

# Saving Lives and Livelihoods<sup>1</sup>:

## A *Micro* Perspective

### of Vulnerability in Fragile States

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Understanding the interrelationships between conflict and poverty is important. It stands as a prerequisite to remedy the lack of consistency between the structures and institutions involved in aid intervention (including development cooperation or emergency aid) and the characteristics of conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

Amongst the reasons that could help explain this inconsistency are the well-known political issues,<sup>3</sup> and the differences between humanitarian principles and goals and the approach to development assistance.<sup>4</sup> However, beyond differences in approach, this inconsistency may also derive from the **ignorance of the *micro-dimension of conflicts*** in the analysis thereof. This has hindered both the harmony between humanitarian action and development interventions, and their adjustment to the needs of the households in conflict.

Ignoring the *micro* dimension in the analysis of conflicts might be the result of two facts: first, the *macro* and *mid-sized* dimensions have prevailed over *micro* ones. In other words, whereas the impact of crises is studied on political, economic and social systems, as well as on the structures, institutions and processes of the political economy, less efforts are made to try and understand the impact of crises on households and their access to resources, goods and services — even less effort is dispensed in trying to understand the mechanisms whereby households face

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<sup>1</sup> The expression ‘Saving lives and livelihoods’ was first adopted by S. Lautze, *Saving Lives and Livelihoods: The Fundamentals of a Livelihood Strategy*, Feinstein International Famine Center: TUFTS University, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> For a review on aid policies in situations of political instability and chronic conflict, see working papers (no. 182-193) of the Overseas Development Institute on ‘Livelihoods and Chronic Conflict’.

<sup>3</sup> It has been said that the increase of aid in emergency is a smokescreen to hide the fatigue of donors, as well as a lack of commitment from their part to try to come up with political solutions that do not compromise their geopolitical and economic interests. P. Le Billon, ‘The Political Economy of War: An Annotated Bibliography’, *Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)*, Network Paper 1, London: Overseas Development Institute, 2000. Also, M. Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development with Security*, London: Zed Books, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Whereas humanitarian aid is based on principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence, development cooperation relies on the pillars of commitment, conditionalities, and solidarity. From the 1980s onwards, in order to face the increase in political and chronic conflicts, humanitarian aid grew in detriment of development aid, whose political conditionalities restricted aid to countries whose legitimacy was questioned. For some years, emergency aid tried to fill the gap left by the decrease in development aid, by transforming it into emergency aid ‘linked to development’, which was strongly questioned in contexts of chronic conflicts due to its potential for causing more damage than benefits, since it created dependence and distortion in local markets, something that can encourage conflict even more. For an exhaustive analysis of changes in emergency aid policies, see J. Schafer, ‘Supporting Livelihoods in Conflict Situations’, *Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Working Paper 183*, 2002. [http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/working\\_papers/wp183.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/working_papers/wp183.pdf)

crises, or their *coping strategies*. Secondly, whereas there is an increasing interest in the study of the *micro*-dimension of conflicts, its integration in aid programmes is still very limited.

This paper tries to add to the debate on Fragile States and Human Security, offering a '**micro-level perspective**' on some of the key issues to understand and reduce the vulnerability of households in situations of conflict.<sup>5</sup> It is worth taking into account the importance of this dimension, since in conflict situations, where neither the State nor the market may be used as vehicles for the development of individuals, it is the individuals themselves, their livelihoods, assets, and strategies that act as the principal driving force behind their own development.

The following conceptual and practical considerations arise from observing how the discourse on Fragile States and Human Security fails to sufficiently internalise the reflections and conclusions made in previous debates, particularly those that challenge the conception of risk as something exogenous, and, subsequently, the vulnerability of households as purely an economic failure.

## Understanding the Vulnerability of Households in Conflict

Different risk situations tend to be compared, whether they are the result of natural, economic, health, social or political reasons.<sup>6</sup>

When conflicts were no longer seen as chaotic and incomprehensible events,<sup>7</sup> they started to be compared with other types of shocking occurrences, such as: droughts, increases in the price of basic commodities, epidemics, and earthquakes. However, despite the fact that it is arguable that these are all caused by human action and not by the will of God, their impact, as well as the reactions they cause among individuals, differs so widely that comparing them may be a futile exercise.

On the one hand, unlike natural or economic crises, the impact of wars is systematic and deliberate, threatening all aspects of the livelihoods of individuals. On the other, coping strategies are the object of blockades and manipulation by the 'promoters' of conflict. Thus, whereas the destruction of cultural, civil, political, and

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<sup>5</sup> Although the terms 'fragile states' and 'conflict', as well as 'human security' and 'vulnerability' are not synonyms, the relationship between them is evident. Although they are discussed separately, they may be regarded as extensions of the same debate, which commenced at the end of the 1980s with the term *Complex Emergencies*, continued in the 1990s with *chronic conflicts and political instability*, finally ending in this new century with *Fragile States*.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of the types and sources of risk, see chapter 8 of the World Bank 'World Development Report 1999/2000'.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the importance of political vulnerability, as will be explained later, the two most common models to explain conflicts ignore the economic and political perspectives. The first model, for instance, describes war as something that is essentially chaotic, an incomprehensible eruption of violence that interrupts ordinary life, while anarchy and arbitrary violence prevail. According to this model, war ends when people '[recover their senses]'. Moreover, the representation of war as chaos suggests that nothing can be done, which can be used as an excuse not to take part in it. The second model to understand war is that which represents it as a thing of bureaucracy, where violent processes are triggered more or less automatically from the moment it is declared, being limited to the participating military forces by deploying troops, winners and losers. (D. Keen, *The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine in South-west Sudan, 1983-1989*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.)

social foundations turns armed conflicts into crises that are more devastating than others, the blockade and manipulation of the responses given by households in the face of crises makes individuals especially vulnerable.

This deliberate and systematic destruction transforms conflicts into endogenous risks; that is, it arises by virtue of internal causes and is encouraged by the power relationships established between the oppressor and the oppressed. It is this internalisation of the risk in the livelihoods of individuals that challenges the traditional concept of vulnerability, as well as that of coping strategies.

On the one hand, vulnerability can no longer be defined solely as a lack of purchasing power, but in conflict contexts, vulnerability also means not having access to the means of power, political representation, and lobbying groups.<sup>8</sup>

On the other, the vulnerable ones may no longer be identified solely by their symptoms — these will have to be understood by taking into account their causes and the power dynamics between the tactics of the winner and the livelihoods of the loser. For instance, to determine who is truly vulnerable, it would not be enough to simply identify his or her coping strategies — reducing purchases, using family savings, selling production assets — to know how much longer he or she can manage. Instead, we would have to understand the causal processes entailed. In other words, getting to know the reasons that have led an individual to adopt a specific coping strategy, as well as its effectiveness and sustainability.

## Reducing the Vulnerability of Households in Conflict

To be able to reduce vulnerability, we first need to understand it. As has been mentioned above, even though natural and economic crises have taken up a large part of the research made on vulnerability, the approach to political crises is still predominantly concerned with the *macro*-level, or with issues related to the impact of crises on poverty. As a result, the vulnerability of individuals and communities in contexts of conflict remains largely unexamined.<sup>9</sup> Given this gap in the existing literature, conflict situations are — now perhaps more than ever — in need of comprehensive and multidisciplinary analyses that are context-specific and disaggregated in geographical terms, so that we may understand the dynamics of political, military, social, and economic systems.

It may seem obvious to state that we need to understand vulnerability in order to diminish it. However, it is indeed necessary to stress this point, since, despite the explicit recognition of the importance of the specificity of contexts and realities, there are pre-manufactured ideas and plans aplenty in the field of development cooperation; all this coupled with a very weak analytical basis, as well as a very questionable participation on the part of the main actors. It is time to bear the responsibility of our actions, and to realize that weak or bad identifications may not only result in ineffective programmes, but may also help to perpetuate conflict, and increase the vulnerability of individuals and their communities.

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<sup>8</sup> M. Duffield, *War and Famine in Africa*, Oxford: Oxfam Research Paper 5. Oxfam, 1991; A. De Waal, 'War and Famine in Africa', *IDS Bulletin*, 24:4, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> R. Chambers, 'Vulnerability: How the Poor Cope?' *IDS Bulletin*, 20:2, 1989; L. Deng, 'Managing Risk and Uncertainty: A comparative Study of Households Assets Management in Complex Emergency', PhD Thesis, University of Sussex, 2000.

As the base document points out, priority should be given to an economic policy that explains the dynamics between causes and symptoms, and which identifies winners and losers. Furthermore, this type of approach should be complemented by one that explains how these *macro* and *mid-sized* dynamics extend to individuals. The *sustainable livelihoods* approach<sup>10</sup> possibly integrates this *micro*-level vision of conflict.<sup>11</sup> In simple terms, this method of analysis is, above all, a tool that makes it possible to dissect the livelihoods of individuals, through an interactive analysis of their main elements: What do they have? What do they do? How do they do it, and what are their goals and results? This outlook, which gives priority to individuals and their strategies, is more relevant if used in contexts of crises where it is essential to understand the coping strategies of households, since this constitutes a key issue in the survival of individuals.

Other strategies to reduce the vulnerability of households in situations of conflict include: the support to social capital (this being understood as the links of solidarity and trust among communities); reciprocal relationships; social networks; and the rules and regulations that make social cohesion possible. On the one hand, social capital is a fundamental asset to face crises in contexts where neither the market nor the State can offer goods or services to reduce risks, as well as to mitigate their impact. On the other, it is not surprising that given its importance, the 'promoters' of conflict like to get rid of this mechanism of self-support, reducing the opportunities for survival and recovery of households.

However, support for social capital is usually conceived as politically incorrect, since it is interpreted as a partisan intervention in the power dynamics between winners and losers. Although the concerns of actors involved in development cooperation with being regarded as biased and partial are fair, it is also true that ignoring the political tensions inherent to conflict and focusing on 'apolitical' activities like goods provision, fails to create a neutral humanitarian space.

When questioning the neutrality of our actions, it is imperative to be realistic and realise, in the first place, that today, given the political and economic interconnections between donors and recipients, as well as among the development agents themselves, it is very difficult to remain neutral. Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that our actions are also generative of winners and losers. Aid may be inefficient not only because the necessary conditions do not exist in the recipient country, but also because of our own incompetence and mistakes. Thirdly, if the vulnerability of households in situations of conflict is not only determined by the lack of purchasing power, but also by the impossibility of accessing the means of power, then the need to introduce solutions challenging this power dynamic is made clear.

Lastly, another potential way of reducing the vulnerability of households in conflict is by supporting the coping strategies of individuals. Given that the promoters of war not only destroy the assets, but also block the attempts of households to recover, not only must aid programmes reconstruct the basis of family and community assets, but they must also support coping strategies. However, the measures to support coping strategies, as strategies for reconstructing the basis for

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<sup>10</sup> For a detailed introduction of the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, see I. Scoones, 'Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis', IDS Working Paper 72, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Schafer, 'Supporting Livelihoods in Conflict Situations', Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Working Paper 183, 2002.

family assets must be accompanied by other policies, the aim of which is the identification and targeting of the causal processes concerning the vulnerability of households. Whereas the first two would help reduce the impact of the crisis and reinforce the capacity of recovery of the affected parties, none of them would defy the *status quo* of the conflict and could, however, help to perpetuate it. This would amount to saving their lives, but not their livelihoods, condemning them to a vicious circle of subsistence and survival completely devoid of opportunities for growth.

FRIDE organised the project **“Spanish Development Aid - Mid-term Review and a Proposal for a Participative Consultation”** between June 2006 and April 2007. This project aims to develop a consultation process about the current Spanish government’s development cooperation policy. We have created a forum for participation and debate, in order to assess the Spanish development cooperation reform agenda and to identify the main achievements and shortcomings in operationalising the initiatives based on the principle of “More Aid, Better Aid”. A set of recommendation guidelines were developed, through participative methods, with the objective of putting into practice the aspirations of the Spanish development cooperation policy.

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