22

The application of PRA methods to the study of conflict management in a pastoral society

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• Introduction

Research into conflict management has gained some attention over the past few years in the field of development studies. Planners and practitioners are being forced to recognise that the success of development projects is not only based on their expertise and on the financial input of donors but also, to a large extent, on the ability of those people involved in the development process to manage conflicts in their social environment.

Violent conflicts are common worldwide and many development efforts are doomed because of them. Somalia, Liberia and the Sudan are the more spectacular examples, but many more projects are hampered because of inter-ethnic conflicts, political rifts and friction at the local level. A keen interest in conflict resolution should be an integral part of any development effort. There should be ample motivation to analyse local conflict behaviour and connect research results to the planning of a project's organisation.

Until recently research into local conflict management was the responsibility of anthropologists. This usually meant long periods of field research and, often, complex academic descriptions of conflict causes and processes. For development practitioners a clear-cut and less time-consuming mode of obtaining data on local conflict management would be highly beneficial. Thus it may be useful to consider how rapid rural appraisal methods could be applied to the analysis of conflict management.

However, the degree to which understanding of conflict situations can be achieved by rapid methods seems uncertain. Conflicts are conditioned by economics, social organisation and ideology and it takes time to become familiar with the various social factors that affect conflict behaviour. Whilst industrialised societies have a highly formalised method of resolving conflict, the authorities within many other societies manage conflicts informally and adapt their methods according to the scope of the people involved. These societies often have no fixed laws and there is usually a great deal of discussion before a solution can be found for a specific case. Additionally, their executive powers are often informal and fragmented.

• Conflict management

The project outlined here aimed to describe modes of conflict management in a pastoral nomadic society (the Pokot) in north-western Kenya and tried to find causes for successful or non-successful (non-violent or violent) conflict behaviour. The project ran for two years and the recording of data involved the gathering of numerous case histories on inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts.

Qualitative and quantitative information had to be obtained on the economic strategies, the social organisation and the belief system, since individual conflict strategies are inextricably enmeshed with other spheres of social life.

Intra-ethnic conflict

The picture which emerged showed that the Pokot managed internal conflicts fairly well. There were rarely any violent rifts; long-standing feuds between factions were unknown and there were few murder cases. Hence, internal conflict management was highly successful, despite being thoroughly informal.

Neighbourhood councils acted as forums for discussing conflicting issues. Decisions were based on consensus and it sometimes took days to find a solution.

There was no judge or body of elder men with this function and anybody who had an interest in the case could participate in the debate. Furthermore, there was no stipulated way for discussing cases and anyone could state his opinion at any given time. Additionally, ritual experts made efforts to, in Pokot terms, 'restore harmony'.

Inter-ethnic conflict

Violent inter-ethnic conflicts stood in sharp contrast to internal peace. For many years raiding was the mode of interaction between the Pokot and their pastoral neighbours. The colonial administration reduced the power of the councils who act on an inter-ethnic level. In pre-colonial times elders would sit together after a period of raiding and forge a truce enforced by solemn oaths. Today the gun reigns. For instance, in Somalia, Ethiopia and Sudan there is no accepted authority able to bring about peace in inter-ethnic conflicts - only the state can enforce a ceasefire.

Explanations

How can this internal peace and external violence be explained? The Pokot livestock management system is conditioned by their unpredictable and varying environment. Droughts, epidemics and stock raiding take a heavy toll on household herds. Herders endure this by diversifying their livestock property, maintaining their mobility and maximising their social capital, by distributing their cattle and smallstock amongst other herding families.

The need to distribute livestock to accumulate friendship-ties, important in times of need, obviously has a positive aspect on conflict management. Every single person is enmeshed in a net of exchange relations. To avoid endangering these, everybody is wary of being too aggressive in internal conflicts. The kinship system, based on patrilineal lineages and clans and the hierarchical institutions of the age-set system, provides a framework for non-violent conflict management.

However, most important is an ideology which discourages any physical aggression towards a fellow tribesman. Aggression is channelled and expressed in rituals of conflict in which violent actions are dramatically enacted, but unthinkable in reality.

There are obvious reasons for unsuccessful inter-ethnic conflict management. The weapons race between Somalia and Ethiopia and the ensuing civil wars in both countries have had a detrimental effect on inter-ethnic relations in northern Kenya. On a local level it is obvious that inter-ethnic exchange is not as relevant to the individual actors. Intra-ethnic exchange and inter-ethnic conflict do not endanger risk-minimising and exchange relations. Furthermore, the pastoral ideology endorses courage and ferocity in inter-ethnic conflicts.

- ### A review of research methods

Although there are limitations, especially when it comes to identifying the causes of conflict behaviour, PRA methods may gather an appreciable amount of descriptive data. The researcher should begin by listening to and recording the accounts of several informants to learn the different views of a specific conflict. Where the laws have not been formalised, individuals' interpretations of 'customary laws' will almost always be different. The researcher may need to attend a council to obtain a feeling for the value of the different accounts.

After recording a number of cases, more formalised interviews or diagramming exercises can be conducted to explore:

- Authority: who is able to influence decisions? How are decisions influenced - by power, by rhetoric?

- Norms: what norms of cooperation control the flow of goods and rights between people?

- Societal scope of norms: which norms relate to which set of people? Do norms relate to kinship groups, village members, age-set comrades, project groups, ethnic groups?

- Character of sanctions: are sanctions of a corporal, material or physical character? Who enforces sanctions - elders, juniors or ritual specialists?

2

Answers to these questions should enable researchers to gradually acquire knowledge of conflict behaviour. However, there is no guarantee that a clear cut picture will emerge quickly. Conflicts are complex social processes, frequently drawn out and consisting of a multitude of individual interests.

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