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Security, humanitarian action and development

Navigating a shared space for international engagement in fragile states

Key points

- Integrated approaches to building stability in fragile states need to balance the differing objectives of security, development and humanitarian action
- Effective strategies to build stability require long-term engagement to strengthen state–society relations and security long after a conflict has ended
- Robust evidence and analysis must inform international engagement in fragile contexts, including sequencing and prioritisation

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This briefing paper outlines the key opportunities and challenges presented by a more integrated approach to international engagements to build stability in fragile states. In particular, it considers the risks and benefits of greater coordination between humanitarian, development and security agendas, suggesting that the potential tension between these objectives must be recognised and addressed in a pragmatic and principled manner.

The security–development debate

The policy debate on the relationship between security and development in conflict-affected countries is gaining international prominence. This can be seen in the adoption of increasingly integrated strategies for bilateral and multilateral interventions. The UK government's Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) in 2010, for instance, calls for a coordinated and integrated approach across the UK government, 'achieving greater effect by combining defence, development, diplomatic, intelligence and other capabilities' (HM Government, 2010: 9). It also advocates a greater focus on upstream conflict prevention and investment in development assistance to tackle threats to stability at their source. Other governments, including the United States, Canada and the Netherlands, are also seeking more integrated approaches to their interventions in fragile states (Collinson et al., 2010).

There is therefore a growing conviction within the international community that development assistance can enhance security, and that improved security, in turn, can create the conditions necessary for long-term development and institutional transformation. In practice, it is increasingly recognised that development programmes that do not take security into account are unlikely to succeed or contribute to sustainable and stable institutions. At the same time, security interventions need to be better tailored to the governance and political realities of different countries if they are to achieve the lasting changes required for meaningful stability.

Sierra Leone has been hailed as a successful example of the 'security-first' approach to development

However, while development and security are interrelated, can be mutually reinforcing and are both crucial for a sustainable transition from war to peace, their relationship is not intrinsic. One does not necessarily bring about the other. The assumption that their increased integration will result in long-term peace and stability is not always borne out in practice, primarily because this outcome depends on the unique nature and patterns of individual transition processes. In addition, other factors may increase risks and threats to stability. Even where external action is benign and has a positive effect, it may not be enough – on its own – to reduce insecurity and conflict.

Building stability: opportunities and challenges

Security, development and institutional transformation

Although the relationship between security and development is not straightforward, it is increasingly accepted that, if they are to succeed in meeting their objectives, international humanitarian and development programmes in fragile states must understand and respond to the prevailing security situation in different contexts. In recognition of this, donors such as DFID, the United Nations, the European Community and USAID have been involved in security programming including security sector reform and efforts to improve justice outcomes for poor and vulnerable communities in a range of environments, from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Liberia, Sierra Leone and Timor-Leste. However, these efforts have been inconsistent and have had only partial success, often as a result of limited capacity and resources within many agencies.

In practice, it is difficult to get the balance and sequencing of security and development approaches right. UK government-supported reforms in Sierra Leone over the last decade, for example, are believed to have improved security, increased access to and the quality of justice, cracked down on corruption and streamlined the public service. The security dividend of these efforts has been significant; there has been no major violence since the end of the civil war in 2002, and the police were credited with ensuring peaceful elections in 2007. Sierra Leone has been hailed as a successful example of the 'security-first' approach to development (Denney, 2011). Indeed, improved security has been critical in providing space to build sustainable institutions.

However, it is only in recent years that DFID has started to prioritise more traditional development objectives in Sierra Leone, such as water and sanitation programmes. This shift may have come too late (White, 2008). Nine years after the end of the civil war, the country remains severely under-developed, ranking third to last on the UN Human Development Index for 2010. Delays in development progress have resulted in frustration among the population, particularly young people, who face a chronic lack of livelihood opportunities and basic services. There is significant potential for a return to violence.

The role of informal actors and the changing nature of violence

Efforts to build security in Sierra Leone and elsewhere have focused largely on national security – engaging with state security forces and addressing issues that might trigger conflict at a national level. While it is important to understand national politics and the role of the state, this is not the only factor in achieving security. A more comprehensive approach to security should address informal actors, as well as regional and international drivers of instability, such as organised crime, drug smuggling and illegal arms trading.

Violence does not end automatically with the signing of peace agreements, as traditionally understood. In many post-conflict states, rates of domestic and criminal violence have actually increased after peace accords (Elhawary et al., 2010). This is an escalating problem in many Latin American countries, where the destructive capacity of criminal violence is undermining state capabilities of basic law-enforcement and security provision. While state capture by criminal elements is nothing new, the scale of violence and the corresponding difficulties of reining in drug-related violence are having grave consequences for citizens' security and social cohesion.

In Guatemala, for instance, the scale of impunity that has characterised the post-conflict period since 1996, following a 30-year civil war, has left room for high levels of complicity between former members of the state security apparatus in charge of repression, and new opportunities for criminal activity (ICG, 2010). Mexico faces extremely high and destabilising levels of drug-related violence, with a reported 10,000 gang killings in 2010, up from just under 6,600 in 2009 (*The Economist*, 2010). The state's capacity to confront drug-related violence is dwarfed by the scale of resources commanded by drug cartels.

The political dimension

If it is to tackle different forms of violence, an effective strategy to build stability requires long-term engagement to strengthen state–society relations and enhance security long after a conflict has formally come to a close. In practice, this means supporting an inclusive political settlement that reflects either a formal or an informal agreement among elites and their constituencies on the distribution of power and resources (OECD, forthcoming). Inclusivity, of course, must be tempered with realism regarding the kinds of actors invited to the negotiating table. Not all actors will make for an effective process. International players may help to broker a dialogue between different national actors inside or outside the state, for example in the run-up or following the negotiation of a peace agreement, or in negotiations for formal constitutional arrangements. While no settlement can be achieved without the involvement of key political leaders, likewise no settlement can contribute to building stability if it lacks broad-based and active support from within society.

An understanding of local politics and the interplay of sub-national, national, regional and international drivers of insecurity is essential for effective international engagement in fragile states. Increasingly, political economy and conflict analysis are seen as a necessary starting point for the development of realistic and feasible development and humanitarian strategies. However, humanitarian actors, in particular, rarely develop

a comprehensive analysis; the failure to sufficiently analyse local structures and capacities, for example, means that national actors are often excluded from, and in some cases even weakened by, the international humanitarian response. Development actors, while increasingly aware of the political contexts in which they operate, still fail to integrate security and conflict assessments into their analysis, and rarely translate the results of such assessments into practice.

Another issue concerns the nature and trajectory of transitions from 'war' to 'peace'. While the word 'transition' implies a linear process from one state to another, from conflict to stability and development, in practice this is rarely if ever the case. Rather, progress is ongoing, takes place through multiple processes of institutional transformation and state formation and is underpinned by power struggles and elite bargaining. These processes can take a very long time, suggesting the need for more realistic time frames for external interventions (Elhawary et al., 2010; Lant and de Weijer, 2010). Managing expectations of what is realistically achievable, and the limits of what donors and other external actors can contribute to these essentially domestic processes, is also crucial. In these contexts the pursuit of quick wins or ideal governance reforms, such as elections, may need to be put on hold or paced. While elections themselves are not necessarily the problem, how and when an election is held can be very significant. In fragile contexts a gradualist approach may be needed, one that strengthens the electoral and political system before moving on to elections.

Tensions and conflicting priorities

Promoting recovery from conflict is not strictly a humanitarian, security or development issue – it is a shared space (Pantuliano, pers. comm), requiring different instruments to ensure that the basic needs of the population are met, while supporting the state so that it can take on its appropriate responsibilities. Understanding the complementarities, tensions and trade-offs between different objectives and modes of action in fragile situations is fundamental.

In particular, different sets of principles and objectives govern humanitarian and other international interventions. There are both complementarities between these principles, such as non-discrimination or 'do no harm', and important differences, notably related to the humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence. Ignoring or challenging the principles of humanitarian action risks undermining the credibility of humanitarian actors among the local population, potentially resulting in restricted access to populations in need and increased threats to staff. Failure to appropriately sequence and prioritise spheres of action may also result in missed development opportunities. In 2005 in Sudan, for example, the focus of aid budgets (both humanitarian and developmental) on the crisis in Darfur resulted in insufficient investment in the South, where the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement had brought a limited period of stability. Failure to capitalise on the opportunities in the South at that time, including to invest sufficiently in security and development programming, impacted the achievement of substantial peace dividends. A similar scenario is playing out in Afghanistan, where aid has been explicitly used as a tool to obtain security in areas of ongoing conflict. This focus has meant that areas that were relatively stable, and that offered greater potential for development progress, were neglected.

The challenge is to manage these tensions between different spheres of action effectively and to make informed decisions about sequencing and prioritisation. This demands more effective and principled coordination between the different players engaging in fragile contexts, and a more thorough analysis of the trade-offs between different approaches and programmes.

Finally, the national security interests of donor countries often skew allocations of funding. In recent years we have seen a focus on threats related to global terrorism, neglecting possibly greater threats such as the impact of climate change, organised crime or regional instability (Evans, 2011). In addition, while the increasing links between security and aid agendas have resulted in more money being made available for humanitarian and development interventions in conflict-affected states, perversely this may result in a concentration of large amounts of aid funding in countries with limited absorption capacity, while ignoring other emerging or lower-profile crises.

Conclusions and recommendations

Aid and development can make a fundamental contribution to long-term peace and stability, addressing the root causes of conflict and reducing the likelihood of a return to violence. More effective, principled coordination between humanitarian, development and security actors is desirable, although the modalities of international engagement must be underpinned by strategic decision-making based on robust evidence and analysis of the specifics of each context. To realise the potential benefits of a more coherent strategy to build stability, external actors need to ensure that their involvement in fragile or conflict-affected states is not overly compromised by domestic pressures and incentives. The potential tension between humanitarian, development, diplomatic and security objectives must be recognised and addressed in a pragmatic and principled manner. It remains to be seen whether integrated and 'whole of government' approaches are the appropriate way to achieve this result.

Policy recommendations

- An integrated approach to development and security has the potential to contribute to building stability. However, this outcome is dependent on the nature and patterns of individual transition processes. Robust evidence and analysis must inform international engagement in fragile contexts, including sequencing and prioritisation of objectives. Where humanitarian needs exist it is important to maintain the independence of humanitarian action so that its principles and objectives are not compromised.
- Violence and conflict can take different forms and occur at different levels. This must inform the design and implementation of security interventions. Particular attention should be paid to emerging forms of sub-national and cross-border conflict and violence and the role of informal actors in fostering state–society relations and building accountable and legitimate institutions.
- It is important to recognise the potential harm that large volumes of aid and external action can cause in fragile contexts. Clear principles to guide the allocation of aid resources in situations of fragility and conflict could help to achieve better synergy between developmental action and the objective of building stability overseas.
- Higher-quality and more frequent political economy and conflict analysis is needed to improve understanding of the incentives and interests at play at different levels (including those of international actors). Such analysis should be the basis for the design of more realistic and politically aware strategies.
- The international community needs to be more realistic about what it can achieve, and must recognise that transitions generally require long time frames and depend largely on domestic processes and actors. This entails a much more explicit effort to manage expectations, as well as longer-term support.

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