

THE [REDACTED] BROKER

Connecting worlds of knowledge



Model or straitjacket? Doing context analysis on fragile or conflict- affected states

Rojan Bolling | January 19, 2015

In the complex contexts of fragile or conflict-affected states, where international interventions can easily influence power relations, good context analysis is crucial. Systematically mapping these contexts allows international actors to work effectively and prevent harmful impacts. However, the analytical frameworks designed for this purpose are often shaped by the goals and norms of the organizations that employ them, giving them certain biases. This article aims to provide an overview of such frameworks, identify what is common to them, and what is needed for the comprehensive analysis of a context. It will show that international, transnational and local views are underrepresented in analysis. This is a situation that needs to change, given the increasingly complex nature of conflict today.

Contents

Structuring analysis in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

- Stabilization and Perspectives on Conflict, Fragility and Resilience
- What management theory can contribute to the Comprehensive Approach
- Joint Analysis in United Nations Peacekeeping Missions

Putting it into context: Conclusions from the review of frameworks

- A comprehensive overview of conflict and fragility

Supply-side versus demand-side security

- Is political economy analysis too challenging for aid donors?

Looking ahead: moving away from state-level analysis and towards reflexive, multi-level analyses that include local perceptions of security

Banks, intelligence agencies, government departments, international institutions, militaries and NGOs all practice context analysis in some form in their strategic planning processes. And while different names are used – ranging from situational or strategic context analysis to environmental scanning – the aim remains the same: to increase the effectiveness of strategic planning. By understanding the context in which they aim to work, organizations can use the options, limitations and opportunities available to them to guide their operations planning, thereby increasing their chances of a positive outcome.

Various standardized analytical frameworks are used to facilitate this process, capture best practices and ensure methodological rigour. They focus on analyzing the status of economic, social, political, environmental, security and cultural contexts and the processes related to them. And each framework has its own priorities, which are reflected in the focus of analysis. A framework for strategic analysis used by the military or an intelligence agency might investigate the capabilities of adversaries, potential catalysts for conflict, or the power base of enemy leadership, while a company conducting an environmental scan would like to know about opportunities and regulatory environments, tariffs, or the buying habits of potential consumers.

In many cases frameworks combine insights from different sectors. An example is Human Terrain Analysis, which was devised especially for counterinsurgency purposes after the experiences of the Iraq war. It includes socioeconomic and socio-political analysis in military planning – thereby integrating social scientific research on identity and needs with security analysis. Additionally, some models often use core methodologies, for example the SWOT or TOWS analysis tool that details strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in a two-by-two matrix in order to map out the best course of action.

Structuring analysis in fragile and conflict-affected contexts

Understandably, organizations that work in contexts of conflict and fragility are most interested in analyzing these contexts. Which means that humanitarian and development agencies, foreign ministries and defence

organizations are the principal producers of models aimed at analyzing conflict or fragility.¹ The way these models are used therefore varies between conflict-sensitive planning of development projects, effectively providing humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding, military planning and analysis for designing foreign policy. Consequently the most prominent models are shaped by the needs of these actors and reflect their organizational aims.²

All of the perspectives underlying the design of analytical frameworks are also based on academic debates on conflict, war, society and the state. Different disciplines have varying degrees of influence on thinking within sectors like development or defence, which is reflected in their frameworks for analysis. Security and strategic studies in international relations for instance traditionally emphasize arguments focused on state power, like balance of power theories.³ And national security or military-related analytical frameworks reflect this development and are therefore often structured according to rationalist ideas. A constructivist view of international relations, focused on the role of ideology in shaping the actions of states, has only become mainstream in academia relatively recently.⁴

By way of example, researchers from the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University have produced an analytical framework designed to assess Regime Stability in the Middle East. The framework does this from a state-centric and rationalist perspective which means that the motivations of citizens and the state are reduced to simple cost-benefit calculations. It measures to what degree citizens are afraid of the security establishment, and the state's ability to enforce rules, but does not examine the informal rules that structure behaviour, and the possibility of changing leadership strategies.⁵ Other examples are USAID's Conflict Assessment Framework and the European Commission's Checklist for Root Causes of Conflict.⁶ Both of these models share a focus on programming for statebuilding, which means that the political institutions of a certain context are central to their analytical framing. By contrast, PMESII and DIME(FIL) are conflict analysis tools with a focus on military operations used by the US military and NATO. Both aim to identify the elements of adversarial power in armed conflict in order to be effective in defeating them.

The debate on grievance versus greed within the discipline of peace and conflict studies is perhaps the clearest example of such a division being reflected in analytical work used for strategic planning. The differing perspectives explain the origins of conflict by focusing either on economic reasons (greed) or divisions and inequalities on the basis of identity (grievance), which produces different outcomes for strategic planning processes.⁷ Starting by examining inequalities between ethnic or religious groups for instance will result in an analysis that finds the state failing to guarantee rights as a main cause – thus leading to a focus on governance and state-building. A focus on conflict entrepreneurs, such as elites that create violent conflict to seek increased income or power, or fighters that join a rebellion to provide for themselves, on the other hand leads to approaches favouring security interventions or socioeconomic development.⁸



By defining the problem in a certain way, underlying normative or analytical assumptions can thus determine the outcome of strategic planning processes. To counteract this, actors working in international cooperation have increasingly been developing whole-of-government approaches that combine the efforts and perspectives from the defence, development, and diplomacy sectors in various ways. This development has been led by the idea that development and security are two sides of the same coin, meaning that one cannot be achieved without the other. This type of approach is usually called an integrated or comprehensive approach, as in the recently presented Dutch Integrated Approach, the Danish Integrated Approach or the European Union's Comprehensive Approach.¹⁰ Military actors refer to this type of cooperation as Civil-Military Cooperation, as for example in the NATO Doctrine.

This focus on intra-government and inter-agency cooperation has also led to the development of analytical models for joint context analysis. Examples include the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework used by the United States and the Joint Analysis of Conflict and Stability currently being developed by the United Kingdom.¹¹ However, as each international actor has developed an individual approach to comprehensive interventions, analysis guiding this process will likely include biases that reflect their specific types of approach to collaboration and intervention.¹² Additionally this will lead to new types of problems, such as how to streamline the integration of information from different sources, and how to create similar levels of ownership of a joint analysis in the various agencies involved.

Consequently, while many models offer very good frameworks for strategic analysis in terms of their set priorities and aims, assumptions like how a state should function or how conflicts originate are passed down through the design and analysis and into practice in the field.

Putting it into context: Conclusions from the review of frameworks

Two notable conclusions can be drawn from this review of frameworks: first, the local and supranational levels of analysis are significantly underrepresented and, second, the cultural structure of society is often neglected. Of the 29 models specifically designed to analyze fragile and conflict-affected contexts, only seven listed objects of analysis that are part of cultural structures of society, such as ideas, cultural norms and the hierarchy of needs. These are typically factors that structure individual and group behaviour and are also important means to study power, especially at micro or local level. This corresponds with the analysis of levels, where 27 frameworks included a focus on the national level while the local (nine), regional (11) and global (10) levels were listed much less frequently. Additionally both divisions are reflected in the broader review of 88 analytical frameworks. Please click on the icon to the left of this text to read more about this methodological review.

The reasons for this outcome could be related to the importance of the state as the central focus of most

efforts to achieve development, stabilization or conflict prevention. Additionally, micro-level dynamics are very time-intensive to investigate, and interventions – be they development or security oriented – usually operate within the borders of a state. As a consequence, the regional causes and dynamics of conflict and fragility – like transnational organized crime, porous borders and illegal trafficking – are underrepresented as objects of peacebuilding and stabilization strategies, and micro levels of conflict and power are still relatively virgin scientific territory as international actors hesitate to incorporate local views of security into their strategies.¹⁴

Supply-side versus demand-side security

In this context, it is useful to examine the concept of security along the lines of an academic framework proposed especially for this purpose by Robin Luckham and Tom Kirk.¹⁵ These authors distinguish between supply-side and demand-side security. Supply-side security “can be seen as a process of political and social ordering established and maintained through authoritative discourses and practises of power, including but not confined to organised force”. This means that an actor like the state will define security in terms of upholding the political and social order, thereby limiting its responsibility to society to protecting that order and reserving the right to use force or other means of power to enforce it for itself.

Demand-side security, on the other hand, is defined as “an entitlement of citizens and more widely human beings to protection from violence and other existential risks including their capacity in practice to exercise this entitlement. As such it is dependent upon the social contexts, cultural repertoires and vernacular understandings of those who are secured.” Based on the ideas of human and citizen security, there is a very clear distinction between state- or elite- defined security and a bottom-up, end-user definition, which may result in entirely different practices for providing security.

The supply-side conception of security is based on realist and liberal theories of the state. And the outcomes of the review of analytical models show clearly that this type of view still dominates international understandings of fragile and conflict-affected states, and therefore how they are analyzed. This means that, even with the rise of widely used concepts like human security, the focus of analysis – and therefore systematic practices of strategic planning – has not shifted towards these locally defined conceptions of security as much as some of the rhetoric would have us believe. This situation is reflected in the difficulty that international donor agencies have in getting past the technical, top-down nature of their intervention planning, begging the question of whether international actors are able to put local interests before their own.

Looking ahead: moving away from state-level analysis and towards reflexive, multi-level

analyses that include local perceptions of security

The challenge is thus to better incorporate this 'human' dimension, the local and cultural dimension, into existing analytical practices in order to 'look beyond the state'. One attempt to achieve this has been undertaken by the Households in Conflict Network, which has developed a Framework for Micro-Level Dynamics of Conflict, Violence and Development.¹⁶ Another good example is the multi-level politics and power-focused Political Analysis methodology developed by the Developmental Leadership Program. And the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations recently issued formal guidance on integrating local perceptions in peacebuilding strategies, based on research undertaken by its Civil Affairs team.

It is important to also take this idea of 'looking beyond the state' to its supranational dimension. Regional geopolitics, and global economic and environmental processes, are potentially important drivers of conflict and insecurity. Cross-border social and economic networks are a fact of daily life in many fragile contexts. And in many cases long stretches of borders are unsecured or badly controlled, allowing anyone to cross unhindered. This means that the national and regional are often deeply connected, for instance by migration, but also by illicit trafficking. Additionally, increasing international interconnectedness means that natural resource markets and globally shared ideologies have an effect on the 'fragility' of states, not to mention climate change or international networks that provide funding for violent political groups.¹⁷

This type of analysis has yet to be taken up in the strategic planning of many international actors working in fragile and conflict-affected states. However, there have been some efforts worth mentioning that aim to facilitate the inclusion of these more fluid and political aspects for analysis into strategic planning practice. There are, for example, promising novel approaches in complexity science, such as the Problem-driven Iterative Adaptation model, which uses a planning system of feedback loops and experimentation to substitute current top-down best practice solutions with bottom-up local innovation. In general, the message from currently surfacing solutions based on complexity theory is to use more adaptive, networked and dynamic approaches in order to incorporate learning and adaptation in intervention planning.

Other approaches, less developed for strategic planning but indicating potential directions for the future, are crowd-sourcing intelligence, scenario and narrative use in forecasting crime and terrorism, and various uses of ICTs. Examples include using social media for conflict early warning, using mobile phones to prevent violence, and using electronic devices to measure the impact of peacebuilding efforts. As new insights on state fragility, hybrid political orders and the origins of violent conflict emerge, so will new ways of analyzing these contexts. If the abovementioned gaps and trends are any indication, this means that context analysis in fragile and conflict-affected states will develop towards more dynamic approaches that integrate multi-level views reflecting our increasingly interconnected and globalized world.

Photo credit main picture: Here to stay Malian refugees in the Mauritanian desert / European Commission DG ECHO via flickr

Footnotes

1. Other producers of conflict analysis models are knowledge institutes like the Institute for Development Studies or the Clingendael Institute, usually by assignment. Additionally, advocacy oriented NGOs produce their own frameworks for conflict analysis in the hope of influencing the practices of these actors. For example GPPAC and Norwegian Church Aid have produced a Conflict Analysis Framework.
2. See also the study by the International Peace Institute (2010) 'Power, Politics, and Change: How International Actors Assess Local Context.'
3. For a recent example, see Alexander Debs and Nuno P. Monteiro, "Known Unknowns: Power Shifts, Uncertainty, and War." *International Organization* (68, 1, January 2014).
4. Jordan et al.(2009), Institute for the Theory and Practice of International Relations. One Discipline or Many? TRIP Survey of International Relations Faculty in Ten Countries.
5. For a critical analysis of approaches that aim to assess state instability, see Margolis, J.E. 2012. Estimating State Instability. *Studies in Intelligence* 56(1):13-24
6. Other models for conflict analysis are for instance: BMZ Germany, Peace and Conflict Assessment; DFID, Strategic Conflict Assessment; RAND Corporation, Assessing Irregular Warfare; SIDA, Strategic Conflict Analysis; SDC, Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment; World Bank, Conflict Analysis Framework; An overview with additional frameworks is provided by Saferworld in chapter 2 of their resource pack on conflict-sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding.
7. An influential econometric model analyzing the outbreak of conflict on the basis of economic reasons (greed) is that of Collier and Hoeffler (2004) Greed and Grievance in Civil War. For a critical reflection see Keen (2012) Greed and grievance in civil war.
8. An interesting study by the International Peace Institute shows the result of this difference, concluding that in five different conflict assessments on Sri Lanka conducted by donor agencies, the nature of the conflict had been diagnosed differently in each assessment – resulting in very different prescriptions for donor responses. See: Vanna Chan, Ellena Fotinatos, Joyce Pisarello, Liat Shetret, and Melissa Waits, "International Peace Institute SIPA Capstone Workshop: Assessing Post-Conflict and Fragile States–Evaluating Donor Frameworks: Final Report," unpublished, May 2009.
9. For example: The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (US); The Stabilisation Unit (UK); The Whole of Government Stabilisation Secretariat (Denmark); The Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (the Netherlands).
10. Other nations employing this approach are Germany (*Vernetzte Sicherheit*, or networked security), France (*Approche Globale*, or integrated approach), Sweden (*Allomfattande ansats*, or comprehensive approach).

11. Other examples of inter-agency collaboration on analysis can be found at the United Nations (Inter-agency framework for conflict analysis in transition situations) and USAID, which developed the Tactical Conflict Assessment and Planning Framework and the District Stability Framework in order to facilitate cooperation with the US military in stabilization missions.
12. See for example these comments by SaferWorld on the JACS framework.
13. For an analysis of the history and workings of Military Intelligence Fusion, see: Connable, B. (2012) Military Intelligence Fusion for Complex Operations: A New Paradigm, RAND Corporation Occasional Paper.
14. Justino, P., Brück, T. and Verwimp, P. (2013) Micro-Level Dynamics of Conflict, Violence and Development: A New Analytical Framework, See also Tembo, F. (2012) 'Citizen voice and state accountability: towards theories of change that embrace contextual dynamics', Overseas Development Institute Project Briefing.
15. Luckham, R and Kirk, T 2013. The Two Faces of Security in Hybrid Political Orders: A Framework for Analysis and Research. *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2(2):44, DOI:
16. An important research programme that preceded and partly inspired this network is the MICROCON project, funded by the European Commission. Additionally, the Institute for Development Studies has developed a conceptual framework on linking Power, Violence, Citizenship and Agency.
17. See also: Veen, E. (2014) Knowledge Platform on Security and Rule of Law Policy Brief. Upgrading Peacekeeping to Counter Transnational Conflict Drivers; or Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson School of Public & International Affairs Policy Workshop. Adapting and Evolving: The implications of Transnational Terrorism for UN Field Missions.

Programme

Sahel Watch

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Summary

Good context analysis is crucial for working in the complex contexts of fragile or conflict-affected states, are the frameworks guiding such analysis up to the task?
