

Unit 1: The Nexus between Parliaments, Poverty Reduction and Conflict

Learning Objectives

What strategies can parliament take to prevent conflict?

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- Understand the relationship between poverty and conflict and the impact conflict has on poverty;
- Appreciate how democratic governance contributes to conflict prevention;
- Identify the reasons why democratic governance is good for development;
- Discuss how parliament can contribute to conflict prevention, not only by addressing contentious issues but also by helping to avert poverty.

Introduction

This unit examines the mutually reinforcing relationships between democratic governance and development, and poverty and conflict. The aim of the unit is to highlight the different strategies that parliament is able to adopt in order to contribute to conflict prevention while performing its everyday functions. The important role of parliament in conflict-affected countries is even more pronounced since that there is now a clearly established correlation between poverty and conflict. By addressing issues of poverty, equitable distribution of resources, and economic development parliamentarians can attempt to guard against the creation of an environment that is prone to enabling conflict. This correlation is reinforced by growing evidence of a positive relationship between democratic governance and sustainable long-term development. This positive correlative relationship is termed the *nexus between parliaments, poverty reduction and conflict prevention*.

The Relationship between Poverty and Conflict

Research has shown that countries with a high level of dependence on commodity exports are at a higher risk of experiencing conflict, whilst countries with higher levels of secondary schooling and economic growth have a reduced risk of conflict. From 1980-2002 low-income countries with a per capita income of less than \$US 2,000 experienced conflict that directly caused more than 1000 deaths per year, approximately one out of every five years. This figure dropped to one in every eight years when a country's per capita income grew to be between \$US 2,000 and \$US 4,000 and to one in every 33 years in countries with per capita income in excess of \$US 4,000. Therefore, the higher the rate of economic development the less likely there will be violent conflict.

Civil conflict has an acute impact on economic growth and food production. Such conflict leads to the destruction of infrastructure, loss of life and social capital, as well as curbing direct capital investment. Food production cannot occur in regions where violent conflict is being waged; fields are laid to waste and the means for production are destroyed. Therefore, when the violence stops, a considerable period ensues between the cessation of conflict and the resumption of food production. Furthermore, provision in national budgets for important areas such as education, health, infrastructure and agricultural development are often diverted for military purposes to the detriment of economic growth and the wellbeing of the population. The average per capita income of countries engaged in conflict over the last 20 years is significantly lower than that of developing countries as a whole. Moreover, the impact of conflict on the economy of a country lingers well beyond the cessation of conflict, making the country vulnerable to a return to violent conflict; this is commonly referred to as the conflict trap.

Given the mutually reinforcing relationship between poverty and conflict, it is pertinent to consider the ways in which parliament can contribute, not only to managing and transforming conflict, but also to addressing poverty, lack of growth and commodity dependence - conditions that are conducive to conflict.

The Relationship between Democracy and Conflict

Democracies do not go to war against each other, and are less likely to instigate war against non-democracies; however, semi-democracies or states undergoing democratic transitions are innately more conflicting and experience higher rates of intra-state conflict and civil war. The reasoning for this heightened risk of conflict varies; however, it is clear that improving economic conditions and political participation are keys to neutralizing the potential threat of conflict posed by semi-democracies and countries undergoing a democratic transition.

The Relationship between Democracy and Development

The last few years have seen a sea change in thinking on the relationship between democracy and development. Recently it has become clear that there is no trade-off between democracy and development. Research on the role of democracy in economic growth in low-income countries over the last 20 years has shed light on the dynamic between democracy and development. Most significantly, these studies have been able to draw upon the experience of the 'third wave of democratization,' which started in Portugal in 1974 and continued into the new millennium with the democratization of countries around the globe, from Latin America to the former-socialist countries of Eastern Europe, and throughout Africa and Asia. The Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, famously argued that democracy, characterized by civil and political rights, was the best system to prevent economic and social disasters. The most recent empirical analysis, which examined the cumulative experience of developing countries, ascertained that those countries with more representative and pluralistic systems of government generally developed more rapidly and consistently than developing countries with closed systems.

There are a number of features in open and pluralistic systems that aid development and performance. These include vertical and horizontal accountability of decision makers, whether via elections or separation of powers between the executive, parliament and judiciary; the openness of governance, especially in terms of access to information; transparency within society; and political adaptability. Democratic systems provide an opportunity through which one set of decision-makers is replaced

with another in a nonviolent manner — if decision-makers and representatives are not responsive to community demands, they can be removed from office at the next election.

Conclusion

It is clear that open and pluralistic systems of governance lead to better development outcomes and have a far better record of preventing violent conflict, especially with other democratic governments. The role of parliament in conflict-affected countries becomes important when you consider the contribution parliaments make to poverty reduction and the well-recognized correlation between conflict and poverty; namely that poverty increases societies' vulnerability to conflict, while conflict itself generates poverty. A closer examination of the parliament, conflict, poverty nexus suggests that parliaments have a vital role to play in managing conflict not just by addressing contentious issues and relationships but by helping to avert poverty, particularly in conflict-affected countries.

Unit 1 Questions

Please answer each of the following questions. If you are taking this course in a group you may then meet to discuss your answers.

1. Why does violent conflict inhibit development?
2. Why do development and increase in spending on secondary schooling reduce the likelihood of conflict?
3. What is it about open and pluralistic systems of governance that stimulate development?
4. Why should parliament seek to avoid building a relationship with the media that is adversarial or too close?
5. Why are countries undergoing political transitions more likely to experience conflict?

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