

Research Agenda and Questions

Our programme of research will investigate the sources of crisis and breakdown in some of the “fragile” political economies that make up the developing world through research at the global, national and local levels. Understanding both the causes of crisis and the processes of institutional change and reform in response to crises can only be deepened by examining the linkages between processes situated both within particular countries and those in wider regional and global systems, and the interrelationship between local, national and international systems. In what follows we outline the principal issues and questions that will be examined in the projects that make up this programme of work. Most of the research projects operate across the boundaries of local, national and global levels and we have tried to reflect that in the way we have organised the programme.

From the global to the national

This programme of work will look at the impact of global economic changes on patterns of conflict in a number of developing countries. We are interested in the impact of both the structural changes in the global economy and the policy prescriptions related to economic development that have gained authority at the international level. We are also interested in the impact of changes in the patterns of politics at the international level, of reigning ideas and policy prescriptions about political, legal and administrative reform, and of changes in international law on patterns of conflict in the developing countries.

Our work that stretches from the global to the national level is three-fold:

- ***Constructive/Destructive trends of global change***
- ***Effects of international intervention***
- ***Deconstructing the agenda for liberalization***

Constructive/Destructive trends of global change

We want to examine the extent to which changes at this level have offered new opportunities for growth, poverty reduction and the social and economic conditions to overcome crises or, conversely, the extent to which these have in fact precipitated crisis and breakdown in parts of the developing world. Of course, we expect to see both constructive and destructive trends and it will be our objective to analyse the conditions under which either trend is more likely to prevail.

- How have changes in the patterns of international trade and finance affected the structure of economic organisation and thus the patterns of wealth accumulation, income earning and social inclusion and exclusion?
- What effect have these changes in the global economy and the structure of national economic organisation had on the institutional arrangements that govern the distribution of political power, coalition formation, community organisation and social cohesion? Specifically, what effect have they had on national governments' ability to contain and regulate social conflict?

Effects of international intervention

We hope to gain a better understanding of the extent to which *interventions of various kinds* by the international community and *the policy prescriptions* they have promoted contribute either to exacerbating breakdown or to creating the conditions to overcome crises and breakdown. This takes us onto the terrain of examining both the impact of reform policies advocating structural adjustment, economic liberalisation, democratisation and respect for human rights on patterns of conflict in developing countries, as well as the impact of interventions in situations of breakdown and violent conflict.

- How have prescriptions of liberalisation, privatisation and fiscal reform promoted by international actors affected national governments' ability to contain and regulate social conflict?
- What effect have internationally promoted prescriptions for political and administrative reform had on institutional reforms at the national and local levels and what impact have they had on patterns of conflict, as well as on the composition, support and strategies of opposition movements?
- What has been the impact of international sanctions on the 'rogue' regimes and groups they have been designed to target? Who has benefited and who lost from the imposition of sanctions and under what circumstances have they achieved their objectives or alternatively served to consolidate the position and power of those who they were designed to undermine?
- What are the main precepts of international law that may be relevant to the prevention of, or response to, situations of breakdown? How effective is this body of law? Specifically, as an example of the role of law in situations of breakdown, how relevant is the Convention on the Rights of the Child - as one of the more - comprehensive recent treaties (incorporating both human rights and humanitarian law) - to situations of breakdown as part of a strategy of prevention or response?

Deconstructing the agenda for liberalisation

Rather than simply taking these structural and policy changes at the global level as given, our understanding of their impact must be informed by an analysis of the processes and constellations of power that have brought them about. In other words, we want to turn the lens around and ask where does the agenda for liberalisation that has been so influential in determining the parameters of national and local development come from in the first place.

- Why, given the problematic nature of these prescriptions have an increasing number of countries chosen this path, especially in the 1990s?
- What has been the role of the IMF and the World Bank in setting this agenda, and what are the political forces that have driven their decision-making processes? What, in particular has been the role of the US Treasury in this regard?

From the national to the local

We need to understand what makes some countries or regions within countries more vulnerable to breakdown and violent conflict and crime, and less able to initiate reform and processes of peaceful conflict resolution, than others. To investigate this our programme will undertake research around four central issues that stretch from the national to the local level.

Understanding conflict and violence

We want to look at how forms of political organisations and institutions have been related to the capacity to regulate and contain conflict, and deal with crises and whether some are more prone to breakdown than others. Related to this, we are concerned with exploring the extent to which violent conflict can be seen as rational – and interrogate the relationship between predictable and unpredictable violence and between “greed and grievance”. This means exploring not only the way elites manipulate situations of violent conflict and disorder, but also the “shared goals” of those involved directly in violent conflict. This should contribute to understanding the causes of breakdown and also to understanding the possibilities for the resolution of violent conflicts.

- What has been the relationship of different frameworks of political representation to the capacity or incapacity of political systems to contain and regulate conflict generated by economic and social change? Specifically, we are interested in examining the record of various types of “participationist” forms of political organisation (based on allegiance to populist leaders, organised around communal or ethnic identities, etc) versus the record of programmatic political parties.
- Have competitive political systems, usually considered as “formally democratic” exacerbated or reduced the possibilities of breakdown and under what conditions?

- What are the factors that have led to political fragmentation and the “criminalisation of politics” that are usually associated with breakdown and the increase of violent conflict? How important has the decline of ideologically inspired oppositional organisations been to the proliferation of the “criminalisation of politics” and the proliferation of “disordered violence”?
- How do some courses of action come to seem - and how are they made by powerful people to seem - 'rational'? What are the 'shared goals' of those involved in violent confrontations and does identifying them contribute to the possibilities of securing peace?

Effect of changing economic organisation

We are concerned with how changes in patterns of economic organisation have affected political and social organisation in ways more or less conducive to breakdown. In most developing countries there has been a move away from statist forms of economic management that shaped patterns of class and group power and bred forms of social organisation, mechanisms of bargaining between conflicting interests and patterns of conflict mediation. Increased informalisation of employment may have profound effects on the livelihood prospects of those without significant assets and their ability to organise as a class.

- How have changes in economic organisation changed patterns of class power and class coalitions, as well as the basis of group organisation and the manner in which social groups participate in politics? Specifically, have they given rise to new class alliances or the organisation of politics on the basis of other identities (caste, ethnicity, etc) at the expense of , or in opposition to, former ruling coalitions and how has this affected political order?
- How have forms of industrial restructuring, and the expansion of the informal sector as the site of income earning, affected associational patterns among poor groups and their ability to bargain over their interests and exercise voice within the political arena, and thus the possibilities for ordered and non-violent conflict resolution?
- Is there a connection between the rise of populism and appeals to identity as a basis of organisation, with the informalisation of employment?
- Has economic change led to an expansion of income earning opportunities or increased unemployment and the proliferation of destructive activities like the sex trade and crime, that could exacerbate other social problems like the AIDS crisis or create unsustainable demands for increased public spending on law and order and social welfare?

Impact of liberalisation

We are concerned with the impact of policies of liberalisation, privatisation and fiscal austerity (whether or not they have been promoted by international actors) on the capacity of state organisations and institutions to regulate and contain conflict and mediate between parties to conflict.

- How have these policies affected the link between state organisations and powerful groups within society and the bargaining processes that existed previously?
- How have these changes in the role of the state affected patterns of patronage and the capacity to deliver social services that may have been the source of economic inefficiencies in the past but also acted to contain and regulate conflict?

Impact of political and governance reforms

We are concerned with the impact of political reforms proposed within the 'governance agenda' of international organisations (including those related to democratisation, decentralisation, human rights, public-private partnership and the development of civil society) on patterns of conflict, violence and crime and the possibilities for containing them, increasing cooperation and participation, and overcoming breakdown.

- To what extent has the introduction of competitive politics under pressure from external intervention expanded or reduced processes of breakdown and violent conflict?
- How has the international legal pressure on countries to comply with 'human rights norms' affected political and social organisation and has it had any significant impact in national law and policy?

- To what extent have decentralisation measures precipitated breakdown, offered the means to respond constructively to crisis, or made no meaningful impact and what are the conditions that lead to these alternative outcomes?

From the local to the national and the global

The assumption underpinning research that will begin at the local level is that the impact of war, conflict and rapid and disruptive social and economic change, while devastating on individual and collective lives, can be experienced as the everyday, constituting the backdrop against which people act out large periods of their lives. Aggregated and broad-brush analyses of political, economic and social upheaval tell us little about the complexity of people's problems, choices and possibilities under such circumstances. In other words, the events, activities, institutional interactions and social relationships associated with 'crisis and breakdown' are often of an on-going, long-term nature, which pre-date and out-live significant disordering political events and periods at the national level and beyond.

Much of what people think and do during periods of acute disruption or disorder is influenced by a multiplicity of factors and is experienced in very local ways. It is not possible to deduce what is happening at the local level just by observing the national and international levels, because they intersect with local processes and do not simply determine them. Work that begins at the local level will be carried out in a variety of settings including those emerging from periods of aggravated conflict, breakdown and war, as well as those where relatively stable and peaceful relations have prevailed despite conditions of crisis.

Systematic differences between violent and non-violent regions

We want to understand why under similar economic and social conditions, in some regions violence has put down roots amongst the local people, while in others peace predominates. We will examine the workings of local institutions and political party systems and the action of local political authorities. The goal will be to determine what are the *systematic* political, institutional and economic differences between violent and non-violent regions. This research will be placed in the context of the local economy and economic actors, natural resource endowments, and the local distribution of income and wealth.

- To what extent does local government represent local civic society and its demands and needs, and then respond effectively to the same?
- What are the linkages between the inclusiveness of local politics, the effectiveness of local government, and civil violence and social breakdown?
- How have measures of devolution or decentralisation affected the local matrix of conflict and cooperation?

Identify the strategies of the poor

We want to identify the strategies poor people follow in rural and in urban areas, in constructing or reconstructing their livelihoods in situations of discord and upheaval, often where natural resources are fragile and the object of conflict. We want to understand ways in which livelihoods are maintained, reconstructed and created in the wake of violent conflicts.

- What are the endowments and histories that people draw upon, which inform how they are able to respond to the challenges, both positive and negative, presented by fluid, unstable and uncertain social and economic environments?
- What happens when formal market institutions (related to local, national and cross border commodity and labour markets) are eroded or break down in the absence of effective state regulation and what practices, relationships and informal institutions do people engage in to achieve or maintain a secure economic position?
- How do people cope with the direct legacy of war and its impact on livelihood possibilities through the persistence of violence and banditry often perpetrated by former combatants (with ample access to weapons and the knowledge to use them) even beyond the geographical limits of war zones?
- How do household and family forms (relationships within households, both across gender and generation) affect people's strategies to secure livelihoods, recognising that 'families'

themselves are often fragmenting and reforming under the strains of people's efforts to maintain social reproduction? Do people retreat into families or do wider forms of trust and networks and communities of reciprocity, mutuality and altruism persist?

Understanding associational life, politics and public action

We want to understand what happens to associational life, local politics and public action in situations of violent conflict and post-conflict reconstruction. The starting point for this part of the investigation is that while generalised national level or international transition is essential for transformatory politics and policy, local arenas are crucial sites of struggle towards social change. It is at the local level that state support on the one hand, or oppression, neglect and breakdown on the other, is felt. It is here too that resistance is generated. The research will question dichotomised characterisations of people either as heroes of resistance or as passive and hopeless, absorbed by fatalism. We will analyse associational life at the local level and the widely divergent bases on which it may be organised and how these relate to political organisations and agencies of the central state. We want to understand the micro-politics of everyday life and the ways in which struggles become collective, publicly articulated and politically engaged in at different times.

- How is social and political life 're-normalised' in the wake of violent conflict and war?
- Do local people actually see the livelihood strategies they contrive as forms of resistance against the state?
- How far do local people and local initiatives build upon older principles of authority and hierarchy, or alternatively do they construct new institutional forms (such as new cults and churches or vigilante groups and people's militia). Do these provide a basis for a central state to extend its legitimacy and operational capability, or, do they, alternatively, challenge state structures at the local level, either in overt defiance or by providing informal and relatively hidden structures for living?
- Why do impoverished and defenseless people at some times risk arrest, torture and even death to fight regimes they seemed to have little chance of defeating and why do protests occur in some areas and not others? Under what conditions do people engage in collective and public action and what is the potential for the formation of social movements under conditions of conflict or post-conflict reconstruction?
- To what extent have processes of breakdown provoked extreme marginalisation? Have measures of reconstruction actually *involved* marginalising and demobilising the majority? Has 'conflict management' at the local level systematically benefited some at the expense of others?
- Does the return of democratically elected political parties to the forefront signal the demise of popular organisations and grass-roots activism and a return to 'politics as usual'?