

Are we working 'in, on or around' conflict and insecurity?

Conflict Policy Group breakout session at Bond AGM, November 2010

Introduction

Bond's 'Conflict Policy Group' (CPG) is a member led working group that aims to develop a better understanding of how conflict impacts on our work and how our work impacts on conflict. It is a forum for sharing experience, analysing current policy, and engaging in joint advocacy where appropriate.

At Bond's recent AGM, the CPG hosted one of the afternoon breakout sessions – a roundtable exploring whether we, as external actors, should work 'in, on or around' conflict and insecurity.

The roundtable had around 30 senior / director level participants from a range of humanitarian, development / multi-mandate and peacebuilding organisations. It began with three discussants – one each from the development, peacebuilding and humanitarian communities – each answering the session's main question from the perspective of 'their sector'. Discussion was then opened up to the whole group.

The roundtable was off the record to encourage open debate, but this report provides a non-attributed summary of the main themes discussed:

1. Are we working 'in, on or around' conflict and insecurity?
2. The relationship between peacebuilding, development and humanitarian assistance
3. Balancing immediate need against long term change
4. Can humanitarian assistance be 'conflict-sensitive'?
5. Putting the context first; civilian-military relations
6. 'Actors' vs. 'problems' and the 'securitisation of aid'
7. A call for clarity

Are we working 'in, on or around' conflict and insecurity?

Each of the three discussants answered this question from the perspective of 'their sector'. Although this was a somewhat artificial distinction, it was useful as a device to draw out the differences between actors.

'Development perspective'

From a 'development perspective', it is wrong to suggest that we should only work 'in' or 'around' conflict. Conflict reverses development gains, especially those around expanding choice or advancing rights, and so development actors must deal with the root causes of this conflict in their programmes.

The three areas of peacebuilding, development and humanitarian assistance are not mutually exclusive; properly programmed, they can be mutually reinforcing – but a holistic approach is needed.

'Peacebuilding perspective'

Peacebuilding is about helping societies to manage their conflicts without resort to violence. It involves many of the issues central to 'development' in any context such as power, politics, and participation. From the peacebuilding perspective, it is not possible to work 'around' conflict – you're always working 'on' conflict, and sometimes working 'in' conflict too.

Conflict and insecurity are not only impediments to broader development, they can also be considered a kind of poverty in of themselves (for instance, communities lacking basic security or access to justice). Development and peacebuilding are also intimately linked because poor or inappropriate provision of basic services is often an underlying cause of conflict.

'Humanitarian perspective'

Humanitarian assistance is not about trying to address the causes of conflict, it is about treating its symptoms – limiting the consequences of violence. On a 'purist' definition, humanitarian assistance is not a transformative exercise at all.

And so humanitarian efforts should not be put in the same category as peacebuilding – peacebuilding is inherently political and it is crucial that humanitarian actors remain neutral so they can get access to people who need their help. This neutrality is especially important for Western NGOs operating in contexts where 'the West' is seen as one of the belligerents in many conflicts.

The relationship between peacebuilding, development and humanitarian assistance

There is no straightforward dichotomy ('trichotomy'?) between peacebuilding, development and humanitarian assistance. There is instead a sort of continuum that runs from providing immediate succour in the midst of conflict, right through to building the long term institutions needed for lasting peace (though of course this doesn't mean there is a simplistic, linear process in reality). Most organisations don't fit neatly into a peacebuilding, development or humanitarian 'slot' but, instead, can be located as working on some part(s) of this continuum.

This doesn't present such an issue for the relationship between 'development' and 'peacebuilding', which are in any case intimately connected in conflict-affected contexts, but is problematic when it comes to humanitarian assistance.

The word 'humanitarian' is perhaps used too loosely and easily. It can be argued that, strictly speaking, humanitarian assistance is about providing immediate, life saving aid only. But a great deal of other interventions have begun to be described as 'humanitarian', blurring the distinction between what is 'development' work and what is 'humanitarian assistance'. Given that development is itself a 'conflictual' process (about introducing resources to, and changing power relationships within, a society) this poses a problem for organisations' 'neutrality' – especially in 'acutely political' environments such as Afghanistan / Pakistan.

There are probably many reasons for this 'blurring' of lines but not least may be the desire to circumvent problematic partner relationships. To comply with various principles of good aid practice, 'development assistance' should be negotiated with and channelled through national partners. 'Humanitarian assistance', however, can be delivered more directly. And so, where external actors want to avoid complex political realities, assistance may be defined as 'humanitarian' in nature – even though, in reality, it is more akin to longer term development work, and so inherently 'political'.

Balancing immediate need against long term change

One participant wanted to explore the balance we should be striking between addressing immediate humanitarian needs and addressing the issues that generate and underlie these needs. They asked the three discussants how they would recommend an individual supporter to split his or her money between the three sectors represented (excluding their own) in order to have 'the most benefit to humanity' over a 40 year period.

The development discussant thought that, if they were looking over the long term, then the best course of action would be to use their resources to support sustainable solutions to the problems

that keep people poor and marginalised. In conflict-affected countries, they suggested, this meant supporting peacebuilding efforts to address root causes of conflict and fragility.

The peacebuilding discussant suggested a supporter could give something like 30% of their money into humanitarian assistance – to help address people's needs, but also as supporting such action with immediate results would help maintain their motivation for the 'marathon' of longer term work needed. They should then give their remaining 70% to those development organisations that recognise the need to work in a way appropriate to the needs of conflict-affected and fragile states.

The humanitarian discussant thought all three areas of work were vital, but suggested that how someone chose to allocate their charitable giving was a matter of personal choice, based on what priorities were most important to them.

Can humanitarian assistance be 'conflict-sensitive'?

The recognition that development is an inherently conflictual process which involves influencing power relationships and the way resources are distributed has led to the idea of 'conflict-sensitive' development.

Being 'conflict-sensitive' simply means understanding the dynamics of the conflict we are operating in and the way that our interventions interact with those dynamics. Based on this understanding, development actors should, at a minimum, ensure that their interventions 'do no harm' – i.e. do not make conflicts worse. A 'militant peacebuilding' perspective would go further than this and suggest that, in conflict-affected contexts, all development interventions should aim at helping to address the underlying causes of conflict at the same time as delivering their broader development objectives.

The question arose, can and should humanitarian assistance be similarly 'conflict-sensitive'?

One participant suggested that humanitarian organisations certainly do think about the impact they will have on a context but 'can't always let that get in the way of delivering life saving assistance'. Another noted that humanitarian organisations use their understanding of local political realities and conflict dynamics for different aims than development / peacebuilding NGOs – primarily, to secure access to communities in need of assistance.

It also was noted that it would be difficult for 'neutral' humanitarian organisations to engage in a maximalist vision of conflict sensitivity (i.e. using their interventions to help address the root causes of conflict) but that, despite being neutral and independent, when operating in conflict zones, humanitarian actors are still a part of the conflict dynamic purely by virtue of being present. Is there a way, therefore, for humanitarian organisations to retain their neutrality but also go beyond 'doing no harm' and play a role, within their mandate, to support the larger transition from violence to peace?

Putting the context first and 'civilian-military relations'

It is widely accepted that every context is unique and faces a specific set of issues – and that external actors should approach their work on this basis.

Similarly, for Western NGOs, does this suggest any difference for how we approach working 'in, on and around' conflict in countries where the West is seen as a belligerent or party to that conflict – such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen for instance – and the rest of the world's 'conflict-affected and fragile states'?

Is it possible for an organisation to do 'pure' humanitarian work in some contexts, and development / peacebuilding in others? Opinion was somewhat divided. Yes, some thought – but in today's

connected world, others countered, there are often global ramifications of local decisions that can be difficult to foresee.

There was a similar discussion on being clearer about the context in which we are critiquing civilian-military relations. It was noted that, looking at the overall continuum of supporting a country from war to peace, 'civ-mil' relations are not just limited to questions over the use of the military to deliver humanitarian aid, or the channelling of development assistance through military command structures (the group was also in broad agreement about the significant problems of these approaches).

Instead, when thinking about longer term development and peacebuilding efforts, there are a wide range of possible relationships between civilian agencies and the military (or broader security actors). For instance, in promoting the protection of vulnerable communities, encouraging the role of women and marginalised groups within the police, ensuring security actors are held accountable to the public, and working to guarantee equitable access to justice for all.

'Actors' vs. 'problems' and the 'securitisation of aid'

Given the range of relationships needed between various civilian and security actors on the journey from war to sustainable peace, do we need to be careful to avoid confusing 'problems' with 'actors'?

For instance, 'security' is not something that only 'security actors' have a stake or role in promoting. It is sometimes suggested that NGO's should 'do' development whilst security actors 'do' security. However, this would be a somewhat regressive position. It has taken a long time for the international community to develop an approach to 'security' that prioritises the needs of people and communities and which stresses the importance of public accountability, oversight, transparency, and responsiveness. These aspects of 'security' are not things that 'security actors' alone are best placed to deliver and, indeed, are close to the heart of the 'development' agenda.

There was also a healthy debate about the 'securitisation' of aid.

At one extreme, a participant suggested that Andrew Mitchell's comments earlier during the day about education and women's empowerment being priorities for bringing peace and stability to the Horn of Africa and South Asia were a sign that development was being co-opted into a certain geopolitical vision of UK national security.

However, another participant wondered if this didn't actually represent an opportunity. There has long been a movement to recognise that peace and security don't 'come from the barrel of a gun' but involve addressing the legitimate grievances and alienation that can fuel conflict and 'radicalisation'. Whilst needing to avoid a crude description of the relationship between 'poverty' and 'conflict', HMG's recognition of the role development can play in building peace, along with an emphasis on dealing with conflict and insecurity 'upstream', could present an opportunity to help them unpack what this means in practice and, crucially, make the case that doing so successfully must be about addressing the genuine needs of poor, vulnerable and marginalised populations.

It was noted that 'policy coherence' makes a lot of sense conceptually but that there is a real issue around the discord between theory and what actually happens on the ground. Again, this perhaps highlights the importance of civil society ensuring it is credibly and meaningfully engaged across the whole of the debate and not abandoning parts of the coherence agenda to other actors.

Finally, another participant noted that it is not just this government that has made the connection between national security and development – the UK has for a long time prioritised aid to, for instance, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and seen development aid as a part of its national security thinking. In some ways, that this government are more explicit about this relationship may provide more space to critically explore how development relates to 'our' security. They also wondered

whether there is such a thing as 'pragmatic realism' and, if so, could such an approach sit alongside our 'principled advocacy'?

A call for clarity

Whether we're looking at what constitutes 'humanitarian assistance', the relationship between civilian and security actors, the similarities between 'peacebuilding' and 'development' in conflict zones, or the 'securitisation' of aid, there is a need for us all to be clearer in our analysis of the issues and more precise in the way we discuss and debate them. We need to unpack and explore these complicated ideas much more thoroughly than we have done so far.

This is not to say that we must ultimately arrive at a consensus on the issues. At heart there may be fundamental ideological differences over what is an appropriate way for us to work 'in, on or around' conflict. But by unpacking these ideas, and extending our analysis beyond our individual organisational comfort zones or priorities, we can help to best understand our relationship as external actors to conflict and insecurity, as well as distinguish genuine ideological differences from things we just haven't fully understood or thought about yet.

Such a deepened and clarified understanding of the debate is not just a rhetorical or theoretical exercise but has significant practical implications – both for the way we work on the ground as organisations and the way we approach our policy development and advocacy on the UK and others' approach to 'conflict-affected and fragile' countries.

The Conflict Policy Group within Bond aims to be a forum for taking this forward.