Assessing conflict vulnerability for better aid allocation: The case of Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

Violent conflict is a common feature of ethnically mixed states. However, the insights into the causes of violent conflict offered by the peace and conflict research all too often fail to generate practical applications.

At the same time, new methodological approaches for mitigating the often disruptive impact of aid are gaining in currency among development actors. However, while the international community is getting better at delivering effective aid in areas where conflict already has erupted, little systematic effort is currently spent identifying areas where future conflict might break out. International aid is therefore overwhelmingly reactive in nature, and often misses opportunities to mitigate latent conflict.

Combining insights from two different academic fields, peacebuilding and theories of ethnic violence and civil war, the purpose of this project is to develop a methodology for assessing conflict vulnerability. The result is then used to evaluate the appropriateness of aid allocation in Kyrgyzstan with regards to conflict sensitivity.

Methodology

Aggregated findings from a variety of studies of ethnic conflict and civil war suggest the following three factors as being the chief risk indicators for violent conflict in ethnically mixed states: 1) Presence of different geographically concentrated ethnic groups; 2) Scarce natural resources; 3) High percentage of young, unemployed and unmarried males

1. Whether an area would be prone to inter-ethnic conflict was calculated using Euclidian distance on the digitized GREG ethnic map of the world. Areas closer to an ethnic boundary line were classified as being more vulnerable to ethnic conflict.

2. Whether an area is prone to resource competition was established based on two criteria: proximity to natural resources, and density of population in that area. Natural resources were defined as proximity to water resources (rivers and lakes) and farmable land. Population density was then multiplied with the natural resource access map to create an index for resource competition.

3. Whether an area has a population susceptible to violence was determined based on three indicators, calculating census data. First, the percentage of young, unemployed men, and second, the percentage unmarried men in a region was calculated. Third, the percentage of different ethnic groups in a given region was added to the compiled map which was then re-classified.

4. Finally, a fourth factor was added to the analysis, namely areas at risk of terrorist attacks, as prior violence indicates higher risk for renewed violence. These areas were identified using the kernel density tool on the GDT dataset for the period 1991-2011.

Each of the indicators was then ranked on a scale 0-4, indicating lower to higher vulnerability, and aggregated using the following method to produce the conflict vulnerability map: (1 x 2) + (3x4)

The aid distribution map was based on international aid distribution data for June 2011 compiled by UN OCHA, documenting the location of all ongoing aid activities in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, areas currently underserved in terms of aid, while scoring high on a conflict vulnerability index were identified, subtracting the areas found to be vulnerable to ethnic conflict, from the aid projects per regional population map.

Results

Applying a set of criteria derived from aggregated studies of civil war and ethnic conflict, the study demonstrated how conflict vulnerability analysis can be used to identify areas which are currently not experiencing conflict, but which nevertheless may be prone to inter-ethnic violence. The findings are useful for development practitioners who seek to ensure that aid money does not aggravate already existing cleavages.

The analysis subsequently identified the areas in Kyrgyzstan which rank high on the conflict vulnerability index, yet are receiving comparatively less aid than other areas with similar vulnerability ranking. At the same time, other areas were identified as receiving comparatively more aid despite the fact that they scored relatively moderately on the conflict vulnerability index. The analysis thus reveals a gap between donor priorities and what might be a more sustainable, conflict-sensitive, long-term aid policy in Kyrgyzstan.

Limitations

The analysis offers quite basic explanatory variables to determine vulnerability to conflict. It also applies a very rudimentary distinction as to the relative importance of the different factors. The GREG map originates in 1964, something which limits the accuracy of the ethnic distribution. Finally, census data was only available at the regional level, which limits the accuracy of the findings. Conflict vulnerability analysis should therefore be further refined, and expanded to include a broader set of indicators, such as, for example, local political context and the impact of neighboring states.