Complex Political Emergencies:
A New World Disorder?

1. Introduction

Since the end of Cold War, the world has witnessed a rise in outbreaks of violent conflicts in various regions. From civil wars informer Yugoslaviaand Iraq to high profile cases in Somalia and Syria, these conflicts have developed into a prolonged crisis that show little signs of improvement. Due to the difficulties involved in both solving them and defining the root causes,the international community has bestowed upon them the label 'complex political emergencies'.

The definition of complex political emergencies as provided by Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) is "a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from an internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing United Nations country programs"[1]. In addition to this, the list by Goodhand and Hulme, featured in their book From Wars to Complex Political Emergencies, includes defining characteristics such as within-state conflicts, political origins, protracted duration, and social cleavages.[2]

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[1] *OCHA Orientation Handbook on Complex Emergencies*, (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 1999), 6.

[2] Jonathan Goodhand & David Hulme, "From Wars to Complex Political Emergencies: Understanding Conflict and Peace-building in the New World Disorder," *Third World Quarterly* Vol. 20 No.1 (1999): 16.

The term ‘complex political emergencies’ has a relatively short history. It first appeared in 1980s following the end of the Cold War to describe the widespread crisis in Africa, and gained currency during the Gulf War.[3] However, despite the wide usage, it stands remaining that there are no concrete definitions for complex political emergencies, and many of the case studies described as such have actually little in common with each other.

The concept of complex political emergenciescan be traced back to the discourse ofconflicts and wars. Clausewitz defines war as a political tool with the clear objective to “compel our enemy to do our will”[4]. This definition fits what Kaldor later describes as ‘old wars’ in her book New and Old Wars.[5] As its modern counterpart, she introducesthe concept of ‘new wars’—conflicts based on identity politics and having a fluid, multi-actor nature.[6]Of course, violent conflicts dooccur outside of war as well, and not all patterns of conflicts can be explained by examining wars alone. But the discourse of complex political emergencies is strongly related to the discourse of warfare; as a result, many characteristics of complex political emergencies echo that of the ‘new wars’ as proposed by Kaldor.

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[3]Mark Duffield, “Complex Emergencies and the Crisis of Developmentalism,”*IDS Bulletin*Vol. 25 No.4 (1994): 3.
[4]Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton University Press, 1984), 75.
[5]Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars* (Stanford Unversiity Press, 2006), 15-32.
[6]Kaldor, 8-10.

Forerunners ofthe research on complex political emergencies include Mark Duffield. His works form the basis ofmore recent theories proposed by David Keen, one of the most prominent scholars of contemporary conflicts in Africa. Duffield and Keen bothanalyzecomplex political emergencies as a newly developed phenomenon that requires a more contemporary approach; underlying their views is the assumption that modern conflicts are of different nature from past. Goodhand and Hulme also make a similar assertion, describing complex political emergencies as being emblematicof the "shift in patterns of violent conflict…which began around the middle of twentieth century"[7].

In this paper, however, I argue that complex emergenciesare not a result of changes in the nature of conflict, but a phenomenon that emerged from a shift in perception. Global trends surrounding the conflicts have forced conflictsof today to be perceived differently from those in the past. In the following section, I will examine global trends observed in the last five decades and analyze each of their influences on the Western perception of conflicts.

2. Global trends and their influences

The concept of complex political emergencies is intrinsically Western in nature;

[7]Goodhand & Hulme, 13.

since the responses to such crises are mainly initiated by Western governments and Western-based international organizations, it is through their lens that the concept of complex political emergencies has been created and defined.Thus we can trace the emergence and development of the concept by examining the global trends influential to the West. Due to limited space, I will focus on four main trends that are thought to have had the most impact: the rise of mass media, developmentalism, humanitarianism and humanitarian relief, and neoliberal capitalism.

The Rise of Mass Media

Complex political emergencies are almost always accompanied by images of poverty, famine and violence,often against innocent children. The rise of mass media, from television to journalism, has led to a widespread coverage suffering and atrocities accompanying modern conflicts.Today, people are able to know what is happening in conflict-torn countries halfway across the globe, andconstantly exposed to gruesome images of suffering.

The effects of the media on humanitarianism have been widely examined. In his book Complex Emergencies, Keen addresses the effects of the media in complexpolitical emergencies, especially regarding aid and humanitarian intervention.

He cautions that while media coverage helps raise awareness of the crises, it can also be used to reinforce Western superiority.[8] Although it remains unclear whether media reporting actually translates into effective action by the international community, the broadcasting of suffering has certainly given a humanitarian face to conflicts, creating a general public consensus that the victims are in a state of 'dire emergency' that must be addressed quickly.

The representation of suffering in the media has been further amplified by NGOs and international aid agencies. Most rely on the media togarner support and raise funds for their causes, relyingon images of suffering in conflict-torn countries to mobilize public empathy. The iconic image of a starving African child, for example, has been usedin so many campaigns directed toward developing countries it has become almost synonymous with the continent itself. When the public read about conflicts today, they see more than the military or political parties involved; they also see the sufferings of the displaced refugees and harmed civilians, adding to the impression that the conflicts are multi-casual and complex.

When comparing images associated with modern conflicts to those with past conflicts, it is important to remember that there is a myth surrounding how wars were

[8]David Keen, *Complex Emergencies* (Polity Press, 2008), 164-165

fought in the past; we cannot say, for example, that if the mass media had existed during the time when the so-called 'traditional wars' took place, with journalists on the ground and NGOs campaigning for their causes as they are today, the public would not find itself witnessing atrocities and suffering that are considered important components oftoday's complex political emergencies.

This newly acquired perceptive can be passed on from the general public on to authorities: with increasing interconnectedness in today's world, there has also been a growing need for governments to take into consideration the public opinion when dealing with modern crisis. Numerous studies have been conducted to measure what is called the CNN effect, a theory that examines the effect of media coverage on foreign interventions by the US government.[9] While a concrete correlation between the two remains yet to be found, there is no doubt that a prevalent shift in awareness on both individual and state levels has been taking place.

Moral arguments aside, it can be said that the heavy representation of suffering in the media has indeed given dimensions to conflicts that have not been acknowledged before.

[9]Piers Robinson, "The CNN effect: can the news media drive foreign policy?" *Review of International Studies* 25 (1999): 301-309.

Developmentalism

International development, one of the major tools of foreign policy, is often examined in close relation when dealing withforeign conflicts. The modern concept of development has been formedmainly in the West,starting with the inaugural address for U.S. President Harry S. Truman in 1949when he announced that benefits of industrial progress be made available for 'underdeveloped' countries, and spread through the crusades against poverty by President John F. Kennedy in the 1960s. The concept has undergone much revision since then, but the main discourse of development remains tied to poverty and its eradication.The turning point came in the 1970s, with the surge in grassroots movements by the impoverished: as freedom from poverty quickly became associated with liberation from structural oppression, development went from being a neutral, economical concept to a process that waspolitical, structural, and more complex.[10]

In Complex Emergencies and the Crisis of Developmentalism, Duffield claims that "complex emergencies challenge conventional views on development"[11], and argues the need for a more innovative approach to the crises.Underlying his argument is the assumption that the challenges faced by the conventional modernist view of

[10]Maggie Black, *The No-nonsense Guide to International Development* (New Internationalist, 2007),120-124.
[11]Duffield, 2.

development studies is caused by the rise of complex political emergencies. However, a comparisonof the histories of the discourse of development and complex political emergencies reveals a much different correlation between the two concepts:the supposed shift in the nature of conflict took place only after the development became perceived as political, and therefore difficult and complicated to achieve.This suggests an opposite picture than what Duffield paints; it is not due to complex modern conflicts that development is deemed difficult, it is because development has become perceived as multi-causal and complicated that modern conflicts are also perceived as being complex.

Past conflicts, including those considered as traditional wars, may have also posed similar challengesto developmentalism as modern conflicts now do. We would never know for sure, of course—but it is likely that modern conflicts are considered 'complex' and 'emergencies'only because of the context in which they are examined.Even Duffield admits that a large part of complex political emergencies is"not an original or apt conception"[12], indicating that the cause of the shift may lie somewhere outside its nature, possibly in the framework within which it is perceived. The more complex development is understood to be, the more complex modern conflictmay be

[12] Duffield, 3.

perceivedas well.

Humanitarianism and Humanitarian Relief

Humanitarian relief, both in the form of aid and intervention, is an essential aspect of complexpolitical emergencies, sincethey are by nature defined as a crisis that 'requires an international response'. The concept of humanitarianism gained momentum during the World Wars with the increase in international organizations, and has today become the core doctrine for external intervention in complex political emergencies.

The history of humanitarian interventionis closely linked to the emergence of the human security discourse. The discourse itself emerged in the post-Cold War era, providing an individual-based view and a wider scope of security as opposed to the traditional concept of security. This, combined with post-Cold War optimism for the potential for peace, hadstrengthened the general support for humanitarian intervention. This can be seen in the increase in emergency spending by Western states and international organizations even as development aid declined.[13] Despite thepast difficulties involving operations in Kurdistan, Bosnia, Somalia, and Rwanda, and the controversies surrounding its legality[14], humanitarian interventions, as opposed to

[13]Duffield, 3.
[14]Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Saving Strangers: Humanitarian Intervention in International*

military interventions, came to be considered as not only moral and acceptable, but necessary to resolving complex political emergencies.

Unfortunately, the language of 'human security' has often been used to legitimize Western interventions in the form of humanitarian relief. Wheeler cites the passing of Resolution 974 by the UN Security Council in 1995 as an example of this, by which"for the first time, humanitarian claims were being advanced and legitimated by members as justification for the use of force"[15]. This trend of humanitarianism has not only helped empower international aid agencies, but also Western governments in their foreign policies. The discourse on development itself has always been eerily reflective of the colonial period; the people of South, instead of savages requiring 'civilization', have now become helpless beings deserving 'development'. Even the term 'third world', still commonly used, is strongly reminiscent of the Cold War power dynamics.[16]

In the last several decades, as security became increasingly connected to development through the concept of human security, the rhetoric surrounding humanitarian relief has become even more prominent. The language of 'failing states' exemplifies this:claiming a state as 'failing' gives a greater legitimacy to humanitarian intervention by Western states, as it is harder to argue against a breach of sovereignty

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Society(Oxford University Press, 2000), 1.
[15]Wheeler,185.
[16]Black, 16.

when the state in question is thought to be have little or no government authority at all.

Yet a fundamental question regarding humanitarianism remains unanswered:what qualifies as ‘humanitarian intervention’, and what exactly is a ‘failing state’? Both these terms are elusive and ill-defined, and more often than not shrouded inthe rhetoric of justification. This has led to difficulties defining the purpose and success of interventions in complex political emergencies, which may have contributed to the perception of modern conflicts as having no beginning or end.

Neoliberal capitalism

The fall of Soviet Union was perceived by many as the triumph of capitalism. Since then, neoliberal capitalism has become the dominant paradigm of the world, with ever increasing pressure on developing countries to open up their markets to the global economy. Its influence extends into other spheresof life, as economic values increasingly replace social and cultural ones. This trend can also be seen inthe conflict zoneswhere government authority has collapsed: capitalistic values gain currency as social and political institutions deteriorate.

Conflict entrepreneursare prime examples. Embodied by people such as arms dealers, warlords and drug dealers, conflict entrepreneurs often sustain violence and

instability for personal economic benefits. Under the capitalistic values that have become so pervasive following the end of Cold War, the actions of these players are considered rational. A recent case of this phenomenon would be the allegations of wide-scale food aid theft that surfaced in Somalia in August 2011: on top of the ongoing crisis involving violent conflicts and famine, food aid was found being stolen by corrupt businessmen and sold to the refugees.[17]The emergence of new economicalactors added a complex dimension to the already difficult situation, increasing the need for a solution that expanded beyond a mere humanitarian response.

Studies on complex political emergencies often cite the presence of conflict entrepreneurs as an important evidence of the complexities involved in modern conflicts that had not existed in conventional warfare.[18]It should be noted, however, that war profiteering itself is far from modern: arms dealing is a centuries-old trade, and was used asa popular tool for winning allegiance during the Cold War era, before the emergence of complex political emergencies.

Rather, it is the amount of influence capitalistic values have gained over conflicts that have altered the context in which conflicts are examined, from

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[17] "Somali: Food Aid stolen, inquiry finds." *New York Times*. August 15, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/16/world/africa/16briefs-foodaidstolen.html (accessed December 8, 2011)

[18] Goodhand & Hulme, 18.

theconventional perceptionas a two-actor game with clear rules to a multi-dimensional crisis whose solution appears to lie outside a purely military or political response.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined four global trends: mass media, developmentalism, humanitarianism, and liberal capitalism. In combination, they have contributed to the change in how conflicts are perceived as having changed from being clear-cut both in the problem and the solution, to a phenomenon that is more obscure and complicated. Because these trends have gained momentum only after the Cold War, theyhave created the illusion that the nature of conflict itself has changed—but none of the fourtrends indicate that there has been an actual change in the nature itself.

Analyzing complex political emergencies as a new form of conflictmay be effective in searching for innovative solutions, but it runs the risk of failing to acknowledge the influence of past wars in today's crises, and thereby failing to properly address the root causes. One could argue that many of the complex political emergencies are in fact extensions ofpast wars, and the common belief that traditional wars before and during Cold War had a beginning and an end is no more than an illusion created by Western perception and solidified by history.

By examining complex political emergencies not as an indicator of changes in conflict itself, but rather of a shift in perception caused by global trends involving technology, economy, and ideas of development and humanitarianism, we would be able to acquire a clearer vision of the true nature of modern conflicts and what can be done to effectively address them.

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