

Livelihoods, conflict and aid programming: is the evidence base good enough?

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In conflict-affected situations, aid-funded livelihood interventions are often tasked with a dual imperative: to generate material welfare benefits and to contribute to peacebuilding outcomes. There may be some logic to such a transformative agenda, but does the reality square with the rhetoric? Through a review of the effectiveness of a range of livelihood promotion interventions—from job creation to microfinance—this paper finds that high quality empirical evidence is hard to come by in conflict-affected situations. Many evaluations appear to conflate outputs with impacts and numerous studies fail to include adequate information on their methodologies and datasets, making it difficult to appraise the reliability of their conclusions. Given the primary purpose of this literature—to provide policy guidance on effective ways to promote livelihoods—this silence is particularly concerning. As such, there is a strong case to be made for a restrained and nuanced handling of such interventions in conflict-affected settings.

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Introduction

Livelihood security and inclusive growth are generally seen to be good for development and peace. By extension, so too are interventions that seek to promote livelihoods and stimulate economic activity. The UN Secretary General's 2006 progress report on the prevention of armed conflict, for example, drew linkages between effective livelihoods and food security interventions and increased stability, arguing that 'tackling food insecurity and related problems of agricultural underproduction and resource scarcity can do much to stabilize a fragile situation' (Alinovi et al., 2007, p. 5). More recently, the 2011 World Development Report (World Bank, 2011) placed significant emphasis on the instrumental role that job creation is seen to play in creating safer societies in the aftermath of war.

Following conflict, therefore, livelihood and economic recovery interventions are often tasked, implicitly at least, with a dual imperative: to generate material welfare benefits (for example, through supporting livelihoods and stimulating local economic activity) and to contribute to peacebuilding outcomes (for example, through raising the opportunity cost of going to war and minimising grievances). This framing may be compelling and appear deductively sound, but catalysing livelihood change and altering market dynamics are complex, highly ambitious objectives for any intervention—