



The Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention consultation series seeks to bring together expert civil society practitioners, academics and Government of Canada officials to generate up-to-date information and analysis, as well as policy and programming options to respond to developments and emerging trends in peacebuilding.

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Policy brief

Civil society views on next generation peacebuilding and conflict prevention policy and programming

SUMMARY

On March 14, 2011, Peacebuild, with financial support from Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (DFAIT), convened the first of a series of six workshops on various peacebuilding and conflict prevention policy issues. This policy brief synthesizes the findings and recommendations arising from the first workshop and from two issue papers prepared to inform the workshop discussion. It highlights policy and programming options aimed at improving Canadian and global responses to violent conflict.

PRIMING THE DISCUSSION

To launch the series of consultations, the agenda for the first workshop allowed participants to take a broad look at current civil society views on policy and programming issues related to next generation peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Two issue papers were circulated to participants prior to the workshop and key points presented to launch the discussion. (Forthcoming at www.peacebuild.ca)

First, Ernie Regehr analyzed trends and drivers of armed conflict, with a view to developing a clearer sense of the structural or chronic conditions that heighten the risks of armed conflict. Conversely, he also identified conditions that should be fostered to reduce the risks of armed conflict. He identified four basic conditions offering a framework for exploring the drivers of armed conflict: (1) heightened political, economic, and social grievances, (2) intergroup competition and conflict, (3) preparedness and

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capacity to use violence and violate human rights, and (4) the perceived absence of legitimate pathways for nonviolent conflict resolution. He emphasized that, from the perspective of conflict prevention, the focus should not be on the broad range of sources of political conflict. Instead, it should be on particular conditions that are more likely to lead from political conflict to sustained violent confrontation. Furthermore, he underlined the importance of the need to develop conflict resolution and diplomacy opportunities in crisis situations. He concluded that the traditional peacebuilding agenda (e.g. building community-to-community engagement and trust, promoting economic equity, etc.) still offered the most promising approach to effective long-term conflict prevention.

Sophie Toupin and Dr. Nicolas Lemay-Hébert highlighted aspects of their issue paper on peacebuilding approaches, policies and practices. They examined the ways in which a variety of international actors have conceived the concept of peacebuilding and how others have contributed to its expansion. Their analysis provided an overview of a number of important debates related to peacebuilding: how to support local ownership in specific peacebuilding strategies, how to promote integrated strategies between donor countries, how to increase interactions between international and local actors, etc. They found that the complexities of tasks at hand, as well as the varying approaches and the numerous actors involved in the process, have shown the importance of coherence and collaboration. They emphasized that successful peacebuilding efforts inevitably require local ownership, since external actors can only facilitate and support peacebuilding.

After an initial exchange of views on the issues arising from the background papers, discussions continued in two working groups: one focused on issues at the policy level, the other on options for new approaches to programming.

POLICY FRAMING

The policy group discussed a number of issues before developing a set of recommendations. One of the key questions was the **importance of the concept of state fragility** for peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Some participants argued that an excessive focus on state fragility as the primary cause of violent conflict limits our understanding of the complex interaction of various factors contributing to armed violence. When the goals of

peacebuilding are confined to the stabilization of a country or region, as opposed to building a lasting peace through reconciliation and societal transformation, we risk reducing strategies to a minimalist vision of what peacebuilding could be and what could be achieved in the long term.

Other participants added that the **nature of the state** had a greater impact on conflict than merely its strength. Authoritarian governments may be able to maintain order, thus contributing to a lower number of intra-state armed conflicts, but the level of violence they apply to their citizens tends to be high, thus considerably undermining the social contract. At the same time, there are numerous countries with weak government institutions which are nevertheless not experiencing intra-state armed conflict. Therefore, a distinction should be made between ‘state’ and ‘government’, with an effective state being characterized primarily by an effective social contract rather than powerful executive institutions capable of maintaining stability by suppressing dissent. Since the notion of the social contract is that individuals give up sovereignty to a government in order to receive social order through the rule of law, the starting point for policy-making must be the people and not government institutions.

One of the implications of such an approach is that **stability should be measured using rights-based criteria**. Policies to address state fragility and enhance stability would need to concentrate on good governance, i.e. competent management of a society’s affairs in a manner that is inclusive, transparent, accountable, equitable and responsive to people’s needs. Based on such an understanding of an effective state, state security and human security are not mutually exclusive. The *raison d’être* of the state would be to advance the welfare of its people and to promote sustainable peace. Efforts to increase state security would not be made for the sake of the state per se, but ultimately for the people living within it. Experience suggests that Western governments find it difficult to adopt such a perspective in foreign policy practice. The language of their foreign policy statements may reflect notions of human security, but their interventions remain state-centric. Oftentimes, problematic compromises are made at the expense of human rights when strategic interests are at play.

Despite the central importance of good governance, participants highlighted the fact that **peacebuilding should not be limited to or equated with state-building**. Key questions in the search for peacebuilding policies and strategies also include what role third-party actors can realistically play in re-establishing a social contract. Furthermore, it was considered crucial to ask what role local non-state actors could play in this regard. Participants stated that possibly the most important contribution of civil society, both external and local, may be to help shift the focus of peacebuilding to the level of individuals and communities. Thus they could balance the conventional perspective of governmental actors who naturally tend to approach issues of peace and security through a state-centric lens.

In light of the plenary and group discussions, the members of the Policy Group developed the following set of recommendations:

1. **Reframe policies to reflect centrality of good governance.**
The Government of Canada should frame its policies regarding countries at risk explicitly with the objective of building a sustainable peace. This requires good and accountable governance and the recognition of the essential role of a vibrant civil society.
2. **Reform funding strategies and patterns**
Canada has three broad choices regarding the nature of its involvement internationally – to concentrate geographically or thematically or, in keeping with long established Canadian practice, to be active across regions and in a wide variety of ways. Participants recommended the third option, which would see Canada leverage its existing multifaceted engagement style by being innovative, attuned and opportunistic in order to develop good ideas that will gain influence among practitioners. In order to implement this approach, the Government of Canada in general and the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) in particular will need to fund many smaller projects, rather than a few large ones. This in turn will require a considerable increase in human resources at START to manage such programming. Furthermore, the explicit and full re-engagement of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) with peacebuilding challenges faced by countries at risk is also required.
3. **Empower peacebuilding actors in the Global South.**
In comparison to development cooperation, peacebuilding is still a young discipline. Its practitioners have not yet had the time to adapt programming techniques and methods developed for development projects to the specific needs of peacebuilding projects. As a consequence, peacebuilding projects have been affected by pitfalls similar to the ones that have bedeviled development programming over the years, for example, in relation to the inability to effectively implement the requirement for local ownership. It is therefore recommended that Canada (including DFAIT, CIDA and other actors) engage more actively in supporting South-South communities of practice (including core funding for southern think tanks), to enable them to build capacity over time and to contribute to the creation of new programming methodologies that better fit the characteristics of peacebuilding projects.
4. **Develop a strategic framework.**
Consistency and continuity in policy and programming for countries at risk will be hard to maintain by the Government of Canada and its non-governmental partners without an overarching strategic framework guiding this work. Such a strategic framework would have to articulate the respective roles and responsibilities of all relevant government departments as well as the potential contributions of, and relationships with, Canadian civil society. To widen the political space that would be required to put in place such a comprehensive framework, civil society actors should reach out to parliamentarians and political leaders to engage in a dialogue on strategic questions of foreign policy, with the aim of generating greater bipartisan interest in and support for policy changes.

PROGRAMMATIC FRAMING

The programming group also discussed various aspects related to peacebuilding programming in light of the ideas presented in the issue papers before formulating a set of recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners.

There was a clear consensus that **peacebuilding projects could only be successful if their objectives, approaches and management were owned by local communities and organizations**. The peacebuilding approach applied by a project must be determined by the local context (e.g. identities, religions, cultures) just as much as the conflict situation it aims to address is determined by the same context. This can only be done through localized analysis capturing context-specific factors which tend to be difficult to identify from abroad. Moreover, approaches must be flexible enough to adapt as dynamic contexts evolve. Practitioners need to have a high degree of familiarity with and understanding of trends and debates, as well as an ability and willingness to engage in them. Outside interventions should therefore be informed by an explicit recognition of their inherent limitations in addition to being decentralized and designed in a bottom-up fashion.

Workshop participants considered grassroots capacities as a crucial pillar of sustainable peacebuilding strategies. An important implication of placing a greater emphasis on local actors is that **more attention and resources need to be dedicated to capacity building of grassroots organizations**, with particular attention to the skills, knowledge and attitude required to successfully manage change processes. Funding mechanisms need to be adapted, training manuals translated and methodologies tailored to become more accessible to such target groups. In fact, where possible, external actors should go one step further and position themselves as supporters of strategies and methodologies developed locally.

Participants debated what the right degree of local ownership of a peacebuilding project would be. Given the fact that peacebuilding spans a wide range of activities, not all of which would be situated at the community level, **it is necessary to further specify what is meant by local ownership and who is supposed to ‘own’ what aspects of a peacebuilding initiative**. Some participants thus saw a need to balance local ownership with a sufficient degree of buy-in and commitment from external actors, who can contribute valuable financial, intellectual and other resources. This could be achieved by more consistently applying the principle of subsidiarity, whereby external actors perform only those tasks which cannot be performed effectively at a more immediate or local level.

An additional question is how external actors can foster local efforts for local solutions in ways that are compatible with their own values and how to manage cases in which such compatibility is lacking.

Following the discussion, participants in the Programming Working Group compiled several recommendations:

1. **Conduct thorough baseline research before designing a project or program.**
One-size-fits-all interventions that are not informed by a deep understanding of the specific conditions on the ground as well as the causes and dimensions of the conflict are ineffective at best and harmful at worst, especially in the long term. Extensive baseline research is also necessary to be able to measure the eventual impact of the intervention.
2. **Develop clear project plans.**
Any intervention should have a well-defined purpose (based on engagement criteria), a clear evaluation strategy (with a reasonable balance between relevance and cost) and a detailed transition plan (to avoid creating dependencies and ensure sustainability of results).
3. **Extend programming commitments.**
Canada's programming with regard to countries at risk must involve longer-term commitments (up to seven years). Experience has shown that longer cycles lead to more thorough planning and implementation, resulting in more meaningful outcomes. The programming approach should also include sustained engagement with civil society and in-country policy consultations at the inception stage. Such sustained engagement and local partnerships will also help address the fundamental challenge of building cultural awareness.
4. **Increase accountability to local communities.**
External actors engaged in peacebuilding initiatives should make greater efforts to be accountable to local communities. They should define clear and specific indicators of success and accept to be held accountable to them. This would lend greater legitimacy to their work and increase the likelihood of success. Currently, no universal indicators and quality standards exist for peacebuilding projects. Possibly, various tools and indicators used for different, but related purposes could be combined and adjusted to this end. Hopefully, more robust indicators would also facilitate a continued shift of focus from measuring outputs to measuring outcomes.
5. **Make better use of communication platforms.**
Peacebuilding practitioners should look for ways to facilitate the use of modern communication technologies and platforms as a force for peace. They should promote the exchange of knowledge on peacebuilding practices, support the sharing of success stories, and harness the potential of technology for early warning, incident tracking and rapid response (e.g. Ushahidi, MediaBadger).

OTHER OUTCOMES

In addition to the presentation of the two issue papers and the deliberations of the two working groups, participants also engaged in extensive plenary discussions throughout the day. Among the most prominent themes were the following:

Do no harm

Some participants argued that **it can be difficult to strike a balance between supporting stability and encouraging freedom**. On the one hand, outbreaks of violence and civil strife should be prevented to avoid suffering and deaths among the population. On the other hand, approaches to enhance stability that result in entrenching brutal oppression may not be more attractive to the local population.

The ‘do no harm’ principle stipulates that practitioners should proceed with programs only after careful consideration and widespread local consultation, so as to minimize the risk of inadvertently exacerbating the conflict situation said programs aim to address. However, there may be situations of latent conflict due to economic or political exclusion where the only solution appears to be escalation and direct confrontation. Some participants argued that achieving freedom and justice for all parts of the population may then require ‘doing harm’ by triggering an outbreak of violence to forcibly change the oppressive social order.

Reacting to this question, others pointed out that the principle of ‘Do no harm’ does not advocate passivity and acquiescence in the face of oppression and abuse. Instead, it states that practitioners should make the greatest possible effort to analyze the potential negative consequences of their actions as they intervene. Also, supporting oppression or fomenting civil strife may not be the only two options at hand. Before destructive conflict emerges, steps can be taken to prevent it, possibly including support for democratic institutions or the facilitation of discussions through intermediaries.

The United Nations’ Peacebuilding Architecture

Among workshop participating, opinions appeared to be divided as to whether the United Nations (UN) has been able to become a leading actor in the field of peacebuilding. Some recognized the organization’s efforts to build on lessons learned, promote integration among agencies, and keep a focus on countries emerging from conflict that receive insufficient international attention.

Others, however, stated that more than five years after its establishment, the UN peacebuilding architecture (the Peacebuilding Commission, Peacebuilding Support Office and Peacebuilding Fund) remains in its infancy, playing a very limited role. Its budgets are minimal and much more is required if the vision and ambition of 2005 is to be restored. As for the contribution the Government of Canada might be able to make in this regard, **participants expressed the hope that decision-makers will see the unique comparative advantage the UN has vis-à-vis ad hoc multilateral initiatives**.

Country-specific strategies

In addition to a comprehensive strategic framework (see recommendations of Policy Working Group), some participants suggested that the Government of Canada as well as other actors engaged in peacebuilding should **step up their efforts to develop integrated, inter-disciplinary strategies for specific countries or regions**. Foreign policy guided by carefully crafted, long-term strategies would have a greater chance of success than disjointed, short-term engagements driven by political expediency or a narrow view on isolated issue areas.

It was also mentioned that the programs of national governments and international organizations often lacked coherence. At worst, international actors would even find themselves in competition with each other as each one of them insists on implementing their own approach to peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Certain participants, however, did not agree with the suggestion that greater coherence and harmonization of approaches would automatically lead to better results. The idea of the international community speaking with one voice is only appealing if we assume that this voice would be representative and informed by an appropriate strategy. To mitigate the risk of external actors placing all bets on a misguided course of action, it might be preferable to allow them to pursue their respective approaches while engaging them in a meaningful dialogue supporting a continuous exchange on lessons learned and best practices.

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