed conflict, completing the causal mechanisms of a 'frustration-aggression nexus' (Gurr, 1970). Second, poverty may cause conflict because violence is simply cost free, especially where there are incentives to engage in conflict. In other words, because the poor have 'a comparative advantage in violence' or because the 'opportunity cost of violence' is low for the poor, they are likely to make conflict more likely.

Both possible mechanisms require further detail, of course, but this stylised version suggests that, in either, extreme poverty may increase the likelihood of conflict. On the one hand, if poverty provokes violent resentment then surely extreme poverty will intensify frustration and tip the balance even more easily towards conflict. On the other hand, if conflict is a function of the poor having a comparative advantage in violence, then surely the very poor, with even fewer opportunities and with even more dire lives than the less poor, will have an even lower opportunity cost of violence: again, this should make conflict more likely still. The two possibilities run together in the argument that 'borderlands and other spatial pockets typified by weak state presence may indeed provide fertile ground for mobilisation of militant groups' (CPRC, 2004).<sup>12</sup> Yet this logic runs into two important questions. Who are the very poorest? And can one generalise to identify which sub-groups of the poor are more significant causal factors of and participants in conflict?

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<sup>11</sup> Exceptions include André and Platteau (1996) and, in a different way, Wood (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Rebel groups then often behave in localised state-like ways, including providing some social services and taxing local landowners and traders. This goes for Maoist rebels in Nepal, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in parts of Colombia, parts of Somaliland, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, and even the Union for the Total Independence of **Angola** (UNITA). What is important is that these organisations vary in the extent to which they provide services, that on the whole little is known about many such groups and, therefore, that it is not possible to generalise about the impact that conditions of dual sovereignty and a duopoly of violence have on the very poorest.





Urban and peri-urban poor people have been important to the origin and prevalence of conflict and social violence in many parts of the world of late – e.g. in Monrovia (Liberia) and Freetown (Sierra Leone), in the pogroms of Surat (India), in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) and in Mogadishu (Somalia) and elsewhere. However, probably the majority of people drawn into conflict are still rural poor people.<sup>13</sup> The difficulty is, though, that it is just as commonly observed that the poor and disadvantaged do not automatically or usually rise up. If poverty and inequality were powerful causes of conflict, surely conflict would be more frequent? One would expect, in that case, a major conflict involving north eastern Brazil rather than the festering dispersed little conflicts and ‘everyday violence’ faced by the poor.<sup>14</sup> China would be in dramatic violent ferment.<sup>15</sup> Rather more of sub-Saharan Africa would be at war than actually is. Many parts of the world resemble the conditions identified before the civil war in El Salvador, where sociologists characterised the rural poor as ‘fatally resigned to poverty and misery, as venerating both civil and military authority, and with little potential for class consciousness’ (Wood, 2003: 14), and identified ‘attitudes of self-deprecation, fatalism, conformism, and individualism among Salvadoran campesinos’ (ibid: 24). Further, extreme poverty may be characterised by alcoholism, mental health problems, disability, fragmented families, etc., all of which may dampen political involvement.

### 3.3 Poverty, mobilisation and conflict

Arguably, available evidence does, though, suggest that poverty is a critical factor in the origin of many conflicts, but only in the presence of at least two other factors: the build-up of political mobilisation and the fact of state repression of non-violent political protest. This slightly more complex conflict mechanism works in various ways. Examples include Central and South America, Nepal, urban and rural India and Rwanda. Thus, the combination of persistent, and arguably worsening, poverty with political mobilisation and the politicisation of social norms is central to the origin of conflicts and to conflict participation in El Salvador and in Chiapas, Mexico. In both cases, conflict broke out only following a slow and intense period of popular mobilisation among the rural poor that involved the intertwining of two traditions of mobilisation: liberation theology and leftwing revolutionary politics.

In both cases, it took time for roving ideologues of change to be accepted. In both cases, the mobilisation effectively awoke poor rural people (not all of them) from habitual quiescence and fatalism. One cooperative leader in El Salvador put it this way: ‘Let’s see why the war

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<sup>13</sup> This is for purposes of simplification. However, no dualism is intended: rather, urban/rural interactions and overlaps are extremely important – to the ‘coping strategies’ adopted to survive conflict and to the generation of conflict, through the flow of resources, weapons and mobilising ideas.

<sup>14</sup> Some do expect future conflict in Brazil. Paul Hirst (2001: 100), e.g., argued: ‘Abandoned regions, like Chiapas or the North East region of Brazil, will be breeding grounds for new rural revolts.’

<sup>15</sup> There is more violence, in fact, in China than is commonly acknowledged or reported (see press reports cited in Harvey, 2003).





emerged. Perhaps – the majority say so anyway – because the Catholic Church gave a certain orientation. Perhaps the words of the Bible connected with a very deep injustice – they treated us like animals, it was slavery. In the Word of God, there was something that would touch you. In truth, we had been living as though the Word was in the air, when it was something to live within ourselves. I am grateful that there were such people, many of them now dead’ (quoted in Wood, 2003: 87).<sup>16</sup>

In both cases, too, poverty was extreme. In El Salvador, extremely unequal allocation of land had long been established, since the 1930s and even beyond to the late 19th century. More importantly, the rural labour force working on coffee plantations was kept in penury. It was effectively an unfree labour force: debt peonage was the norm and landlords tightly controlled workers’ mobility. Even by Latin American standards, poverty was extreme and chronic, and there was, for example, very little access to education. National guardsmen were billeted to protect large estates. According to Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) estimates, in 1980 more than 76 percent of rural people were without the means to secure basic needs and some 55 percent were estimated to live in extreme poverty, unable to cover the cost of a minimum shopping basket of food. Poverty was also prevalent in Chiapas and, again, by some estimates was worsening in the years leading up to the Zapatista uprising in 1994.

Thus, to understand the role of poverty in the causal chain leading to conflict, one has to appreciate the specificity of groups of poor people and of the context of policy and politicisation. As Breman (1993) argues, localities where the rural and urban poor live are neither cradles of revolution nor just a lumpen mass with no will that can easily be manipulated by outside agents. Complexities of shifting social identity have a bearing on whether or not they will produce conflict. Further, if there are clear efforts to impose a duality (what Tilly would call a categorical inequality), say between inclusion and exclusion or formal and informal or Hindu and Muslim – with associated privileges and disadvantages – then there will probably be political calamity. As a recent conflict assessment exercise in Nigeria puts it, the federal state’s repertoire of response to grievances and opposition has been restricted to the single instrument of repression, which itself has fuelled multiple conflicts (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2002). The implication for targeting preventive work or forecasting conflict is that it may be more important to focus on political and institutional processes rather than on indicators of extreme poverty *per se*.

### 3.4 Shocks to the system

External shocks, and policy reforms, also affected the rural poor in Chiapas and Rwanda. In both, the collapse of coffee prices in 1989 is widely cited as an important factor contributing

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<sup>16</sup> On Chiapas, see Harvey (1998) and Guillermprieto (1995).



to conflict. Sharply falling coffee prices deepened poverty, presumably (though precise data on this are missing) both converting some peasant families into transient or even chronic poverty and aggravating the poverty of those already classifiable as very poor. The impact was especially severe given that there was no institutional protection against price shocks. In Mexico, the liberalising Salinas government had abandoned policies insulating farmers against world market volatility.

The idea of a poverty-deepening shock as a precursor to conflict has a long heritage. For example, Scott's (1976) work on Southeast Asia emphasised how commercialisation (including fluctuating market prices) and state formation, the latter especially through taxation, could destabilise rural societies. More recent versions – e.g. Rodrik (1998) – stress the impact of external shocks on 'latent social cleavages', these being measurable through indices of political rights or ethnic fractionalisation or vertical inequality (the Gini coefficient).

### 3.5 Nothing to lose? Or too much to lose?

A rather different possibility is that, irrespective of whether or not there are objective or 'felt' grievances, the main causal contribution of the poor to conflict is that, basically, for them 'life is cheap'. In other words, if the poor are characterised as people – probably especially young males – with no economic opportunities, then they forego nothing by choosing violence rather than cooperation, and all it will take is the availability of direct material incentives to produce a conflict in circumstances of poverty. Drawing on Mancur Olson's reasoning about the impediments to collective action, a number of people have put forward this kind of argument.

Hirshleifer's (1994) argument that the poor have a low opportunity cost of violence, and that, therefore, poverty would tip the scales in favour of conflict versus cooperation, was taken up by Collier (2000). Collier's model to 'test' whether greed or grievance were better at predicting civil war posits as the main proxies for poor people with a comparative advantage in violence two variables: the share of 15-24 year old males in the population and the average years of schooling. The latter is meant to capture lack of economic opportunity. Together, these variables purport to show whether or not there is a substantial group of unemployed male youths, which makes for a particularly combustible concoction when mixed with the presence of potential for 'direct taxation', i.e. loot – this being somewhat awkwardly proxied by the share of primary commodities in gross domestic product (GDP).

This perspective suggests that the poorest have nothing to lose by engaging in violent conflict. It also suspends the notion of the poor as risk averse. However, from a different analytical perspective, the poorest had too much to lose, precisely because of risk aversion. Wolf (1969) considered which rural groups were most likely to contribute to rebellions. He argued that the poorest have too much to lose to risk rebellion and violent upheaval; that the



richest peasants had too great a stake in the status quo; and that the middle peasantry were the most likely to rebel.

Goodhand (2001) echoes this tradition in arguing that it may be more the transiently poor than the chronically so who are prone to violence. The key is that the poorest are poorly organised. One version of this argument would be that the very poorest typically are women or people living in female-dominated households, and that women are the least likely causers of conflict, because they are typically the least politically organised group and their adaptation to entrenched poverty and political exclusion is more structural in most societies than for any other group.

Indigent rural women may well become involved in conflicts – as cooks, domestic servants and concubines to soldiers and, in some cases, as combatants. Women may even bring their own agendas of political struggle to conflict: Kriger (1992), for example, argues that women folded their own struggles against rural male power into their logistical support for the liberation struggle in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe (on Somalia see Gardner and El Bushra, 2004). However, although generally the poorest (along with the young and the elderly and disabled), they do not typically make up the bulk of either armed forces or political movements that may end up taking part in conflict.

The focus in most recent literature has been on age and sex cohorts – i.e. basically on the concentration of poor young men and boys – rather than on nuances of the socioeconomic conditions of a differentiated poor population. Certainly, from Sri Lanka to Sierra Leone, from Afghanistan to Angola and from Colombia to Nepal and Nigeria, young men and boys dominate the practice of conflict. Given that demographic structures in very poor countries tend to be skewed towards young cohorts and that, from time immemorial, organised conflict has typically been a male endeavour, and generally fuelled by young males at that, it is not terribly clear how much this adds to our knowledge of the causes of conflict.

Further, years of schooling are a poor proxy for the role of poor males or even young men with a low opportunity cost of violence. If this is a proxy for unemployment (which it can only very crudely be), by itself it is not a good proxy for extreme poverty in many low-income countries. It is a myth that the poor always overlap precisely with 'the unemployed': aside from people counted as unemployed who cannot reasonably be termed poor, there are large numbers of people in developing countries who are clearly among the very poorest but who are not unemployed and whose survival depends on their engagement in fragile and exploitative wage labour or commodity markets.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, plenty of employed people participate in conflicts. It has been estimated, for example, that more than 40 percent of the adult male labour force in agricultural areas in Eritrea were either recruited by the Eritrean

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<sup>17</sup> See the Chronic Poverty Report 2004-05 (CPRC, 2004), Section 8 and Section 9, which argues that poverty is not just about 'exclusion' but about 'adverse incorporation', for example in labour markets.



People's Liberation Front (EPLF) or conscripted into the Ethiopian army. This exodus of young men 'prompted a major redistribution in the gender division of labour, placing a much greater burden on women' (Cliffe, 1994: 165, quoted in Luckham *et al.*, 2001: 36).

In El Salvador also, many farm labourers voluntarily joined the FMLN insurgents, both at the start of the civil war and once it was underway. However, Wood's research in El Salvador to some extent confounds most expectations of participation – both those from the peasant uprising tradition such as Wolf (1969) and Paige (1975) and those of the choice-theoretic and neo-classical economic tradition such as Popkin (1979), Hirshleifer (1994) and Collier (2000). For the socioeconomic characteristics of participants varied: participation and insurgency support could not be 'read off' from variations in these characteristics.

One further factor – where the poorest are a permissive factor in the origin of conflicts rather than a trigger or direct 'root cause' – is precisely that, in many conflicts, many people do not volunteer. Many people are press-ganged, kidnapped, threatened and abused into joining armed groups. Given that the evidence suggests that these victims of coercive recruitment are usually among the poorest – unprotected boys and girls, usually rural but often living in peri-urban slums – it is clear that many conflicts rely on those with the weakest resistance to conflict, i.e. with the lowest bargaining power and faintest voice. In this sense, the very poorest are both victims of the impact of conflict and at the same time an unwitting cause of conflict.

## 4 Conclusions

Violent conflicts have multiple causes. They also have *different* sets of causes from each other, rooted in specific histories and processes of political economy. Further, during violent conflicts, the impact and dynamics of violence are complex: they vary spatially, socially and temporally, often at highly disaggregated levels. The implication is that donors cannot 'read off' best practice guidelines from a general blueprint for conflict analysis and response. Another implication is that more research is required to probe the reasons for differences among conflict causes rather than searching for common, cross-context patterns.

No conflict is an island. This paper has eschewed an international focus for reasons of space; however, all conflicts are in various ways integrated into international markets and politics. The linkages between conflict and the very poorest are themselves internationalised. Interventions designed to protect the very poorest and to protect people from becoming the very poorest must focus on international dimensions as well as on local dimensions. This means that donor policy must acknowledge the interactions of local interests with those in rich and middle-income economies, and it must acknowledge inter-linkages at the levels of commodity chains and corporations as at the level of international policy advice.



On the one hand, there are moves (like the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative – EITI) towards greater transparency in particular markets that lend themselves to consumer pressure and awareness, e.g. oil and diamonds. On the other hand, there is still extremely weak international regulation of the small arms and light weapons industry and trade. There are multiple loopholes in existing legal frameworks and a frail body of non-binding international codes of conduct. Meanwhile, export credit agencies continue, in Britain and elsewhere, disproportionately to support arms exports and to subsidise arms (and agriculture) exports under exemptions from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) rules – despite the implications for conflict and for the very poorest.

There is also very little backbone in the international regulation of individuals and corporations who are in one way or another complicit in the extremes of conflict accumulation. Documents such as UN Security Council (2003) ultimately point a little lamely to firms that have violated, perhaps unwittingly, the OECD guidelines on the behaviour of multinationals. Given that the lives of many very poor people, made very poor or poorer by violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), are directly tied in a chain of transactions to OECD consumer welfare (e.g. through the use of coltan in mobile phones and games consoles), there is a powerful argument for developing firmer regulation and enforcement capacity. If firms that benefited unduly from conflict in the DRC were genuinely unaware, then there is an information failure that would be rather easy to correct. If these firms were more *au fait* with the conditions in which they won contracts, then there is a more complex regulatory challenge. The point, again, is that isolated initiatives such as the EITI are ineffective where they are contradicted by other OECD policies.

This paper emphasised that war economies are not simply characterised by a ‘retreat into subsistence’ or by ‘development in reverse’. One feature of war economies is the accumulation of assets through violence and the exploitation of wartime market conditions out of sight of regulatory surveillance. Whether the wartime entrepreneurs involved are profiting from mining or logging or agriculture or consumer goods trading, they are not necessarily a developmental lost cause. Many of them become and remain *rentiers* but – if historical experience is anything to go by – such people can and have become part of a more progressive capitalist development. The challenge to the international community is to find ways to intervene that encourage this more progressive dynamic. One example lies in post-conflict privatisation programmes. Often these programmes are precisely a moment where military and entrepreneurial veterans of the war take legal possession of land, factories and other assets. In Nicaragua, for example, post-war privatisation was known as *la piñata*, after the birthday party bag suspended in the air and beaten till its goodies spill out: the military and others scooped up all the prize assets. However, experiences in Nicaragua, Mozambique and elsewhere do not suggest that just the fact of privatisation produces efficient capitalist enterprise. The process is often corrupt and the outcomes far from efficient. In other words, post-conflict privatisation has at times been a missed opportunity for converting the dynamics of the war economy into a developmental peacetime economy.



Above all, the analysis and evidence suggests the need for far more detailed research that begins by acknowledging the differentiation within ‘the poor’ and, from there, tries to develop knowledge of the differential conflict–poverty linkages according to various sub-groups of poor, including the very poorest. To date, most knowledge over-aggregates the poor in this field. Some of the biggest gaps in knowledge, where further policy and research work is required, are the following:

What are the effects of conflict on labour markets and how varied are these effects? How do labour markets operate during conflicts?

What are the linkages between remote and/or border areas and violent conflict, especially since in many countries these areas are socioeconomic as well as spatial peripheries, and many people living there are among the poorest?<sup>18</sup> What are the links between physical boundaries/borderlands and social mechanisms of ‘boundary activation’ that commonly lie behind the escalation of social conflict into violent conflict?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Goodhand (2003), whose footnote 3 gives the example of Sri Lanka, where remote rural areas in the deep south provided the main support for the violent People’s Liberation Front (JVP) uprising in the late 1980s. ‘The geography of risk, vulnerability and insecurity deserves further examination.’

<sup>19</sup> On the mechanism of boundary activation see Tilly (2003).



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