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# Examining and Critiquing the Security–Development Nexus

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The security-development nexus has firmly established its place in global policymaking (European Council, 2003; DFID, 2005; OECD, 2007). Understanding the nexus is hailed as the key to success: security and development mutually reinforce each other to create peace and prosperity. However, the flip side of the nexus is that when either of these conditions are not met, conflict looms. In the famous words of Paul Collier: ‘war retards development, but conversely, development retards war’ (Collier et al, 2003: p. 1). The nexus points to the political and economic environment in the developing world as a root cause of the seemingly unbreakable cycles of violence and poverty.

Yet, how accurate is the idea that war and underdevelopment positively reinforce each other? Does war necessarily cause underdevelopment, and conversely, does underdevelopment necessarily cause war? This essay will draw on existing literature in the field of conflict, security and development to examine the arguments formulated by Collier et al. (2003). More specifically it will be argued that the interaction and linkages between war and development are more complex, multidimensional and embedded in social, political and historical context than is acknowledged by Collier et al. (2003). Importantly, it is argued that only by recognizing the complexity of war we can further our understanding of it and respond adequately.

## The Argument Behind the Security-Development Nexus

The security-development nexus (hereafter ‘the nexus’) builds on academic theories that are important to briefly consider. These are the ‘new wars’ thesis, most famously articulated by Mary Kaldor (1999), and the greed thesis as put forward by Collier and Hoeffler (2004). Both theories rejected traditional explanations for the onset of civil war and emphasized war’s economic dimension. This logic is clearly present in the nexus too, demonstrated well by Kofi Annan’s quote above.

This essay is specifically concerned with the two major arguments as put forward by Collier et al. (2003) in the World Bank report *Breaking the Conflict Trap*. Although the nexus remains an ambiguous and contested concept, their arguments are commonly accepted as one of the most articulate, accurate and influential explanations.<sup>[1]</sup> Linkages between security and development are also far from new (Hettne, 2010), but Collier et al. (2003) provided a more radical and unequivocal interpretation of their relationship. Their first argument is that war leads to underdevelopment. Collier et al. (2003) explain that war has severe economic, political and social costs, which all revolve around the obvious destructive power of war. These costs include the destruction of infrastructure and private assets but also more abstract results of war, such as refugees, more crime and a socially divided society. Importantly, Collier et al. (2003) stress the legacy effects of war such as the impact of an uneducated generation and the militarization of politics.

The second proposition states that underdevelopment is the most important factor in the onset of war. In line with Collier’s early work on the greed thesis, Collier et al. (2003) argue that traditional explainers of war, such as ethnic or religious division, inequality or a lack of democracy, are severely overstated. Rather, poverty is the key causal factor in explaining civil war. Collier et al. (2003) assert that all that is needed to spark civil war is a relatively small group of people attacking the government. Poverty creates economic incentives for war, for instance through low and

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declining wages. This makes recruiting rebels easier and thus enables conflict.

I will first evaluate both arguments and subsequently briefly discuss Colombia as a case study to demonstrate the complexity of the dynamics in the interplay between security and development.

## Does War Cause Underdevelopment?

At first glance, the idea of war causing underdevelopment seems undeniably true. However, the claim fundamentally mischaracterizes war and its complex social, political and economic effects. Focusing solely on its destructive power is misleading, as it disregards the transformative and creative powers of war. Many of the liberal Western institutions that are so highly praised for its inclusivity and performance were shaped by violent (social) transformations, coined as critical junctures in Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson's (2012) book *Why Nations Fail*. Major critical junctures, which they define as 'major events disrupting the existing economic or political balance in society' are often violent, given they are the result of competitive and intense conflict of interests (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012: p. 101). Good examples include the English Civil War (1642-1651) and the Glorious Revolution in 1688, which the authors argue were important steps to creating the current inclusive political systems in the UK (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012: p. 102). More recent examples of impressive post-war recovery include Rwanda, Angola and Mozambique (Voors et al, 2012).

Civil war can be a logical response to changing political, social and economic circumstances and create new orders. The idea that war can only be viewed as negative is a rather modern view according to Cramer (2006), who criticizes this 'liberal interpretation of war'. On the contrary, in his book *Civil War is not a Stupid Thing*, Cramer (2006) argues that development is often inherently violent. It is the 'paradox of violence and war: violence destroys but is also often associated with social creativity.' (Cramer, 2006: p. 279) Taking this argument even further, Cramer asserts that most conflict occurs precisely *because* capitalist development creates and reinforces often contrasting or even conflicting interests in developing countries. Echoing Huntington's argument, Cramer (2006) states that a process of rapid accumulation usually knows losers who (can) resort to violent means. Civil war ensues. Moreover, Cramer (2006) argues capitalist development often exacerbates civil wars, because violence opens up investment opportunities to foreign capital that take an interest in the civil war. These dynamics will become clearer in the discussion on Colombia.

Case studies provide more empirical depth to Cramer's rather theoretical discussion of development in times of conflict. For instance, in a study on the economic activity of 25 communities in Burundi, Voors et al. (2012) find that in addition to some negative long-term effects of the civil war, such as low levels of savings, positive effects of war are also apparent. Communities display more altruistic behaviour and have higher discount rates, making them more attractive for investment.

Collier's et al. (2003) argument about the criminalization of society furthermore neglects the multidimensional and complex effects that war economies can have on people, state institutions and society. David Keen (1998), for instance, rejects the notion that war only destroys and creates anarchy. Rather, he argues, war creates its own economic order that can be profitable for some, as well as disadvantageous for others. A good example is the opium economy in Afghanistan. Admittedly, Collier's et al. (2003) argument is true to a certain extent in South Afghanistan, where opium fuels disorder and the Taliban insurgency (Felbab-Brown, 2016). However, opium also provides essential income for many Afghan farmers who would otherwise not be able to sustain their families (Fishtein, 2016). Moreover, in the Sheghnan district, which borders Tajikistan, the drug economy provided funds and political connections that were crucial in state-building processes (Goodhand, 2012). Indeed, the complex effects of the opium economy in Afghanistan are arguably precisely what made it so hard to tackle for NATO in the Afghan war.

The Afghan example highlights that the profound transformative impact of war extends to the political realm too. Regarding war's impact on political institutions, Collier et al. (2003) bring forward a rather one-dimensional argument, asserting that the militarization of political institutions usually prevents positive political change. Although a credible claim, this argument focuses on merely one possible outcome of war. It has already been mentioned that a myriad of historical examples exemplify a more positive political settlement or evolution can be born out of conflict. Additionally,

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Somalia is an interesting recent example that supports this thesis. In an article addressing the apparent vicious cycles of violence in Somalia, Ken Menkhaus (2004) argues that violence created conditions in which new political orders have emerged. In the face of state collapse, actors have proven to be resilient, adaptive and innovative. Local communities started developing increasingly sophisticated forms of governance, that ranged from providing judicial services to regulated market places and piped water systems.

The conclusion we can deduct from these examples, is that more nuance is needed when discussing the relationship between security and development. Undeniably, war has destructive effects on a country. However, arguing war brings countries in a conflict trap disregards the potentially transformative and creative powers of war.

## Does Underdevelopment Cause War?

The argument that underdevelopment, or poverty, causes war is firmly rooted in Collier's earlier work on his greed thesis (Collier 1999; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Collier and Hoeffler (2004) famously used statistical analysis to claim it is greed rather than grievance that explains the onset of civil war. Rebels are motivated by economic desires and they can more easily recruit when a country experiences poverty as it provides the rebels with a large pool of unemployed young men. The argument brought forward in *Breaking the Conflict Trap* (Collier et al, 2003) relies heavily on this logic. Implicit in this argument is the presumption that people in a less developed economy have more to gain and less to lose. Consequently, they are more likely to wage war. As Collier et al. (2003, p. 4) put it: declining and low wages provide cheaper rebels. Nonetheless, Collier et al. (2003) also nuance the argument by putting more emphasis on the contextual circumstances rather than the rebel motivations, for instance claiming: 'Loot is not usually the root motivation for conflict, but it may become critical to its perpetuation.' (Collier et al., 2003: p. 79)

Similar to the previous discussion, this argument is not as much untrue as it is too simplistic. The quantitative evidence Collier et al. (2003) use, much of which is drawn from Collier's (1999; Collier and Hoeffler, 2002) earlier articles, has received much criticism. Many have pointed out that the operationalisation of the proxies used can be interpreted as a factor for both greed and grievance, thus questioning whether it is truly economic considerations that are decisive explanatory factors (Nathan, 2005). Similarly, Djankov and Reynal-Querol (2013) disentangled the large data set used to substantiate the greed thesis, by showing that many proxies were uncarefully coded and adding extra robustness checks. They found that although civil war occurs in poor countries, it is not poverty that causes civil war.

Methodological issues aside, other theoretical discussions, as well as case studies, have revealed some of the shortcomings of the argument. These studies emphasized the complexity of civil war onset, nuancing the overstated importance of economic factors. As Karen Ballentine writes 'While there is overall agreement that economic factors matter to conflict dynamics, there is little consensus as to how they matter and how much they matter relative to other political and socio-cultural factors.' (Ballentine and Nitzschke, 2003: p. 2) Other writers, such as Moris Miller (2000), have also questioned poverty as a cause of war for various reasons. Most importantly, Miller claims there has yet to be a convincing case study in which the causal link is firmly established. Although the study was written in 2000, Collier's et al. (2003) statistical analysis does not provide an answer. Jonathan Goodhand (2003) is more convinced and acknowledges that poverty, both as an economic factor and as a cause of grievance, influences the onset of civil war. But, he also stresses poverty is not a sufficient condition and many other contingent factors play an important role that should not be forgotten. In an attempt to overcome the greed and grievance divide, Ballentine and Nitzschke (2003) draw upon many case studies in their work and highlight the importance of the interaction between factors such as political grievances, historical social relations and institution functioning. And last but not least, in later publications Collier himself has acknowledged that feasibility matters more than solely economic motivations, thus acknowledging that social and political factors can be influential as well (Collier, Hoeffler & Rohner, 2009).

All of these discussions come to a, seemingly, obvious conclusion: the onset of war is a complex process where many factors are influential. The political, social and historical context are crucial in understanding civil war. Importantly, the dichotomy created by the plain and unequivocal stance of Collier et al. (2003) does not help in understanding why civil war occurs, because it tries to appeal by offering a simple explanation for a complex problem.

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## Security and Development in Colombia

Given that my main critique is that Collier's et al. (2003) arguments are too sweeping, general and one-dimensional, it is useful to briefly consider the case study of Colombia to substantiate the argument put forward here with more contextually grounded evidence. A substantial body has emerged on the relation between (under)development and war that highlights some of the key dynamics discussed above.

Colombia is an excellent example demonstrating that the onset of civil war is rooted within a particular historical and social context. Already in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the roots for the FARC insurgency were laid (Thompson, 2011). Agrarian violence followed clashes between traditional land-owning elites and workers who found new economic opportunities (Thomson, 2011). Economic motives were important, but likewise traditional class struggles were key. Violence plagued the country for years and the Colombian state took an increasingly active role in the conflict, usually protecting the landlords. The use of the state army to repress farmer resistance sparked a militarization of farmer communities, a crucial factor that allowed the FARC to mobilize years later.

As for the motivations of new FARC rebels in later stages of the conflict, these too were diverse. Collier (1999) actually uses the importance of cocaine in the Colombian conflict as evidence, asserting that cocaine trade has become an end in itself, a lucrative alternative as a result of underdevelopment that increases levels of violence. Detailed studies on Colombia tell a different story, however (Thompson, 2015; Arjano and Kalyvas, 2012). For instance, Arjano and Kalyvas (2012) interviewed over 800 ex-combatants in Colombia and found that personal involvement in the war was more important than material benefits for joining armed groups.

Furthermore, Colombia is used by multiple authors to highlight that it was not underdevelopment, but rather development that created violence in Colombia. Confirming the theoretical analysis offered by Cramer (2006), these scholars find that the process of development is violent (Gómez, Sánchez-Ayala & Vargas, 2015; Thompson, 2015; Maher, 2015). Capitalist incentives have facilitated an expansion of commercial agriculture in the country, often driven by large foreign companies. Maher (2015) observed that foreign direct investment (FDI) and GDP/capita actually have been steadily increasing in Colombia since 1990. The oil industry was mainly responsible, and Maher analysed the course of events in the Arauca department to prove that violence of right-wing paramilitary groups forcibly displaced civilians and freed up opportunities for oil companies to start extraction. Similar processes occur in the palm oil industry (Thompson, 2015). Not only is this tolerated by the international community, some of these companies are financially supported by USAID money (Thompson, 2015). The neoliberal development policies, seen as part of the solution by Collier and the World Bank, sometimes thrive on violence rather than prevent it.

The case of Colombia exemplifies the difficult and complex relationship between development and conflict. Surely, some FARC fighters joined the insurgency on account of a poor economic situation, but their reasons are more multidimensional and complex than that. Crucially, Arjano and Kalyvas (2012) show their motivation is contextual. Moreover, the studies show that development is an often subjective term in the context of war, where some might experience growth at the expense of others. Indeed, development, it can be argued, perhaps contributes just as much to the violence as underdevelopment does in the Colombian case.

## Conclusion

Collier's et al. (2003) arguments have been very influential in sparking many academic and policy discussions, investigating the interaction between security and development. Nonetheless, the two main arguments formulated in *Breaking the Conflict* are ultimately a too simplistic view on the causes, effects and realities of conflict. Using underdevelopment to explain security threats undervalues historic, political and social contexts in which conflict arises. Moreover, as Colombia illustrates well, development can contribute to war just like underdevelopment can. The destructive nature of war, often used to explain vicious cycles of violence, ignores the multitude of effects war can have. Again, Colombia has shown that development is sometimes facilitated by war, rather than hindered by it.

Most merit in Collier's (2003) arguments can be found in the fact that they draw attention to the economic dimension of the interaction between security and development. This dimension is an important piece of the puzzle. Security

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and development need to be better understood for the purpose of improving the state of both. Ultimately, reducing their relationship to simple and one-dimensional linkages will not help us in understanding the complexity of conflict.

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## Endnotes

[1] A coherent formulation of the ambiguity of the nexus can be found in Maria Stern & Joakim Öjendal (2010), who argue the nexus is explained and interpreted in six different narratives. This is the result of the many possible interpretations of the terms security and development. Stern and Öjendal (2010) crucially highlight the difference between understanding the nexus as a way to analyse dynamics and phenomenon in international politics and as 'used by actors applying these concepts to prescribe processes and determine outcomes' through its discursive power. Nonetheless, Collier et al. (2003) arguments fall in the most common understanding of the nexus, which they term the 'Security–Development Nexus as Modern (Teleological) Narrative' in their article.

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