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FLEEING, STAYING PUT, WORKING WITH REBEL RULERS

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Summary

This policy brief explores two sets of decision-making processes pursued by civilians in war-affected Côte d'Ivoire in the 2000s. When confronted with violence, civilians may first consider whether to stay or to go. Those fleeing may base their decision on their perception of the threat they face, while others amongst those who stay seem to have less agency in responding to the threat. Eventually, if military positions of belligerents freeze, cooperative relations might emerge between civilians staying behind and armed groups in control of the territory, possibly leading to the delivery of public goods. This is what happened in the educational sector in Côte d'Ivoire's rebel controlled north. Parents, civil servants staying in the occupied area, or volunteers pooled resources to re-open schools under rebel rule.

Introduction

In conflict-affected zones, civilians may be left with no option but to flee. But many do not and have to deal, more or less willingly, with a changed, often volatile, political landscape. Hence the decisions of civilians during wartime sequentially concern where to locate themselves, then what coping strategies to adopt under changed circumstances in the given location. The formation of these choices is addressed in this research through two main examples taken from Côte d'Ivoire in the last decade.

Who stays, who flees and how does one flee are questions explored in a study of Abidjan residents targeted by forces loyal to the president Laurent Gbagbo, who refused to leave power after losing the elections in 2011.

Then what to do on staying behind is the object of a second study, a set of case studies specifically geared toward the understanding of the conditions facilitating the provision of public goods in areas left under non-state actors' control. We examined how the school system was revived and operated under rebel rule over a period of almost a decade, following joint action by civilians and rebel leaders.

Whether or not public goods are delivered to populations, we argue, is subject to a range of circumstances, which include the willingness of rebel leaders to build a positive image locally or internationally, the often chaotic iteration of war itself or the capacity of the civilians to self-organise and pool resources.

Summary box

In September 2002, French troops intervened to prevent fighting between forces loyal to the south-based government of Côte d'Ivoire, and rebels that had previously taken over the northern half of the country. This intervention reinforced the *de facto* partition of the country. Millions of people ended up in the hands of armed groups ready to seize state power but not to capable themselves of running schools or hospitals. In a matter of months though, substitutes to state institutions were chaotically built up and satisfied some of the populations' most pressing demands, notably education.

Developing the arguments

Who flees?

The research focuses on displacement decisions in PK18, a poor and remote suburb of northern Abidjan, during the 2011 post-election crisis when the area was subject to shelling, street-to-street fighting and targeted violence. The most intense period of violence lasted less than a week in February 2011, and in that week PK18 experienced massive population displacement.

Displacement, we found, is not a simple response to a single threat. Many competing threats to life and possessions exist in such contexts of wartime displacement decisions, and the decision is not just between life and possessions but also between, for instance, threats to life if staying and other threats to life if leaving. Displacement decisions are about using the resources of the household and its network to manage all of those competing threats for household members, within a context of very limited information. As such displacement decisions are far from a straightforward, if difficult, decision and are often extremely complex.

Hence wartime displacement is not a simplistic dichotomy at the household level. Households use decisions about the physical location of their constituents to manage competing threats both to those constituents and to their physical possessions. Well over a third of the population sampled made a decision to split the household. Often household heads or other, usually male, adults stayed behind to protect the home while women and children left. Even in the context of very intense fighting, people are willing to risk their lives to protect their property.

Econometric analysis emphasizes the role of the following socio-economic factors of displacement:

- Wealthier households, as measured by an asset index, were more likely to split in order to protect assets.
- Those who all remained behind appear to be poorer and worse educated, with an older household head than those who split or who all leave together. They are just as likely to have children. Households who split are less likely to be female-headed and are more likely to be non-nuclear; they are also likely to be larger.
- Relative to those who all leave together, those who all remain in whole or in part are less open to taking financial risks and more open to taking risks with their personal security.
- Financial decisions are complex in the context of displacement. Households stayed saying they could not afford to leave, and others left saying they could not afford to stay. Knowledge of a destination - one that is affordable to get to and one where conditions are known - is likely to be very important in permitting financially constrained households to leave. That said, many households also left without knowing where they would go.
- People overwhelmingly choose the timing of their departure based on seeing other people leaving. This is likely to go some way to explaining the mass nature of displacement.

Education under rebel rule

When rebels took over northern Côte d'Ivoire in late 2002, they were not prepared to administrate the zone under their control and doing so was not a priority: their primary interest was to consolidate their military grip on the territory they had conquered and to build an uncontested leadership among competing rebel figures who each controlled sections of the northern land. The capacity of the north to meet the population's basic needs was complicated by President Gbagbo, who retained control of the south, issuing an ultimatum to civil servants in rebel controlled territory: they were to come to Abidjan or be considered traitors. Despite this, a few months after the *de facto* partition of the country provoked by the French peacekeeping deployment, primary and secondary schools re-opened throughout the north, staffed with 'volunteers' and financially supported by parents.

Qualitative case studies conducted in various northern Ivorian localities in 2012 and 2013 sought to build a retrospective understanding of the process of gradual revival of a schooling system left without most of its administrative structure. Interestingly the impetus to reopen schools did not come from the rebels but from a joint effort of their sympathisers among civil servants who stayed put in the north despite Gbagbo's injunction, along with parents who did not want to see their children deprived of what they saw as a right as well as, since Independence, a crucial instrument of social mobility. But what practically permitted the restoration of the educational system was not just the good will of many hundreds of civilians worried about their children's future but the intelligent instrumentalisation of the situation by the rebel leaders. The rebels sought simultaneously to improve their image internationally while casting the southern regime and its sympathisers in a negative light through accusations of the perpetration of an 'intellectual genocide' against northerners. Simply by providing minimal and inexpensive coordination

among well-intentioned volunteers and parents raising funds at the neighbourhood level, a purely military rebel movement managed ultimately to raise its profile and set up a state-like administration in charge of primary and secondary education. This positive outcome owes much to savvy leadership on the part of the rebels but also, more structurally, to the popularity of the 'cause' the rebels (sometime very charismatic – see picture) claimed to fight for: rebels did have a constituency *ex ante.*

***Cherif Ousmane:** a charismatic rebel commander
of Bouake during the rebel rule in Cote d'Ivoire*

What appears eventually though is that the newly built structures were far from inclusive. In fact, those who filled the institutional void left behind by civil servants abandoning their jobs seem to all belong to social networks close to each other, and close to the political wing of the rebellion. Accountability and transparency were lacking in the new system, which reflects its improvised and temporary nature. The revived schooling system did not just help children access education but simultaneously served the promotion of a large cohort of skilled volunteers who had previously been marginalised by the state and not able to secure state jobs. This change particularly signals the role of war in changing society profoundly.

Policy Implications

Displacement and humanitarian action

Conclusions regarding the external validity of the policy discussion on displacements have yet to be drawn; it is certain that displacement is highly context-specific, not least to the nature of the threats faced. There is very little evidence at the sub-household level regarding displacement decisions, and more work is needed to substantiate these findings in other contexts. However, it is likely that poor and vulnerable families may be trapped - financially or due to the risks of leaving - within areas that suffer intense violence, and *some capacity to enter these areas with humanitarian aid is likely to be crucial in avoiding further welfare decline.* In addition risks at the potential destination is also taken on board in the decision making-process: fear of retaliation against perceived enemies or potential 'infiltrators' - as belligerents may often instrumentally call refugees – may prevent victimised civilians from moving to a safer place. Therefore, a *viable humanitarian space should be granted not just where violence is located.*

Delivery of public goods in rebel-held areas

Generalising from a single case is likely to be misleading yet a few useful remarks stem from our observations. Rebels do need to look after the populations they deal with when they seek external legitimacy through international recognition. This means that external actors, whether multi- or bilateral can curb the behaviours of the rebels in a way beneficial to the populations, by *trading partial*

recognition against better behaviours towards civilians. In addition, when cooperative arrangements emerge, necessitating the mobilisation of *ad hoc* human resources, *it seems important for future social cohesion to credit those who took part of these initiatives in the same way combatants are offered DDR programmes.*

Key references

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