

Does poverty cause
war?



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The central argument of this essay is that rather than treating poverty as a direct causal factor behind war, it could be viewed as one of the many processes that lead to a conflict when other social, economic, political and ethnic factors come into play.[1]The essay will begin with the definitions of war and poverty. This will be followed by examining the premise that poverty alone may not be a cause of war. From this starting point, the essay will move on to explore the view that poverty might not cause war independently but it acts as a facilitator and a trigger in the vicious circle leading to war. This will lead to the assessment of one such trigger- the awareness by the poor of the growing disparities between wealth and income.[2]

To take the argument of poverty being a contributor forward, the role of 'horizontal inequalities', as outlined by Frances Stewart, will be analysed as being a part of sequence of events leading to war.[3]This will lead to tracing the roots of grievances encompassing inequalities and poverty in factors like poor governance, historical development patterns and international linkages. [4]After exploring these grievances assessment of Paul Collier's greed hypothesis will be carried out and its critical review will be presented.[5]The essay will also discuss Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' as a plausible cause of war and a critical review of his work will be given.[6]The essay will conclude by saying that poverty independently does not cause war. In fact, none of the factors leading to war can be dealt with, in isolated terms. A combination, overlapping and co relation of social, economic, political, ethnic, language, cultural factors may lead to war.[7]

Poverty alone may not be a cause war; Definitions of poverty and war:

There is nothing like an absolute truth. Even as the poverty to war relationship seems straightforward, it is extremely complicated.[8] Before exploring this relationship, the definitions of poverty and war need to be looked at. Poverty, as defined by the UN statement of June 1998 is 'denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity. It means lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in society....; it means insecurity, powerlessness and exclusion of individuals, households and communities....'[9]

'War can be briefly defined as armed conflict between two or more parties, nations or states. The days when international lawyers could claim that the term war only applied to armed conflict between states have surely long gone. The twentieth century and the opening years of the century are replete with examples of internal wars of all kinds – civil wars, ethnic and tribal wars, religious wars and insurgencies. In common usage the term war is widely used to refer to any conflict relating to war or with the characteristics of war.'[10]

Poverty may lead to anger and frustration but it's the political, social, cultural interactions that lead to conflict.[11] Poverty and poor social services can fuel conflict 'from below,' just as it feeds into 'top down' violence.

[12] Kolkata, a city in eastern India is one of the poorest cities of the world but with one of the lowest crime rates. This is because the city has always lived with mixed neighbourhoods and ethnicity, as compared to other cities of India. Also, the communist political system in Kolkata has focussed on

class and gender related deficits thus shifting focus from religion based differences and reducing the likelihood of religion based instigations- a phenomenon not witnessed in other Indian cities. Similarly, Ireland, during the 1840's was struck with famine and saw all food laden ships moving to England, but remained peaceful. On the other hand, the high crime rate South Africa is due to the legacy of Apartheid and subsequent divided families and neighbourhoods.[13]

Awareness by the poor of the disparities between wealth and income acts as a trigger in the stages leading to war:

There was a 30: 1 gap in 1960 in the average per capita income between the fifth of the world's population in rich countries and the fifth of the world's population living in poor countries. This increased to 60: 1 in 1990 and beyond 2000, 74: 1. The figures now stand at \$30, 000 annual average income per person and less than \$400. These vast disparities lead to tensions, riots and insurgencies. A few developing countries with a yawning gap between wealth and income have been victims of civil war. For example, In Sierra Leone and Columbia half the population has about 5 percent of the country's total income. These inconsistencies increase the probability of armed conflict. The World Development Report 2000- Attacking Poverty also discusses the condition of poverty, 'as perceived by the poor.' [14] The theory of 'relative deprivation' also indicates the occurrence of a similar situation. Relative deprivation is 'perceived discrepancy between value expectations and value capabilities' and adequately encompasses most pre requisites to revolution. If dissidents feel that their goals can be achieved only by altering

the system, terrorist tactics will be applied to gain support and publicize the government's incapability.[15]

Modern wars do not happen by chance. They stem from the perceived difference between income and available resources. Conflicts and wars within states have occurred due to food shortage, water scarcity and land ownership. Riots in Indonesia and Lesotho were a result of sudden rise in food prices. The Chiapas rebellion in Mexico, guerrilla movement in Columbia and conflicts in Senegal were an outcome of the opposition movement's claim on large land tracts.[16]

Role played by Frances Stewart's Horizontal Inequalities (HI) in the sequence of events leading to war:

The discussion on plausible causes of war is incomplete without analysing the role of Stewart's Horizontal inequalities – 'inequalities in economic, social or political dimensions or cultural status between culturally defined groups'. If driven by political HI's, higher the socio economic inequalities, higher is the likelihood of conflict.[17]

HI's give rise to grievances, which may cause violent disturbances. The longevity of these grievances can lead to wars-Yorkshire in Britain, various cities in the US displayed this trend. So did India. India's war against the colonization rule of the East India Company was finally won over after 200 years. Civil wars are severe manifestations, such as the Biafra and Eritrean attempts to fight for independence. Burundi and Rwanda massacres, terrorism in its local and international form- 9/11 attacks are examples of economic and cultural horizontal inequalities between the US and the world's

Muslim population.[18]In Sierra Leone, unemployment and inability of the youth to access education acted as Horizontal Inequality and regionally and ethnically defined identity, poverty and insecurity, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.[19]Horizontal inequalities between ethnic groups and states can promote ethno-nationalist conflict. Tests with new data on wealth and ethnic groups' boundaries and political access show- the rich and poor groups with respect to the national average are conflict participants.[20]

Exclusion from citizenship is a form of HI and a considerable cause of inequalities as it can decline people's right to work, join a union or receive government assistance. For example, in Nigeria, the settler distinction has been the source of many local level conflicts.[21]

Factors like poor governance, historical developments and International linkages contribute to poverty and inequalities, which lead to grievances, which may lead to war:

UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, in a speech given in October 1999 correlates grievances due to horizontal inequalities and poverty, to violence- `A recent study has shown that one highly explosive structural factor is “horizontal inequality” which rises when power and resources are unequally distributed between groups that are also differentiated by race, religion, or language...Grievances by groups with uneven access to power can provide a trigger...., The fact that political violence occurs more frequently in poor countries has more to do with failures of governance....'[22]Inadequate State policy and institutional capacity lead to poverty which gradually becomes a grievance. Bad Governance and poverty are closely linked.

[23]Underdeveloped states raise revenue through resources or foreign aid

and lack incentives for public goods. Political factors like predatory rule, authoritarianism and state decay along with economic variables can also cause conflict. Also, specific groups may enjoy a state bias while others are alienated. The Tamil population in Sri Lanka, for instance, suffered from land colonization and education policies leaving them feeling alienated.

[24]International linkages also play their part in civil wars. `Bad governance (political underdevelopment) is made, not born and " we" (in the North) play a part in creating and maintaining it.'[25]Structural adjustment and trade deregulation stemming from international policies cause exclusion and grievance. For instance, liberalization in Sri Lanka devastated peasant farming and horticulture in the Tamil North East.[26]' Poor societies are at risk of falling into no-exit cycles of conflict in which ineffective governance, societal warfare, humanitarian crises, and the lack of development perpetually chase one another'.[27]

The dynamics of historical developments cannot be ignored in causing grievances. Many of today's conflicts date back to the colonial era and marginalisation of poor. For instance, Rwanda crisis is an outcome of failed development policies of past decades.[28]Poverty, starvation and inequity of the Irish famines affected Anglo-Irish relations. The ill-treatment, drawing, redrawing of borders of the Middle East by the West during colonial times did not spark a rebellion in the 19th century but gradually developed an animosity between the two factions. When a long term grievance interacts with economic and political agendas, it can lead to war.[29]

Paul Collier's greed hypothesis and its critical review:

To wage war, funds, mobilization and pay-off for the armed act are considered necessary. The importance of finances and subsequent exploitation is argued by Paul Collier in his greed hypothesis. 'Grievance-based explanations of civil war' were 'seriously wrong' is what Collier had daringly argued and said that conflicts are a cause of economic opportunities, not grievance, and that the key to understand the causes of war lay in the greed of rebel actors. The importance of exports of private commodities is the most important economic agenda according to Collier. [30] Similar views proposed that wars need effective strategies to mobilize people around the issues causing discontent. [31] The game-theoretic approach shows that a rational person will not rebel against inequality, if there are no returns. [32] The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) lured youth by giving them hopes of a better career. In order to mobilize and hold the rebel group, a cause and a robust group identity like ethnicity, kinship etc. is needed. Discourses on grievances like poverty and injustice may be given to motivate them. However, these views are contested. David Keen suggested that violent conflict has several functions for its participants and that there 'may be more to war than winning.' Collier's quantitative research and the World Bank jumping into the fray made everyone believe that civil wars are fought just to gain from war and its main drivers are loot seeking rebels rather than justice seeking, socio political or grievances.

Later this theory also talked about the sustenance of wars through economic resources. [33] For example, The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) has controlled 70 percent of Angola's total diamond

production since 1992 sustaining the war through its exploits.[34] However, authors like Karen Ballentine and David Keen refuted Collier's ideas.

Dependency on natural resources doesn't increase likelihood of conflict. Not resources but their governance is a direct causal factor behind conflict. In Sierra Leone, a stable diamond producing country, poor governance and corruption caused conflict. Also, kinship based mobilisation, regional allies, weak military, economy and State could be a cause. Kosovo's separatist conflict and insurgencies in Nepal, DRC and Sierra Leone occurred due to weak military, State, and corruption.[35]

The greed hypothesis was thus, found to be empirically unsustainable and impressionistic causing war lords' predatory nature a part of propaganda. [36] Even as economic agendas are significant in sustaining wars, greed cannot still be a significant driver and the 'resource curse' can be termed a permissive condition. As the governance issue is recalled, commodity exports form a significant factor in areas of weak state authority. Therefore, the fundamental cause is bad governance with greed merely being a symptom. A focus on greed overshadows the issues of political and social factors. Usually wars are an amalgamation of intersecting conflict and a plethora of agendas which are not based on a common agenda.[37] Instead of treating greed and grievance separately, their relations and synergies need to be understood. Grievance is manipulated and exploited by those with greed. For instance in Nepal, it was the power abuse and mounting corruption that gave rise to grievance and subsequent rebellion and greed sustained it. Surprisingly, later Collier himself shifts from his greed hypothesis. In *Breaking the Conflict Trap*, a World Bank Policy Research

Report, authored by Paul Collier along with a team of World Bank associates, the conceptual distinction between greed and grievance was not found to be convincing, in either explaining the motivation or persistence of civil wars. It indicates a distinct shift from the importance of ‘ motives of rebel actors’ to the ‘ opportunity for organised violence’ and the ‘ feasibility of rebellion . . . regardless of motivation’.[38]The World Bank Report has also modified its view. It states now that ‘ While the prevalence of natural resource secessions suggest that greed cannot be entirely discounted’, the report notes, ‘ it does not appear to be the powerful force behind rebellion that economic theorists have assumed’.[39]

Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations as a cause of war and its critical review:

The essay will be incomplete without discussing Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ as a cause of conflict and its critical analysis put forth by authors like Edward Said and Amartya Sen. According to Huntington, civilizations have basic historical, cultural a traditional and religious difference that cannot be ironed out easily. There are differences between political ideologies and political regime. Due to a lot of interactions between civilizations the awareness of differences is also increasing. Economic modernization, social change is leading to religion becoming an identity. The clash of civilizations occurs at two levels- micro and macro level. At micro, ‘adjacent groups along the fault lines between civilizations’ resort to violence to capture a territory. At the macro level, ‘states from different civilizations’ want to emerge militarily and politically stronger.[40]Huntington has divided the world into eight religions. However, he focuses on the clash

of the western and Islamic civilization and conveniently narrows down the causes that lead to rebellion. Critiquing his hypothesis, Edward Said observes that Huntington did not invest in understanding the internal dynamics and plurality of every civilization. He called Huntington an ideologist, someone who looks at civilizations and identities the way they are not. Said suggests one should rather analyze the relationship between powerful and powerless societies and justice and injustice. Clash of civilizations is like the 'war of the worlds' 'better for reinforcing defensive self pride than for critical understanding of the bewildering interdependence of our time'. [41] Amartya Sen, through his 'civilizational approach', also observes that Huntington's clash of civilizations definition is constricted. According to him, Huntington's is one that only seems to cover religions, thus placing religion over other crucial economic and political causes of conflict. The 'civilizational' clash has been called an artificial view of History, which takes a shocking 'short cut' to the understanding of identities. No civilization has grown without interacting and communicating with each other and there have been movements and interaction of ideas and influences across all borders. In reality no individual belongs to a single group or one identity and everyone has various groups. [42] In fact, plurality within cultures exists and so does movement. The ubiquitous presence of Muslims in all European countries and the United states shows that Islam is at the centre of the west and not at its periphery. [43]

Conclusion:

Poverty, in its pure independent form might not cause war but when intermingled with the important and severe horizontal inequalities, it forms a

grievance pool which in turn could be exploited by leaders to carry out violent goals.[44] Most of the literature concerned with poverty to war relationship agrees that several factors combine to lead to a situation of an armed rebellion and no particular reason can be assigned to it independently. The causes of war cannot be explained in isolated terms. Therefore, economic, social inequalities, deprivation, identity, cultural factors cannot be dealt with, exclusive of each other to track the causes of war. Instead their intermingling, relations, overlapping and combinations have to be presented to espouse the causes of war.[45] Lopsided development gives rise to inequality, exclusion and poverty thus contributing to the grievances pool especially when ethnic, religious, language and religious parameters overlap with poverty. Over a period the pent up grievances may take vent when catalysts like external shocks like a sudden trade change, or mobilization and motivation by rebel authorities prey upon them.[46] The World Development report also states that when political exclusion and inequality has a bearing on regional, ethnic or religious groups, the likelihood of war increases.[47]