

AT STAKE: CONFLICT PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

ISSUE

Conflict is tied to injustice at many levels. The lack of physical security for the poor is a major impediment to their ability to claim their rights and reduce poverty. Donors have defined for themselves a set of “failed and fragile” states in which they seek to prevent conflict or restore peaceful conditions. Unfortunately, major recent interventions in the affairs of developing countries in crisis or conflict have been driven by short-term strategic interests of donor countries, including overriding interest in countries seen to be on the “front line” of the war on terror.

BACKGROUND

The population of conflict-affected states today represents a third of those living in poverty. According to the United Nations (UN), 22 of the 32 countries in the low human development category have experienced violent conflict at some time since 1990. In December 2004, there were 32 conflicts in 26 countries with more than one-quarter of African and one-fifth of Asian states affected by one or more wars, all but one internal.

These wars have seriously affected the well-being of large numbers of civilians, particularly women and children. Indirect war deaths in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (1998- 2001) is estimated at 2.5 million and in the Sudan (1983 – 2002) at 2 million.

The UN General Assembly Special Session in September 2005 acknowledged the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations from genocide, war crimes and ethnic cleansing. Several donor governments have called for improved capacities for “humanitarian intervention” and “peace operations” to meet this responsibility. But critical questions remain unanswered – where to act, on whose authority, and with what actions?

WHOSE SECURITY?

Whose security are we protecting? International humanitarian law requires that proportionality according to need shape the response of the international community to humanitarian emergencies arising from conflict. It is apparent that some crises – where the strategic interests of the donors are important – receive considerable attention, while other conflicts are ignored.

The potential of donors to address conflict within a human rights framework was undermined in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. With the declaration of a “war on terror” by the United States and its allies in 2001, urgent peace operations in other parts of the developing world have been sidelined by aggressive military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The “war on terror” has been accompanied by a global effort to strengthen repressive security forces in countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia, with profound consequences for the rights of poor and marginalized people.

WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

In zones of conflict such as Afghanistan, Sudan or Haiti, donors are working to establish their own whole-of-government coordination of defence, diplomacy and development strategies. The tools of diplomacy and development, however, are often ignored in donor responses to conflict. On the ground, the priority is often a military response to control conflict, particularly where the strategic interests of donors are involved (Afghanistan, Iraq).

Operational control by the military in high conflict areas gives the military both war-fighting and “humanitarian” and “reconstruction” roles. This confusion of roles can easily put both humanitarian workers and local populations in danger as they become identified with a military party to the conflict. Military interventions for peace operations must explicitly protect the space for independent humanitarian and civil society actors, clearly separate from military forces on the ground.

THE WORLD BANK

In post-conflict recovery, the World Bank is playing a key coordinating and financing role. The Bank, unfortunately, is taking a “one-size-fits-all” approach to recovery, focusing almost exclusively on what it defines as “good policies” (trade liberalization, limits on public sector budgets, privatization of services – for example water, etc.) and “good governance” (quick elections).

Despite decades of failure, donors continue to attach stringent conditions on their aid, insisting on economic policies that have perpetuated poverty and have systematically undermined the capacity of governments.

Donor governance programs are ignoring the delicate politics of recovery by concentrating largely on externally designed technical fixes. In post-conflict environments, the rebuilding of trust and confidence in government is critical to establishing peace. Donor initiatives will fail if they are not informed by deep understanding of local politics and local knowledge, including community level conflict resolution and local initiative for improving livelihoods. Civil society can play a role by encouraging conditions for democratic governance – tolerance, diversity, and mediation of social and economic conflicts.

DONOR CULPABILITY

As donors seek to prevent conflict and restore peace, they often ignore their own responsibilities in creating conditions of impoverishment. Donor actions have perpetuated unfair trade, unsustainable debts, and aid spending focused on their own security needs rather than on ending poverty.

Aid must not be diverted to deal with the security concerns of the North. Aid must also not be used to impose conditions to resolve conflict. Conditions, imposed by the World Bank, are incompatible with local peace processes. It must be a reformed UN, not the World Bank, taking the lead role in conflict prevention, resolution and recovery.

Attention must be given to the de-stabilizing effects of small weapons. The five permanent members of the Security Council account for 90% of the small weapons delivered to the South. And whether it's Burma, the Philippines or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, major corporations from the North continue to extract natural resources without regard to rights of local communities.

Policies for creating conditions for peace in the South will fail if donors steadfastly fail to recognize their own culpabilities.