

# **War Economies: Evaluating the Importance of Economic Incentives in the Perpetuation of Complex Emergencies**

**Marina M. Fassi**  
**University of London**  
**London School of Economics and Political Science**

*This paper evaluates the role played by economic incentives in the onset and perpetuation of complex emergencies and their significance in relation to other factors. Conflict analysis highlights the complexities of short-term and long-term interventions needed to stabilize a region that has been devastated by civil armed conflict. Evidence suggests that disrupting existing economic incentives is a required but insufficient condition to restore order and maintain long term peace.*

*Keywords: complex emergencies, civil conflict, war economies, long term peace, peacemaking, civil unrest, new war, food aid, livelihoods*

## **INTRODUCTION**

OCHA defines the term Complex Emergency as a situation threatening the lives of a large percentage of the population that requires substantial multi-sector assistance. Said situation originates from government's inability to provide human security after a natural disaster or escalation of civil unrest (Kaldor). When infrastructure and civil society break down, it is hard to restore socioeconomic order without external intervention. However, there are many aspects to the intervention that need to be taken in consideration when trying to restore order and the economics of violence is only one of them. War economics refers to the balance of power including institutions and actors benefiting from the status quo and the economic activities supporting the backbone of the conflict. These activities can include, mining, commodity exchanges, weapons trade and also the dynamics of livelihoods for people living under these conditions. All play a role in keeping the war going unless they are disrupted.

Economic incentives play an important role in both the onset and perpetuation of complex emergencies but they are not the most important factor in perpetuating the conflict. Understanding existing power dynamics is key for OCHA conflict coordinators, as a way to disrupt them in order to achieve positive peace (J. Galtung). However, solely focusing on the economics aspect of the conflict, risks ignoring other factors that are important to the peace building process, such as cultural power dynamics and grievances. Focusing on economic incentives also ignores the coordination activities that need to take place to resolve the conflict. I will expand upon additional functions that should be considered in attempts to resolve complex emergencies.

One of the strengths of focusing on war economics is gaining a good understanding of the factors that originated the conflict and that keep the war going. Evidence from peace studies shows that both economic hardship or a sudden abundance of resources tend to amplify existing inequalities, strengthening

ethnocentric views and polarizing politics (M. Cox). This inevitably leads to armed conflict in states where civil society is fragmented and incentives to take over resources are high (Kaldor). After conflict breaks out, there are other dynamics that keep the war going. For example, farmers unable to grow food or support their livelihood through other trades are more likely to join a fighting group as a way of supporting and protecting their family (Cramer). Therefore, alternative livelihoods need to be made available in order for the cease-fire to persist. At the same time, there are other macroeconomic dynamics taking place in a complex emergency (referring specifically to a long term armed civil conflict). International arms trade networks combined with illegal trade of commodities such as diamonds or other raw materials and even international aid are other contributing economic factors that keep the conflict alive. International institutions (firms or governments) deal with warlords because there is no alternative. Even the logistics of food-aid distribution require at times that NGOs give up a percentage of the food to war lords in exchange for safe passage. Therefore, understanding how all these interactions play a role in sustaining the war, it is crucial to breaking these relations of power while diminishing the negative impact on the victims. Breaking existing patterns is a necessary but not sufficient condition to resolve complex emergencies. New patterns need to be created with healthier institutions and actors. This is not easy to discern, as the ICC has found that groups who seemed to support democracy, can turn into a dictatorship after they are in power. This was the case of Charles Taylor in Liberia.

Focusing solely on the economic dynamics of a conflict has some disadvantages. There is the issue of ignoring both short-term and long-term needs for humanitarian and financial aid. OCHA conflict coordinators serve a very important role coordinating an array of interdepartmental agencies in the UN providing relief and guidance during the peace-making process. For instance: food aid, medical services, temporary housing and training is needed and provided in IDP camps (Uganda for example). Local government is often non-existent or unable to provide this support, which is crucial to enabling alternative livelihoods to those affected by civil war. Whilst other agencies are coordinating building infrastructure, reconstructing the legal framework, negotiating cease-fire and peace agreements. There is also the issue of long-term aid handled by World Bank loans. All these activities coordinated without breaking the existing socioeconomic networks could result on futile efforts to stabilize a region.

Media is another factor that plays an important role in keeping the war going. Enemies are created by the use of narratives and media; they are not born (D. Rieff). During a conflict, there is an opportunity to analyze local narratives to resolve grievances through designing interventions aimed at changing the views of rival groups that perceive each other as enemies. Galtung goes on to assert that when latent structural violence is present in civil society, it often results in overt violence as a cause-and-effect relationship. In order to achieve positive peace, peace has to be built in the structure as well, not only in the human mind. Therefore, grievances between groups embedded in cultural values need to be corrected before positive peace can be achieved. "The different types of interventions will vary on the level of existing media infrastructure and will also depend on the local notions of justice" (D. Rieff). However, Rieff was criticized for not pointing out that the models of humanitarian interventions act as an enabler for governments that don't want to take responsibility for intervention on human rights violations in their own territory.

## **CONCLUSION**

Understanding the role of economics incentives in the onset and perpetuation of civil armed conflict is a necessary but insufficient requirement to stabilize the region. There are many other factors that should be taken in consideration and coordinated to achieve long term peace. Overlooking any of the factors mentioned above can easily lead to conflict recidivism due to perpetuation of negative peace (Galtung).

## REFERENCES

- Cramer, C. (2002). Homo Economicus Goes to War: Methodological Individualism, Rational Choice and the Political Economy of War. *World Development*, 30(11), 1845–64.
- Dunne, T., Cox, M., & Booth, K. (1999). *The Eighty Years' Crisis: international relations 1919–1999*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, Peace and Peace Research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(167), 167-191.
- Harrell-Bond, B. (1986). *Imposing Aid*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kaldor, M. (2001). *A Decade of Humanitarian Intervention: The Role of the Global Civil Society*. Global Civil Society. Retrieved from [www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Publications/Yearbooks/2001/2001chapter5.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Publications/Yearbooks/2001/2001chapter5.pdf)
- Keen, D. (2008). *Complex Emergencies*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Marriage, Z. (2006). *Not Playing the Game, Not Breaking the Rules: International Assistance to Countries at War*. London: C. Hurst & Co.
- Rieff, D. (2002). *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- United Nations, “Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization”. (2003). Supporting the Media in Liberia: A Review of the Media Landscape for the Post-Conflict Transition Period. The Partnership for Media and Conflict Prevention in West Africa.
- United Nations. (2008). Civil-Military Guidelines & Reference for Complex Emergencies. Retrieved November 10, 2019, from <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Civil-Military%20Guidelines%20and%20Reference%20CUN-IASC%2021%20Oct%2008%20English.pdf>.