Summary

Since the end of the Second World War, international wars involving two or more antagonistic sovereign nations have become increasingly rare. Rather, the past 50 years have witnessed a changing nature of warfare, with internal conflicts or civil wars (wars that are fought within the boundaries of one nation and mostly oppose the government army and various domestic rebel groups) becoming the dominant type of armed conflict. To illustrate, only 42 of the 232 armed conflicts between 1946 and 2006 were traditional interstate wars, while 169 were internal or civil wars. In the post Cold War era, the prevalence of civil wars is even more pronounced, with 115 of the 122 armed conflicts being civil wars. Finally, all wars between 2004 and 2006 were of the intra-state type.

While the bulk of internal wars were originally concentrated in Asia, the independence of former African colonies in the 1960s led to an explosion of civil wars in this continent. The policy of the international community towards civil wars has long been marked by indifference. The common belief that such wars originate from ancestral and deep-rooted ethnic or religious cleavages has led the international community to adopt a “let them fight it out under themselves” approach. Only recently, the observation that civil wars occur mostly in poor countries and tend to have devastating effects on already poor and fragile economies has put the phenomenon of civil war at the forefront of development policy and the fight against poverty.

Despite all the death and destruction that civil wars cause, relatively little is known about their economic effects on the households and individuals exposed to it. This dissertation attempts to address this gap by focusing on the microeconomic impact of the civil war in Burundi, one of the most brutal and deadliest conflicts in recent history. Between its onset in 1993 and its official end of 2006, the war left over 300,000 civilians dead and many more maimed and scarred for life. Income per capita plummeted during the war, leaving Burundi as one of the poorest countries in the world. The dissertation focuses on the impact of the violence in Burundi on important socioeconomic outcomes at the level of the household and the individual. Combining data from various household surveys administered during the war with detailed event data on the evolution and intensity of the conflict, we focus on the conflict’s impact on child health, household activity choices and household welfare growth.

In Chapter 4, we find that young children who were exposed to the violence have worse health outcomes than non-exposed children and were more likely to be malnourished. Given the adverse effect of early childhood malnutrition on economic outcomes in adulthood, it is likely that the war in Burundi – through worsening the health of children affected by it- will have negative economic consequences that will last long after the shooting stops. Chapter 5 argues that the presence of widespread violence and insecurity dramatically increased the risk that household faced in generating income. The analysis in this chapter suggests that households responded to this increased risk by engaging more in low risk low return activities to generate income. Although this is a logical strategy, this implies that households sacrificed long run welfare for short run income stability. Chapter 7 uses
data from a panel survey conducted in the second half of 2007 in Burundi. We find that violence affects households’ welfare growth through various channels. Both displacement due to violence and the number of battle-related deaths and wounded in the village entail considerable welfare losses to the affected households. In contrast, engaging in violence (becoming a rebel) seems to have paid off: households with a former rebel have much higher growth rates than other households.

Chapter 3 is somewhat an outlier in this dissertation. This chapter focuses on the events that started the civil war: the assassination of the first Hutu President in October 1993 and the subsequent mass slaughters. We argue that the acute shortage of land (and hence, food) in 1993 Burundi provided a non-negligible incentive to land-hungry farmers to participate in the killings of their neighbours. Next, the pattern shown by the data suggests that the political party that was in power in 1993 played a role in facilitating and organizing the massacres.