

Employment and rebellion in conflicted and fragile states

Jobs programs may not reduce rebellion

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ELEVATOR PITCH

In addition to the heart-breaking human costs, violent civil rebellion is a cause of chronic economic underdevelopment. Employment programs with former combatants and at-risk youth have improved their livelihoods, but not their support for non-violence and respect for law. Rebel groups provide security and social benefits that formal employment does not offer, possibly making switching out of rebellion into formal employment unappealing. However, a jobs program that addressed the psycho-social motivations to join rebel groups resulted in significant reductions in crime and violence. This is an important step forward in our understanding of how to lure people away from violent rebellion.

KEY FINDINGS

Pros

- ⊕ The economic idea of “opportunity cost” suggests that rebels should be willing to switch out of rebellion as soon as sufficiently lucrative and formal employment opportunities become available.
- ⊕ Civil violence can increase following negative economic shocks, as the resulting unemployment releases a pool of labor for rebel groups.
- ⊕ Unemployment may create an aggrieved underclass susceptible to rebel recruitment.
- ⊕ People who have steady jobs may become more responsible, less violent, more respectful of authority, and invest more in their communities.

Cons

- ⊖ Rebel groups may offer personal security for people in fragile states that is not otherwise available through formal employment.
- ⊖ Participation in rebellion offers a number of social benefits, such as a sense of contributing to an important just cause, that are not offered through formal employment opportunities.
- ⊖ Studies have failed to provide a clear causal link between unemployment and civil war violence.
- ⊖ Improving ex-combatants’ and at-risk youths’ livelihoods does not make their political and social views less violent or more respectful of legal authority.

AUTHOR’S MAIN MESSAGE

Aid agencies use jobs programs to try to lure people away from rebel activity. But there is no established empirical link between employment and rebel activity at the macro level, or support for non-violence and legitimate authority at the micro level. Evidence indicates that social motivations (e.g. a perceived “just cause”) are important reasons for participating in rebel organizations, and that the behaviour of “at-risk” youths can be significantly changed with psychological and social therapies that break the bad habits and indoctrination that influence decisions to join rebel groups. Civil violence is not only, or predominantly, an economic problem, but also a psychological, social, and political one that should be approached holistically, rather than addressed simply by creating jobs programs.

