

## PURPOSE AND INTENDED USE

In 2019, Sida conducted an external evaluation of its support to peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict contexts. This evaluation recommended Sida to enhance its focus on root causes and drivers of conflict (as well as drivers of peace<sup>1</sup>) and to link these specifically to the expected results of its peacebuilding work.<sup>2</sup>

While root causes of armed conflicts are highly contextual, this evidence brief discusses a selection of general root causes of conflict as supported by research with a strong focus on empirical evidence.<sup>3</sup> The brief can be used by Sida managers and staff as a starting point in the preparation of a context-specific conflict analysis; in analysis of the peace and security dimension of Sida's multidimensional poverty analysis (MDPA) and/or in the development of theories of change in the operationalisation of strategies.

The evidence brief mainly focuses on state-based internal armed conflict.<sup>4</sup> The number of state-based armed conflicts is on a historic high and most of them are internal.<sup>5</sup> This type of conflict is common in the contexts that Sida is engaged in.

## INTRODUCTION TO UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF CONFLICT

Root and structural causes of conflict are synonymous terms and refer to long-term or systemic causes of violent conflict that are built into the norms, structures and policies of a society. These often interact with drivers of conflict, which are commonly described as proximate (direct) causes. Drivers of conflict change more quickly, can accentuate structural causes and lead to an escalation of violent conflict.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that causes of conflict differ in character and scope between contexts and types of conflicts. Root causes and drivers of conflict should therefore be analysed and understood as something contextual and dynamic that, in combination with other factors, can lead to and sustain violent conflict. It is often challenging to determine root causes and drivers of conflict in a given context as conflict parties may be reluctant to share their underlying interests and some actors do not have a unified position on all issues. What someone claims to be fighting over (their stated position) is not the same as the root cause in that conflict. Moreover, root causes do not exist in isolation from each other. Rather, it is the interaction between different causes that results in violent conflict. New drivers can also arise throughout the course of an armed conflict. In addition, many of today's most violent intrastate armed conflicts are classified as "internationalised civil wars" in which at least one foreign party is militarily involved in the conflict. These foreign elements play an important role in instigating, prolonging, or exacerbating intrastate conflicts.

Explaining conflict is not the same as explaining why some conflicts turn violent. None of the root causes of conflict that are discussed in this brief lead to armed conflict in the absence of a mobilisation process for violence. Research has concluded that some form of ideology or legitimising narrative is required for collective violent mobilisation to occur.<sup>7</sup> Other important factors that determine whether a conflict becomes violent include the availability of weapons and economic resources to build and sustain the military capacity of warring parties. Most conflicts are prevented or resolved constructively before they escalate into one-sided violence, armed conflict or war.

1 Key drivers (driving factors) are elements without which the conflict would not exist or would be significantly different. There are drivers of violence and drivers of peace. While this brief only focuses on causes and drivers of conflict, it is equally important to understand and support key drivers of peace in peacebuilding strategies.

2 E. Bryld et. al., Evaluation of Sida's support to peacebuilding in conflict and post-conflict contexts, Synthesis report, Sida Evaluations, 2019:1, p. 76.

3 This brief largely builds on an "Evidence-based overview of some of the most common root causes in armed conflict", conducted by Alma Estrada, Intern at Sida's Policy Support Unit (August 2021 – January 2022) under the supervision of Anna Åkerlund, Lead Policy Specialist Peace and Security at Sida. The full paper can be accessed upon request. The brief is mainly based on a literature review of a selection of empirical research. Articles that only account for theoretical causes of armed conflict without backing this up with empirical evidence has not been included. The paper does not present an exhaustive list of root causes, nor a full literature review of each root cause that is included.

4 A state-based armed conflict is a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. Source: UCDP [definition of armed conflict](#).

5 In 2021, UCDP registered 54 (state-based) armed conflicts and only two of those were interstate (where both warring parties are states). The same year UCDP also registered 76 different non-state violent conflicts around the world (where none of the parties are states). Source: Journal of Peace Research 2022 "Organized violence 1989–2021 and drone warfare", Vol 59(4)593–610.

6 Herbert, S. (2017). Conflict analysis: Topic guide. Governance and Social Development Resource Center (GSDRC), University of Birmingham, p.3.

7 Haider, H. (2014). "Conflict Topic Guide", Revised edition with B. Rohwerder. Birmingham: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

## UNDERSTANDING ROOT CAUSES OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

### Resource-related root causes of conflict

In this section, root causes relating to the distribution and management of resources will be discussed. Subsections included are territory, resource scarcity and resource abundance.

#### Territory

According to empirical research, territory has long been the most common incompatibility in intrastate armed conflicts. In 2020, around fifty-five of the recorded armed intrastate conflicts had territory as the main contradiction<sup>8,9</sup>

The majority of intrastate conflicts fought over territory involve groups pursuing greater autonomy within the borders of their own countries.<sup>10</sup> Territorial control is further a common contradiction in non-state violent conflicts.<sup>11</sup> In addition to being a major contradiction in conflict, territory tends to affect conflict dynamics. For instance, a key empirical finding is that wars over territory last longer and are more difficult to resolve than conflicts fought over governance.<sup>12</sup>

There are several theoretical explanations for why territory becomes a contested issue in armed conflicts. First, territory often holds a strategic value. Conflicts related to the strategic worth of territories are more commonly fought between states rather than within them.<sup>13</sup> Second, territory can have an intrinsic value. Since territorial control provides important and valuable resources, actors may be willing to engage in conflict for the sake of material gains. It should be noted that territory with an intrinsic value also enhance opportunity for violent mobilization and is therefore not only a motivating factor but also an enabling factor for armed conflict.<sup>14</sup> Finally, territory can have a symbolic value, which makes it particularly difficult to divide.<sup>15</sup>

#### Resource abundance

Empirical evidence supports that resource abundance increases the risk of armed conflict.<sup>16</sup> The resources under contestation are often non-renewable and have a high economic value. For instance, oil appears to have a particularly strong link to armed conflict. Empirical findings further show that resource abundance attracts foreign support in the form of troop involvement. In turn, this type of third party military involvement in intrastate conflicts tends to intensify and prolong armed conflicts.<sup>17</sup>

While empirical findings support the linkage between resource abundance and conflict, there is some disagreement regarding why this is the case. There are in general two possible explanations: 1) abundance have a direct effect on conflict risk, 2) abundance have an indirect effect on conflict risk.<sup>18</sup> Research that has found a direct link between abundance and conflict focuses on the fact that resource wealth enhances groups' opportunity to finance costly wars (mobilisation opportunity) and that this can contribute to decision to initiate conflict.<sup>19</sup> Research arguing for an indirect link between resource abundance and conflict argue that resource abundance weakens state institutions, which in turn increases the risk of conflict.<sup>20</sup> The main explanation for this is that governments who control valuable resources lack incentives to provide public services as they are not in the same need of public taxes as other governments.<sup>21</sup>

#### Resource scarcity

The variety of empirical findings within peace and conflict research indicate that a relationship between scarcity and armed conflict exists, however, the linkage is complex, often indirect and combined with other factors.<sup>22</sup> Empirical findings also support that scarcity can function as a multiplier of already existing threats and grievances.<sup>23</sup> Some researchers argue that there is a direct link between resources, such as food and

8 In peace and conflict research, the term contradiction refers to an "opposition between conflicting forces or ideas", i.e. what people are fighting over.

9 Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) Charts, Graphs and Maps. Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict Research. Available at: <https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/charts/>, accessed 2020-09-28.

10 Toft, Monica Duffy (2014) "Territory and War." *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2, March, 185–98.

11 Fjelde, Hanne, and Desirée Nilsson (2012) "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4: 604–28.

12 Toft, "Territory and War."

13 Ibid.

14 Fjelde, Hanne, and Desirée Nilsson (2012) "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 4: 604–28.

15 Toft, "Territory and War."

16 Koubi, Vally, Gabriele Spilker, Tobias Böhmelt, and Thomas Bernauer. (2014) "Do Natural Resources Matter for Interstate and Intrastate Armed Conflict?" *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2, March: 227–43, pp: 228

17 Weinstein, Jeremy M. (2005) "Resources and the Information Problem in Rebel Recruitment." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 598–624.; Karlén, Niklas. (2016) "Historical trends in external support in civil wars". *Sipri Yearbook* 2016: 117–128.

18 7 Le Billon, (2004) "The Political Ecology of War"; Collier, Paul, and Anke Hoeffler. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4: 563–95.

19 Koubi et al., "Do Natural Resources Matter"

20 Fearon, James D. (2005) "Primary commodities and civil war". *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49(4): 483– 507. ; Humphreys, Macartan (2005) *Natural resources, conflict, and conflict resolution*. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49(4): 508–537.

21 Boix, Carles. (2008) "Economic Roots of Civil Wars and Revolutions in the Contemporary World", *World Politics* 60, no. 3, April: 390–437.; Bates, Robert H. (2008) *When Things Fell Apart: State Failure in Late-Century Africa*, New York: Cambridge University Pres.

22 Koubi et al., "Do Natural Resources Matter"; Heslin, "Riots and Resources".

23 Wain, Ashok (2016) "Water and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding." *Hydrological Sciences Journal* 61, no. 7, May 18: 1313–22.

water, and violent conflict. However, this claim has received limited empirical support.<sup>24</sup> When the state is responsive toward the general public and institutions are well-functioning, societies tend to solve conflicts over scarcity in constructive ways, and grievances do not usually lead to violence.<sup>25</sup>

### Governance-related root causes

This section discusses governance-related root causes of conflict, with key focus on government systems and corruption. Political exclusion is to some extent addressed in the political systems section below but it is discussed in further detail in the section on inequality-related conflict causes.

### Political systems and conflict risks

Researchers tend to agree that the risk for armed conflict is highest in semi-autocracies<sup>26</sup>, defined as political systems with a mix of democratic and autocratic institutions.<sup>27</sup> This means that the risk of armed conflict is at its highest when a state moves from autocracy towards democracy, or from democracy towards autocracy. The conflict risk in semi-democracies can, however, be moderated by a number of factors. For example, one study argues that democratisation aid decreases the risk of violent conflict to erupt in semi-democracies. This is the case since aid provides an external source of state power.<sup>28</sup> However, this finding is challenged by another study showing that development cooperation directed towards democratisation only has a positive impact when there are good conditions for civil society organisations to operate.<sup>29</sup>

Well-functioning democracies are the most peaceful political system, with a lower risk for intrastate armed conflict than both semi-autocracies and autocracies.<sup>30</sup> The risk for armed conflict is low in autocracies as well. Nonetheless, it is important to note that authoritarian regimes are more likely to use repression than

are democratic regimes<sup>31</sup> and the lack of intrastate armed conflicts does therefore not reflect a general state of peace.

### Corruption

Corruption can have a direct impact on the risk of armed conflict. A quantitative study covering the period of 1984-2007 found that corruption increases the risk of armed conflict.<sup>32</sup> One reason for this is that corruption increases group inequality and grievances<sup>33</sup> between those that are seen to benefit from corruption and those who do not. In combination with weak rule of law and where the institutions charged with delivering services are politicised or captured, corruption can generate popular “distrust, dissatisfaction, and grievances with the existing political system”<sup>34</sup>.

Some scholars argue that corruption does not systematically increase the risk of armed conflict. Rather, the effect depends on the management of corruption. Research supporting this argument finds that armed conflict arises from changes in the patterns of corruption rather than from corruption itself.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, some research suggests that corruption can have a stabilising role, depending on the context and the form it takes.<sup>36</sup>

### Root causes relating to inequality

Inequality is believed to be one of the main contributors to grievances in armed conflict. This comes from the idea that it is not absolute poverty which causes grievances, but the relative deprivation people perceive in relation to others.<sup>37</sup>

### Horizontal inequality

Horizontal inequalities<sup>38</sup> and exclusion are important factors in violent conflict. Horizontal inequalities risk fuelling armed conflict when there is a strong group identification, some degree of intergroup comparison,

24 Koubi et al., “Do Natural Resources Matter” and Le Billon, “The Political Ecology of War”.

25 Weinstein, “Resources and the Information Problem”; Karlén, “Historical trends in external support”.

26 Hegre, Håvard (2014) “Democracy and Armed Conflict.” *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2: 159–72.

27 Ibid and Hegre/Hegre, Håvard (2001) “Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816–1992”, *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1: 33–48.

28 Savun, Burcu, and Daniel C. Tirone (2011) “Foreign Aid, Democratization, and Civil Conflict: How Does Democracy Aid Affect Civil Conflict?”, *American Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2, April: 233–46.

29 Braithwaite, Jessica Maves, and Amanda Abigail Licht (2020) “The Effect of Civil Society Organizations and Democratization Aid on Civil War Onset.” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 64, no. 6, July: 1095–1120.

30 Hegre, Håvard (2001) “Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816– 1992.”, *The American Political Science Review* 95, no. 1: 33–48 and Hegre, Håvard. “Democracy and Armed Conflict”.

31 Davenport, Christian, and David A. Armstrong (2004) “Democracy and the Violation of Human Rights: A Statistical Analysis from 1976 to 1996”, *American Journal of Political Science*, 48 (3): 538–54.

32 Neudorfer, Natascha S., and Ulrike G. Theuerkauf (2014) “Buying War Not Peace: The Influence of Corruption on the Risk of Ethnic War”, *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 13, November: 1856–86.

33 Orjuela, Camilla (2014) “Corruption and Identity Politics in Divided Societies.” *Third World Quarterly* 35, no. 5, May 28: 753–69 and Le Billon, “Buying Peace”.

34 Taydas, Peksen, and James 2010 cited in cited in World Bank Group & United Nations (2018) “Pathways for Peace Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict”, p. 159.

35 Le Billon, Philippe (2003) “Buying Peace or Fuelling War: The Role of Corruption in Armed Conflicts.” *Journal of International Development* 15, no. 4: 413–26.

36 Hussmann, Tisne, and Mathisen 2009 cited in World Bank Group & United Nations (2018) “Pathways for Peace Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict”, p. 159.

37 Gurr, Ted (1970) “Why Men Rebel”. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

38 Horizontal inequality is defined as inequality among culturally defined (or constructed) groups, in contrast to vertical inequality, which is inequality among households or individuals.

an evaluation of the injustices and blaming of others. The risk of violence increases when the state fails to address group grievances and actively excludes the affected group,<sup>39</sup> for instance in relation to unequal governance over scarce resources.

It is important to note that perceptions play a powerful role in creating feelings of exclusion and injustice that may be mobilised toward violence. Some evidence suggests that perceptions of exclusion and inequality are at least as important for the mobilisation of violence as objectively measured inequality.<sup>40</sup>

Some qualitative case studies and quantitative evidence suggest that political exclusion is very important in fostering group tensions that can lead to violence. Politically excluded groups experience violent conflict at a much higher frequency in comparison with included groups. They also show that the less included a group is politically, the more likely it is to fight the incumbent government. This effect is even more pronounced when groups have experienced a change of power. Some studies argue that political exclusion is more visible than economic disadvantage and, as such, groups can more easily assign blame – which is considered an essential step in stirring grievances to violence.<sup>41</sup>

## Gender inequality

Research has shown that gender inequality has important links to armed conflict. Gender equal societies are more peaceful.<sup>42</sup> The explanation for this is less clear. While earlier studies hypothesised that gender equality supports peace as women are more peaceful in themselves<sup>43</sup>, more recent studies have shown that it is rather peoples' attitude towards gender equality and gender norms that matters.<sup>44</sup> Specifically, the upholding of stereotypic militarized masculinities result in a higher acceptance of violence at both the individual and state level in society.<sup>45</sup> Since gender inequality reproduces, and is sustained by, the upholding of stereotypical gender roles, gender unequal societies are more likely to experience violence overall.<sup>46</sup> Gender equal states, on the other hand, tend to have a lower military spending, are less likely to be part of state-based armed conflicts and are less likely to use repression against civilians.<sup>47</sup>

39 Cederman, Lars-Erik, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Halvard Buhaug (2013) "Inequality, Grievances, and Civil War", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

40 Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013 cited in World Bank Group & United Nations 2018 "Pathways for Peace Inclusive Approaches to Preventing Violent Conflict", p. 122.

41 Jones, Bruce, Molly Elgin-Cossart and Jane Esberg (2012), "Pathways Out of Fragility - The Case for a Research Agenda on Inclusive Political Settlements in Fragile States", Center on International Cooperation (CIC), New York University, New York.

42 Bjarnegård, Elin, Erik Melander, Gabrielle Bardall, Karen Brounéus, Erika Forsberg, Karin Johansson, Angela Muvumba Sellström, and Louise Olsson (2015) "Gender, Peace and Armed Conflict", In SIPRI Yearbook 2015: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security. 101–9. Oxford University Press.

43 Conover, Pamela Johnston (1994) "Feminists and the Gender Gap", The Journal of Politics 50 (4): 985–1010.; Smith, Tom W. "The Polls (1984)" Gender and Attitudes Toward Violence", Public Opinion Quarterly 48(1B): 384–96.

44 Bjarnegård, Elin, and Erik Melander (2017) "Pacific Men: How the Feminist Gap Explains Hostility", The Pacific Review 30 (4): 478–93.

45 Goldstein, Joshua S. War and Gender (2001) "How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa", Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

46 Caprioli, "Gender Equality and State Aggression".

47 Caprioli, Mary. (2003) "Gender Equality and State Aggression: The Impact of Domestic Gender Equality on State First Use of Force", International Interactions 29(3): 195–214.; Koch, Michael T., and Sarah A. Fulton. (2011) "In the Defense of Women: Gender, Office Holding, and National Security Policy in Established Democracies", Journal of Politics 73 (1): 1–16.; Melander, Erik. (2005) "Gender Equality and Intrastate Armed Conflict", International Studies Quarterly (2005a) 49 (4): 695–714; Melander, Erik. (2005) "Political Gender Equality and State Human Rights Abuse", Journal of Peace Research (2005b.) 42 (2): 149–66.