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How to engage constructively with fragile states

Jon Bennett

Donors have allocated increasing resources in fragile states to the reform and/or rebuilding of the architecture of the state – such as justice systems, the police and army, and the management of ministries – in efforts to support stability. This has been important for all sectors of society, including displaced people.

Conflict invariably goes hand in hand with displacement. The protracted nature of conflicts in countries such as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan means that conflict-induced IDP settlements soon become semi-permanent and aid projects correspondingly move away from immediate relief towards basic service provision. Part of the 'stabilisation' and state-building agenda is the requirement that host governments should take increasing responsibility for these and associated activities. Success in post-conflict state-building largely depends on re-establishing effective governance and security structures. In the decade to 2010 the share of overseas development assistance (ODA) to fragile, conflict-afflicted countries doubled to US\$50 billion and 39% of total available ODA.

At the same time there has been a growing interest in how best to evaluate and learn from experiences in conflict prevention and peace building, whether the intervention is **on** conflict (with specific objectives towards increasing peace through direct intervention) or **in** conflict (conventional sector-specific projects often 'tweaked' to be conflict sensitive). Among the techniques are thematic evaluations that attempt to capture common findings across geographically and historically diverse contexts. Evaluating aid in conflict settings has become something of a specialist skill, recognised by the recent publication of the OECD/DAC guidance on the topic.¹ Evaluators are aware of the challenges of the highly complex non-linear pattern of social change in conflict-affected countries which cannot be captured by simple cause-effect logic.

A recent thematic evaluation examines the performance of UNDP in 20 conflict-affected

countries, focusing primarily on UNDP's contribution to enhancing governance in fragile settings.² UNDP is one of the few agencies with the capacity to operate 'at scale' across multiple programme areas, before, during and after the outbreak of conflict and especially during transitions to peacebuilding and post-conflict development.

The ten OECD Principles of Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations

1. Take context as the starting point.
2. Do no harm.
3. Focus on state-building as the central objective.
4. Prioritise prevention.
5. Recognise the links between political, security and development objectives.
6. Promote non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies.
7. Align with local priorities in different ways in different contexts.
8. Agree on practical coordination mechanisms between international actors.
9. Act fast ... but stay engaged long enough to give success a chance.
10. Avoid pockets of exclusion.

See www.oecd.org/dac/incaf/38368714.pdf for details.

Yet one of the inherent problems is that this builds an historical expectation that the organisation can and will respond positively to the many wide-ranging requests for support it receives.

Development activities alone cannot stop or prevent violent conflict and the displacement that goes along with it but benefits from a

cross-sectoral approach. In Sierra Leone, following a brutal civil war from 1991 to 2002, the Lomé Peace Agreement provided for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For those returning from IDP settlements an approach to community-based reconciliation included investigations into human rights violations during the civil war and organising research on traditional conflict resolution and reconciliation processes among the various ethnic groups.¹ Likewise, in the aftermath of the 2006 crisis and ensuing displacement in Timor-Leste, UNDP supported the return of IDPs through three projects involving dialogue between communities and a government-run reconciliation process. Community mediators were trained by about 12 NGO partners.

Public sector support

UNDP often works in conflict settings through project support units, which are generally embedded in the public sector and operating parallel to it. While this method can enhance the pace and quality of service delivery, it also runs the risk of weakening institutions that countries must rely on in the long term. The international community as a whole has come under a lot of criticism for poorly coordinating the embedded international experts assigned to ministries. In South Sudan, for instance, there have been hundreds of foreign faces ostensibly ‘advising’ the government but effectively running whole departments of government. Even where national experts are employed, the wage and benefit incentives used to attract talented staff for these posts often create major distortions in the public service labour market. There is also often pressure to deliver services on the ground while knowing that the expansion of state capacities to deliver such services themselves can take years. The dilemma is particularly acute in places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where a weak state government has not been able to address many of the underlying causes of the continuing conflict and certainly not to deal with the many IDPs generated by the conflict.

Returning refugees and IDPs frequently face problems over land and property ownership, particularly if they have been absent for a long time. In this context, it may be important to rehabilitate the basic legal infrastructure and expand access to legal aid. Often the challenge in post-conflict contexts is to bridge traditional dispute resolution and formal justice systems while furthering transitional justice. For this to work, it is essential to understand the political economy of a given country in conflict in order to approach legal reform in a coherent fashion. For instance, judicial training that allows judges to make better judgments is not likely to have much impact if there is no judicial independence, if corruption still dominates the legal system or if the police system has been destroyed or is biased. Overcoming these problems is of key importance to enabling sustainable return.

In Puntland (Somalia), as a result of the emergent formal legal system, customary structures – especially ‘elders’ groups’ – felt threatened by the reduction in their authority and influence. This led to an alarming increase in assassinations of judicial officials in 2009 and 2010, and has sparked a debate over how to make rule-of-law programming more sensitive to conflict. By contrast, women in the autonomous Somaliland region of Somalia have increasingly turned to the UNDP-supported emergent formal structures since they provide a forum for women’s voices to be heard, whereas traditional and customary mechanisms still exclude women.

Notable successes in supporting opportunities for women to participate more fully in the emerging political and legal landscape of post-conflict countries include the expansion of female access to justice in some countries, especially for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. Gender-based violence almost always increases during civil war and generally among forced migrants. Despite the disproportionate impact of conflict on women, they are often not included in decision-making and planning processes. There is still little provision for women’s voices in the

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The local community in El Srief area, North Darfur, welcomes the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) outreach activity organised in 2011 by UNAMID, with the support of UNDP, UNICEF, North Sudan DDR Commission and the local NGO Friends of Peace and Development Organization.

post-war macroeconomic frameworks that determine how the economy grows, which sectors are prioritised for investments and what kinds of jobs and opportunities for employment will be created and for whom.

The disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants is a process that rarely works smoothly, not least because it is a highly politicised arena that involves the wider community as well as those who are demobilised. Despite some innovative approaches, there has been a tendency to concentrate on outputs – numbers demobilised and presented with reintegration packages – rather than longer-term improvement in livelihoods. The problem is that once the highly complex technical (and inter-agency) aspects of the exercise are complete, partner agencies close their projects, donor funding drops and follow-up work is consigned to a relatively small coterie of agencies (including UNDP) with reduced budgets. In some countries positive gains are then offset by the resumption of local conflicts, leading to secondary displacement. This was the case for DDR programming during the period of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan, from early 2005 until South Sudan seceded in July 2011. The cumulative effect can be a return to arms and a resumption of displacement

after the attention of the international community has moved elsewhere.

Conflict analysis and change

Anticipating conflict and helping to prevent it requires detailed and operational conflict analyses to be carried out at the country level. A conflict analysis sets the stage for a theory of change. Once the problem is assessed and the triggers of violence are known, a theory of change suggests how an intervention in that context will change the conflict. But this must be preceded by a thorough understanding of context. The operational landscape in most conflict-affected countries is characterised by new and fluid forms of internal conflict, usually brought on by multiple ‘triggers’ and exacerbated by the resulting displacement.

The very nature of conflicts is that they are country-specific and there cannot be a formulaic response across the board. The effectiveness of programming support is always contingent upon events in the political and security realm, many of which are beyond external agency power to influence. Where the semblance of political reconciliation has been scant and violence ongoing (for example in southern Somalia), some interventions have had limited impact, and progress has been frequently reversed due to the resumption of conflict and the failure to resolve situations of displacement.

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One clear conclusion is that in fragile states there is no substitute for a strong and continuous field presence. Yet even allowing for the difficulties of recruiting field staff for hostile environments, there is an alarming trend among some donors to increase funding while reducing the number of permanent staff on the ground. UNDP has to some extent bucked the trend but developing trust and demonstrating long-term commitment cannot be held hostage to 'cost efficiency' in countries where fragility is defined precisely by transitory relationships.

Jon Bennett *Jon.Bennett@dsl.pipex.com* was team leader and principal author of two recently

published reports: 'Evaluation of UNDP Support to Conflict-Affected Countries in the Context of United Nations Peace Operations' (UNDP Evaluation Office, September 2012)

<http://tinyurl.com/UNDP-eval-conflict-2013> and 'Aiding the Peace: a multi-donor evaluation of support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities in southern Sudan 2005-2010' (ITAD, December 2010).

<http://tinyurl.com/OECD-southsudan>

1. 'Evaluating Peacebuilding Activities in Settings of Conflict and Fragility: Improving Learning for Results', DAC Guidelines and References Series, OECD Publishing (2012).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264106802-en>

2. Bennett, J et al, 'Evaluation of UNDP Support to Conflict-Affected Countries in the Context of United Nations Peace Operations', UNDP Evaluation Office, September 2012.