Conflict and Resilience:
A Synthesis of Feinstein International Center Work on Building Resilience and Protecting Livelihoods in Conflict-Related Crises

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER BRIEF

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Resilience is briefly defined as the ability of people to mitigate, withstand, and bounce back from shocks and stresses. Much of the research on resilience has focused on climatic, environmental, and economic risk. However, different kinds of analysis are required to understand the resilience of people and their livelihoods to the kinds of shocks and stresses associated with violent conflict.

For the past fifteen years, the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University's School of Nutrition has been examining the livelihoods of people in complex emergencies. A small research team reviewed over a decade of Feinstein research to examine the resilience of people and their livelihoods to stresses and shocks related to conflict. This briefing paper presents the main findings.

Conflict directly undermines livelihoods and resilience

In contemporary conflict, the destruction of livelihoods is often deliberate. Looting or "asset stripping" is a common means of violence against civilians. Asset stripping can be the looting and destruction of livelihoods assets; it can also be indirect attacks undermining the processes, institutions, and policies upon which livelihoods depend. While the latter is less visible, its effects go deeper, fundamentally transforming livelihoods systems so that they are adapted to, and dependent on, the dynamics of the conflict.

Conflict can also have the effect of turning assets into liabilities. Assets such as wealth or cattle can make households targets for attack. Assets (including human and social assets, not just physical or financial ones) are the key to resilience. Any disruption in people's access to their assets has a profound impact on their ability to sustain their livelihoods in times of stress or recover afterwards. In contexts where certain kinds of assets actually put people at risk, practitioners need a strong understanding of conflict dynamics and need to develop alternative kinds of livelihood support to help keep people safe.

Displacement affects civilian livelihoods during and after conflicts

One of the primary effects of violent conflict is displacement—sometimes because armed actors intentionally force people to flee; sometimes as a by-product of violence and livelihood destruction. Displacement is not random: frequently, aspects of people's identity (i.e., their gender, socioeconomic status, clan affiliation, politics) determine who is displaced. Displacement disconnects people from their previous livelihoods, forces them to adapt to new circumstances, and transforms the livelihoods and roles of those left behind.

Displacement forces households to develop new strategies to survive, some of which might be dangerous, destructive, and/or illegal. At the same time, these shifts may also open up new opportunities for groups who were marginalized under the previous social and economic systems. These changing dynamics affect gender roles and relations—often placing new responsibilities on women and children who may be forced to become primary breadwinners.
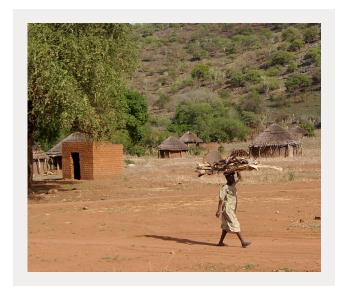
Much displacement is long term or even permanent, which translates into permanent shifts in livelihoods strategies and associated pressures. This can present serious challenges when people displaced for protracted periods return to their communities of origin. As many people end up fleeing to urban areas during crises, they may both lack the skills to engage in urban economic activities and lose the skills they need to return to a rural way of life upon resettlement. Another barrier to supporting livelihoods for resettled persons is a loss of access to land and other natural resources.

As a very frequent direct outcome of conflict, displacement has a range of effects on people's livelihoods—and their ability to cope and recover. These effects may be felt long after the displaced population has returned to their places of origin. Displacement is not a uniform experience: a person's gender, age, ethnic identity, caste or class, and disability have an influence on his or her livelihood before, during, and after displacement.

Conflict is not the only factor undermining the resilience of crisis-affected households

While violent conflict and displacement have clear effects on resilience, other factors may also determine whether people are able to protect their lives and livelihoods in crisis. These factors include competition over access to natural resources, economic shocks, natural hazards, chronic poverty, politicized violence, and governance failures. Conflict may compound these other factors, but these factors must be understood on their own in order to properly address the underlying dynamics of vulnerability.

In addition, individual and household resilience varies greatly in conflict due to a number of idiosyncratic shocks—such as illness, disability, and non-conflict-related deaths—and contextual factors, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and location.

Social networks shape people's resilience in the face of conflict

Membership in social networks often strongly influences resilience in conflict contexts. Beyond the concept of "social capital" as a livelihoods asset, social networks—and the ability to call on them for assistance—are critical to people's resilience during conflict. Social networks help people to stay safe during conflict, meet basic needs, and recover in the aftermath. Membership in a social network is often a vital factor in how people access remittances and other resources, how and where they migrate, and whether and how they access labor opportunities.

While inclusion in social networks can help with physical and livelihood security, it also comes with social obligations that may strain household resources (such as expectations around bridewealth). Social networks also embody hierarchies of power that disadvantage certain members of the conflict-affected household. The very factors that promote cohesion for a stronger group may result in exclusion for less powerful groups, with stronger groups more able to capture the benefits of external interventions, or exploit labor or other assets of less powerful groups.

Conflict may undermine, alter, or destroy social networks by contributing to displacement, intergroup or intergenerational conflict over resources, or a decreased ability to fulfill social obligations. Understanding social dynamics is critical for deciding which groups to prioritize for assistance or protection, and should be examined even in the emergency response phase. At a minimum, the "do no harm" imperative should prevent external programs from undermining people's own coping mechanisms and networks.

Post-conflict dynamics can severely limit livelihoods recovery

As conflict is clearly a major constraint to livelihood security, post-conflict recovery strategies often assume that these constraints end with the fighting. It is also a common assumption that after conflict, a "peace dividend" accrues as conflict-affected households resume their pre-war status quo, labor returns from fighting to productive activities, and economic growth takes off. This is frequently not the case.

Conflict often does not have a clear end. Many conflicts that have been "resolved" by political agreements continue to see periodic spikes in violence (i.e., in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Afghanistan) or even a return to large-scale violent conflict (i.e., in South Sudan). Even where violence has ended, its effects can stretch far into the post-conflict period. At the household level, conflict may lead to the loss of livelihoods assets, as well as the death, displacement, or disabling of breadwinners. Unsustainable livelihood strategies that allowed households to survive during the conflict may undermine household resilience after conflict ends. On a broader level, conflict may permanently shift livelihoods and governance systems.

As a result of assumptions cited earlier, post-conflict programming often does not target the most vulnerable. Programs often target those who can take advantage of post-conflict market opportunities (who are more well-off) or highly visible groups (such as returnees), and exclude others based on political identities and other factors. Programs often are one-off interventions that provide physical or financial assets (such as seeds and tools) and neglect to address underlying structural issues (such as lack of access to land).

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National and international actors need to understand post-conflict livelihoods dynamics and the longer-term impacts of conflict in order in order to effectively promote resilience in the aftermath of the conflict while addressing new problems that emerge in the post-conflict setting.

Livelihoods programs alone usually cannot stabilize conflict-affected societies

If policy makers assume that the end of conflict brings a "peace dividend" and stronger livelihoods, they may also assume that investing in livelihoods can stabilize conflict-affected societies. As economic grievances and vulnerabilities are often key drivers of many conflicts, it is logical to assume that livelihoods programming would contribute to a reduction in conflict. Evidence suggests there is great merit in programs that seek to provide economic opportunities, but livelihood-support activities alone are often inadequate to bring stability, and actors must combine such programs with other interventions to counter radicalization or the propensity for violence.

Livelihoods and resilience interventions are critical to increased stability, but the way programs are carried out determines whether or not these programs contribute to building a sustainable peace. Operational constraints (such as limited funding cycles), political constraints (such as the tying of livelihoods programming to counter-terrorism measures), failures to adequately understanding underlying conflict dynamics, and the unintended consequences of the programs themselves all constitute significant obstacles to achieving peace-building or stabilization goals through livelihoods programming.

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