

MICROCON Kick-off Workshop Report

Workshop held at the Institute of Development Studies, UK
28th - 29th March 2007

Introduction

The MICROCON consortium came together for the first time on 28th – 29th March at the Institute of Development Studies. The main purpose of the Kick-Off Workshop was to discuss the Conceptual Framework, Research Methods, Data Collection, Research Ethics and the Gender Action Plan. A number of other issues were discussed such as the dissemination plan, the training and mobility element of the programme and some management systems.

Conceptual Framework

Dr. Michalis Lianos gave a talk on the sociological aspect of the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework will need to be able to take in a range of points of view, such as rational choice theory, game theory or evolutionary theory. ‘Social control’ could be a key concept drawing these ideas together, i.e. the sum of behavioural constraints that belonging to a group entails for its participants. This concept is useful because it is an established intellectual concept that brings together the negotiations that take place between daily practice and social culture, the peace-based dynamics.

Prof. Mansoob Murshed gave a talk on the ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’ explanations of conflict onset. He concluded that greed seems to be important in cross-country analyses and explains persistence better; whereas grievance is important in country case studies, and explains onset better. Greed and grievance can and do co-exist, and because one breeds the other a model of their simultaneous determination is required, along with the contribution of poverty and institutional quality.

Discussions on this topic included how to combine quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis, with the latter being particularly useful in shedding light on ‘quantitative patterns’ and on mechanisms. The importance of explicitly incorporating an analysis of power was emphasised, as was the importance of testing concepts against empirical work.

Research Methods

In this session, MICROCON Deputy Director, Dr. Philip Verwimp discussed how to turn concepts into the empirical, how to develop good data to be used throughout the MICROCON process, and how to measure data in the field. An important objective for MICROCON will be to develop and adapt research methods collectively over the course of the programme. It will be important to take an integrated approach, and to think about what insights can be gained for policy before going out to the field.

He outlined an ideal situation, where household-level data exists from before the conflict, and one can attempt to interview the same households in order to create panel data. Quantitative data should be combined with qualitative data in order to get a deeper explanation of processes. In ‘second best’ situations there are methods that can compensate for shortcomings, but design here is especially important. For example, recall questions can be used, and these can be particularly useful for demographic questions.

In the discussion it was noted that research methods should be determined by the research questions; that it was sometimes difficult to define exactly when a conflict 'started'; and that to build bridges between the different disciplines in the programme it will be important that everybody speaks the same 'language'.

Data and Measurement

The purpose of this part of MICROCON is to identify and compile existing datasets to be used in the programme, and to develop new methods for measurement, whilst making sure that both of these tasks are grounded in the conceptual framework. Dr. Jon Pedersen identified a range of challenges related to data in MICROCON, which were: (i) incomplete conceptualisation; (ii) selection bias; (iii) looking at trends over time; (iv) comparison within settings, between settings and across time; (v) the conflict between rights-based approaches and variation approaches; (vi) system delimitation and (vii) bad data.

The discussions in this session pointed out the need for data on economic / political / institutional mechanisms and household identities; that an interest in the actual functioning of violence is a fairly new research phenomenon that governments often do not want to approve; and that surveys are not necessarily always the best instrument for capturing reactions to violence.

Research Ethics

The objective of MICROCON's ethical guidelines is the ethical conduct of all of our research. Dr. Philip Verwimp pointed out that this is not self evident, it demands particular effort, and there may be some tension between research interests and ethical conduct. He emphasised the importance of ensuring the safety of both researchers and respondents, and a number of procedures to be followed to ensure this.

There will be an ethical scrutiny committee in place to ensure compliance with MICROCON's ethical scrutiny guidelines. This will consist of six senior researchers, and will make decisions with a 2/3 majority. Each researcher will be required to submit a detailed Research Outline Document, before conducting fieldwork, which will include plans to ensure the security of respondents and researchers.

The difficulty of establishing a policy on the compensation in the light of different cultural settings was discussed, as was the importance of ethical requirements for those working with secondary data.

Gender Action Plan

Dr. Colette Harris started by pointing out that MICROCON's work has to abide by European Union guidelines on gender equality, which have a number of stipulations, and that gender must be included in all programme outputs. However, we would like to go beyond the EU's guidelines, and bring out specific relations of masculinity and femininity in our research, rather than just tackling 'women's issues'. Gender is less of a cross-cutting issue than one that permeates all aspects of society and all of our lives – as such it should be considered in all areas of research and policy.

Colette went on to present lists of gender characteristics for men and women that participants in gender training had drawn up in different parts of the world. There are striking similarities between them, especially in relation to masculinity and aggression, multiple sex partners, etc. and femininity linked to submission, and chastity/virginity.

In all the Work Packages gender plays a significant role as they all tackle issues that are differentially experienced by males and females, for example land tenure, poverty or refugee status.

There was some discussion on what exactly the phrase 'peace-based normativity' means, and to what extent it adequately captures the lived reality of women's lives which may often be more violent in times of 'peace' than in times of war.

Other issues

Other, non-research issues were also discussed. MICROCON Deputy Director, Prof. Tilman Brück presented MICROCON's dissemination plan. Feedback was sought from consortium members, who discussed a range of issues including what kind of support they would find useful in disseminating their work; how to get the news media interested in research and how to disseminate to audiences with limited internet connectivity.

Dr. Philip Verwimp presented the Training and Mobility Plan. The aims of this strategy are: to train young researchers in new methods and concepts for micro level conflict analysis; to encourage the mobility of young researchers; and to contribute to the deepening and widening of the European Research Area, by ensuring an effective transmission of policy and scientific knowledge.

Finally, Theresa Jennings, MICROCON Manager, talked about Programme Management and Finance, touching on MICROCON's organisational structure, internal communication procedures, finance and reporting.