



The Structure of Rebel Organizations Implications for Post-Conflict Reconstruction

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Applying organizational dynamics to the study of rebel groups yields a number of interesting findings. Whether a rebel group is organized around material incentives or shared identities has dramatic implications for how the organization behaves during the conflict, for negotiations to end the conflict, and for the design of demobilization, disarmament and reintegration programs.

Introduction

Civil war is now the most common form of violent conflict: all but seven of the 110 conflicts recorded between 1989 and 2000 were civil wars. To be considered a civil war, according to the academic definition, conflicts must be between a government and an identifiable rebel organization and generate at least 1,000 combat-related deaths, of which at least 5 percent must be on each side. While significant attention has focused on the macro-level factors that explain where conflicts break out, how long they last, and why they come to an end, comparatively little research has been done at the micro-level on a central question with significant implications for policy: how do rebel groups organize violence?

This is true, in part, because rebellion has been traditionally analyzed as a “romantic” phenomenon. Like participants in social movements, rebels have been seen as activists working outside of the political system, fighting for a collective cause, at significant costs to themselves and their families, against a typically repressive government. In such an analysis, the expressed grievances of the rebellion are sufficient to make sense of the organization itself. Motivated by calls for economic redistribution, ethnic pride, religious hegemony, or nationalism, it is assumed that rebels join movements voluntarily, take risks and absorb costs in order to achieve the group’s objective, and rarely act in ways that threaten the organization.

A growing body of scholarship challenges this depiction of rebel organizations. Instead, it argues that rebellion is shaped by opportunity rather than motivation. It is the circumstances in which groups are able to rebel that are sufficiently rare to deserve attention. This economic perspective on rebellion demands a more fine-grained examination of the factors shaping the groups that organize violence.

How do rebel organizations overcome collective action problems? To what extent are groups able to control the

behavior of their members? What implications does the organizational structure of rebellion have for post-conflict policy options? I explore these questions in more detail in this brief dissemination note.¹

Stated simply, economic models of conflict assert that rebellion is costly. To engage in conflict, groups must find ways to entice individuals to participate, even though the risk of death is extremely high and the likelihood of victory quite small. Without some mechanism for attracting recruits, prospective organizations will surely fail as individuals reject risky opportunities and free-ride on whatever gains are achieved down the road. The key is for groups to make rebellion profitable for potential recruits.

Empirical research from the World Bank’s project on the economics of crime and violence suggests that rebel groups meet these high costs of organization in two specific ways. First, where resources are available to finance the organization of violence, rebel groups are more likely to form.² These resources can be generated internally (through the extortion of natural resources, the production of illegal drugs, trade in legal goods, or from taxes levied for protection) or solicited externally (from foreign powers, ethnic and religious diasporas, or criminal networks). The presence of these potential economic endowments makes rebel organizations more likely because it enables rebel leaders to finance recruitment and purchase the military resources needed for war.

Second, where ethnic groups are highly polarized, the cohesion that exists within ethnic groups enables rebel

¹ The argument presented in this note is based on an in-depth analysis of three rebel groups: the National Resistance Army (Uganda), Renamo (Mozambique), and Sendero Luminoso (Peru). Interviews with former combatants and commanders were used in all three cases to reconstruct the organizational development of the insurgencies.

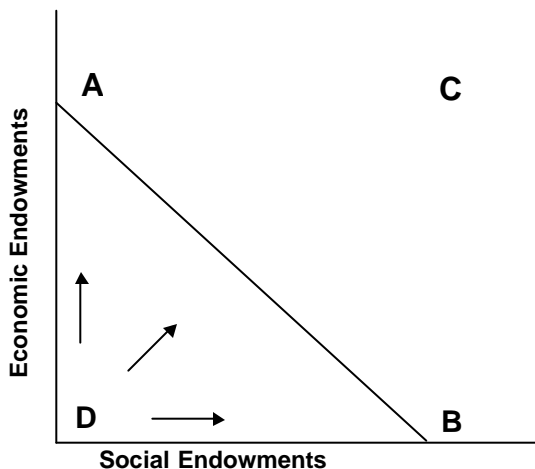
² Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler. 2001. “Greed and Grievance in Civil War.” Policy Research Working Paper 2355. World Bank, Washington, D.C.

organizations to form and survive through long periods of conflict.³ Ethnic identities are used to signal support for a cause, make promises of future benefits credible, coordinate actions across individuals, and work within social networks that ease the process of recruiting members and generating the supplies necessary for war. Cohesion (or “social capital”) may also come from other shared identities (religious, cultural, or regional) or ideological belief-systems, such as Marxism, Maoism, or capitalism, that bring individuals together and harmonize their behavior. These social endowments provide a second, critical avenue through which rebel organizations can reduce the costs of conflict.

We can therefore imagine a “production function” for violence. Rebel leaders build organizations by using economic and/or social endowments to recruit the labor necessary for war, given the strength of the state and its military. Economic resources and social identities can be usefully seen as “inputs” in the process of organizing violence.

Imagine a small core of rebel leaders plotting a rebellion. At least in the short run, the level of economic and social endowments is relatively fixed. As a result, theoretically, rebel leaders might find themselves in one of four situations (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Theoretical Possibilities



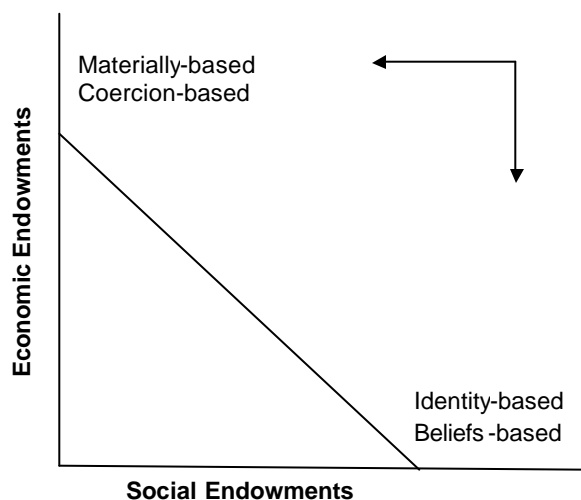
For groups of type A, rebellion will be cheap and relatively more attractive because the financing is already available. On the opposite extreme, where no financing exists, rebellion is a risky proposition. However, groups of type B will be able to compensate for a lack of economic resources by drawing on their social endowments. If strong social identities or ideologies exist, the costs of organization can still be overcome in these contexts by enabling individuals to coordinate their

actions and by making commitments within the group to deliver benefits credible. Groups able to access both economic wealth and social networks (type C) are best equipped to reduce the costs of organization.

Rebel leaders who find themselves without any financing nor an ethnic, religious, or ideological base (type D) are unlikely to grow large enough to engage in civil war. Because there are economies of scale in rebel organization—groups must be large enough to credibly challenge the government—rebel leaders must develop a consistent source of finance (becoming type A) or invest in the cultivation of social or ideological identities (becoming type B) if they are to survive. Without such efforts, leaders will be unable to overcome the *threshold* of rebel organization and will be quickly crushed by government forces or left to operate as a gang of bandits.

The reasons these initial endowments are so important is that they fundamentally shape the internal dynamics of the organization. The presence (or absence) of economic endowments influences the type of individual who chooses to join a rebellion and determines how organizations keep members committed over time. Resource-rich groups attract opportunistic joiners and must maintain their organizations through a consistent flow of material payoffs or through the use of force. Resource-poor groups must recruit followers by drawing on sources of social cohesion. Only die-hard activists are attracted to rebel and these organizations are held together by the power of shared identities or beliefs. A rebel organization lucky enough to have wealth and cohesion will try to recruit and organize without wasting its resources on material incentives; if it cannot, it becomes a type A group as it spends its wealth on recruitment.

Figure 2: Actual Rebel Organizations



³ Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Mans Soderbom. 2001. “On the Duration of Civil War.” Policy Research Working Paper 2681. World Bank, Washington, D.C.

Thus, rebel organizations separate into two distinct equilibria (Figure 2). In the first, the organization is held together by material incentives or by force. Large enough to compete against the government, this group survives by maintaining a consistent flow of resources, making payments (of some form) to its members, or using force to prevent defection. Members' commitments to the group are weak and based largely on short-term considerations. The RUF (Sierra Leone), UNITA (Angola), and RENAMO (Mozambique) are good examples.

In the second equilibrium, the glue holding the organization together is fundamentally different. This group survives because of social bonds that tie its members together. Shared identities or belief systems generate trust across members enabling the group to recruit by promising only future rewards. Commitment is maintained because individuals believe that if the group's objectives are achieved, they will be rewarded. The National Resistance Army (Uganda), Sendero Luminoso (Peru), the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Union (Guatemala), and the FMLN (El Salvador) are representative of this class of rebel organizations.

Three Implications

What do we gain by focusing on the organizational dynamics of rebel groups? In-depth research on rebel organizations in Uganda, Mozambique, and Peru has yielded a number of interesting findings.

Rebel Behavior in Conflict

Whether a group is organized around material incentives or shared identities has dramatic implications for how the organization and its members behave during the conflict. By attracting participants interested in short-term gains, resource-rich groups face significant and damaging principal-agent problems in the course of conflict. Individuals soldiers and small units operating far from the central command are hard to control, even when groups have access to communications technology. To deal with these problems, rebel leaders choose organizational structures that are either highly centralized (a traditional military) or highly decentralized (warlords). Rebel behavior in these contexts is often characterized by a total disregard for the interests of the civilian population and includes looting, destruction, and the use of indiscriminate force.

Resource-poor groups attract only individuals truly committed to the cause. Accordingly, principal-agent problems are much less damaging to this type of rebel organization. Rebel leaders can successfully decentralize power to independent, operating units without sacrificing the objectives of the group. The influence of the leadership provides a steady, guiding hand, even without resorting to coercion and force. In this environment, rebel behavior is characterized by high

levels of discipline, active engagement with non-combatant populations, and the selective use of violence.

Post-Conflict Strategies: Dealing with the Group

When the time comes to negotiate a transition from war to peace, the structure of the rebel organization becomes extremely important. Actors from the international community that seek to lay the groundwork for a peace agreement and the incorporation of all the major actors into the political system, must ask themselves: with whom are we dealing? This is a question about the structure of the rebel group, its command and control, and the capacity of its leadership to influence the behavior of its dispersed and armed membership.

Groups built around a shared identity or commitment to a set of ideological beliefs are best able to make credible commitments in the peace process. The leadership structure of these groups has the capacity to guarantee that its commitments will be honored at all levels of the organization. In these contexts, engaging with the leadership structure and securing its commitment to the peace framework is absolutely critical. Good examples are provided by recent peace agreements or war-to-peace transitions in Uganda, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

Where groups are held together by material incentives or force, it is more likely that multiple actors (on the rebel side) will determine the likelihood of the transition's success. Because rebel groups often disperse combatants throughout the country, even if the leadership commits itself to a transition plan, local commanders and combatants may reject the terms of the settlement and continue the conflict. Such a result is far more likely in cases where the organization is held together by profit-motives or force. This situation may confront the international community in Afghanistan, where local warlords cobbled together to defeat the Taliban, may attempt to reinforce their political and economic power at the local level and may resist plans for their incorporation into the political system and demobilization. Many transitions have failed because the rebel organization was unable to credibly commit to the process. Recent experience in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone (for a significant period of time) bears this out.

Post-Conflict Strategies: Dealing with the Individuals

At the same time, in the process of conceptualizing demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs, international agencies must keep in mind the individual incentives at work in the rebel organization. DDR programs are a critical tool for bringing rebel groups and their members to the table and preventing a return to conflict.

Where individuals lack a strong commitment to the organization and participate for short-term gains or because they are coerced, cash payment schemes can work especially well in reducing the motivation for continued conflict. With the high costs of war, the risk of death, and a significant probability of failure, offers of economic resources will often be sufficient to encourage individual combatants to lay down their arms, even if the leadership of the group is not committed to the process. However, given that combatants in these forces engage largely in military activities and profit-seeking, they are unlikely to have education or other skills. As a result, reintegration into civilian communities can be incredibly difficult.

As World Bank experience demonstrates, though, DDR programs are not one-size-fits-all. Where individuals commit themselves to rebel organizations that seek long-term goals for an ethnic, religious, or cultural group or envision fundamental political or economic transformation, DDR programs designed to change the short-term calculus of combatants are less likely to be successful. In these contexts, program planners must invest more heavily in the design of individual-level initiatives that reflect the substantive motivations of the participants including access to land, education, training, and political power. DDR should be accompanied by investments in the design of political institutions that incorporate the former rebel forces, either as a political party or as actors in a decentralized administration. In addition, since individuals in these types of groups often engage in administrative work and governance during

the conflict, taking advantage of these skills in designing reintegration initiatives should be a priority.

CPR Unit

This Dissemination Note was written by Jeremy Weinstein, a Visiting Scholar in DECRG, who is currently finishing his Ph.D. at Harvard University. This note series is intended to disseminate good practice and key findings on conflict prevention and reconstruction. The series is edited by the Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction (CPR) Unit in the Social Development Department of the Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Network of the World Bank. The views expressed in these notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank Group, its Executive Directors, or the countries they represent. CPR Dissemination Notes are distributed widely to Bank staff and are also available on the CPR website (<http://www.worldbank.org/conflict>).