Hurdles to Development: Assessing Development Models in Conflict Settings

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Abstract

In this piece, the author attempts to reveal the unsuitability of existing models of development for societies experiencing or emerging from armed conflict. Both the dominant neo-liberal model of development and the more contemporary, oppositional model of Gender-and-Development are rejected here as unresponsive to the specific needs created in conflict situations because the models represent the interests and experiences of those who have been privileged by the absence of armed conflict and the presence of high levels of human development in their lives. The author provides six flexible factors that, rather than providing a “one-size-fits-all” approach to development, allow for the particular circumstances of different conflicts to move people and societies towards a conflict-aware model of development.

Conflict has affected the economic and social development of prodigious numbers of people across vast spaces in recent decades, exacerbated by the concentration of conflict in areas already behind other states in development. For this reason, theories and models for development must take into account, and sometimes even go so far to assume, that praxis will occur under conditions of ongoing conflicts or in situations dubiously termed “post-conflict.” Unfortunately, the dominant strains of development discourses have failed to address the realities of many societies that they target in relation to conflict. This is true whether we speak of the neo-liberal development model historically advocated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the Gender-and-Development (GAD) model advocated by Shawn Meghan Burn in her book Women Across Cultures: A Global Perspective.

Since World War II, the majority of states in Latin America, Africa, and Asia have been scarred by conflicts internal and external and currently conflicts causing more than 1,000 deaths a year are ongoing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Sudan, Pakistan, Somalia, Mexico, Palestine, and elsewhere. Though war has been a regular fact of life for many people across wide swaths of the Global South in the past 30 years, the Global North has seen few significant, sustained armed conflicts outside of Northern Ireland since the neutralization of communist insurgents in Europe during the 1980’s. This should never be taken as a metonym for the peaceful nature of the Northern states, as though actual fighting has primarily occurred in the territory of the South since the end of WWII, the states of the North have been the major funders of conflict and belligerents in past and ongoing conflicts.

Before proceeding, it is important to have some understanding of the contested terrain upon which the word “development” sits, as the way it is defined directs both goals and methods for a model. When used without modifier by the author, development is understood here to mean, very generally, the improvement of quality-of-life for people through social and/or economic change. This paper focuses on two contesting approaches to development: first, the neo-liberal model that defines development as those processes that assist in the creation of a highly-industrial, capitalist economy and then the GAD model, which looks towards a transformation in society affecting greater equality between men and women as development.

Close examination will reveal that both of these models are insufficient for meeting the specific needs of societies experiencing or emerging from conflict and each model has different limitations in regards to meeting the
gender-specific needs of both women and men. The purpose of this paper is to learn from both the strengths and weaknesses of each model in order to create a loosely defined model that addresses the needs of some of the most threatened and marginalized people in the world. Due to the dire situations experienced by large numbers of people in the regions most targeted for development, it is imperative that such models are designed, and to understand the history that has led to the current paradigm, it important to begin with an examination of the neoliberal model that has dominated development discourse since the 1940’s.

The Failure of the “One-Size-Fits-All” Washington Consensus

Most basically, neoliberalism is economic policy or theory that supports less public involvement in the economy through reductions in government spending and public ownership, as well as a reduction of barriers to international trade and a general deregulation of the economy. The Bretton Woods conference gave birth to the IMF and other instrumental proponents of neo-liberalism in an attempt to shape the future world order in the interests of the capitalist Allied nations who participated in the meetings. As stated on their website, “The IMF has played a part in shaping the global economy since the end of World War II,” most prominently through structural adjustment plans (SAPs). SAPs function as sets of conditions for states that wish to obtain developmental aid from the IMF or World Bank, often the only institutions willing and able to loan the large sums of money desired by contemporary governments.

Suzanne Bergeron identifies two levels of ideology at work inside of SAPs in her book Fragments of Development; first, a belief that the economy is a bounded phenomenon that can be studied quantitatively, and second, a belief in neoliberal economic policy. Bergeron explains that the IMF presents the economy “as a disembedded entity, an object that can be viewed in its entirety by a dispassionate scientist who stands outside of it.” This assumption allows prominent economic theorists, almost-exclusively wealthy intellectuals from the North, to present their model as if it were not shaped by their identity and privileged geographic position in the global economy. It also leads to a marginalization of the human constituents of the economy. Numerical abstraction substitutes for analysis based in lived reality and “downplays the differential effects of economic change across lines of ethnicity, gender, and class (Bergeron 2004, 105).

SAPs have been documented by Maureen Larkin as “exacerbat[ing] the already severe health problems which prevailed … undermin[ing] food security… depress[ing] incomes and employment opportunities,” and impacting women in a particularly deleterious manner (Larkin 1998, 97). Women suffer disproportionately from structural adjustment because of the historical, patriarchal values and structures that have rendered them more likely to be responsible for children and more likely to be dependent on government spending. This vulnerability, experienced by many more women than men, becomes a liability within structural adjustment because “In the IMF world, the cause of inflation and external imbalance [in trade] is excessive government spending” (Bergeron, 103). SAPs provide only one solution to relative under-development and only one pathway to monetary aid: cut government spending and open the country to foreign goods and investment in order to pursue an austerity project of paying back debt to foreign, wealthy countries and institutions (Bergeron, 103).

This policy is based on assumptions that markets will correct imbalances and drive economic expansion, which is undergirded by assumptions that prices will be exclusively determined by competitive markets and that all actors in the economy act with “rational” self-interest and “respond to policies in predictable ways.” The insufficiency of this model for application in conflict environments is obvious since, as Bergeron notes “The model does not take into account the existence of any uncertainty in this decision-making process” (Bergeron, 104). The needs of people who have survived conflict are not met by market-based approaches because they interact from unequal power positions within the economy dependent on the degree to which the conflict affected them.

Post-conflict environments easily slide back into conflict without strong intervention based on the principles of redistribution and equity manifest in social spending, and already taxed societies should not be expected to bear the future burden of servicing their debt in order to prevent a return of violence. The neoliberal approach encourages competition in environments marked by violent competition where a need exists for development policy that encourages solidarity and cooperation as opposed to providing incentives for rivalries and self-interested behaviour. Lastly, though this is by no means an exhaustive indictment, personal success in neoliberal economies is dependent on western-style economic thinking and actions related to maximizing one’s
personal utility that are not culturally appropriate or relevant in all contexts.

The neoliberal model promoted by the IMF through SAPs is not only ill-suited for development in the context of conflict, it is ill-suited for meeting the needs and desires of a majority of the world’s people. Attentiveness to the needs of marginalized people, however, is not enough to build development models that are responsive to the context of conflict, as an inquiry into the work of Shawn Meghan Burn will reveal.

**GAD and a Shift Towards Awareness**

Gender and Development, according to Shawn Meghan Burn, is a model that “focuses explicitly on improving women’s status,” with “an emphasis on looking at the overall power relationships of women and men and their importance to development” (Burn 2005, 149). The approach is inherently critical of existing means and ends of development, which predominantly ignored the participation of women in economy and development until worldwide women’s movements forced male-dominated governments and institutions to give them some, if only token, representation. The gradual steps taken by the UN to “mainstream” gender analysis into all of their work have not achieved full relevance even within that organization, not to speak of the countless other institutions driving development that have appeared more threatened by gender-based analysis. Because gender remains a marginalized category of analysis in development discourses, Burn’s elucidation of the GAD model is significantly different than the previously elaborated approach.

Burn writes that “development programs do not usually enhance women’s status, and women’s lives are often made even harder” (Burn, 135). Development programs often aim to improve conditions through increased opportunities for higher-wage employment in export-oriented industries as well as increased opportunities for investment by the few who possess some form of capital. Both of these opportunities are maldistributed across gender difference. Employment opportunities are less useful for women due to decreased female access to the labour force dictated by their customary compulsory care for the family. Additionally, patriarchal values restrict women’s access to the public sphere and sexist attitudes amongst management and ownership lead to lower wages and fewer opportunities for advancement. The chance to invest capital is so often irrelevant for women because so few of them, compared to men, possess the capital necessary to make investments, meaning profitable private investment furthers the economic inequality between men and women.

Numerous scholars have documented the increased burden women are forced to assume by the expectations of femininity in response to structural adjustment. Femininity has historically been constructed around the role of caretaker-for-the-family and when governments reduce food subsidies, health-spending and educational opportunities; women are most often forced to act as quartermasters, caretakers, and teachers for their family with a decreasing amount of resources. Burn also identifies neoliberal development models as adding to “women’s workloads through environmental degradation, taking water and land for cash crop production, and taking men away for wage earning.”

The GAD models addresses two assumed needs, economic inequality across the North/South divide and gender inequality within a society, by attempting to “transform society to create gender equality” while expanding economic opportunities for all people. The means for this transformation require women to be cast as “architects of their own development,” according to Burn, “through women’s organization and activism, participation in politics, and decision making” (Burn, 140; 150). The GAD approach is best exemplified by organizations like the Self-Employed Women’s Association of India (SEWA) that functions as both a financial institution and labour organization for women entrepreneurs and those who wish to become entrepreneurs. The organization attempts to not only raise the income gained by women, but also to raise consciousness about means to understanding and altering the marginalized role of women in society. SEWA is driven by the desires and needs of its constituents, not by the will of wealthy, foreign donors, and it attempts to transform gender relations far beyond just providing financial stability. However, organizations of this stripe cannot succeed in creating gender equity by themselves, as they target only the feminine side of gender identity for transformation.

Societies emerging from or engaged in conflict are also embedded in conflict about gender roles. Many of the most heinous forms of violence inflicted upon women and men by the mostly-male combatants “are linked to traditional images of what it is to be a [masculine] warrior, [or] because of women being seen as man’s property” (Connell 2000, 14). Conflicts in recent decades have featured a disturbing array of forms of gender-based violence...
that includes mass rape, forced abortion, forced pregnancy, sexual slavery, gender-targeted executions, and other sexually exploitative or demeaning activities performed under coercion. These events trouble both masculine and feminine roles and further the construction of a binary representation of men-as-violent and women-as-victims, or its equally problematic, euphemized substitute: a binary of the masculine-as-protector and the feminine-as-protected. Not only are particularly violent forms of masculinity often encouraged by conflict, other less-aggressive forms of masculinity are often marginalized in societies experiencing the negative economic repercussions of hosting conflict.

Marko Zivcovic, in assessing the legacy of the wars that fractured the former Yugoslavia in the 1990’s, claims that:

[...] economic emasculation, at least for certain segments of the population, “depresses” the male pole of the gender balance [...] Ethnonationalist re-traditionalizing rhetoric of recovering some ideal, proper, traditional, etc. masculinity feeds off and exploits this “depression,” and, under situations of crumbling legal order, the resultant boost to certain kinds of masculinities could account for at least some of the appeal of war (260).

For societies emerging from conflict, this means masculinities, both victorious and defeated, must be addressed and altered in ways that encourage gender equity and peace if a society hopes to prevent a reoccurrence of open hostilities. In marginalizing masculine gender in its analysis, the GAD model, undoubtedly strong in many regards, fails to live up to its name or the needs of people who have survived violent conflict in the Global South.

Conclusion: Conflict-Aware Development

No one development model can address the need and desires of every person in every context, a major pratfall of most models that attempt to be “one-size-fits-all.” The six points presented here to direct conflict-aware development are not weakened by the limitations of specificity, but rather draw strength from their applicability in the widest possible range of contexts. With this in mind, I propose the six crucial elements of conflict-aware development must be demilitarization; targeting the most deprived; fast, non-segregated resettlement; rewards for cooperation; limited private foreign investment; and some form of truth and reconciliation.

**Demilitarization** involves disarmament across the society (not just of combatants), demobilization of the largest possible number of armed individuals, removal of military officers from all sites of political power, and an ideological process of de-programming militarized values from those who were subjected to them. Disarmament, focusing on small arms, is one of the biggest instrumental steps a society can take towards preventing future violent conflict; though people have been participating in violent conflict for much longer than small arms have existed, their reduction also reduces the probability that conflict will spread as well as reducing the lethality of it. Beyond taking arms out of people’s hands, it is perhaps more significant to marginalize the ideology of militarism, which Cynthia Enloe defines an internalization of values like “a belief in hierarchy, obedience, and the use of force,” as well as a worldview that sees “military solutions as particularly effective” and “the world as a dangerous place best approached with militaristic attitudes.” At the same time, it is important to recognize that “Most militarized people are civilians” (Enloe 2007, 4) and not trained soldiers, because customary responses to conflict from governments and social movements have fostered militarization, which creates a constant impetus to resort to violence as a means to solve problems.

**Targeting the most deprived** differs vastly from other development models in that it looks towards the populations with the least likelihood of economic and social success as the gauge of the model’s efficacy. If a development model enriches the sector of the population that already has some wealth and education, it only exacerbates the relative deprivation of the marginalized groups and creates fertile ground for future conflict. This aspect of the model also ensures that “the real need women feel for social transformation rather than the reconstruction of the past” (Meintjes, Pillay, and Turchen, 2001, 4) is met by targeting assistance based on contemporary need rather than the return-to-normalcy (i.e. return to stratified, hierarchal gender roles) that post-conflict models often encourage.

**Fast, non-segregated resettlement** is, unfortunately, only a pleasant fantasy for the world’s 30,000,000
refugees and the probably equally large quantity of internally displaced persons (IDPs) that are not tallied by the 
UN’s High Commission on Refugees. Refugee camps not only feature appallingly low standards of living, their 
formation has been criticized for concentrating vulnerable ethnic and identity groups, increasing the possibility of 
genocide, and for becoming semi-permanent communities for people disenfranchised by conflict. Though refugee 
camps are a necessity as a stop-gap measure during conflict, creating a truly post-conflict setting requires 
resettlement for all people in a manner that equitably compensates them for what was lost in the conflict. Resettlement procedures must also take care to not further factionalization through ethnically segregated 
resettlement and should assist to redistribute wealth in the form of land resources.

Conflict-aware development must offer rewards for cooperation and create dis-incentives for competition, 
which is the polar opposite of the neoliberal model that advocates competition as the source of social and 
economic growth. In a society where individuals were recently pitted against each other by outside forces for the 
sake of waging war, there is a need for communication and solidarity, not further struggle over finite resources. Conflict-aware development would require all programs to target all sides in the conflict and penalize or limit 
engagement with programs—public and private, foreign and domestic – that are based around one identity group.

As a last stance against the market-based development that has failed the majority of people in societies 
damaged by conflict, conflict-aware development must limit private foreign investment for a number of reasons. 
First, it is often corporations who were involved in funding conflicts that attempt to continue their influence over a 
foreign state or their resources through investment. Second, investment, as opposed to aid, often furthers the debt 
of countries, eventually leading to cuts in desperately needed social spending. Finally, societies wracked by violent 
conflict need to be given time and space to develop domestic industries without multi-national corporations from 
wealthier nations taking advantage of the vulnerable economy to create barriers-to-entry that domestic industries 
will not be capable of meeting. If we hope to mold economically sustainable societies, they must be given 
no-strings-attached monies with which to develop instead of the self-interested investment of foreign capital.

The final aspect necessary for conflict-aware development is some form of Truth and Reconciliation 
process that documents the events that triggered the conflict and crimes committed during it as well as promoting 
dialogue, healing, and preventing combatants from profiting off of their actions during war. The process would not 
necessarily have to take the form of the widely noted Truth and Reconciliation Commission active in South Africa 
after the end of apartheid, nor does it need to take on the revanchist character of the Nuremberg Trials. A true 
process of truth and reconciliation would involve accounting for the gender-based violence, displacement, fear, and 
derprivation experienced by constituents and assistance to cope with these negative outcomes in the spheres of 
economy, civil society, and mental and physical health.

If development models hope to positively impact the largest possible number of people their policies need 
to reflect the historical and current realities of conflict. Conflict has differential effects across geography, gender, 
class, and other forms of identity that we must also be attuned to in order to affect positive change. Further 
research is necessary in this field and, unfortunately, the contemporary world provides many sites in which 
conflict-aware development must be implemented. Until the guarantee of sustainable personal security is extended 
to all people of the world, the potential for conflict stalks every corner of the globe.

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Footnotes


About the Author

Josh Cerretti is currently a PhD candidate in Global Gender Studies at the University at Buffalo where he also teaches. He also holds a MA in Gender and Peace Building from the University for Peace in Costa Rica. His research focuses on the intersections between gender and post-conflict transformation.

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