News Item, 15/09/2009, Berlin/Gütersloh: Are violent cultural conflicts becoming more prevalent?

Bertelsmann Stiftung study shows that cultural differences can promote conflict, but are normally not the underlying cause

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The number of cultural conflicts has increased dramatically over the past 25 years. At the same time, such conflicts are extremely prone to becoming violent. Conversely, conflict is not the usual result when groups with opposing values come in contact with each other or when cultural fragmentation occurs, i.e., when groups with different languages, religions or historical backgrounds coexist within a given society. Cultural conflicts, moreover, are primarily a domestic as opposed to an international phenomenon. Those are the key findings from a comprehensive study recently carried out by the Bertelsmann Stiftung designed to identify the causes of global conflict.

Data collected by researchers at the University of Heidelberg on all global conflicts since 1945 served as the basis for the study, along with the researchers' assessments of the conflicts' causes and intensities. According to the data, the number of conflicts arising from a cultural context has increased dramatically and is now at an all time high. Over the entire observation period (1945 to 2007), 44 percent of all conflicts examined were of a cultural nature. Since the mid-1980s, moreover, the number of cultural conflicts has even surpassed the number of non-cultural disputes. Since the end of the Cold War, domestic religious and ethno-historical conflicts in particular have increased, such as those in the former Yugoslavia, in the southern Caucasus region and in Sri Lanka. Although when it comes to non-cultural conflicts the number of disputes and the level of conflict have declined, cultural strife has exhibited exactly the opposite tendency, i.e., it has become more prevalent and more violent.

The study's findings also show that cultural cleavages take place most often in a domestic context – in four cases out of five – and only rarely betweens nation-states. "The 'clash of civilizations' that has been prophesied by many, such as between the Western and Islamic worlds, is not taking place on an international level," says Malte Boecker, Senior Expert at the

Bertelsmann Stiftung, summing up the findings. "At the same time, cultural factors must be taken more seriously as aggravating factors than in the past, especially among actors favoring a dialogue-based approach. Still, cultural factors are not 'master variables' capable of explaining global conflict in and of themselves."

The study shows, for example, that other factors also play a key role. For instance, the presence of a "youth bulge" – when a given society is home to a large number of young males between the ages of 15 to 24, relative to the overall population – increases the likelihood that conflict will ensue. Other influential factors include economic development, economic growth, arable land mass and the degree of democratization. Inflows of immigrants, conversely, have no discernible effect. According to the study, one particularly inflammatory combination occurs when a country has both a sizeable youth bulge and a high degree of linguistic fragmentation. When both conditions are present, the chance that a highly violent cultural conflict will ensue increases dramatically. At the same time, the study's findings do not support the assumption that the greater a country's religious fragmentation, the higher the number of conflicts it will be susceptible to, i.e., in terms of the religions present there, both highly fragmented and highly homogeneous nations tend to be relatively free of conflict.

Despite the clear increase in the number of cultural cleavages, the study's authors are not pessimistic. "Relative to the number of potential conflicts, the number of actual violent conflicts is minuscule," says Prof. Aurel Croissant of the University of Heidelberg. According to Croissant, the comparative study also reveals no causality between cultural fragmentation, conflict and violence. "There's no combination of cultural elements that automatically tips a country into conflict or violence," he says. "While cultural background can be seen as a given, cultural conflicts are not."

About the study:
The study was jointly carried out by the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the University of Heidelberg's Institute for Political Science under the direction of Prof. Aurel Croissant and Prof. Uwe Wagschal. It is based on information supplied by CONIS database, which quantifies global conflicts since 1945. The study takes an empirical look at which conflicts are directly influenced by cultural factors and the extent to which those factors correlate to the level of violence. Its findings are meant to help promote cultural dialogue and understanding among the globe's diverse cultures.

For more information see sidebar on the right.