

## 2. Analytical elements, methodologies and tools for conflict analysis

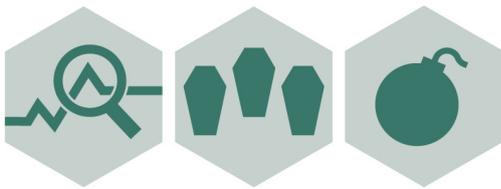
### 2.1 Core analytical elements of conflict analysis

Violent conflict is about politics, power, contestation between actors and the (re)shaping of institutions for the benefit of some (and at the expense of others). People and groups do not randomly fight each other, even if stark inequalities or other grievances prevail in a society, they need to be mobilised. An understanding of these processes of mobilisation is critical to understanding violent conflict.

For further discussions about conflict, see the GSDRC Topic Guide on Conflict

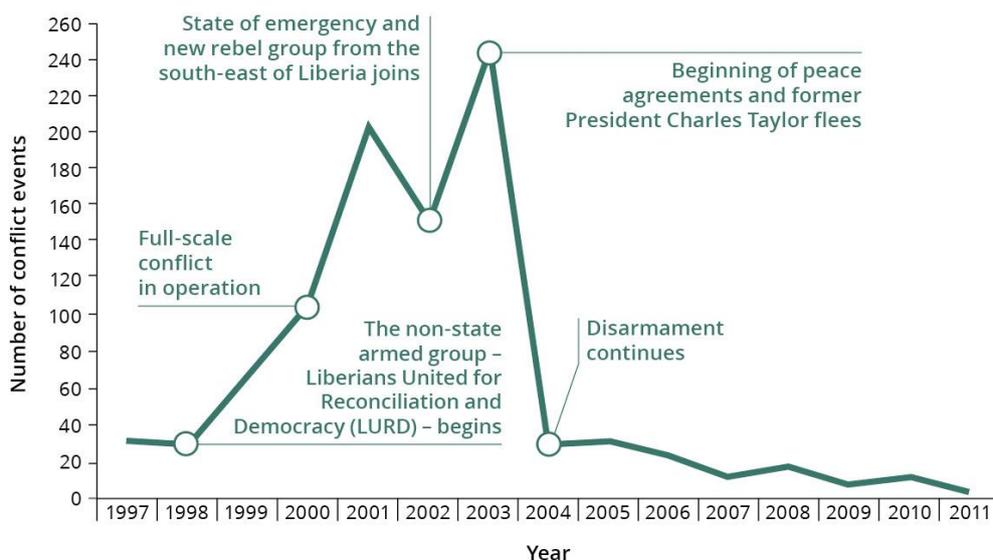
The literature widely uses the same concepts to describe conflicts – actors, causes, dynamics, triggers and scenarios. Within the policy and practitioner literature, there is general consensus on how to use and understand these terms, as explained in the many toolkits and manuals. Some criticise the words used in the toolkits as being technocratic, and thereby disguising the political nature of these problems (e.g. Mac Ginty, 2013) – such as the idea of structural causes (see Box 2). Table 1 below summarises the main guiding questions for conflict analysis and examples of their practical application.

#### Conflict profile



The overarching question for the conflict profile is – what is the context that shapes conflict? (See Table 1 for sub-questions and examples). Table 2 presents practical exercises for analysing the conflict profile and dynamics. For example, Figure 1 presents a timeline of conflict events in Liberia (1977-2011).

Figure 1: Timeline of conflict events in Liberia (1977-2011)



Source: Adapted from Dowd & Raleigh (2012: 14)

**Table 1: Guiding questions for conflict analysis**

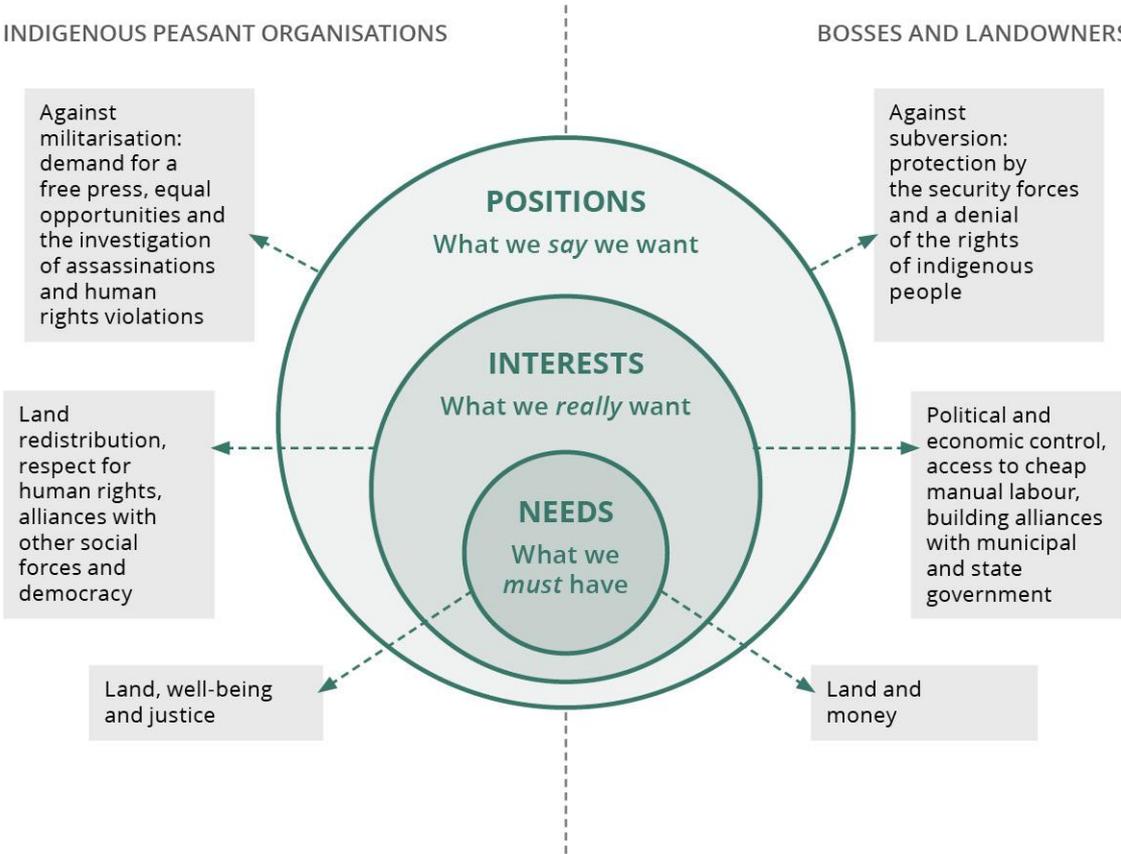
<b>Profile</b>	<p><b>What is the context that shapes conflict?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Is there a <i>history</i> of conflict? (e.g. when? How many people killed and displaced? Who is targeted? Methods of violence? Where?)</li> <li>▪ What political, economic, social and environmental <i>institutions and structures</i> have shaped conflict? (e.g. elections, reform processes, economic growth, inequality, employment, social groups and composition, demographics and resource exploitation)</li> </ul>
<b>Actors</b>	<p><b>Who are the actors that influence conflict?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Who are the main actors? (e.g. the military, leaders and commanders of non-state armed groups, criminal groups)</li> <li>▪ What are their <i>interests</i>, concerns, goals, hopes, fears, strategies, positions, preferences, worldviews, expectations and motivations? (e.g. autonomy, inequality between groups ('horizontal inequality'), political power, ethno-nationalist, reparations)</li> <li>▪ What <i>power</i> do they have, how do they exert power, what resources or support do they have, are they vulnerable? (e.g. local legitimacy through provision of security, power over corrupt justice institutions, weapons and capacity to damage infrastructure)</li> <li>▪ What are their <i>incentives and disincentives</i> for conflict and peace? (e.g. benefiting or losing from the war economy, prestige, retribution for historic grievances)</li> <li>▪ What <i>capacities</i> do they have to affect the context?</li> <li>▪ Who could be considered <i>spoilers</i>? What divides people? Who exercises leadership and how? (e.g. economic beneficiaries of conflict, criminal groups, opposition leader)</li> <li>▪ What could be considered <i>capacities for peace</i>? Are there groups calling for non-violence? What connects people across conflict lines? How do people cooperate? Who exercises leadership for peace and how? (e.g. civil society, religious authorities, local justice mechanisms)</li> <li>▪ What are the <i>relationships</i> between actors, what are the trends, what is the strategic balance between actors (who is 'winning')? (e.g. conflictual, cooperative or business relationships)</li> </ul>
<b>Causes</b>	<p><b>What causes conflict?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are the <i>structural</i> causes of conflict? (e.g. unequal land distribution, political exclusion, poor governance, impunity, lack of state authority)</li> <li>▪ What are the <i>proximate</i> causes of conflict? (e.g. arms proliferation, illicit criminal networks, emergence of self-defence non-state armed actors, overspill of conflict from a neighbouring country, natural resource discoveries)</li> </ul>
<b>Dynamics</b>	<p><b>What are the current conflict dynamics/trends?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What are the current conflict <i>trends</i>? What are the recent changes in behaviour? (e.g. conflict acts have increased but the number of deaths has decreased; political violence has intensified around local elections; defence spending has increased; paramilitaries have started running in local elections)</li> <li>▪ Which factors of the conflict profile, actors and causes <i>reinforce or undermine each other</i>? Which factors balance or mitigate others? (e.g. horizontal economic and political inequalities can increase the risk of conflict; uncertainty about succession of the president strengthens party factionalism; cash for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration fuels small arms proliferation)</li> <li>▪ What <i>triggers</i> conflict? (e.g. elections, economic and environmental shocks, economic crash, an assassination, coup, food price increases, a corruption scandal)</li> <li>▪ What <i>scenarios</i> can be developed? (e.g. best-case scenario: a peace agreement is signed quickly and the conflict parties implement a ceasefire; worst-case scenario: local politicians mobilise along ethnic lines in the run-up to elections and political violence and riots increase where groups meet)</li> </ul>

Sources: Drawn from Fisher et al. (2000); FEWER et al. (2004); Conflict Sensitivity Consortium (2012); CDA Collaborative (2013); DFID (2015); Mason & Rychard (2005).



Topic Guide understands the political settlement as ‘the informal and formal processes, agreements, and practices that help consolidate politics, rather than violence, as a means for dealing with disagreements about interests, ideas and the distribution and use of power’ (Laws & Leftwich, 2014: 1). The idea is that, for a political settlement to be stable and non-violent, it needs to be inclusive of 1) the elites that have the power to disrupt peace and, some argue, also 2) wider societal groups that are currently marginalised from power (e.g. indigenous people, women) (e.g. DFID, 2015). The question of who to include and how depends on how the actors interact (e.g. do the elites excluded from the political settlement mobilise support from marginalised groups?)

**Figure 3: Onion actor analysis – actors’ positions, interests and needs in Chiapas, Mexico**



Source: Adapted from Fisher, et al. (2000: 27)

**Causes**



The overarching question here is – what causes conflict? (See Table 1 for sub-questions and examples.) Table 2 presents practical exercises for analysing conflict causes. For example, Figure 4 presents a ‘conflict tree’ exercise looking at conflict causes in Kenya in 2000.

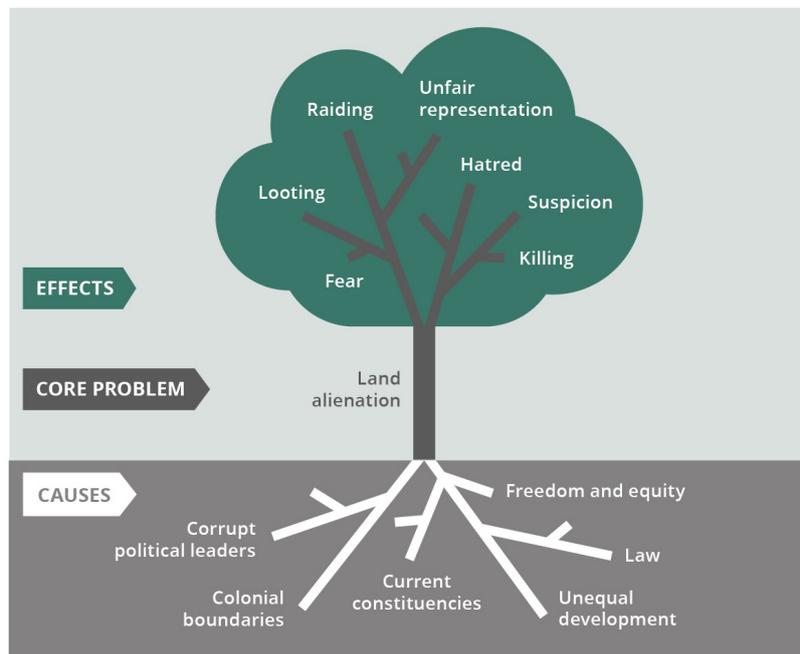
Actors fight over ‘issues’, and conflicts are complex and multi-causal, therefore it is useful to distinguish between different types of causes, influencing factors, and outcomes, and to differentiate the sources of tensions or divisions that affect large or small numbers of people at the local, subnational, national, regional and international levels (DFID, 2015).

**Structural causes** of conflict (also called *root causes* or *underlying causes*) are long-term or systemic causes of violent conflict that have become built into the norms, structures and policies of a society. **Proximate causes**

of conflict (also called *immediate* causes) are more recent causes that change more quickly, that can accentuate structural causes and that lead to an escalation of violent conflict.

Ultimately, these are political issues, involving power, contestation between actors and the shaping of institutions for the benefit of some (and at the expense of others). The original causes of conflict may not be the same factors that sustain war – for example, conflict may have political and social motivations but be prolonged by economic motivations, creating disincentives for peace (Berdal & Keen, 1997). It is thus important to adopt a chronological, contextual and dynamic approach when engaging in analysis to be able to understand how the conflict has developed over time. This means looking at the outcomes as well as the causes (Woodward, 2007).

**Figure 4: Conflict tree to visualise conflict causes in Kenya**



Source: Fisher, et al. (2000: 29)

**Box 6: Analysis of violent extremism: part of conflict analysis?**

Conflict analysis toolkits do not include explicit categories to analyse violent extremism, but where relevant it will emerge through analysis of the conflict actors, causes and dynamics. As the development agenda broadens to include radicalisation, policymakers are increasingly linking the latter with the drivers of conflict in specific contexts.

A GSDRC Topic Guide on Countering Violent Extremism (Schomerus et al., 2017) highlights that, while research is extremely limited, recent debates on VE focus on ‘push and pull factors’ (e.g. the role of personal relationships; beliefs, values and convictions; narratives of history; rejection of a system; etc.). The Guide finds weak evidence for some commonly stated influencing factors (e.g. poverty, religious faith, lack of education).

**Dynamics**

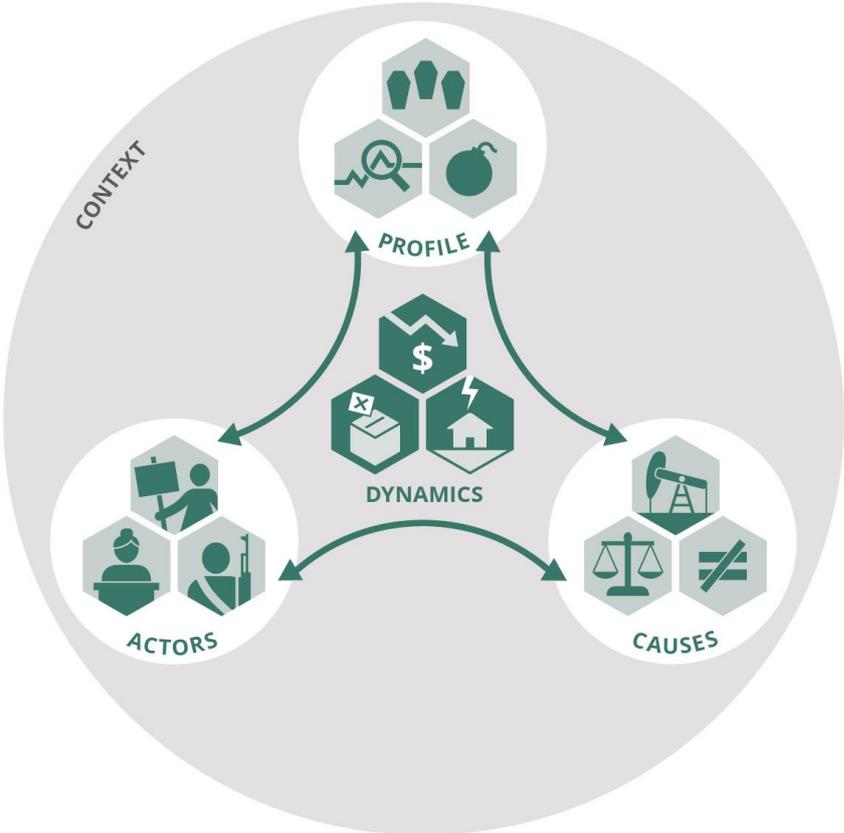


The overarching question here is – what are the current conflict dynamics/trends? (See Table 1 for sub-questions and examples.) Dynamics result from the interaction of the conflict profile, actors and causes, and they can be triggered by events (FEWER et al, 2004: 5) (see Figure 5 below).

Focusing on dynamics helps understand whether, why and how the conflict is escalating, intensifying, decreasing, spreading, contracting, or in stalemate, etc. (DFID, 2015). Table 2 presents practical exercises for analysing conflict dynamics.

Analysis should focus on latent as well as manifest violence to be able to identify potential outbreaks of violence.<sup>8</sup> The idea of the ‘temperament’ of a conflict relates to how people are transformed by a conflict or the energy of a conflict (Mason & Rychard, 2005). The literature has increasingly focused on understanding the processes through which conflict issues become so salient that leaders mobilise around them, and on identifying transition opportunities that may help break cycles of violence and state fragility – rather than on, as before, developing typologies of issues that cause conflict (World Bank, 2011; Jabri, 1996). Analysis of dynamics ensures conflict analysis does not just produce detailed lists, but rather an understanding of the dynamics and the interaction of the different elements.

**Figure 5: Visualising the dynamics of conflict—how the conflict actors, causes and profile interact**



Source: Adapted from FEWER, et al (2004: 2)

**Triggers** are single events, or the anticipation of an event, that can change the intensity or direction of violent conflict (e.g. elections, economic crisis, a natural disaster, etc.). **Scenarios** describe possible imagined futures and/or tell the story of how such futures might come about (Bishop et al., 2007). Through analysis of the potential future interactions of the conflict profile, actors, causes and dynamics, a number of different and competing scenarios can be developed. These can be framed as best-case, middle-case, worst-case, most-likely-case or status-quo scenarios – the normative framing of what is ‘best’ will depend on the object of study and the perspective of the researcher (e.g. whether the objective is stability or sustainable peace). Or they can be framed around story narratives – for example in an analysis about prospective elections in Sierra Leone, three scenarios were presented: Scenario 1: election violence; Scenario 2: regional stalemate; Scenario 3: youth, drugs and violence (Adolfo, 2010: 49).

<sup>8</sup>For example ACLED (2015) also records in its dataset of political violence some non-violent events (e.g. protests), to capture the potential antecedents to violence or critical junctures of a conflict.

**Table 2: Practical exercises for conflict analysis**

<b>Profile and dynamics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Plotting a graph of events gives a sense of time, frequency, trends and stages of the conflict (see Figure 1). Conflict events can be disaggregated, e.g. by type of conflict act, perpetrator/conflict actor, conflict cause, etc.</li><li>▪ Drawing a map or maps across time periods to visualise trends, e.g. with conflict events or territorial control of different actors.</li><li>▪ Drawing a timeline of historic conflict events, phases and triggers to help identify trends, temporal patterns and potential triggers. This can then be analysed against future events coming up (e.g. elections, reform processes, youth bulges).</li><li>▪ The Glasl model conceptualises escalation ‘as a downward movement, where conflict parties get sucked into the conflict dynamics’ (Mason &amp; Rychard, 2005: 6). The nine levels of escalation are (ibid.):<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) Hardening of positions but still belief in discussion to resolve conflict;</li><li>2) Debate, polemics and polarisation;</li><li>3) Actions not words, danger of false interpretation;</li><li>4) Images and coalitions as the parties see the other in negative roles and fight these roles;</li><li>5) Loss of face, a major escalation step;</li><li>6) Strategies of threats and counter threats;</li><li>7) Limited destructive blows, dehumanisation, shifting values;</li><li>8) Fragmentation and destruction of the opponents’ system is the aim;</li><li>9) Together into the abyss, total confrontation without any possibility of stepping back. Self-destruction is the price of destruction of the opponent.</li></ol></li><li>▪ ‘Multi-Causal Role Model: This model focuses on causation, on the different quality of reasons, triggers, channels, catalysts, and targets. Content and actors, dynamics and structures are also considered’ (Mason &amp; Rychard, 2005: 2).</li></ul>
<b>Actors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Actor or stakeholder mapping can be a useful tool to get a graphic snapshot of actors’ relative power in the conflict, their relationships and the conflict issues between them. Different mappings representing different perspectives can be useful to understand different perspectives (Fisher et al., 2000) (see Figure 2).</li><li>▪ The ABC triangle graphic tool is used to examine actors’ attitudes, behaviours and context (depicted graphically in a triangle) and compare the different perspectives (Mitchell, in Fisher et al., 2000: 25-7).</li><li>▪ The onion graphic tool is used to examine actors’ public positions (the outer layer), interests (the middle layer) and needs (inner layer) (Fisher et al., 2000: 27) (see Figure 3). It can be used to examine actors’ competing interests and to identify possible trade-offs.</li><li>▪ The pyramid graphic tool is used to examine the different levels of stakeholders in a conflict – starting with key conflict actors at the top level (adapted from Lederach, in Fisher et al., 2000: 33-4).</li></ul>
<b>Causes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ The conflict tree graphic tool is used to examine core problem(s) (the tree trunk), causes (the roots) and effects (the branches and leaves). It visualises how structural and dynamic factors interact to lead to conflict (see Figure 4) (Fisher et al., 2000: 29; Mason &amp; Rychard, 2005).</li><li>▪ The forcefield analysis graphic tool is used to examine the different forces influencing a conflict (Fisher et al., 2000: 30–1).</li><li>▪ The pillars graphic tool is used to examine the factors or forces that contribute to create conflict (based on Goss-Mayr, in Fisher et al., 2000: 31).</li><li>▪ The greed and grievance model makes lists of the conflict causes according to whether they relate to greed or grievance (Vaux, 2015: 4).</li></ul>