



CONFLICT PREVENTION AND DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION IN AFRICA: A POLICY WORKSHOP

SESSION 11 PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Panel Comments

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Introduction

These remarks address three themes that have emerged in different ways and guises during the course of the conference:

1. Distinctions and dividing lines – between peace and war, conflict and armed conflict, prevention and post-conflict reconstruction;
2. The issue of the state – state-building, fragile states, and state sovereignty;
3. The role of the donor community in relation to state building.

1. Distinctions & dividing lines

Discussions during these few days have repeatedly recognised that there is no “one size fits all” – neither a single template for analysis, nor a successful default mode for policy. The specificities of each situation repeatedly defy crisp definitions and distinctions. Faced with the tenuous nature of generic statements, we can be tempted to say nothing general, which would take us into denying that there can be worthwhile overall approaches or general policy guidelines.

To muddy the waters of this discussion, let me throw in the most striking definition of peace I know of, by the early 20th century US journalist Ambrose Bierce in his *The Devil's Dictionary* – “a period of cheating between two periods of fighting.”

The truth is that we do not always know whether we are in a post-war, inter-war or pre-war period, and we need a policy approach and guidelines for action that allow us to be equally effective in all the different situations.

It is widely argued and accepted, both in academic and policy circles, that the likelihood of violent conflict is greater in countries that have not developed successfully and where democracy is deficient or absent. Thus, countries that are attempting to recover from armed conflict and those that are thought to have a particularly high risk of falling into armed conflict are urged to adopt policies for successful development and democracy. But we also know that social-economic development is a process that generates conflict. Whether the conflicts it generates are violent, and if so amount to armed conflict and civil war – all that is another matter. But conflicts are inevitable – between classes, between winners and losers, between those who held power and those demand a share of it. And the capacity to manage conflicts and settle them peacefully is therefore at a premium. At the same time, while democracy is good for peace, one of the things we know about causes of internal armed conflict is that democratisation is dangerous.

Thus, the double development and democratisation path on which poor, badly governed states, often recovering from armed conflict, are asked to embark is very risky.

I suggest, therefore, that a useful language for us to draw on to develop an overall policy approach that meets the wide range of different specific challenges is that of risk and risk management. Whether the label is conflict prevention, peacebuilding or something else, what we are talking about is seeing if it is possible to work with communities, societies, governments and inter-governmental regional organisations to enhance their capacities to address and manage the risk of conflicts escalating into violence. I submit that this can only be achieved as a cooperative endeavour involving the full range of actors, including civil society, working in the same direction.

I hope that looking at the issues in this way and developing a common, cooperative approach will help us to get away from the standard blockages when it comes to thinking about prevention of violent conflict. One side of the problem is summed up in the political wisdom that no donor country politician ever got re-elected by stopping a war that might not have happened in a far away country none of her/his voters ever heard of and about which they wouldn't care unless and until there were a terrible war. And from the other side of the street, the problem is illustrated by the way that successive efforts to bring in an early warning capacity and prevention policy in the UN have tripped over the issue of sovereignty and non-interference in internal state affairs.

Understanding the issue and the task as being about addressing risks and enhancing capacities to address risks might allow us to finesse the objections of sovereignty, in that no intrusion on sovereignty is implied, and likewise the unconcern of voters, in that the issue is not stopping a particular war but – on the easily understood basis that prevention is better than cure – developing a healthy international system.

2. State-building & sovereignty

All the evidence is that sovereignty remains a highly desirable commodity in the marketplace of international politics. In the past sixty years new states have been founded and recognised at historically unprecedented speed. The end of the Cold War produced new political entities demanding sovereignty. As we meet there is a possibility of a new explosion of violence in the western Balkans because of the Kosovo Albanians' desire for sovereignty.

There is also broad (though not universal) agreement that sovereignty should not be an alibi for governments abusing human rights, nor is it an acceptable excuse for international inaction. This concept of sovereignty recognises that it involves responsibilities as well as rights. In this sense, a state that lacks capacity and/or willingness to address and manage internal conflict risks lacks some of the attributes of sovereignty; to work with a state to strengthen its capacity for conflict risk management is to work with it to deepen and strengthen its sovereignty.

Approaching the issue in this way helps us move beyond the situation where sovereignty is a stumbling block for conflict prevention. But we must then note the prevalence of a strangely a-historical view of the state and state building. It is widespread in the development industry among donor governments and international NGOs alike, generating a conceptual vocabulary that has credence in inter-governmental organisations, IFIs and beneficiary governments. It focuses everything onto capacity building, as if the way that states have come into existence in history is by developing the technical capacities for revenue management, educational policy and the like. It manages not only to be conveniently uninterested in the history of power relations, the colonial era and resource exploitation, but also to ignore the state history of today's donor countries.

If we want a world of states that are responsive and responsible to their citizens, we could begin by looking at the history of state formation and understanding the importance of power struggles over citizens' rights. States were created as the outcome of political battles between established authorities and rising powers in society. The outcome was a compromise, often provisional, regularly revisited in strife and conflict, stable at times in only a precarious sense of the word. They required competent and honest administration – cf capacity building – in order to reflect and implement the terms of the compromise fairly. But that administrative capacity cannot create the compromise itself, nor does the construction of an

appropriate capacity substitute for the process of arriving at that compromise between different groups.

Support for state building therefore needs to involve support for the vibrant society that is a key part of the foundations on which the state is built. This is perhaps easier for NGOs and INGOs to handle than for donor governments, inter-governmental organisations and IFIs with their inevitable emphasis on bilateral relations.

Part of what donor governments can best do in this context is to link bilateral relations and development assistance more directly than hitherto with the still developing framework of multilateral ties, laws, obligations and institutions. It provides a context of international norms and standards to which most governments have linked themselves, even if the linkage is often aspirational more than actual. It therefore allows assistance in managing conflict risk to remain consistent with sovereignty. For this to be credible, of course, it means donor governments beginning by respecting that multinational framework themselves.

3. The donor community's role

With apologies for a culturally specific tendency to alliteration, I will suggest three E's for donor action:

- **Enablement:** to create an enabling environment for peace, which will also eventually enable development, by working with states, civil society, the private sector and regional organisations – all to enhance the capacities for managing the risk of conflict;
- **Engagement:** to get involved in real discussions with these actors, from which all parties learn including donor governments, about what the needs are and how best they can be met. This will involve donor government representatives getting outside of national capitals, listening and analysing. It means getting away from off-the-shelf programmes and default modes of policy implementation. Building peace and building states – core parts of development – are tailored, context-specific work.
- **Encouragement:** to contribute to the positive feelings and the energy that are needed to build peace, especially in war-threatened and war-torn countries. The burden of the tasks of building peace and building states does not fall on the donor community or the internationals but on the active citizens of the country. It is an uphill struggle and I make no apology for what might be thought a sentimental closing note – the importance of encouraging their efforts, not by patronising them or by talking of rewarding success, but by making the effort to understand the work they are trying to do and supporting them in it.