

STRUCTURED SUMMARY

DYNAMIC LIVELIHOODS IN CONFLICT AND RECURRENT CRISES

Stories of change from Ethiopia and South Sudan

Leigh Mayhew, Simon Levine, Abraham Diing Akoi, Fekadu Adugna Tufa and Caitlin Sturridge

Motivation

Livelihoods in conflicts and recurrent crises are commonly seen to be changing. Yet analysis of change and innovation in such situations is usually missing from assessments that underpin support for livelihoods. Support would probably be more effective if based on a better understanding of how people already seek to innovate and adapt their livelihoods.

Purpose

We aimed to identify the patterns of changes people make in response to crisis and conflict; factors facilitating change; conditions favouring local adaptation and its spread; and constraints to people's own livelihood changes — and whom they most affect.

Approach and methods

Stories were collected from people in Mekelle (Ethiopia), and Bor and Nzara counties (South Sudan). Stories of positive change were identified through group discussions and snowball sampling (where each informant led to another). Men and women were invited to tell their own stories of how they had innovated or adapted to make a living, and from where their ideas came.

Informants were identified purposefully, to document success: they were not a random sample.

Findings

- Change is not linear and not always obviously transformational. People were constantly looking for what can work best for them within the range of what they thought was possible. Sometimes they adopted ideas for a short time then moved to something else — perhaps in reaction to a change in circumstances, or perhaps as a stepping stone towards future changes.
- The flow of ideas from place to place was the most important driver of change. People learned from others as they moved to new places or from people moving into their area. Personal networks helped spread ideas and knowledge, and encouraged people to try something new.

- Capital and skills matter for change, but these can be acquired. The prerequisite for change was the confidence to take risks. People gained confidence in different ways: from life experience, from positive examples set by others, by taking small steps, and by working in groups.
- Even in the most challenging of circumstances, some people took risks and tried out new ideas. However, circumstances – for example, market conditions, opportunities, access to capital, networks of contacts – set limits to what people could undertake.
- Change happened when people thought differently about what was possible and about the value of change. The most dynamic situations were seen when people had deliberately embraced change for the first time, rather than accepting previous cultural limitations, such as women's roles. Individuals can catalyse wider change by setting examples and challenging societal expectations.

Policy implications

In conflict and recurrent crises, people are changing their livelihoods accordingly: those seeking to help them need to appreciate these local changes and their rationale. Rather than offering ready-made solutions, such as teaching generic business skills, outsiders should help people to unlock opportunities – for example, by learning skills from their peers, meeting peers and sharing ideas with them, and by helping people to find ways of innovating that have lower risks or lower costs.

Since people need to continually adapt, there is unlikely to be a single set of skills that will remain relevant. More important than offering a specific package of skills is encouraging people to find the skills relevant to them and to help them put those skills to work.

Every situation is different. People view their goals from different starting points, with different objectives and in different cultural and economic contexts. This poses a challenge: how to offer support that matches people and contexts, but also to reach scale?

Funded by



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.