



Saferworld briefing

Strengthening the Conflict Pool

Saferworld response to the Independent Commission for Aid Impact's *Evaluation of the Inter-Departmental Conflict Pool*

Overview

"In the field of international conflict, it is often observed that prevention is better than cure. The costs of major post-conflict interventions are so large in both human and financial terms that effective investments in conflict prevention should provide good value for money by comparison. This proposition is, however, rarely put into practice. Funds are usually mobilised only once international crises reach the headlines, when it is too late to talk of prevention." - ICAI

The UK Government's commitment to investing greater resources in preventing violent conflict before it breaks out is to be commended. As the above quotation recognises, while governments often acknowledge the value of such efforts, this does not always translate into changing practices. The continued use of the Conflict Pool, and the *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (BSOS) which now underpins it, represents a step in the right direction toward achieving that aim.

The Independent Commission on Aid Impact (ICAI) rightly recognises in its report on the functioning of the Conflict Pool that it "has proved effective at identifying and supporting worthwhile conflict prevention initiatives and has delivered some useful, if localised results" (p 1). Saferworld concurs with this positive appraisal of the Conflict Pool's value, particularly the conclusion that it "functions well as a responsive, grant-making instrument for supporting small-scale peacebuilding activities by local partners in conflict-affected countries" (p 1).

It is encouraging that the ICAI report identifies a number of ways in which the functioning of the Conflict Pool could be improved, including through greater attention to how a cross-departmental approach should work in practice, more clearly identifying how Conflict Pool spend can achieve impacts on the scale that is needed, adopting a more conflict-sensitive approach and improving monitoring and evaluation systems. Saferworld broadly concurs with ICAI's recommendations and sets out below a response to key issues raised in the report, expanding on some of these findings.

Strategy and the integrated approach

ICAI recommends that the Building Stability Overseas Board should identify how it will integrate defence, diplomacy and development into a multidisciplinary approach to conflict prevention, whilst recognising that the BSOS published in July 2011 now provides an overarching strategic framework for the Conflict Pool which was previously lacking.

Making a multidisciplinary approach work

The BSOS provides an overarching vision for the UK's ambitions in preventing conflict overseas, however it provides little detail on how this approach will work in practice, which is perhaps what ICAI refers to in its assertion that the Conflict Pool "has not articulated how it will integrate defence, diplomacy and development into a multidisciplinary approach to conflict prevention" (p 19). Saferworld would argue that the activities which the UK undertakes as part of its conflict prevention efforts should be tailored to individual conflict contexts and it is therefore right that priorities are set at the country level and not imposed centrally. Saferworld understands that these will be set out in cross departmental conflict strategies for individual countries or regions. Nonetheless, there are challenges to integrating defence,

diplomacy and development capabilities which may be common across contexts (see below for examples), and further consideration is needed as to how these will be addressed.

As Saferworld noted in its submission to the ICAI inquiry, the Government is still in the process of integrating the BSOS approach into its policy and practice across government departments.¹ Since the publication of the BSOS in July 2011, the Government has made progress in establishing the institutional structures needed to implement it, such as setting up the Building Stability Overseas Board, increasing contact between departments in country posts, and creating financial mechanisms such as the Early Action Facility and Strategic Alliances and Partnerships fund. While these are important steps forward, it is vital that the Government now invests as much effort in implementing the policy elements of BSOS as it has in the structural elements. Slower progress in this area may explain why ICAI found “few examples of activities that were genuinely multidisciplinary in nature” and that “tri-departmental working was focussed on basic management tasks, to the neglect of strategy setting” (p19).

For example, for BSOS implementation to be effective, it is necessary for DFID, FCO and MOD officials both in Whitehall and in country posts to understand and endorse the progressive definition of ‘stability’ outlined in the BSOS, which is characterised as “political systems which are representative and legitimate, capable of managing conflict and change peacefully, and societies in which human rights and rule of law are respected, basic needs are met, security established and opportunities for social and economic development are open to all.”² If some actors were to pursue this vision while others adhered to the top-down vision of stability which has led to, for example, the UK providing support for dictatorships in the Middle East and North Africa, these competing approaches would likely undermine each other. Similarly, there is a need to establish a clear understanding across departments of the meaning and implications of ‘upstream conflict prevention’. The lack of a shared understanding of this third ‘pillar’ of the BSOS, which seeks to identify and address the root causes of conflict, presents a major barrier to incorporating this approach.

The challenge of uniting three departments, each of which have their own policy objectives, organisational cultures and ways of working, behind the single vision set out in the BSOS should not be underestimated. ICAI notes that strategic coherence is currently limited because “each department brings its own mandate and interests to the table” and that reaching consensus is so challenging that “those charged with its management have tended to shy away from harder strategic issues.” However, the value of the integrated approach lies precisely in the possibility of facilitating consensus on those difficult strategic issues on which the approaches of different departments are furthest apart. The government must resist focusing only on the low-hanging fruit of issues on which departments are already largely in agreement. Strong political leadership will be needed, and clear incentives must be provided for officials to prioritise shared BSOS objectives over individual departments’ competing objectives.

Furthermore, while BSOS is jointly owned by only three departments, a truly integrated approach requires all of the government’s interactions with conflict-affected and fragile states to be conflict-sensitive, including the activities of other departments such as justice sector assistance delivered by the Ministry of Justice, energy co-operation managed by the Department of Energy and Climate Change or trading relationships managed by the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills.

Transaction costs of joint working

The National Audit Office (NAO) in its report on the Conflict Pool published in March 2012 criticises what it sees as inefficiency whereby “the tri-departmental structure duplicates roles with each department having representatives at all levels.”³ However, as Saferworld set out in its submission to the ICAI inquiry, while it may seem time-consuming to include representatives from DFID, FCO and MOD in meetings and processes at all times, participation of all three departments at all stages of planning, implementing and evaluating activities is crucial to ensuring continued buy-in. It is therefore very welcome that ICAI recognises that “the high transaction costs associated with consensual processes are arguably a necessary part of inter-departmental working.”

¹ Saferworld, *Conflict Pool Review: Saferworld submission to the Independent Commission on Aid Impact review of the Conflict Pool* (2012), http://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/ICAI%20submission_Saferworld_.pdfhttp://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/ICAI%20submission_Saferworld_.pdf p 2.

² HMG, *Building Stability Overseas Strategy* (2011), p 5.

³ National Audit Office, *Review of the Conflict Pool* (2012), <http://www.nao.org.uk/idoc.ashx?docId=10be92b2-20a5-4c36-938a-cfbb00e7d843&version=-1>, p 10.

Working to scale

ICAI recommends that the Conflict Pool should clarify its comparative advantage alongside DFID (p 19). However, the report itself describes the Conflict Pool's comparative advantage very well when it states that "the Conflict Pool functions well as a responsive, grant-making instrument for supporting small-scale peacebuilding activities by local partners in conflict-affected countries" (p 1). The report also rightly points out that "in many ways, the Conflict Pool is at its best when it acts as a venture capital fund for peacebuilding activities. Its strengths are its willingness to act quickly and flexibly in complex and dynamic environments and its ability to identify and nurture promising conflict prevention initiatives." (p 10)

Saferworld's submission to the ICAI inquiry stated that:

"...the Conflict Pool has added significant value to other existing UK Government funding mechanisms through smaller, more flexible and quick-to-access grants, which can better respond to rapidly changing environments. While Saferworld strongly welcomes the introduction of three-year funding allocations, we would also recommend that flexible and quick-to-access funds continue to be made available through country offices."

Relatively small amounts of are often much more appropriate for conflict prevention activities than multi-million pound grants. Many small community organisations and NGOs, or committed individual leaders in conflict-affected communities may lack the capacity to absorb large amounts of money, yet these are often the very groups and individuals who are best placed in terms of legitimacy and local knowledge to design and implement effective peacebuilding projects at the community level.

However, ICAI rightly points out that the small scale of the activities funded by the Conflict Pool are not commensurate with the large scale of the conflicts they seek to address, finding that "Conflict Pool staff were often unclear as to what level or type of results they should aim for i.e. small-scale, localised impact on particular communities, strategic impact on larger conflict dynamics, or a combination." (p 7)

Saferworld would argue that there is value in pursuing small scale initiatives for the reasons cited above, but ICAI is also right to point out that, once an intervention has been proven to be effective on a small scale, it is important to then identify ways to reproduce the same effects on a scale which is more likely to have significant impacts on the conflict more widely.

ICAI recommends that "where the Conflict Pool supports innovative pilots, we would like to see a more considered strategy for leveraging resources from other sources in order to take them to scale" (p 8). The Conflict Pool has had some successes in doing this: for example, Saferworld's Central Asia programme received funding in 2010 for a community security project in the Ferghana Valley to strengthen communities' resilience to violence. This initial grant enabled Saferworld to respond to rapidly changing conflict dynamics and establish the project which, based on its initial success, attracted follow-on funding from DFID, the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation and the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights.

Identifying partners who can work to scale

ICAI recognises that one of the major challenges to working to scale is identifying partners who have the capacity to work on a larger scale (p 8). Saferworld would argue that this is not a failing of the Conflict Pool per se, but rather a problem facing all actors who would wish to see conflict prevention activities carried out on a scale commensurate with the conflicts they seek to address. A case in point is security and justice programming. Currently, the majority of development money directed towards security and justice work is spent through private sector consortia. While the private sector has a valuable role to play in delivering UK aid and such consortia are often good at delivering certain aspects of security and justice reforms (such as providing police training or building courthouses), this is not the whole picture. Skills and expertise in community engagement, participatory approaches and civil-society capacity-building are crucial for ensuring that security and justice reforms are also effective in empowering and supporting poor and vulnerable populations to effectively demand the services they really want, and this type of expertise is more commonly found within the development community. While NGOs such as Saferworld are currently doing this work at a local level, major development NGOs have very limited engagement in this type of work, meaning that there are few partners able to deliver participatory, people-focused security and justice programming on a large scale.

In order to address this implementation gap, Saferworld recommends that the Conflict Pool explore how it could incentivise potential implementing partners who have the capacity to work at scale but do not see conflict prevention as part of their core mandate to begin engaging in conflict prevention activities.

Conflict sensitivity

A key guiding principle of all engagements in conflict-affected and fragile states should be conflict sensitivity. It is therefore concerning that ICAI found a “lack of attention to conflict sensitivity and the risks of unintended harm.”

Conflict sensitivity can be understood in a minimalist and a maximalist sense. The minimalist approach is sometimes described as a ‘do no harm’ approach, requiring actors to minimise any negative impacts on conflict dynamics. A maximalist approach requires actors to maximise the positive impacts on conflict dynamics as well as minimising negative ones. Saferworld would argue that, while certain activities such as the delivery of humanitarian assistance must take a minimalist view for operational reasons, wherever possible engagements in fragile contexts should take a maximalist view of conflict sensitivity and aim for positive peacebuilding impacts. Given that the purpose of the Conflict Pool is to fund conflict prevention activities, making positive impacts on conflict dynamics is built into the design of the activities it funds. However it is still vital that all activities are designed based on thorough conflict analysis to avoid any unintended harm. The new Joint Analysis on Conflict and Stability (JACS) tool provides a useful means of doing this.

ICAI recommends that the Conflict Pool adopt guidelines on conflict sensitivity, and there is no shortage of guidance available.⁴ However, in order for such guidelines to be effective, this issue will need to be given a much higher profile by officials. Political pressure will also need to be applied from the top in order to ensure that a conflict sensitive approach is implemented.

Monitoring and evaluation

ICAI rightly highlights the need for robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for assessing results at the output, outcome and impact stages. Saferworld understands that the Government is already in the process of redesigning monitoring and evaluation arrangements for the Conflict Pool. However, Saferworld highlighted in its submission to the inquiry some of the risks of imposing an inappropriate or overly simplistic results framework on conflict prevention activities. It is therefore very welcome that ICAI recognises that “a poorly designed results management system might have a number of unintended consequences, such as stifling risk-taking, imposing unrealistic time frames or pushing programme teams to focus on results that are measurable rather than meaningful.” (p 18)

ICAI’s finding that the Conflict Pool has no formal mechanism for collecting and sharing lessons and experiences is of concern, particularly as the BSOS outlines the Government’s objective of strengthening the evidence base for what works in addressing conflict and fragility.⁵ The UK Government has the potential to be a leader internationally in promoting good policy and practice on conflict prevention, but to do this it must have clear mechanisms for collating the lessons learned from its own experience and that of others.

Saferworld concurs with ICAI’s finding that “there is insufficient information in the public domain to allow external scrutiny of the Conflict Pool’s portfolio.” Awareness of the Conflict Pool among parliamentarians is relatively low, and it therefore receives little parliamentary scrutiny. Making more information available on how it is spent and what results it has achieved may help to encourage greater scrutiny and pressure to maintain or increase spending on conflict prevention in future.

Conclusion

It is encouraging that the ICAI report has highlighted some key issues and suggested improvements to the Conflict Pool. Saferworld broadly agrees with these, particularly the need for greater cross-departmental buy in to the vision set out in the BSOS, the need for greater attention to conflict sensitivity and for improved monitoring and evaluation of the Conflict Pool, to facilitate greater public scrutiny.

The Conflict Pool has key strengths, including its ability to provide small amounts of responsive funds to facilitate grassroots conflict prevention activities, but requires strategic and procedural improvements. The BSOS sets out a strong vision for upstream conflict prevention and the overarching strategic framework for the Conflict Pool. However, coordination across departments poses a significant challenge to fulfilling the progressive vision of stability set out in the BSOS. Strong political leadership will be

⁴ For example, the Conflict Sensitivity Consortium, of which Saferworld was a member, recent produced the *How to guide to conflict sensitivity*, http://www.saferworld.org.uk/downloads/pubdocs/CSC_HowToGuide_CS_WEB.pdf.

⁵ *Op cit* HMG, p 34.

needed, with clear incentives for officials to prioritise the objectives set out in the BSOS over competing objectives from individual departments.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in over 17 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and Europe.

Saferworld – 28 Charles Square, London N1 6HT, UK. Registered Charity no 1043843. Company limited by guarantee no 3015948.
Tel: +44 (0)20 7324 4646 | Fax: +44 (0)20 7324 4647 | Email: general@saferworld.org.uk | Web: www.saferworld.org.uk