

Poverty, Militancy and Citizen Demands in Natural Resource-Rich Regions



In brief

- Existing aid programs, conflict resolution and reconciliation programs and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in conflict zones are often developed under the assumption of the existence of a bright line between insurgents and civilians. In reality, the situation is much more complex.
- This study examines how civilians interact and cooperate with militants in the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria using survey data from communities near former militant camps and present oil theft operations used to fund militant groups.
- Key policy implications:
 - Civilians in resource-rich regions hold substantial combat-relevant information about resource extraction infrastructure, insurgents, and counterinsurgency forces.
 - Opportunities for information transmission from civilian to insurgent are abundant in the Niger Delta. Civilians frequently encounter militants and the social networks of militants and civilians substantially overlap, including friendships, sexual relationships, and familial ties.
 - Information transmission can be frequent from civilian to militant even where civilian support for militant goals and policies is low.
- The implications of this research are that identification of program beneficiaries is substantially more difficult than is typically understood.
- Program benefits aimed at non-combatants will likely spill to combatants. Programs that are instead designed to benefit both groups are more likely to succeed.

Policy Motivation

What is the role of civilians in armed conflict in regions rich in natural resources? In this project, we examine how civilians interact and cooperate with militants in the oil-producing Niger Delta region of Nigeria using detailed survey data from communities near former militant camps and present oil theft operations used to fund militant groups. We explore the types of information about oil production and oil theft possessed by civilians, how the social networks of militants are embedded with those of these communities, and whether and how militants extract information from civilians in these communities.

Policy Impact

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We expect this research to impact conflict resolution and reconciliation programs, post-conflict reconstruction efforts, and aid programs in conflict zones. Existing programs are often developed under the assumption of the existence of a bright line between insurgents and civilians, and we show that reality is much more complex. We expect our findings to be relevant in areas affected by insurgencies and especially those in environments where information is difficult to obtain for combatants such as urban areas and areas rich in natural resources.

Audience

These findings are likely to be relevant to post-conflict aid practitioners and national policymakers in countries affected by insurgencies and other types of armed groups.

Policy Implications

Civilians in resource-rich regions hold substantial combat-relevant information about resource extraction infrastructure, insurgents, and counterinsurgency forces.

We show that Niger Delta civilians hold substantial, relevant information about oil production in their communities, navigation in the difficult terrain in rural areas, and about the movements of the combatants. Nearly two-thirds of civilians regularly encounter counterinsurgency forces in their rural communities, and most are able to navigate nearby creeks even if they do not themselves drive boats.

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Opportunities for information transmission from civilian to insurgent are abundant in the Niger Delta. Civilians frequently encounter militants and the social networks of militants and civilians substantially overlap, including friendships, sexual relationships, and familial ties.

We find that interactions with militants were frequent — only a third of respondents reported “never” encountering a militant in their communities — and 35% of respondents are estimated to know a militant, either a family member, friend, or someone they “talk to at least once in a week.” Policies aimed at reducing harm

from militant activities in resource-rich regions and elsewhere must consider the crucial role of civilians in these conflicts. Given the high degree of social embeddedness of militants in these communities documented in this research — in which militants frequently attend social functions, host parties, and live in the community — simple interventions aimed only at civilians will be unlikely to succeed.

Information transmission can be frequent from civilian to militant even where civilian support for militant goals and policies is low.

“Though only a small proportion of the community may be communicating with them, information is transferred fluidly about community activities and threats to the militants”

We find that despite the fact that support for these groups is relatively low (we estimate that 25% of respondents “generally agree with the goals and policies” of the group), almost half of respondents we estimate to know a militant reported information about oil infrastructure or the activities of counterinsurgency forces.

Though only a small proportion of the community may be communicating with them, information is transferred fluidly about community activities and threats to the militants. Moreover, in post-conflict settings programs that aim to “reintegrate” combatants into their communities miss the crucial fact that often members of armed groups are already central parts of the community.

Implementation

The implications of this research for implementing programs in active conflict zones and post-conflict contexts are that the identification of program beneficiaries is substantially more difficult than is typically understood. Program benefits aimed at non-combatants will likely spill into combatants, a particularly worrying scenario during periods of fighting. Programs that instead are designed to benefit both groups are more likely to succeed.

Further Readings

John Ghazvinian, *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa’s Oil*.

About the authors

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