

Chris Blattman: Hi. My name's Chris Blattman. I'm a professor at the University of Chicago. I'm gonna start today talking about some work that I began doing in Liberia about 10 years ago. Essentially, what I was trying to do when I started working in Liberia 10 years ago was to look for ways to stop this kind of thing from happening. So what you see here is a picture of a young man who is ... the picture was taken in 2011, and it was taken in Cote d'Ivoire. So this young man is a fighter. And he has come as a mercenary from Liberia to fight for one of the sides in the early days of the war that was brewing in the country after a controversial election.

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And the kind of interventions that I was looking at and that I was studying in Liberia, a lot of them have the same flavor. A lot of them were looking at young men like this and trying to give them economic opportunities, trying to give them jobs, trying to provide them with better livelihoods in farming. And if you looked at the programs directed at his commanders, or even the most senior warlords, they all had an economic flavor as well. And essentially, what they were trying to do is they were trying to give these people an economic stake in a peaceful future.

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Now, behind that solution was a definition of a problem. Behind these economic solutions was an idea that the cause of conflict was that there were a lot of young men and commanders and warlords who did not have an economic stake in peace. And that's a legitimate point of view. That's something that I spent a lot of my last 10 years or 15 years studying. There's some truth to that. But the thing that I learned is that this is a very incomplete picture of conflict. This is a very incomplete picture of why we have conflict from the lowest level to the highest level. And I was missing something deeper. And if you took one thing away from today's talk, I'd want you to think about conflict as bargaining breaking down.

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And that means that peace building is about helping bargains get made and stay made. And I've learned this in an unexpected place, studying an unexpected thing, at a very unexpected level. I've learned it working in a Liberian village that looked a lot like these. These are hundreds of small rural villages where we were working that are very far from anywhere where they can resolve a conflict should they have one with their neighbor. And like anywhere in the world, disputes and conflicts are ever present.

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So it so happens, in a village, people's most valuable asset was their land. It was the land they were farming on. It was the land that they had their market stall on, or maybe the land where they built their home. And there are disputes all of the time about these assets. There are inheritance disputes. There are disputes over the border. Maybe a stream changes course, and where is my farmland and where's yours? There's disputes between landlords and tenants as there are anyplace. And what made these villages unusual was not the number or the frequency of disputes, because disputes are present in every society all of the time. What was different is, first, a lot of these disputes turned violent.

Now most of the time, that was a punch in the nose, or trampling somebody's crops, or breaking their fence. So some ways it seems harmless, but sometimes

[00:03:30] those disputes would escalate. They could escalate into a village level conflict between different ethnic groups or between different sects. They could even escalate regionally. And so this is serious. Also, these disputes, a lot of them just didn't get resolved. A year later, two years later, something like one quarter of these disputes would be unresolved. This is a problem any time. It means there's more opportunities for violence, more opportunities for misunderstanding. But it also means that this is people's most valuable asset probably being unproductively used because it's in dispute.

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So why was it that these people were having such a hard time resolving these disputes? Well there's two answers. And one part of the answer is that different parties had different information and beliefs. So to think about this, I want to think of most of you have probably been in a market place, somewhere haggling over a good. And think about what it's like. You don't know the exact quality of this good. You don't know how much the seller wants to sell it. You don't know how good or bad of a sales day it's been, what kind of price they need to get, what they paid for it. And this person is trying to sort of figure out how much you're willing to pay, how long you'd be willing to hold out, how much you're worth.

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And then, what you both do, what you both sort of intuitively lead to is the strategy that the game theorist working it out mathematically would tell you was your optimal choice. Your optimal strategy in the situation is to each stake out an extreme position. You say something absurdly low. They say something absurdly high. And gradually, you concede until you maybe find a bargain somewhere in between those two distant points. And that can take a long time. And so, at the very least, this imperfect information is gonna make bargaining long and drawn out. But if you've done this before, you realize that a lot of those bargains break down. You may never find that bargaining space. Also, emotion intrudes. Is he lying to me? Is he trying to mess around with me? And emotions can run high. And you can both walk off quite upset.

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Now put this into a much higher stakes dispute where it's much harder to walk away, at least permanently. And you can imagine ... how much is this land worth? There's a lot of imperfect information. How much is this worth to them? How long are they willing to hold out? And we're gonna stake out our extreme positions and gradually concede, but all sorts of ... besides the usual things that would make emotions run high, then ... my fence broke last night. Was that the wind or an animal or did they have something to do with that? My child is sick. Did they cast the evil eye on my child? There's lots of opportunities for misunderstanding. And so, at the very least, this is gonna draw out disputes and maybe lots of opportunities to break down.

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The other problem is that it's gonna be hard to commit to some bargains, even if you can find them. And that's gonna be because it's hard for one party or the other to commit to that solution. There's gonna be a commitment problem. In any situation where power might change or circumstances might change tomorrow, you want both parties to have an incentive to keep that bargain. And if beforehand, at the time you're bargaining, you can foresee that under no circumstances does

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this person have any incentive to keep this bargain, well what's the point of even making that bargain? And the fewer incentives the other side has to commit to a bargain, the less likely that bargain is going to be made.

[00:07:00] In the context of these land disputes, here you see two parties arguing their land dispute in front of a village mayor. One of the many things that makes commitment difficult in this situation is that this man, if he doesn't like the outcome and the woman does, he can go to the counsel of elders because there's another authority that has some legitimacy to govern land disputes. She doesn't like that so she'll go to this guy's boss, the regional mayor, or she'll go to the courts, or she'll go somewhere else, and on and on and on. So you can see, as they shop different forums, why it's hard to commit because one of them can renege from that commitment at any time.

[00:07:30] And what I'm describing to you are classic impediments to bargaining that are used to understand break downs in everything from labor bargains and strikes to international warfare to, frankly, if you went to a marriage counselor with your spouse. You would encounter a lot of the same problems, and they would walk you through a set of practices and skills and norms to try to actually overcome this asymmetric information, overcome the difficulty of commitment. And that's exactly what we were studying. We were studying an attempt to do exactly this in these 250 Liberian villages. They were introducing an alternative dispute resolution program.

[00:08:00] Alternative dispute resolution is a set of skills and practices and norms. To accomplish these things, it was a mass education program in hundreds of villages. And alternative dispute resolution was created in the US. It was created in the US to get a lot of civil disputes out of the courts and settled without external enforcement. It was helping people find self enforcing bargains that don't require an external enforcer, judges, and the law to step in. It helps that this ADR and this informal resolution operates in the shadow of the law. They can also take it to the court, if need be.

[00:08:30] The challenge in a place like Liberia, especially a rural village very distant from the courts, is it operates in the shadow of nothing. And that, if anything, makes these kinds of practices even more valuable. Because what was this doing, or first I should say what it accomplished was that it cleared ... within a year to two years, it cleared the entire backlog of disputes in most of these villages. And it reduced the amount of violence in these disputes by about a third. And we've seen that persist by as long as three years by now. And what did it do? It explicitly educated and built awareness of a set of skills, practices, and norms in the population that would promote information exchange and would provide commitment.

[00:09:00] So besides teaching neighbors to proactively mediate other disputes, to teach people not only how to communicate more effectively and the virtues of communicating more effectively, but convincing the community that they ought to shame those who don't. Shame the liars. Shame the people who conceal. And promote and give a claim and respect to those who communicate openly and who

don't bargain in this particular way. It would also teach people tips and tricks to cool tempers, things as simple as learning to count to ten. And it would do this by practice, and practice, and practice over months in these villages.

[00:10:00] The second thing it did, it would help to sort of build a norm in the community that violence was not acceptable, that defecting from a bargain was not acceptable, that shopping forums was not acceptable, and this too would be rewarded or punished with praise and shame. This is a microcosm of conflict and conflict resolution at much much higher levels. You can see this in studies of the mediation of wars. Now, the mediation of wars, sending people into ... once a truce begins, to help mediate the discussion between both sides in a civil war is a very very different level. It's not the kind of thing you can run a randomized evaluation of very easily. And it's not the kind of thing where we have hard evidence. It's very hard to know if it's effective.

But one political scientist named [inaudible 00:10:45] made an observation. He said, "Well, it turns out that throughout the year, from January to December, there's a fairly steady number of wars ending in the sense of their ending in a truce and talks are beginning."

[00:11:00] And so, talks are beginning at a steady rate throughout the year. But not all of them get mediators. Many talks never get a mediator. They're merely negotiated between both parties. But talks that start in the summer, truces that begin in May, June, July, and August are much more likely to get a mediator. And why is that? It's because European and American and other western diplomats and parliamentarians and such are on summer holidays and they have more time. And it turns out that once you analyze the data and you crunch the numbers, you see not only is mediation more likely, but if your truce happened to begin in June, July, or August that it's actually much more likely to reach a resolution, and that those resolutions are more lasting.

[00:12:00] And when people like [inaudible 00:11:39] not only crunch the numbers, but go and study all of the cases and follow mediators around, they see them doing many of these things. They see them structuring bargaining. They see them so that people stay at the table. They see them cooling tempers. They see them seeking out the important information and relaying it to all sides. And they see them promoting settlements where there's some hope of credible commitment. You can look at peacekeeping exactly the same way, except peacekeepers have a wider tool kit. Page Fortna, who's another political scientist, has ... again, you can't run a randomized control trial with peacekeepers, and you hope that nature might provide some sort of experiment or evidence for you to at least look at.

[00:12:30] And what she noted is first, if you look at how long after an armistice or a ceasefire that you have how many years of peace, the places that have one kind of peacekeeping mission or another are much less likely to break out in war one, two, three, four, five, six, seven years after this armistice. But those places that don't receive peacekeepers are much more likely to revert to conflict. Now if you're cynical or a little bit suspicious, you might say, "Well, are the Canadians or the

Bangladesh really going to send peacekeepers to the hard places? I don't want my people killed. And maybe this is just a function of their picking winners."

[00:13:00] If anything, the thing points to the opposite. Peacekeepers appear to go to the harder cases. They're not going to the full victories. They're not going to the places where negotiations seem to be preceding a pace. They go to some of the more irresolvable conflicts on average. And so, if anything, this understates probably the effectiveness of peace keeping.

[00:13:30] So, what are peace keepers doing? Well like [inaudible 00:13:24], Page Fortna not only crunches the numbers, she goes and she follows around these these missions and she looks at different case studies. And she sees the same thing. They are [inaudible 00:13:33] forces, setting up buffer zones, monitoring compliance, monitoring any violations, communicating all of these things to both sides. And then, when there are skirmishes or accidents or violations, they're informing people about them, they are preventing them, and sometimes if necessary they're using the force of arms to keep them from happening and keep them from escalating. I saw this myself in Liberia, when one of the villages where we were running this incident had a murder, which escalated into tensions between two tribes, which escalated into riots in the village, which escalated into riots in the district, which escalated into riots in the county capitol where the vice president is getting pelted with rocks inside a building.

[00:14:00] And what are the force that brought this down, because there are no Liberian police at this time? It's the Pakistani peace keeping mission 20 miles away that comes in and settle things down, and then puts leaders from both sides on their radio stations to sort of give people accurate information about what's actually going on. This is a picture I took in one of my first days of Liberia. And it's the Ministry of Justice under construction. It's an amazing metaphor for what was going on, what the government was trying to do, and what the international community was trying to foster. And many good policies, like mediation, like peace keeping, like rebuilding the institutions of peaceful bargaining or justice, like the ministry of justice, like the police ... when you look at the set of policies and interventions, it seemed to have a successful track record either because they've got a good reputation, or because the evidence, like what I've shown you, is coming out in favor of them being highly effective at promoting peace.

[00:15:00] It's because they usually address information asymmetries or the commitment problem, and help sustainable bargains get made. So building justice and police institutions is one. Another is decentralizing political and fiscal power. If you think about a place like Liberia, this is an incredibly centralized political system, where the president is essentially a winner takes all position. And that's not a terrible description of nearly every African regimes, and many other regimes in low income countries around the world, very very centralized political systems. And this creates a winner takes all system, which by definition creates a commitment problem. The winner that takes all now has the ability to renege on any other set of agreements. And that's the history of Liberia. And that's the history of Liberian conflict.

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[00:16:00] If you read former President Amos Sawyer's own analysis, because he's a political scientist in addition to being a politician. If you read his analysis of the Liberian conflict, it's all about over centralized power and the commitment problems that this creates leading to the war in Liberia. So decentralizing power at any level is a way to sort of provide the means to provide credible commitment, because it's no longer a winner takes all situation. Likewise, there's the obvious kinds of credible commitments that would come from guaranteeing post war well being of warlords and fighters. So if they each know they have an economic stake in the future, they're more likely to accept that bargain, but the credibility of that commitment is very important.

[00:16:30] So if, as post conflict aid community, or as a conflict aid community, we make credible aid commitments and we have effective programs that deliver on these promises, then we have something that enhances credible commitment. If we have aid and post conflict commitments that aren't worth the paper they're written on, and we don't have effective means of generating economic growth, or

[00:17:00] guaranteeing political or economic power for some of these combatants, then it's going to enhance the commitment problem. It's going to make the bargain harder to get made.

[00:17:30] Other policies that we do all of the time, in conflict and post conflict situations, don't seem to have any logic at all in this bargaining frame. This doesn't mean they're not useful. They might achieve another goal. They might achieve one of the other causes of conflict. There's no one cause of violence. There's no one cause of societal break down, but questions get raised. Short term road work and cash flow work programs are universal. What does this accomplish besides putting money in people's pockets? What credible commitments or promises can this be made to anyone? I think the answer is not much. Community driven reconstruction and community driven development, which is in some sense the donor's greatest ... in some sense, one of their largest programs right now, where they're dropping money out of helicopters essentially into villages in order to build public infrastructure.

[00:18:00] Not only does this not seem to have a clear logic in terms of improving bargaining, and improving bargains getting made, it's actually giving a relatively unexpected resource for people to compete with. It could actually accentuate some problems. Counterinsurgency operations is a tactic. It's actually a tactic in fighting to weaken your other side, at which point you begin bargaining. It doesn't make bargaining any easier. Arguing from a weak or strong or middle position, the fundamental challenges to bargaining still exist. So it may just serve a national security or national interest objective of strengthening your hand in bargaining, but this is not a peace building strategy.

[00:18:30] A useful rule of thumb in conflict: Those of you who are going to go out and make programmatic decisions or think about interventions, if you walked away from this just thinking one thing it would be to remember to ask yourself this question the next time you're thinking about what should we do. Does this intervention make it easier or harder for both sides to make and keep a bargain? Am I promoting the

exchange of information? Am I facilitating commitment or am I making commitment and information exchange more difficult?

[00:19:00] And this is really an example of a much sort of broader question that I think we have to ask in any policy situation, which is some ways is a seldom asked question, where we have lots and lots of solutions, but we very seldom have articulated the problem that we're trying to solve. And very often, when you articulate that problem, you suddenly start to realize that perhaps that's not the right problem or perhaps the solution that I'm proposing is not the right solution for that.

[00:19:30] So ask yourself: What is the problem for which your policy is a solution? Thank you very much.