

RESEARCH STATEMENT

I am an applied micro-economist interested in development and international economics, with a specific interest in conflict. My work focuses, first, the effects of conflict on the individual level, and second, on the effects of conflict on an international level.

The first strand of my work focuses on understanding how various forms of conflict impact micro-economic outcomes on an individual level.

A. Ideological and social dimensions of conflict. Not all effects of war and conflict are tangible: there is a new and growing field of development and conflict studies that focuses on the role of ideology and religion (Hirose et al., 2017), rebel governance (Arjona et al., 2015, among others), and social cohesion (Rubin, 2020) during conflict. The topic of my job market paper is in line with this growing interest in the ‘non-violent’ aspects of conflict. In the paper *“Education during conflict: the effect of territorial occupation by insurgents on schooling”*, I study the short and long-run effect of insurgents’ occupation on school participation. I focus on the case of the temporary occupation of territory in North East Nigeria by Boko Haram as a quasi-natural experiment, comparing children exposed to the occupation and insurgency with children solely affected by the insurgency. Using a difference-in-differences approach, the results show that children exposed to Boko Haram’s occupation experience significant educational losses in the short and long-run. The effects cannot be explained by well-known mechanisms found in the literature. However, I show that social identity theory, peer effects and social pressure, and violent enforcement of anti-educational rules seem to play a role. By identifying individuals that might be most at risk of experiencing a large and persistent educational set-back, this work can aid policies aimed at improving educational outcomes for children in conflict zones.

In work in progress (*“Religious violence and the spread of ideology”*), as an extension of my job market paper and relating to the significant increase in so-called religious violence (Crisis group, 2016; Global Terrorism Index, 2022), I examine the role between (reported) religion and exposure to violence by rebel groups that self-identify with specific religions. Specifically, the project focuses on the question whether being confronted with sets of ideas, convictions and ideologies – such as religion – through conflict leads to alignment of (reported) individual religion with the religion of perpetrators. Such an alignment could be either due to a genuine shift in preferences or strategic, as individuals try to avoid potential retaliation. I compare violence carried out by self-representing religious militias to violence carried out by groups that do not align themselves with a religion. Using data on various countries that includes the self-reported religion of respondents, I am interested in seeing whether, as in my job market paper, social identity theory, network and peer effects, social pressure, and intimidation play a role in the transmission of ideology.

B. Income shocks, fragility and development in conflict situations. Conflict can create opportunities to reap benefits for some agents, while others are negatively affected. This adds to the complexity of such situations, making it more difficult to disentangle effects empirically. For example, evidence indicates that the presence of coca in Colombian municipalities increases violence, while changes to the price of coca products can have both negative and positive effects on conflict. I address this in *“Cultivation and competition in Colombia: disentangling the effects of coca price changes on violence”* (Under review). Using an Early Stage Researcher’ (ESR) grant that I was awarded for this project, I relied on novel data on local prices of coca products, production and supply chains, to disentangle returns to employment in the agricultural and in the criminal sector and examine the effects of changes to these returns. I find suggestive evidence that higher income for cultivators leads to higher school attendance rates; but increasing returns in the criminal sector leads to school dropout rates, more violence, and increased competition among armed groups.

These results show the impact income shocks have on especially poorer, lower-income, more fragile, households. Extreme poverty is increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected situations (World Bank, 2015) and linked to food insecurity. In ongoing work (*“Shocks to international food prices: food security in sub-Saharan Africa”*) I aim to exploit the international fluctuations in the prices of various food products to examine local effects on food security and violence. First, using very detailed individual level panel data on month-by-month food security, prices in local and international markets, and household income, I examine the link between international prices of crops and food insecurity. Second, I consider the effects of food insecurity on an individual level. Do individuals from households that report (temporary) food insecurity have lower educational outcomes, are they more likely to work, or suffer health consequences? As food security is often linked to violence, specific attention will be paid to the role that violence plays as a multiplier or interaction effect on these outcomes.

The second strand of my work considers conflict on an international level and in a broader sense of the word, within a framework of international economics and political economy.

A. Political economy and democracy. Related to my interest in the ideological and social dimensions of conflict, I am interested in the relationship between (engagement in) (violent) political conflict and social identity, social engagement, and support for democracy and electoral processes. With respect to this topic, there are two research projects – in early stages – that I am working on. The first project, *“It was better back in my day: heterogeneity in support for democracy”*, in cooperation with Tuuli Tähtinen, focuses on explaining significant heterogeneity across age groups with respect to support for democracy and electoral participation. This project considers to what extent (violent) protests and exposure to conflict can explain these differences. A second project focuses on the ‘paradox of repression’. In this project I consider how the outcomes of protests and governments’ response to protests vary across countries, and the role of protests as a mechanism to achieve economic, political and social goals.

B. Conflict on an international level. I examine conflict and war in the more traditional sense of the word in “*Estimating the Alliance Effect: a Synthetic Control Approach*” (*Defence studies*, 2022). In a time of rising threat, recurring discussions about burden sharing within NATO and almost twenty years after the start of the ‘war on terrorism’, this paper explores a novel idea in the field of alliances and defense spending: the effect of alliance-membership on defense spending in response to a threat. I find that both large and small states have stronger (positive) response to threat as NATO members, compared to if they would not have been part of the alliance.

C. Conflict as a mismatch between beliefs, reputation, and types. In “*Reputation signals and contract-intensive industries*” (ongoing, co-authored with Mustafa Kaba), using industry level data on exports for both high and low contract-intensive industries, we provide empirical evidence that supports the reputation trap theory (Levine, 2021). Summarizing, assume that an agent who was initially a bad type becomes a good type. The theory states that the other agents’ beliefs on the type of the first agent do not change and this agent can thereby become ‘trapped’, unless she can send a credible signal that she is, indeed, a good type. Our preliminary results seem to support the theory.

This work is related to another paper, “*The Olympic effect: fact or fiction?*” (*Under review*) (co-authored with Mustafa Kaba) that focuses on explaining the use of signalling by countries to increase export levels. In the paper we examine the puzzling historical interest in hosting the Olympic games, and the recent trend of withdrawals of countries’ bids. This recent development casts doubt on the existence of the so-called Olympic effect: the positive impact of the Olympics on international trade. We show that the Olympic effect is more pronounced for countries that stand to gain from an international publicity, and present the novel insight that a substantial positive Olympic effect is only associated with earlier games.