Investigating the Impact of Agrarian Policies on Conflict and Peacebuilding

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When Jean Daudelin assembled a research team to examine the impact of agrarian policies on conflict or peace, he imagined that one of the results might be a kind of checklist — or similar diagnostic tool — to help international development agencies develop programs that would not exacerbate political strife.

Working for Canada's North-South Institute, and funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s Peace, Conflict and Development (PCD — formerly Peacebuilding and Reconstruction) program initiative, Dr Daudelin wanted to take a fresh look at the linkage between public policy and conflict. He recruited seven "area specialists" with extensive knowledge of specific, localized conflicts in Central America and Mexico, and asked them to test existing assumptions about which agrarian conditions and policies fuel disputes, and which ones help calm them.

Bridging research gap

"I was trying to bridge what I saw as a gap in the literature," he explains, "by looking for people who have been working for years on the same cases, and asking them the questions that are normally answered by people who do comparative analysis in the peace field."

The results were startling. His colleagues rejected even the concept of a checklist, convinced that the complex web of variables at the local level makes it meaningless — and sometimes dangerous — to apply a simple and strict set of guidelines to situations of conflict.

Checklist mindset

"We concluded that the checklist mindset is likely to get you into trouble," says Dr Daudelin. Instead, the research results point to a development policy that is "embedded" in local realities. Policy-makers, he insists, also need to re-examine their own assumptions and methodologies.

While this may sound abstract, it has important practical implications for how aid agencies design their programs. For example, Dr Daudelin points to the newly widespread idea that development projects are more likely to bolster peace in areas endowed with high levels of "social capital" —

the extent to which people trust each other. This assumption was challenged by team member Henri Favre's work on the conflict in Chiapas, Mexico. There, a range of social organizations — especially the Protestant and Catholic churches — has been in fierce competition and their presence has actually exacerbated the conflict.

Land titling

Land titling is another practice that has won almost blanket support in theory — while producing, according to the North-South team, mixed results in practice. On the positive side, the research shows unequivocally that agrarian distribution is the strongest single factor predicting levels of violence in El Salvador — with violence decreasing as land titles are more widely distributed.

But Dr Daudelin notes that in many places, the mechanics of land titling are a key determinant of conflict. In parts of Chiapas, for example, the amount of land that has been formally granted through land titles far exceeds the actual available land, an indication that effective "titling of the land will be a massively conflictual process." Meanwhile, in the Yucatán region of Mexico, the government's inability to assign titles in a timely fashion — and the complexity and confusion of the administrative process — had surprising consequences, giving the government time to implement a development policy that reassigned the Yucatán's agrarian "surplus population" to new work in maquiladoras and the growing tourism industry, defusing the conflict impact of relative land scarcity.

Emerging orthodoxy

In the face of such complexity at the local level, Dr Daudelin is concerned that an "emerging orthodoxy" is casting the link between peace and development in overly black-and-white terms. The more fixed the assumptions, the fewer the policy options and the less likely the fit with the local situation, he warns. Of particular concern is the idea — flowing from the increasingly influential "Economic Theory of War" — that sees insurrectional violence "like a form of organized crime," as Paul Collier, that school's best known advocate, puts it.

The dangers of this are illustrated, he believes, by an episode in central Nicaragua documented by team member Angel Saldomando. The area in question had been the setting, since the Contra war, for conflicts between various bands of 'Recompas' and 'Recontras' — ex-Contra and ex-Sandinista units — with the region remaining outside government control. Eventually, one group gained the upper hand. "It so happens," recalls Dr Daudelin, "that this group had a political agenda, and was starting to organize an area in which, for all practical purposes, there had not been a state of governance since 1983."

Back to chaos

But the government took the official line that this group was a criminal gang. After the leaders were killed in a confrontation, "they are now back to chaos." The lesson? "If you criminalize political action, your policy options remain in the area of repression and management of crime — you have no possibility of dialogue," he says.

Dr Daudelin expects that a number of publications will arise from this project: several case studies; new examinations of peace issues in Guatemala — and possibly Columbia and Peru; and an examination of the terms 'peace', 'crime', and 'violence'. Follow-up research projects are also being developed, for instance, on the impact of land distribution on civil violence, on the ways in which conflict impact assessment could be integrated into the policy development process of aid agencies. On the policy front, his group hopes its recommendations for a flexible but systematic

consideration of the conflict potential of development will be heard by the World Bank, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and various national development agencies.

Counterbalance

Dr Daudelin sees this research as a counterbalance to the constant pressures to centralize development assistance work. "There are a lot of reasons for aid workers to stay in the capital with their check-lists," he notes. "They don't have the staff, it's dangerous, in many areas there are no specialists to do extensive consultations. But if your activity is likely to be counterproductive, perhaps 'do no harm' would be a better motto."

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