

Development People

"I would like the climate change adaptation discussion to absorb the lessons of conflict sensitivity in the development field"

Dan Smith



• Women from Kamanyola, Democratic Republic of Congo
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Dan Smith, International Alert, makes the link between conflict and climate change and suggests that the failure to gain a binding climate change agreement at Copenhagen may not be a bad thing.

Describe your role at International Alert?

I am responsible to the Board for the implementation of the programmes, to make sure they are adequately resourced, and to see that everything in International Alert works the way it should.

What inspired you to work in the sector?

In the 1970s I was active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament when almost nobody else was and researched and wrote on defence issues and East-West questions. I started to get really interested in the small wars that nobody had ever heard of that were endemic in developing countries, and in the 1990s that became the focus on my research.

I was fortunate enough to be made director of the International Peace Research Institute in Norway just at the time when the Norwegian Government decided that a policy of peace made for a good foreign policy so I then had the chance to link a long-term research interest with the possibility of actually changing things by working on peace processes.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am most engaged in the work on the relationship between climate change and conflict and therefore between climate adaptation and peace-building.

Also, I am spending quite a lot of time on our work in Lebanon because it's a new programme which we have only recently started.

What impact/outcome do you hope this will have?

On climate change, the most important thing, having over the last couple of years achieved a much higher profile for the adaptation issue in the international discussions on climate change, is to get it treated properly.

As with development aid, there is too much focus on putting a huge amount of money forward and getting the rich countries to stump up that money. I agree it is important but when you look at how resources are used on the ground and the harm that can be done as well as the good you soon realise that the 'how' is as important as 'how much'.

I would like the climate change adaptation discussion to absorb the lessons of conflict sensitivity in the development field and to

bring those into the way in which an eventual agreement on climate is implemented.

You recently co-authored a report that details the linkages between climate change and conflict. Is there the will to act on its recommendations when negotiating a new international climate change agreement?

The situation is extremely varied. The negotiations themselves are not being handled by people with knowledge about development and peace-building issues. Instead, they are being handled by people with knowledge about climate, financing and legal questions, and of course then there are the political leaders with more political considerations.

So, in one way the answer is no – there is no recognition of the problem amongst the negotiators – but if you look at the circles around the negotiations then you see a great deal of interest in the climate-conflict linkage and finding viable policy. As yet, that constituency is neither well enough equipped with actionable ideas nor influential enough to have an effect on how the negotiations are conducted.

However, experience has been that this issue can move at extraordinary speed and awareness is increasing all the time about just how much is involved in wanting to resolve climate change problems. I think that there is willingness, broadly speaking, to take that on.

It is not that bad that a full new agreement was not reached in Copenhagen because it gives an opportunity for these issues to permeate the discussions in the coming months.

What is the most challenging part of International Alert's work?

On the work that we do in our programme countries there are two distinct kinds of challenge. One is how do you get the purchase to start developing resonance, understanding the problems in that society and figuring out what needs to be done about them. Very often it feels like trying to climb a wall of glass – there is no obvious handhold on which to start. Once you get going and build momentum it becomes easier.

The second big challenge is that for peace to be built takes a long-term effort with citizens of that country and international support, working together consciously for the explicit goal of building peace. All it takes though is a couple of irresponsible political leaders, 500 unemployed young men with access to weapons and a couple of days madness and you have armed conflict again.

The difficulty is maintaining the momentum when it could so easily be knocked off course and then recovering the momentum if it does. It is especially difficult to re-engage people to build peace at a time when they are at their most vulnerable, bitter and angry.

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What, in your opinion, is International Alert's most significant achievement?

Approaches to key issues have changed; peace building, conflict sensitivity, and the conflict linkages of climate change, are all on the international political agenda and we are a part of the forces that have achieved this. On the ground we have contributed significantly to improvements in Burundi, underpinning the peace process in Liberia, and keeping doors for peaceful resolution to long term conflict open in the Caucasus. At a very local level in eastern Congo and Rwanda we have contributed to building the prospects for peace there.

In other countries, our contribution has been more about strengthening the constituencies for peace and strengthening the knowledge and awareness of what is required for long term peace.

Where would you like the organisation to be in five years time?

Where we are now but with more time to reflect on the work we are doing and how to make it even better. I am very proud of our achievements but one of the things that is evident is that all the time we are stretched – we have barely enough resources for the work that we want to do. I would like us to organise and resource ourselves in a way that we were not working quite so much to the limit but had more time for reflection because I think that could produce more effective work.

What is the key challenge for the sector in the coming year?

Both in peace-building and development we need to do everything we can to be as clear as possible about the beneficial impact of our work. The clock is ticking towards 2015 when the Millennium Development Goals need to be fulfilled and there are going to be some tough questions asked about why more progress has not been made.

I think the pressure on the sector becomes even stronger because of the recession. When the public spending cuts begin to bite, taxpayers will ask why their money is being spent on countries that they know nothing about, in ways which are mysterious, for an effect which seems to be not very great. We need much better narratives about the impact of our work or else we are in for quite a rude awakening, and I think this challenge is very real regardless of the outcome of the General Election.

Dan Smith is Secretary General at International Alert.
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