

# Bottom-up perspectives on violence and conflict: lessons from Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, South Sudan and Zimbabwe

## Summary of research findings on ‘Power, Violence, Citizenship and Agency’

**How can positive change be supported in contexts affected by violent conflict?**

Many working in development, relief and conflict resolution organisations are concerned about whether their responses to conflict are appropriate and effective, how their interventions could be improved, under what conditions is it even right to get involved, and how best to determine this. There has been a growing recognition of the need to look beyond state-centred and institutional solutions focused on elite actors, such as political settlements.

**It is time to understand better citizen-centred perspectives and the potential of citizen agency in negotiating and transforming conflict.**

The Institute of Development Studies (IDS) led an action research programme in five countries – Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, South Sudan, Zimbabwe – to explore the role and potential of citizen agency in driving positive change, and to understand whether and how this can be supported. The study critically investigated the scope and substance of citizen action in violent contexts, mindful of the often uncritical assumptions about the power of citizen participation.

Seen through the lenses of that perennial debate in the social sciences between *agency* and *structure*, both violent conflict and its resolution derive from the exercise of agency, the effect of structures and the interplay between them.

The study puts the people inhabiting violent and conflict-prone settings centre-stage, in recognition of the key role that they must play as individual and collective citizens if violence is to be managed or overcome.

## Research Questions

1. How do social actors react to complex, violence-prone contexts? In such circumstances how do they exercise agency and use citizen engagement strategies to realise their rights or transform conflict? How do their reactions confirm or negate the legitimacy of powerful actors and structures, tacitly or consciously?
2. What hinders their efforts to engage in some way with the conflict and what facilitates them? What can be gained through reflexive analysis of the roles that immersed social actors themselves and external actors seeking to support them, play in catalysing or restraining both violence, and agency to transform violence?
3. How can international social actors, such as aid donors, INGOs and others, best interact with these expressions of agency and these strategies in the interests of violent conflict transformation and prevention? Are there cases when they should not get involved?

## Case Studies and Methods

| Country     | Context and focus of case study  | Methods   |
|-------------|--|---|
| Egypt       | Examines the causes and dynamics of violence after the demise of President Mubarak up to present times. Explores the extent to which the political settlement that emerged in February 2011 was responsible for the rising violence and the ensuing revolt in June 2013  | Mixed-method research design: qualitative methods to identify key actors, agendas and processes, formal and informal; quantitative secondary analysis of indicators of violence; survey of respondents involved in revolt; and focus groups to deepen survey findings |
| Kenya       | Focuses on how citizens live through and mitigate different types of violence in Marsabit county, northern Kenya, enquiring into the part that endemic violence at the micro level plays in the current political settlement, through exploration of day-to-day reality of violence in people's experience. Based on fieldwork carried out in 2013-14. | Two-stage qualitative method: scoping through an informal 'listening' method (structured stratified focus group discussions), followed by deep conversations with people from different communities, ages and genders   |
| South Sudan | Provides a gendered perspective on the different forms of violence experienced by people in an insecure state, post-civil-war South Sudan. Agency is expressed through the modification of customary institutions to develop security strategies. Based on fieldwork in Eastern Equatoria state in 2013.   | Qualitative and participatory approach, using focus group discussions, individual interviews, participatory methods and participatory photography   |
| Zimbabwe    | Explores the strategies of youth in dealing with political violence and repression, in their individual and collective forms. It explores how the repressive regime context shapes the socialisation of youth and how they experience their citizenship. Fieldwork in Mashonaland and Matebeleland in 2013-14.   | Qualitative and participatory approach. Focus groups, interviews, participatory analysis, theatre and drama   |
| Colombia    | Explores citizen agency in the form of several overlapping citizen-led processes of <i>resistencia</i> (resistance) to violence, variously located within and without constitutionally-provided spaces, in a 'post-conflict' setting of intense structural and direct violence. Fieldwork in Buenaventura in 2014.                                     | Qualitative research and action research processes, using sequence of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions with different ages and genders, and exploration of cultural expressions of resistance  |

## Framework for analysis

Our framework for analysis was guided by a multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary approach using concepts of power, violence, citizenship, agency and identity, and inspired by our observations of 'structuration.'

This is a theory about how all agency tends to either confirm or disconfirm structure. If this is the case, people's everyday actions and sense of identity will play a vital role in reproducing resolving or transforming conflict, and in conferring or withholding legitimacy.

On this basis we proposed the following framework for analysing our findings across the five cases:

1. **Agency** is a process of highly complex navigation of the terrain and of the power relations between different actors. Any mistake in this navigation is costly, because some actors' **power** in relation to others is backed up with the threat or actuality of **violence**.
2. While **identity** is recognised as a key aspect of citizenship and agency, in situations affected by violent conflict, it is all the more important to understand how identity influences citizen agency because identity shapes and differentiates experiences of violence and responses to it.
3. In violence-affected settings there arise forms of non-violent social **leadership**, individual and collective, which are rare, risky and important to the wellbeing and agency of citizens.
4. Ordinary citizens are connected to violent actors and non-violent leaders in a complex relationship in which one major currency is **legitimacy**, which can be conferred or withheld in various ways.
5. Citizens' everyday actions, **agency** and expressions of **identity** will tend to either confirm or disconfirm prevailing social norms and structures in contexts of violence.

## Findings

### **Resistance**

Rejection of violent behaviours and actors is often expressed as resistance. Like violence itself, resistance is enacted by actors, but also embodied in norms and formal and informal institutions. Its diverse forms range from explicit and overt to tacit and subtle, from the individual to the collective and even societal level, and from relatively passive behaviours to sophisticated strategies of action driven by aspirations of social transformation.

People may adopt personal behaviours of resistance, associate themselves with organisations that visibly take stances against violence or violent actors (as do the arts groups in the Zimbabwe case study), or work to expose, counterbalance and change norms and values that, in the course of prolonged and pervasive conflict, have come to legitimise and condone violence.

In a context where the state has routinely and demonstrably wielded and sponsored violence, resistance can take the form of deliberate disengagement from various facets of the state and from formal governance norms and institutions (for instance, youth disengagement from electoral politics in Zimbabwe). This may be at the cost of self-exclusion from benefits that the state may provide directly or through patronage networks.

Where violence is wielded by non-state actors, people resist by refusing to confirm their authority and legitimacy, or by conferring legitimacy on alternative actors and on forms of non-violent social leadership.

The focus of resistance can be territory and place, forms of livelihood, or ideology and world view: all figure in the Colombia case.

### **Legitimacy**

Citizens have a range of options available to them in violent conflict settings. Some involve resistance to armed and violent actors. Others involve negotiation with them; and others still, support for them.

People frequently accommodate the presence and actions of violent actors in their midst, coming to terms with whichever leader or authority seems to offer what they need, conferring social legitimacy on them and subscribing to their leadership in return for a measure of safety and predictability. This is very clear in the Egypt case. Also, citizens themselves, individually or collectively, emerge as potential leaders, subject to others' legitimisation of their leadership role.

The result is a complex web of agency, formal and informal institutions, and legitimacy. In the dynamics of this web, citizens' acts of leadership and legitimisation are as crucial as any actions by state actors or political leaders.

Granting or withholding of legitimacy is, then, an important 'currency' in the hands of ordinary citizens, in situations where they may have relatively little power. Among actors at the local level, the legitimacy amongst themselves is at least as important as the legitimacy of national-level state actors or national political leaders.

*On whom people confer legitimacy or from whom they withhold it is affected, among other things, by identity, which is core in defining senses and practices of citizenship as well in as shaping agency.*

Differences between social identities give rise to differentiated experiences of violent power relations and to differentiated exercise of agency – including legitimisation - in the face of conflict and insecurity.

### ***Social leadership***

Social leadership was explored in three of the five countries (Colombia, South Sudan and Zimbabwe), defined as individual and collective expressions of leadership which appeared to have potential to resolve or transform violent conflict.

Four conditions appear to affect social leadership's potential to take hold and thrive:

- **Safe and protective spaces and allies**  
Social leadership has more potential to arise where there are relatively safe and legitimate spaces – and prominent allies affiliated with those spaces – that can confer legitimacy or protection.
- **Mobilising structures and activities**  
Within these spaces and under the protection of their allies and sponsors, we identified structures and activities that serve as mobilising and legitimising vehicles for social leadership: youth clubs, arts clubs, women's groups, residents' associations, church groups.
- **Imagination and creativity**  
These mobilizing structures serve as places of survival and flourishing, collectives which contribute to an alternative social fabric and imaginary. Such collectives are 'political' in effect, in their refusal to participate in or confer legitimacy upon violent activities.
- **Alternative cultures and collectives of leadership**  
Youth leaders and groups are creating alternative cultures of leadership and collective action, in contrast with the authoritarian, patriarchal and top-down models that are perceived by them as part of the pattern of violence.

There are of course many constraints to this kind of non-violent and collective social leadership. Where the above conditions are not present or enabling, it is more difficult for citizens to act or speak in ways that 'disconfirm' the prevailing structures without exposing themselves to risk.

### ***Invisible power and culture of violence***

Violence is not just perpetrated by actors. As in Galtung's definition of "structural violence"<sup>1</sup>, which applies closely in many cases we studied, it can be embedded in social norms and beliefs, a kind of 'invisible power' that is internalised and that enables and constrains thinking and behaviour.

We observed instances of what some have called the 'culture of silence' or 'culture of fear': a nearly subconscious awareness of the threat of (violent) powerful actors, that makes people restrict their actions and discourses to what they feel is safe.

Different kinds of violence, apparently disconnected, turn out to be connected, for example gang violence, gender-based domestic violence, random killings, ethnic conflict or warfare. They operate as 'systems of violence', in which people often experience violence in forms other than whatever is considered the main conflict, and which have more impact on everyday lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research" *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1969), pp. 167-191

In terms of how people experience the culture or system of violence, the intensity of violence may fluctuate, and people may adjust to this in terms of how they use public spaces, move around, and resume economic activities and social interactions when they see opportunities. This is part of the 'social navigation' of conflicted contexts. At the same time, people's sense of security may be overshadowed by uncertainty about when the situation will tip back into dynamic violence. Even in relatively stable periods, people feel they need to be constantly alert.

In a system of violence, local, national, and international levels are inter-connected. A national political settlement can incite violence, and violence is one of the dynamics through which the political settlement is created, shaped and sustained, as in the Kenya case. The complexity of a system of violence creates huge challenges for interventions aimed at furthering peace, stability and democracy, which can seldom address the system as a whole.

## Further reading

Oosterom, M. (2014) 'It May Approach as Quickly as a Bushfire': Gendered Violence and Insecurity in South Sudan', IDS Research Report 71, Brighton: IDS

Oosterom, M. A. and Lloyd, P. (2014) 'Being a Born-free. Violence, Youth and Agency in Zimbabwe', IDS Research Report 79, Brighton: IDS

Scott-Villiers, P., Ondicho, T., Lubaale, G., Ndung'u, D., Kabala, N. and Oosterom, M. (2014) 'Roots and Routes of Political Violence in Kenya's Civil and Political Society: A Case Study of Marsabit County', IDS Evidence Report 71, Brighton: IDS

Tadros, M. (2014) 'Settling After the Revolts? Egypt's Political Settlements and Violent Transition', IDS Evidence Report 57, Brighton: IDS

## Credits

This summary was written by Rosie McGee and Jethro Pettit, Research Fellows at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). It was prepared for the event, 'Bottom-up perspectives on violence and conflict: lessons from Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, South Sudan and Zimbabwe', 15 April 2015.

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