

IDS

EVIDENCE REPORT

No 36

Addressing and Mitigating Violence

‘External Stresses’ and Violence Mitigation in Fragile Contexts: Setting the Stage for Policy Analysis

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October 2013

The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across seven key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Addressing and Mitigating Violence theme.

The author would like to thank Robin Luckman, Mick Moore and Jeremy Lind for their helpful comments on previous versions of this paper.

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The material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

AG Level 2 Output ID: 358

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First published by the Institute of Development Studies in October 2013
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Executive summary

Following on from the World Bank's World Development Report 2011 on conflict, security and development, a debate has emerged about the role of so-called 'external stresses' in generating 'new' forms of violence and insecurity in poor and fragile countries. The Bank posits that the combination of **internal** stresses (e.g. low income levels, high youth unemployment) and **external** stresses (e.g. cross-border conflict spillovers, illicit drug trafficking) heightens the risk of different forms of violence, which are not confined to inter-state and civil war but range from communal conflicts to criminal violence and terrorism.

This perspective is useful in as much as it makes explicit that instability and political disorder are not only related to domestic weaknesses of fragile states, but are also conditioned by outside forces. Yet the binary internal–external/fragility–vulnerability model that underpins the World Bank's analysis of external stresses appears to be too limited to inform strategies to address the challenges that arise from pressures as diverse as illicit transnational trafficking, price and resource shocks, and cross-border conflict spillovers.

A more comprehensive and nuanced framework for policy analysis is called for, based on the recognition that external stresses: (a) tend to involve external, internal as well as transnational actors and variables that are often interrelated; (b) create both losers and winners, and can promote the interests of powerful state and non-state groups in and outside of the country or world region under 'stress'; and (c) do not all have the same kind of impact on states and societies in terms of generating violence.

1 ‘External stresses’: what’s behind a term?

The World Bank’s influential *World Development Report 2011* (WDR 2011a) on conflict, security and development highlights the centrality of ‘internal stresses’ and ‘external stresses’ for generating insecurity and increasing the risk of violence in fragile countries. Among the major *internal* stresses identified by the Bank are: economic factors such as low income levels, youth unemployment, and corruption; security-related factors such as legacies of armed conflict; and justice-related factors such as human rights abuses and impunity. Major *external* stresses are linked to military invasion and occupation, external support for domestic rebels, cross-border conflict spillovers, international terrorism and criminal networks, price shocks, and perceptions of global inequity and injustice in the treatment of ethnic or religious groups.

Fundamentally concerned with the human development and security of over a quarter of the world’s population that live in fragile and conflict-affected states, the Bank identifies ‘organized crime and trafficking, civil unrest due to global economic shocks [and] terrorism’ as responsible for spawning ‘new’ forms of violence that have ‘supplemented continued preoccupations with conventional war between and within countries’ (WDR 2011b: 1). Adopting a ‘stressor’ approach drawn from contemporary resilience thinking,¹ the report argues that the risk of ‘new’ forms of conflict and violence stems from the ‘combination of the exposure to internal and external stresses and the strength of the “immune system”, or the social capability for coping with stress embodied in legitimate institutions... Countries and subnational areas with the weakest institutional legitimacy and governance are the most vulnerable to violence and instability and the least able to respond to internal and external stresses’ (WDR 2011b: 7).

As Michael Watts puts it, ‘the centrepiece of the vulnerability model [employed by the Bank] is the concept of institutional capacity and legitimacy. Societies that rely on elite pacts, coercion, and patronage risk cyclical violence’ (Watts 2012: 120). The *World Development Report 2011* posits that such countries lack sufficiently robust ‘buffering institutions’ with the capacity to absorb external shocks and prevent the shockwaves from wreaking political, social and economic havoc. In short, in the Bank’s analysis, state fragility (internal) combines with vulnerability (external) to create situations in which the risk and adverse impacts of ‘new’ forms of violence on states, societies and citizens increase significantly.

This narrative about external stresses and state vulnerability is useful in as much as it makes explicit that instability and political disorder are not merely related to domestic weaknesses of fragile and conflict-affected states, but are also conditioned by outside forces. Using the language of ‘internal’ versus ‘external’ and portraying the state as a normally ‘healthy’ entity that comes under stress from both internal and external actors and variables allows the Bank to communicate its argument in easily understandable terms to a broad, non-specialist audience. However, by doing so, it runs the risk of over-simplifying complex issues and framing the analysis in a way that reduces its usefulness for policy purposes. It also runs the risk of uncritically reiterating dominant contemporary discourses on global and transnational problems, such as the one on transnational organised crime and illicit trafficking.

¹ Originally developed by scholars working on systems ecology, in the past few decades resilience ‘as a science of complex adaptive systems and an operational strategy of risk management’ has ‘infiltrated vast areas of the social sciences, becoming a regular, if under-theorized, term of art in discussions of international finance and economic policy, corporate risk analysis... development policy... and national security’ (Walker and Cooper 2011: 143). Applied resilience thinking, such as in the *World Development Report 2011*, is essentially based on the assumption that shocks and threats to political systems and institutions cannot be fully predicted and prevented for they are constitutive and inherent features of social life and organisation. ‘The catastrophic event (natural, social or economic)... becomes a sign not of the occasional failure to predict, prevent and manage crisis but of the systemic limits to public management and state planning’ (ibid: 154). In this vein, it is held that a ‘strategy of resilience replaces the short-term relief effort – with its aim of restoring the status quo ante through post-catastrophe reconstruction – with a call to permanent adaptability in and through crisis’ (ibid: 154).

National and multilateral crime-fighting and counter-trafficking agencies tend to operate on the basis of the assumption that with the intensification of globalisation after the end of the Cold War, states have come under increasing attack from transnational organised criminal groups and networks. These processes have been analysed as 'illicit globalization' (Andreas 2011) and are described as the 'dark side of globalization' (Heine and Thakur 2011) in which transnational criminal organisations and trafficking networks exploit the institutional and other weaknesses of states for illicit economic purposes, making a mockery of national sovereignty by operating across international borders, playing off one national jurisdiction against another, and using violence to regulate global black markets. The *World Development Report 2011* adopts this framework, although it also acknowledges that 'international mechanisms that focus on global or transnational issues... have tended to neglect impacts on fragile states' and that 'policies are often only suitable for the larger, more capable states' (WDR 2011a: 217). The existing prohibitionist UN-administered international drug control regime and the counter-narcotics policies that flow from it would be a case in point, but the report stops short of elaborating on this politically sensitive issue.

There is no doubt that illicit trafficking and contraband, cross-border insecurity, and commodity price and resource shocks – among other transnational and global pressures – create very difficult situations in many developing countries, and particularly in fragile states. The problems range from drug trafficking-related violence epidemics and food riots to regionalised conflict and political regime change or breakdown. Yet it is crucial to recognise that these complex processes: (a) tend to involve external, internal and *transnational* actors and variables that are often interrelated; (b) create losers as well as winners, and can promote the interests of powerful state and non-state groups in and outside of the country or world region under 'stress'; and (c) do not all have the same kind of impact on states and societies in terms of generating violence.

Thus, the issue is not merely that state fragility (internal) and vulnerability (external) *combine* to create significant and sometimes overwhelming levels of 'stress' in affected countries, which can heighten the risk of violence; it is that internal and external stresses actually *relate to and reinforce one another*, for they are interconnected through *transnational* actors and processes – i.e. 'regular interactions between state and non-state actors across national boundaries [that contribute to shaping] political, social [and economic] outcomes at home, abroad, and in an emerging global governance sphere' (Orenstein and Schmitz 2006: 482). This transnational dimension, which is crucial for understanding illicit flows and their associated organised criminal networks as well as regional conflict spillovers and other external stresses, does not figure as prominently as it should in the World Bank's analysis.

The *World Development Report 2011* also fails to acknowledge that in some circumstances, stresses – external and internal – can have *stabilising* effects, in that they work to the benefit of, or indeed are the making of, powerful state and non-state groups in the affected countries or world region (Andreas 2011; Abraham and van Schendel 2005). Here we have to remind ourselves that 'illegal flows are not external forces that, arrow-like, fly past supine borderland societies. On the contrary they are actively domesticated and incorporated into borderland projects' (van Schendel 2005: 55). Beyond the impact of illicit flows like drug trafficking on the structuring of social, political and economic relations in borderlands and between them and the central state, they also have effects on the national body politic and governance structures, and on wider state–society relations. 'The image of states as simply reactive, responding [or not] to the growth of clandestine transnational flows, is misleading because it understates the degree to which states actually structure, condition, produce and enable clandestine border crossings [and illicit flows]' (van Schendel 2005: 59).

To illustrate this point, one state's external stress can result from a neighbouring state's activation of a 'safety valve' by tolerating or actively facilitating (unauthorised and uncontrolled) economic migration with the aim of reducing youth unemployment or increasing

the volume of annual remittances. Bangladesh has been cited as an example of this, with large numbers of Bangladeshis being pushed to migrate to India in search of work and income (van Schendel 2005).

Also, external stresses, such as illicit drug trafficking, are not always associated with armed conflict and violence. As discussed in more detail below, depending on the type of policy a government chooses to tackle such stresses, they can actually lead (at least temporarily) to development gains in producer and transit countries, often in peripheral and desperately poor internal agricultural frontier communities and borderlands that span international boundaries (Goodhand 2009). In settings where drug trafficking *is* driving large-scale violence, such as presently in Mexico, this is related both to external factors (such as the massive flow of Andean cocaine through Mexico to the US consumer market) and internal ones (such as Mexico's transition from a closed, one-party political system that operated an illicit 'joint extraction regime' (Snyder 2006) together with trafficking groups, to a more democratic and pluralist system deeply entangled in the US-led 'global war on drugs').

In sum, while intuitively appealing, the binary internal–external/fragility–vulnerability model that underpins the World Bank's analysis of external stresses appears to be too limited to inform strategies to address the challenges experienced by states and societies arising from external pressures as diverse as illicit transnational trafficking, price and resource shocks, and climate change. There is a risk that the *World Development Report 2011* is contributing to the over-simplification of complex issues and the uncritical reiteration of dominant discourses about pressures on states, thereby limiting the policy options available (which are discussed in more detail below) to tackle what are undoubtedly serious problems for fragile and poor countries, including risks related to the outbreak or perpetuation of different types of violence.

2 ‘External stresses’ and ‘new’ forms of violence: the case of transnational cocaine trafficking

The *World Development Report 2011* adopts a very broad notion of violence, which it defines as the ‘use or threat of physical force by groups, including state actions against other states or against civilians, civil wars, electoral violence between opposing sides, communal conflicts based on regional, ethnic, religious, or other group identities or competing economic interests, gang-based violence and organized crime, and international, nonstate, armed movements with ideological aims’ (WDR 2011b: 39). The core of the argument is that these different forms of ‘21st century violence [do] not fit the 20th-century mold. Interstate war and civil war are still threats in some regions, but they have declined over the last 25 years... Many countries and subnational areas now face cycles of *repeated* violence, weak governance, and instability’ (WDR 2011b: 2).

Echoing the ‘new wars’ narrative (Kaldor 2012; Münkler 2002), the Bank perceives violence and armed conflict in their ‘new’ guise as more diffuse, recursive and globalised than during the Cold War era, and instrumental for achieving economic gains for private violence entrepreneurs such as warlords and drug traffickers. It also perceives violence and armed conflict as less driven by states and clearly identifiable organised non-state groups with political and social reform agendas, though the *World Development Report 2011* does not rule out the existence of such agendas.

Concerned with the huge death toll and the destabilisation of countries as diverse as Mexico, Guinea-Bissau and Afghanistan (in terms of their geographic location and levels of development and institutional strength), the *World Development Report 2011* emphasises the highly adverse effects of illicit flows on national governance, institutions and development. It is well known that the trafficking and sale of illicit drugs are presently among the most lucrative transnational criminal activities (Allum and Gilmour 2012), which provides huge opportunities for traffickers to bribe police, customs and other officials, and to fuel corruption, mostly in source and transit countries. Under certain circumstances, these activities are also associated with high levels of what the Bank would label ‘new’ forms of violence of criminal origin. While the report seems to present illicit flows as epitomising external stresses, it does not elaborate on the differences between the broad range of external stresses it has identified in terms of their destabilising and violence-generating potential and impact.

As in the case of licit global economies, the illicit drug business functions on the basis of the principle of demand and supply, and is structured along transnational commodity chains. For cocaine, for example, the chain extends from coca cultivation and cocaine production in the source countries in the Andean region of South America, to export (or ‘trafficking’, as cocaine is an illegal commodity) to North America and Europe via transit countries – a process that is run by transnationally networked criminal organisations and their partners in the state and in wider society – and finally, to the illegal wholesale and retail sale and consumption of the drug in destination markets.

Most of the violence associated with the global cocaine business occurs at the production and transit stages (particularly the latter). For instance, Colombia’s protracted internal armed conflict and pervasive criminal violence are largely driven by the cocaine business; Mexico’s drug wars have killed an estimated 60,000 people in the past seven years alone; and in 2009, Guinea-Bissau saw its president killed in what some observers allege could have been a vendetta between local politicians and military officers involved in cocaine trafficking to

Europe along the West Africa route. In the large consumer markets of the North, where the price of cocaine reaches its peak, trafficking-related violence is much less dramatic, while incarceration rates of so-called 'drug offenders' – dealers and users – are high, especially in the United States. Different types and combinations of local, national and transnational non-state and state actors are involved in the cocaine business at different points in the chain. They include (some) coca farmers,² cocaine processors, traffickers, corrupt law enforcement and customs officers, shipping agents, political elites, and end-users.

The example of the transnational cocaine business illustrates that the challenges posed to states by drug trafficking, and its potential to generate violence, should be conceptualised both from the vantage point of internal and external stresses. In source countries such as Colombia, the cocaine industry and its potential for generating violence is essentially associated with 'internal' factors such as the lack of state presence in large swathes of the country's rural areas, governance weaknesses, and the long-standing existence of armed non-state and criminal groups and networks. However, key participants in the cocaine industry (as well as in the Colombian government's efforts to curb the illegal trade, with major US support, through forced coca crop eradication, drug shipment interdiction and law enforcement) are transnationally networked. The 'pull factor' – i.e., global demand for Colombian cocaine – is external.

In the cases of Mexico and Guinea-Bissau, which do not produce cocaine but are located on two major trafficking routes from the Andean region to North America and Europe respectively, the notion of external stresses applies more readily. The starting point of the transnational cocaine trafficking chain lies outside of the national jurisdictions of the two countries (and, in the case of Guinea-Bissau, in another continent). As transit countries, with relatively little (though growing) domestic cocaine consumption, they are not a significant part of the pull factor. But both Mexico and Guinea-Bissau are experiencing major destabilising impacts from the transnational cocaine business, which undermines their governance structures and generates violence (in the case of Mexico, on a very large scale). However, it is crucial to recognise that in both countries, externally driven destabilisation and violence are *shaped* and *enhanced* by existing internal weaknesses such as pervasive corruption, weak justice systems, high rates of impunity, the existence of organised criminal groups with links to the state, and weak accountability and transparency. Transnationally networked groups in Mexico and Guinea-Bissau, whether non-state or state actors, benefit from cocaine trafficking through their respective countries either because they act as powerful intermediaries, brokers and *transportistas* in the illicit business or because they gain access to sizeable external counter-narcotics and security aid, which can inadvertently contribute to the propping up and stabilising of illegitimate and/or ineffective national political regimes and states (Felbab-Brown and Forest 2012).

In sum, whether cocaine trafficking carries the potential to generate violence, disrupt governance and block or reverse development appears to depend on the effectiveness and willingness of the state to control production and trafficking ('gate-keeper state') and the policy it chooses to achieve control (hard or soft-line approaches); it also depends on the degree to which key domestic state and non-state groups, including criminal organisations, are transnationally networked and linked into global trafficking chains and counter-trafficking efforts. While there is abundant evidence that, in the longer run, transnational drug and other illicit flows can have devastating political, social and economic effects in source and transit countries, it must not be overlooked that they can also (at least temporarily) contribute to job creation and income generation for underprivileged sectors of the population, to political stability (which might well be of an authoritarian and non-democratic nature), and the

² It is important to note that not all coca farmers in the Andean region participate in the illicit cocaine business as suppliers of coca leaf. Especially in Bolivia, but also in Peru and Colombia, large quantities of coca leaf are produced for traditional, cultural and licit economic purposes, such as for the manufacture of coca tea (*mate de coca*).

emergence of centre–periphery ‘political equilibriums’ (Goodhand 2009). Finally, it is paramount to distinguish between the different types of external stresses identified in the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2011*, as they are not readily comparable in terms of their destabilising and violence-generating potential, and in how they relate to, and are reinforced by, internal stresses and transnational factors.

3 Tackling transnational trafficking and insecurity: beyond buffering institutions and enhanced regional cooperation

As noted earlier, underpinning the World Bank's analysis of external stresses is a vulnerability model centred on the institutional capacity and legitimacy of fragile/vulnerable states. In the absence of sufficiently robust, effective and legitimate buffering institutions, fragile states or states with a legacy of violent conflict are said to risk cyclical, recursive violence. This risk is heightened due to the impact of external stresses stemming from various sources such as illicit trafficking, cross-border violence spillovers, and commodity price and resource shocks. According to the Bank's analysis, the region in which a state is located defines not only the type of threats it is likely to face but also the potential support available to it to help withstand the destabilising impact of external stresses. Hence, '[regional] collaboration and shared administrative services could create... the net gains in capacity that would allow all participating states to better handle organized violence' (WDR 2011a: 233).

While this reasoning might apply in some cases – such as with 'uncontrolled' economic migration and refugee flows, and even cross-border support to rebels provided that an agreement to stop such support is negotiated and adhered to by the governments of the states in question – it does not readily apply where the nature of the external stresses is determined by sweeping processes of (illicit) globalisation, such as in the case of drug trafficking, and resource and commodity price shocks. It is unlikely that tackling these issues through creating stronger domestic buffering institutions and enhancing regional cooperation will be sufficient. It is further questionable whether such a strategy would be politically feasible. Arguably, the global and transnational nature of these activities and processes and of the actors involved transcends the regional context, which needs to be factored into the policy responses; it is this same situation that provides significant opportunities for key (criminal) state and non-state groups, including in borderlands, to enrich themselves and amass 'illicit elite political resources' (Moore 2011).

Underlying the notion of buffering institutions is the assumption that major transnational and global pressures can be neutralised by building stronger domestic institutions, presumably at the central government level; and that there is no or only little agency on the part of transnationally networked groups in the affected countries in the making and promotion of such pressures. However, in many fragile states this is not the case (or if it is, it is only to a limited degree). On the other hand, the idea that enhanced regional cooperation could effectively shield fragile states from external stresses fails to acknowledge the empirical fact that whole world regions (e.g. Central America/Mexico and West Africa) are presently being overwhelmed by immensely powerful global illicit flows, such as the large-scale trafficking of cocaine (as already discussed). Numerous regional cooperation mechanisms have been established to address the problem, including the Mérida Initiative involving the United States, Mexico and Central America; and the Regional Action Plan to Address the Growing Problem of Illicit Drug Trafficking, Organized Crime and Drug Abuse in West Africa, adopted by the 15 member nations of the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS). Yet they appear to have produced only limited results thus far (Ribando Seelke and Finklea 2013; Aning and Pokoo 2013).

4 Implications for policy analysis

This discussion gives rise to several implications for policy analysis in countries and regions affected by (illicit) transnational activities and flows. Instead of focusing primarily on how and which national buffering institutions in the countries under stress should be strengthened, and how regional cooperation to tackle external stresses could be enhanced to reduce the risk of violence and instability, the focus should shift to addressing the following (non-exhaustive list of) questions:

- How is state fragility and vulnerability *reinforced* by the *interrelationships* between internal, external and transnational actors and variables? How could these interrelationships be restructured in such a manner that the risk of outbreaks or perpetuation of violence is mitigated?
- Who are the losers and who are the winners? Which interests, in and outside of the affected country and region, are being promoted and safeguarded? How could the incentives for state and non-state actors to participate in illicit transnational activities and flows be changed?
- Which (illicit) transnational activities and flows have a higher propensity to generate 'new' forms of violence in fragile and vulnerable states, and under which conditions? Under which conditions do they have stabilising effects?
- Which policies designed to deal with (illicit) transnational activities and flows are likely to be most effective in preventing and mitigating violence, and which policies are likely to be least effective?

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