Demographic Transformation and Socio-Economic Development 4

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Violence, Statistics, and the Politics of Accounting for the Dead

Springer

Demographic Transformation and Socio-Economic Development

Volume 4

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Foreword

It should go without saying that numbers cannot properly represent human lives. Numbers more or less perfectly occupy the domain of the measurable and quantifiable, of interchangeable units – money and credit, bales of cotton and bushels of wheat. Even some of these we only consider unitary for convenience: in reality each individual grain of wheat in every silo in the world is unique; it is just that replacing one grain with another of the same variety makes no meaningful difference.

Human lives are not so interchangeable, and it is here that – for our species, anyway –the words "irreplaceable" and "unique" find their most profound meaning. So when we document human lives lost to armed violence and conflict, it can never be enough to record how *many* have died, but *who* has died: only a record of *individuals* killed can hope to represent their loss adequately.

If the circumstances and means available to casualty recording practitioners allow it, this normally means a list of names. Under the best circumstances, it can mean extended biographies and recollections of the dead by those who knew and loved them. Such meticulous casualty recording in no way precludes an analytical and statistical approach to the information it uncovers: rather, it enhances the ability to acquire meaningful understanding from the details that are known about individuals, including their demographics, and the circumstances under which they were killed.

All too often, especially in poorer countries, the casualties of armed violence, most of them civilian, are only recorded as statistics, as numbers alone. A weakness of this state of affairs is that mere numbers are much easier to dispute and argue over and, as is evidently appealing to some, can draw attention away from the victims to quarrels over whose methods are the best. The experiences of today's casualty recorders, most of them working in the civil society, and the obstacles they face as presented in this (it is fair to say) uniquely practitioner-informed book provide ample evidence that while progress is being made, perhaps the bulk of it is ahead of us.

We should also take note that no matter how fully a human life is memorialised, it cannot truly represent that life, any more than their name, alone, really indicates who the living, breathing human being was. But what the recording of the

dead – including their unequal recording across the world, particularly in official efforts – does very accurately depict is how much value we place on their loss. In that respect, the work of casualty recorders probably says as much about our society as it does about the dead.

Iraq Body Count
Every Casualty Worldwide
London, UK

Hamit Dardagan

Acknowledgements

The editors thank Kate Hofstra of the Every Casualty Worldwide for her substantial assistance in editing Chaps. 1, 3, 7 and 8. We also thank all the authors for their hard work in bringing this volume to fruition, including the members of the Casualty Recorders Network, at whose first conference the idea for this book was conceived. The editors, and authors of the chapters in Part II, also endorse the *Charter for the Recognition of Every Casualty of Armed Violence* (http://www.everycasualty.org/campaign/charter), which draws attention to the importance of accurately documenting the dead, and many of whose themes are echoed throughout this book.

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Chapter 1
General Introduction: Armed Conflicts and the Body Count: An Issue for Population Studies and Development

Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos

> *To be sure, adding up corpses and comparing the tallies across different times and places can seem callous, as if it minimized the tragedy of the victims in less violent decades and regions. But a quantitative mindset is in fact the morally enlightened one. It treats every human life as having equal value, rather than privileging the people who are closest to us or most photogenic. And it holds out the hope that we might identify the causes of violence and thereby implement the measures that are most likely to reduce it.*
>
> (Pinker and Mack 2014)

Mortality is an important indicator of development and population change. Statistically, it serves many purposes, for instance in determining life expectancy and calculating the human development index. In times of crisis, more precisely, excess mortality is a key indicator to assess both the impact of a disaster and basic needs for reconstruction. In case of war, it can help alert the international community to the necessity to provide relief and, sometimes, send troops to enforce peace. Humanitarian workers also use the statistics of excess mortality to evaluate their performance. Meanwhile, the military and jurists rely on the body count of victims to declare "war" or "peace". And policy makers and aid practitioners who link development to human security need to know how many people died in order to know how many still live.

When it comes to mass violence, however, population studies are often deficient. The encyclopaedia of Demeny and McNicoll (2003), for example, has only one entry on the demographic consequences of war. It deals with famine, genocide, and ethnic cleansing, but does not address the long-standing issue of assessing excess

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mortality in the context of armed conflicts. Demography and geopolitics are two academic fields that live apart and work is needed to bring them together. This is not to say that the impact of war on development and population changes has not been investigated. Researchers have shown that armed conflicts kill 'human resources', lead to forced migration, exacerbate capital flight, destroy infrastructures, hinder economic growth, harm the social fabric, damage industry, disrupt agricultural production, and sometimes result in reducing life expectancy.

However, the academic debate has usually focused on whether development can occur without security, or security without development (Martin and Owen 2014). Many aid practitioners thus claim that there cannot be growth without 'human security', a term coined by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) in 1994. In other words, access to capital, education, and health is not enough to foster development. Political stability, good governance, the quality of institutions and the capacity to regulate conflicts are also key issues.

Of course, the high profile of crises and wars should not obscure broader population and development questions. Mortality is both a determinant and a consequence of poverty (Pool 2007, p. 22). The usefulness of casualty records and statistics is that they not only expose the impact of armed conflicts and the challenges for reconstruction, but also potentially the mechanisms that led to the confrontation. Economists and geographers may attempt to analyse this by, for example, examining if poorer regions are more prone to violence: a very controversial assumption indeed. Jurists are concerned too, since systematic patterns of victimization according to age, gender, ethnicity, religion, wealth, citizenship, etc. can reveal avenues for legal investigation into the conduct of hostilities. Accurate casualty statistics are, furthermore, important to compare the intensity and the nature of different armed conflicts against the current claim that developing countries are more impacted by civil wars today.

Undoubtedly, the study of excess mortality in times of crisis helps to analyse the link between poverty and violence. Yet there is no general rule. The synthesis given in Chap. 2 of this book does not provide enough evidence to speculate further on the reproduction of a similar pattern over continents and centuries. Internal and international armed conflicts obviously affect development and population changes, and vice-versa. The impact is usually negative but wars sometimes improve the standards of living for the people who do not fight.[1] Moreover, statistics and averages can be misleading: for instance, killings and the exodus of refugees reduce population density and so artificially produce a rise in the gross domestic product per capita.

[1] In the UK during World War One, for instance, better welfare for pregnant women and the increasing use of dried milk, which was less likely to carry the tubercle bacillus, reduced infant mortality while stricter controls on liquor availability decreased the incidence of alcoholism (Winter 1977).

The Objectives of the Book

The originality of the following chapters, in this regard, is to investigate excess mortality as a key indicator of the impact of war on development and social changes. To do so, the analysis focuses on the body count of victims, more than rates, the population denominator and the construction of an index. The main objective is not to investigate further the link between development and security, or to disaggregate the determinants of war. Neither is it to know if poverty begets conflict, or if violence generates poverty. Rather, it is to show that the numerator of excess mortality is an important indicator for development and population studies, yet a difficult one to assess because it is prone to political manipulation. The objective of the book is also to explain how the issue of conflict casualties contributes to frame the narratives of insecurity, the poverty trap and the 'curse' of failed states in comparison to developed countries.

The following chapters thus deal with populations at risk in situations of mass violence that are alternatively qualified as war, terrorism or crime. It raises methodological issues and studies the political implications of recording or estimating the number of deaths from conflict. It shows that aid organizations involved in development and reconstruction can use such data to monitor violence, assess needs, adapt coping mechanisms and, in some cases, argue for a military intervention to save lives and/or arrest war criminals. It also reveals that the statistics of excess mortality pertain to strategic issues regarding war propaganda and legal evidence. Their political manipulation can thus affect development and reconstruction policies.

Indeed, the way to assess the numerator of excess mortality is not standardized. The body count is not a comprehensive indicator and it is often criticized as unreliable. Indeed, accurate information is difficult to obtain, a challenge that affects more generally the measurement of poverty, especially in war-torn countries. Discrepancies can produce massive variation in the analysis of armed conflicts. In the period 1960–1999, for instance, Jonathan Di John (2007, p. 977) observed that the four main datasets used by academics gave very different results, with 111 civil wars for Nils Gleditsch et al. (2002), 78 for Collier and Hoeffler (2002), 97 for Fearon and Laitin (2003), and 108 for Elbadawi and Sambanbis (2002).

Moreover, there are many disagreements regarding the definition of 'direct' or 'indirect' war victims, 'casualties', a word with a broader meaning than just 'fatalities', and the 'battle-deaths' of political 'armed conflicts' as compared to the 'homicides' of criminal acts. This book does not investigate if excess deaths result from intentional violence or 'collateral damage'. But it addresses the controversial issue of including indirect victims of war to assess excess mortality. Thus the academic debate on the levels, fluctuations and causes of violence in developing countries is very much centred on questioning methodologies to estimate rates. Clearly the absolute number of the body count has its limitations (see Box). In his seminal work, for example, Steven Pinker (2011) focuses on homicides and war fatalities to prove the decline of violence in history. But he seldom investigates non-lethal violence and tends to treat each country as one, at the risk of comparing Vanuatu to

China without considering their size. Methodological problems also plague opposite assessments. Ziad Obermeyer et al. (2008), for instance, claim that deaths caused by armed conflicts did not decline since the end of the cold war. But they ignore war-trend data before 1955 and after 1994, extrapolate from a biased convenience sample of only 13 countries, and base their conclusions on estimates that are not statistically significant (see Spagat et al. 2009). Moreover, they tend to confuse direct battle deaths and war deaths in general, as they didn't try to add "non-state" actors and "one-sided violence" to their database.

Box: Rates and Absolute Numbers
To avoid a statistical bias toward most populated countries, rates are more important than absolute numbers when attempting to compare levels of violence and the impact of war on development and population change. Yet the accuracy and the reliability of the assessment of conflict mortality depend on its numerator, the body count. Lack of international standards and obligations do not help in this regard. Moreover, the manipulation of statistics as well as perceptions can affect the decisions of development practitioners. National averages, for instance, are misleading if they obscure the lethal impact of violence in a specific region, as with the Indian case of Manipur studied in Chap. 6 of this book. Likewise, a local rebellion can obscure improvements elsewhere. In Nigeria, the national body count of victims of armed conflicts is on the rise because of the insurgency of the Boko Haram sect in the North-East. But the other regions of the Federation confirm a worldwide trend, that is, a general decline of lethal violence (Nigeria Watch 2014, p. 11). In this regard, it is important to break down averages to identify conflict zones within a country. The relationship to the density of population is also a key issue, hence the necessity of rates.

Methodologies and the Battle of Indicators

In general, methodological areas of contest pertain primarily to the civilian status of victims, their direct or indirect relationship to violence, and the difficulty of establishing a credible baseline of "normal" mortality to assess excess mortality. On one hand, some researchers and advocacy NGOs may be less concerned with details, mixing all causes of deaths to produce rough figures that alert the public to the devastating impact of armed conflicts. Michel Adam, for instance, does not refer to any source or timeframe to claim that wars killed directly or indirectly ten million people in sub-Saharan Africa, probably between 1970 and 2000 (Adam 2002). On the other hand, quantitative studies of armed conflicts pay a lot of attention to the way that statistics are collated and produced. They often rely on the number of 'battle deaths' as defined and recorded by the databases of PRIO (Peace Research Institute