



## Measuring Conflict in Micro-Level Surveys

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- Socioeconomic research on conflict has demonstrated that the circumstances of conflict matter greatly to policies designed to overcome legacies of conflict.
- Measuring conflict exposure in micro-surveys also helps to avoid biases in studies of conflict-affected areas not directly focusing on violence or conflict.
- Capturing how people experience such conflict dynamics requires increased capacity on the part of researchers and policymakers to identify how violent conflict affects individuals, households and communities along key social and economic dimensions.

Violent conflict has significant effects on the welfare, resilience and behavior of individuals, households and communities. These impacts deserve close study at the micro-level, both as a new field of academic inquiry and as an aid to development and poverty reduction policy. Policy practitioners have increasingly realized the importance of understanding, compensating for, and overcoming the constraints caused by violent conflict.

To gather better data on the impacts of such conflict, well-designed surveys need to acknowledge the prior existence of violent conflict in formal questionnaires and survey designs. The Conflict Survey Sourcebook and the accompanying Conflict Exposure Module serve as a basis for developing how a socioeconomic survey may be deployed in conflict-affected contexts.

The sourcebook reviews current practices and discusses specific methodologies for empirical research in conflict-affected areas and among conflict-affected populations. The module is particularly useful for researchers interested in developing a conflict typology. It may also be useful for the analysis of violence in other settings such as fragile states or areas suffering from high degrees of violence (such as some urban areas affected by organized crime).

### Current Survey Practices

On the one hand, some recent surveys focus on investigating conflict, creating new methods for collecting data at the micro-level. Examples include surveys on ex-combatants or child soldiers. This new research details conflict's functions and dynamics, as well as its impact on people's behavior and welfare, on institutional change, and on overall development outcomes.

On the other hand, there is a great need for making existing multi-purpose socioeconomic surveys more conflict-sensitive. The World Bank and other institutions have developed highly sophisticated surveying techniques, most notably the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS), to collect socioeconomic data at the micro-level. Yet these instruments have not been explicitly adapted for use in conflict-affected areas, despite being deployed in several conflict contexts.

Standard household surveys in conflict-affected countries only sporadically feature questions related to the causes and consequences of violence, leaving treatments ad-hoc and incomparable across different settings. Further, the lack of micro-level data forces researchers to rely on standardized macro-level measures of violent conflict (e.g. number of battle deaths per country per year). This makes it hard to build a

systematic and comparable understanding of how violence has affected different people, communities and population groups, and constitutes a key gap in current development interventions.

## Methodological Challenges

There are several common methodological challenges related to researching in conflict-affected contexts. The first challenge is to agree on a workable definition of conflict. The Sourcebook defines conflict broadly as the systematic breakdown of the social contract resulting from and/or leading to changes in social norms, which involve violence instigated through collective action. Examples of such conflict include genocide, civil war, armed rebellion, and terrorism.

Other important methodological points include the choice of the appropriate unit of analysis; how to introduce time variation into surveys; common biases that often appear in data collected from conflict-affected populations (e.g. various selection biases and recall error); and ethical and security challenges associated with researching in conflict affected contexts and with populations that have experienced violence.

## The Conflict Exposure Module

The Conflict Exposure Module aims to identify manifestations of violent conflict at the individual and household level through both direct and indirect channels. Violent conflict may directly impact welfare, through physical and psychological harm, death or illness of household members, destruction of assets and human capital, and displacement. Conflict may also have an indirect impact through its effects on income, prices, wages, access to markets, access to safety nets, social, economic and political institutions, community relations, and overall levels of insecurity.

The questions in the module are designed to measure both types of impact channels. The module has also been designed to be included—with minor modifications depending on the local context—in future micro-level surveys conducted by the World Bank and other stakeholders in government, civil society and academia in conflict-affected contexts. Handling a ready-made module saves upfront costs, makes more efficient use of staff and facilities, and helps to standardize, and hence compare, responses across different contexts of conflict and violence.

The module is not intended to be a “standard”/ “one size fits all” approach. By adapting the module to local needs and realities, micro-level surveys in conflict-affected countries can be more realistic and appropriate. Studies using such conflict-sensitive surveys will be more nuanced and persuasive, whether they aim to explain violence or investigate the legacies of violence. Even studies not directly referring to conflict will be improved if they use some or all of the conflict variables suggested in the module, as otherwise studies run the risk of incurring omitted variable bias.

## Conclusions

The Sourcebook maps out a path for building a systematic and comparable understanding of the channels through which different types of group-based violence affect the behavior and welfare of individuals and households—and thereby their communities and countries.

Conflict should be treated as an important variable in its own right. Many socio-economic surveys in conflict-affected areas ask about conflict only selectively, missing important features in the process, while other surveys specialize on particular conflict features without giving a comprehensive treatment of the multifaceted ways that conflict can impact respondents.

Appropriately adapted to local conditions, the Sourcebook and its Conflict Exposure Module can serve as a basic model for comprehensively investigating how conflict changes demographics in the household, affects economic welfare, challenges people’s ability to cope, causes physical harm, dislocates people, shortens education, and alters perceptions.

This brief is based on: Brück, Tilman, Justino, Patricia, Verwimp, Philip and Tedesco, Andrew (2013). Measuring conflict exposure in micro-level surveys. *LSMS-ISA Working Paper*, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. The full paper is available for download at <http://www.worldbank.org/lsms-isa>.

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