Photo Credit: M. Madukwe for Mercy Corps[*]

GOOD GOVERNANCE:
PREVENTING CONFLICT & BUILDING PEACE

SEPTEMBER 2019

Overview

Conflict and violence affect countless communities around the world, driving many of the worst humanitarian crises. In 2018 alone, there were 52 state-based conflicts, 77 non-state conflicts, and 33 one-sided incidents of violence which resulted in over 77,000 deaths.[1] The past five years have witnessed some of the highest levels of fatalities since the end of the Cold War 30 years ago.[2] Current estimates predict that 30 years from now, one in three people will be living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts.[3] Conflict and violence are driven by a number of complex underlying social, political, economic, and ecological dynamics, or "root causes," many of which directly connect to how communities and nations are governed.

In this research brief, we synthesize academic and practitioner research on governance and conflict with a review of Mercy Corps' programming portfolio in this area. Through this analysis, we identify three broad "families" of governance-related root causes of conflict, as well as the types of programming approaches that can target each type of cause. The aim of this document is to help practitioners, policymakers, and

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[*] March 2019, Anyiin, Nigeria – Veronica Suswam, farmer. "I enjoy speaking to large groups of women about the triggers of conflict in our communities and how to mitigate it. As women, we are often overlooked and our needs overshadowed by that of the men. Being a part of the Anyiin Peace Committee has given me a better platform to air my views and encourage other women to understand our roles in influencing our men and our youths positively," Veronica says. Engaging Communities for Peace in Nigeria (ECPN) is a four-year USAID funded project implemented by Mercy Corps and its partner Pastoral Resolve.

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researchers working on conflict prevention to match context-specific diagnosis of governance root causes to innovative and effective program designs that can ultimately help to alleviate and prevent human suffering.

Addressing Governance Root Causes of Conflict

Ineffective and unjust governance compounds natural resource challenges, perpetuates distrust, alienates youth, and exacerbates inequalities between communities, which ignite and prolong violent conflict. Mercy Corps recognizes that we must tackle these governance-related root causes of conflict in order to effectively promote sustained peace and attain lasting development outcomes. Mercy Corps programs work to engage decision-makers and power-holders to ensure they are responsive, accountable to and capable of engaging with citizens, while also harnessing the collective power, knowledge and capacities of communities and civic action.

Governance challenges like illegitimate and unfair institutions, lack of political inclusiveness, unequal provision of services, and corruption are key drivers of conflict in many of the contexts where Mercy Corps works. Poor governance fuels grievances and can create space for violent extremist groups to gain hold in communities. While there are multiple paths to participation in violent extremist groups, there are often links to governance-related root causes like exclusion, discrimination, and corruption, or more extreme cases of state-sponsored abuse of specific communities and vulnerable populations.[4]

In contrast, positive governance outcomes like fair power structures, effective and legitimate institutions, low levels of corruption, inclusive political settlements, and equitable and efficient provision of public services are critical for creating an enabling environment for peace. The theoretical link between governance and peacebuilding is increasingly being made by leading donors, think tanks, organizations and institutions, and donor governments have identified governance-related factors, such as inclusive and transparent public institutions, as priorities for international assistance.[5] However, of the $180.6 billion spent by all donors on development assistance worldwide in 2016, just 8% was spent on governance, justice, and security.[6]

UNDERSTANDING ROOT CAUSE APPROACHES

Mercy Corps is committed to addressing the root causes of conflict and humanitarian crises.

Using root cause approaches in our work means acknowledging that fragility and conflict are driven by the interaction of shocks and stresses within multiple interconnected complex systems: economic, political, social, and environmental.

As a result, targeting root causes has less to do with identifying *what happened first* or *who is responsible*, but rather relies on identifying and classifying the various deep systemic factors that underlie recurring cycles of conflict.

Careful, ongoing context analysis is the bedrock of any attempt to address root causes. Analytic tools used in Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) are especially helpful at helping to pratictioners to unearth root causes by encouraging them to repeatedly ask "why" conflct dynamics and drivers exist, until a set of deep causes are identified.

Other sector-specific analytic tools such as conflict analysis and political economy analysis can also help to surface root causes of conflict when they pinpoint the structural factors that shape the interests and behaviors of actors in a conflict.

While there are many governance-related contributing factors that shape conflict and violence, Mercy Corps has identified three categories of governance-related root causes of conflict: 1) weak state capacity and accountability, 2) exclusion and marginalization of population groups, and 3) weak civic engagement.

Root Cause 1: Weak State Capacity, Accountability, and Legitimacy

Governance institutions that are unable or unwilling to respond to citizens' needs – due to factors like corruption, capacity or resource shortages, and the absence of accountability mechanisms – can contribute to unrest and violence. Poor performance diminishes trust and legitimacy[†] in governance institutions and, in some cases, this can exacerbate grievances and lead citizens or groups to turn to violence to get their needs met. Underperforming governance institutions are linked to rising instability and violence in a variety of conflict settings, including violent extremism, insurgencies, civil war, as well as the recurrence of violence in a post-conflict context.[7] Mercy Corps has also found that corruption and perceived unfairness of the law are often associated with a greater risk of political violence, particularly among youth.[8]

While there are many governance-related factors that contribute to or diminish trust and legitimacy, Mercy Corps programs focus on three specific areas:

Weak service provision:

Delivery of basic services (e.g., education, water, sanitation) can shape factors like state legitimacy and in turn the propensity for violent conflict. In contexts emerging from conflict, governments often struggle to restore services quickly and disruptions may also occur as international aid organizations transition service delivery functions back to national and local actors.[9] Studies have linked services like education and water services to propensity for conflict, particularly where access to services is perceived as unequal, unfair, exclusionary, or corrupt.[10] In some cases, non-state armed groups, like ISIS, have taken advantage of service gaps to build support among the local population by providing public services in areas neglected by the government.[11] While service delivery has played a role in improving perceptions of state legitimacy in some contexts, the quality of services, the inclusiveness of decision-making, and the existence of grievance mechanisms appear to be more important than factors like access.[12]

Poor governance of natural resources:

Violence over natural resources is more likely to occur in places where institutions lack technical and operational capacity to equitably manage resources, which can be further compounded where the distribution of natural resources aligns with ethnic, tribal, or other identity boundaries.[13] Similar to other areas of governance, corruption in natural resource management can fuel grievances that give rise to unrest and violence. Bitter disagreements over the fair distribution of resources, such as land, water and oil, can perpetuate grievances and threaten long-term instability, even where these disputes are localized.[14] The capture of resources by elites, and particularly extractive and high value resources, can be a major source of conflict, particularly where benefits are bestowed upon specific groups to the exclusion of others.[15] Though climate change does not directly cause conflict, climate-related shocks and stresses further strain weak institutions with magnified resource scarcity and challenge their capacity to manage and respond to shocks efficiently and equitably.[16]

Inadequate justice and security provision:

Weak rule of law and lack of due process has been associated with low levels of legitimacy and credibility.[17] Low confidence in justice and security institutions and perceptions of corruption are also risk

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[†] "Legitimacy" refers to the process whereby an act, process, or ideology becomes legitimate by its attachment to norms and values guided by principles of good governance within a given society. It is the process of making something acceptable and normative to a group or audience. Legitimacy is shaped not only by authorities' capacity and the processes through which they relate to the population, but also by local norms, beliefs, historical grievances and expectations that change over time

factors for fragility.[18] Corruption in the security sector is particularly problematic because it undermines trust in governance institutions broadly and diminishes the likelihood of fair resolution of disputes or treatment of abuses in other areas of life.[19]

Mercy Corps Approach for Root Cause 1: *Building Legitimacy Through Responsive, Accountable and Transparent Institutions*

Effective and legitimate governance institutions are a cornerstone of good governance and long-term stability.[20] Citizen participation and active solicitation of and response to feedback from community members helps to build legitimacy and functionality of government institutions. Improved governance therefore requires both citizen collective action (see Root Cause 3) *and* the state's capacity to respond.[21] Program approaches like community-driven development (CDD) are intended to increase the frequency of interactions between citizens and local governance institutions and drive positive community perceptions of legitimacy.[22]

To address weak state capacity and accountability, Mercy Corps prioritizes four strategies which seek to strengthen the capacity of governance institutions as well as increase collaboration and cooperation between communities and governance institutions, often through Mercy Corps' community mobilization process, CATALYSE (Communities Acting Together to Advance Linkages Yielding Social Engagement):

1. Increase interactions between governance actors and communities by building channels, platforms, and skills for engagement.

2. Increase access to, quality, and management of basic services.

3. Improve natural resource management.

4. Improve provision of security and justice services.

Photo Credit: J. Vaughan for Mercy Corps

❭ ESTABLISHING TRUST IN NEPAL

*Mercy Corps' USAID-funded **Inclusive Resource Management Initiative** enhanced local dispute resolution and promoted more inclusive decision-making through trainings on mediation, negotiation and dialogue with key stakeholders, resulting in the resolution of 61 natural resource conflicts. IRMI encouraged governance actors and communities to work together to identify conflict cases collectively and develop natural resource management plans. Capacity building activities increased accountability and led to inclusion and better transparency in managing natural resources.*

Root Cause 2: Exclusion and Marginalization

Governance structures and institutions that entrench or deepen social divides between certain groups can exacerbate grievances and lead to violence by those that feel politically, socially, or economically excluded.[23] In many contexts, the exclusion of certain minorities, women, youth, or other groups from local and national decision-making processes directly contributes to conflict and instability.[24] Countries with high-levels of state-led discrimination are three times more likely to experience civil war as compared to states without such discrimination.[25]

Vulnerability to recruitment by violent extremist groups is also often shaped by structural factors like repression, inequality, discrimination, and a history of hostility between identity groups.[26] The political marginalization of specific ethnic or religious groups is associated with an increased risk of violent extremism.[27]

Photo Credit: C. Robbins for Mercy Corps

❯ INCLUDING YOUTH IN GOVERNANCE IN KENYA

*Mercy Corps' USAID-funded **Yes Youth Can!** program engaged youth to take collective action for the betterment of their country and become better citizens for peace and prosperity through the establishment of village-, county-, and national-level youth associations. Youth leaders were equipped with information, tools and resources to mentor their peers and effectively engage with policy makers and stakeholders at the national, county and constituency levels.*

Mercy Corps Approach for Root Cause 2: *Supporting Fair & Inclusive Power Structures*

Research suggests that more inclusive and representative decision-making may reduce the likelihood of civil war and violence.[28] This is supported by literature on the linkages between political inclusion and the consolidation of peace and stability.[29] Attitudes, institutions, and structures that facilitate tolerance and respect between groups within a society are also a critical component of peace.[30] **Inclusive, fair, and representative decision-making not only leads to better governance outcomes, it also facilitates perceptions of legitimacy** (see Root Cause 1).[31] Studies have also shown that the inclusion of women, in particular, can have significant outcomes for peace and security.[32]

Mercy Corps' programs include strategies to promote more inclusive and participatory governance, particularly in contexts where the exclusion of women, youth, ethnic, religious, or other identity groups is linked with conflict. These strategies are targeted at both governance actors as well as marginalized groups themselves and often seek to build capacity, awareness, and avenues to promote more inclusive decision making:

1. Increase governance actors' awareness of the importance of including marginalized groups.

2. Build solidarity, capacity, and influence of marginalized groups.

3. Ensure community planning processes and platforms are inclusive of marginalized groups.

Root Cause 3: Weak Civic Engagement

Mercy Corps believes that **good governance requires both citizen collective action *and* the state's institutional capacity to respond.** Effective interactions between citizens and governance institutions are more relevant to levels of peacefulness than other indicators like democracy.[33] Programs solely focused on institutional reform (i.e. Root Causes 1 & 2) do not necessarily lead to improved governance and/or relationships between citizens and institutions.[34] As such, Mercy Corps focuses on two interrelated areas of civic engagement:

Uninformed, disengaged, and disconnected citizens:

There are many factors that can lead to a weak citizenry which fails to hold governance institutions accountable. Citizens often do not have access to basic information about their rights and responsibilities and may lack the knowledge, skills, and connections to voice their needs and meaningfully participate.[35] A disengaged citizenry can also be the result of factors like violence, exclusion, and trauma which can physically and psychologically constrain citizens' agency, particularly where the potential costs of participating in civic action are high. In these cases, inaction and silence may become a protective strategy for survival.[36]

Weak civil society:

The presence of a robust civil society is an enabling factor for civic engagement as well as a critical foundation for peace and long-term stability.[37] The absence of a well-functioning civil society can also have detrimental impacts on governance, peace, and stability. When a government closes off space for independent civil society, it creates significant structural obstacles to achieving inclusive governance and positive state-society relations.[38]

Mercy Corps Approach for Root Cause 3: *Strengthening Civic Engagement with Communities and Civil Society*

An active citizenry supported by a robust civil society are necessary components for sustained good governance and long-term peace and stability. Cultivating an engaged citizenry – *in addition to* developing responsive institutions – is an iterative process that requires broadening inclusion, voice, accountability and transparency over time.[39] An active, connected citizenry requires skills to apply that knowledge effectively as well as specific mechanisms to foster communication with governance institutions and address asymmetrical power dynamics that impede collective action.[40]

Photo Credit: S. Agha for Mercy Corps

❯ **ENGAGING SYRIAN REFUGEES IN COMMUNITY PLANNING IN LEBANON**

*Mercy Corps' DANIDA-funded **GCAP/RECOVER** program established local committees – consisting of Lebanese and Syrian community leaders as well as municipality staff – which used the CATALYSE framework to identify and design nearly 70 projects that contributed to the municipality's local development plans and took into consideration the longer-term needs of each of the communities.*

Civil society organizations also play an important role in facilitating and reinforcing civic engagement. They inform citizens about the performance of governance institutions and support citizen action to influence to public policies. Studies have found that civil society organizations lessen state corruption, promote the rule of law, and establish greater governmental effectiveness by making it more accountable in the eyes of the public and responsive to citizen demands.[41] Civil society may also enable citizens to feel they can legitimately challenge violent actors as well as those who use exclusion and repression to maintain power.[42]

To support a more active citizenry and robust civil society, Mercy Corps' programs focus on capacity building (particularly for civil society organizations) and increasing collaboration between governance institutions and communities through the CATALYSE process. With CATALYSE, Mercy Corps equips citizens with the knowledge and skills critical to identify, organize and advocate for needed resources and services. As Mercy Corps increases citizens' understanding of their rights and responsibilities, they are provided opportunities to turn that understanding into action by:

1. Engaging communities in ongoing long-term mobilization processes in partnership with policy- and decision-makers, and

2. Strengthening the ability of communities and civil society to hold governance actors to account.

Conclusion: Analyzing and Working with Governance Root Causes

To effectively prevent human suffering, humanitarian and development programs must attempt to address the deep institutional, social and normative structures and dynamics that cause and sustain conflict. In this brief, we have identified three common types of governance factors that, when neglected or absent, can serve as the root causes of conflict or, when strengthened, can build peace: 1) the extent to which decision-makers are effective, responsive, accountable and legitimate, 2) the degree of fairness and inclusion in power structures, and 3) the level and quality of engagement by civil society and communities.

The aim of grouping governance root causes into these three categories is to help practitioners and policymakers in their attempts to address the complex interconnected political, social, economic, and environmental systems that lead to fragility and recurrent crises. Since every program should be designed with a particular context and set of communities in mind, this brief is intended to serve as a reference for practitioners, researchers and policymakers working in conflict-affected contexts as they move from problem diagnoses and conflict analyses to intervention design.

While any analysis or programming approach focused on root causes will examine and address factors identified in all interconnected political, social, economic and environmental systems, the focus on governance root causes presented here is designed to aid in efforts at innovative cross-sector policymaking and programming. By creating a shared language for the common types of governance problems that can cause protracted conflict and a menu of promising programming approaches that can address them, the framework presented here can help bridge divides between governance and other technical specialties within peacebuilding, development, and humanitarian response. Grouping common root causes into categories can support governance experts in integrating their programming approaches into cross-sectoral programs. Conversely, this approach can also help development practitioners to sharpen their analyses, theories of change, and program designs related to legitimacy, inclusive power structures, and civic participation and engagement.

[1] State-based armed conflict includes violence where at least one of the parties is the government of a state, that is, violence between two states and violence between the government and a rebel group. State-based armed conflict includes violence where at least one of the parties is the government of a state, that is, violence between two states and violence between the government and a rebel group. Data source: Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).

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[5] Frameworks like the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, DFID's Building Stability Framework, and the OECD's States of Fragility Framework all include reference to the link between good governance and stability.

[6] Data pulled from OECD - Query Wizard for International Development Statistics (QWIDS) filtered by 'all donors,' 'ODA,' and CRS categories 'Civilian peace-building, conflict prevention and resolution' (15220) and 'Child soldiers (prevention and demobilisation) (15261)', https://stats.oecd.org/qwids/.

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