

Tackling conflict in the United Kingdom's Integrated Review

You had to look for it, but buried deep in the UK's Integrated Review is the acknowledgement that during the coming decade "conflict and instability will continue to pose a major test to global security and resilience".

Teresa Dumasy argues that we must do more to address this challenge

The acknowledgement that conflict and instability negatively affect global security is a welcome, if well hidden, part of the UK government's Integrated Review, given that rising levels of violent conflict are a huge cause of human suffering and threaten our shared security and UK interests, while exclusion and injustice drive conflict and terrorism. Speaking about terrorism, UK Chief of the General Staff General Sir Nick Carter has said, "The long-term solution is to fix the causes of it, which are invariably a lack of education, a lack of opportunity, and a growing feeling of exclusion and isolation."

Conflict creates space for armed and criminal groups to thrive, undermines democracy, and undoes development and trade opportunities. Moreover, it is driving soaring levels of displacement. If current trends persist, according to the World Bank, by 2030 67% of the global poor will be living in countries affected by conflict and insecurity.

The review concedes that it will not be possible to prevent all conflicts but it commits the United Kingdom to working to reduce their frequency and intensity. This muted ambition contrasts with a landmark UN/World Bank Group study in 2018 that called for the international community to focus urgently on prevention. The report claimed

that not only does prevention work but it is cost effective. It predicted that a scaled-up system of preventative action could save between USD5–70 billion per year. Even this would go some way towards offsetting the cost of violence and conflict to the global economy, which is estimated to be USD14.76 trillion, or USD1,988 per person.

We now know more than ever before about how to make peace. Political settlements, community security, mediation and dialogue, conflict analysis, and the management of natural resources are a few areas where global knowledge has developed from decades of practice. The UK is home to leading peacebuilding non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and research institutions in the field. They may not be household names but these organisations have been supporting people and peace efforts across more than 30 countries for decades.

Meanwhile, the Integrated Review also commits to a more strategic and integrated bilateral approach to conflicts and their political and social drivers, continuing support to global efforts and developing diplomacy and tools such as mediation. Another positive: the complexity of contemporary conflict requires adaptation, multilateral co-operation, and political commitment. Indeed, NGOs have long been calling for a

cross-government conflict strategy to guide policy coherence in conflict-affected countries.

Where the doubt sets in is how rhetoric will meet reality. The UK's 10-year strategic vision is off to a bad start with a 36% cut to the Conflict Stability and Security Fund alongside a cut to official development assistance, which supports civilian conflict prevention efforts, from 0.7% to 0.5% of GDP. Even anticipating some effect from the Covid-19 pandemic on public funds, the scale of the cuts is dramatic. They are out of kilter with the needs identified in the review and risk a devastating effect on those countries in the greatest need, such as South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Yet, in November 2020 the government found the funds to raise defence spending to at least 2.2% and it intends to invest further in its nuclear capability in a perilous context of 'systemic competition'.

There is incoherence in other areas, too. For instance, how does the commitment to open societies and defending human rights square with the need to strike deals with trading partners in the Indo-Pacific region that may have poor human rights records? Where is the link between conflict and the climate crisis? Climate change exacerbates existing conflict dynamics, while conflict hampers

the ability to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change.

Finally, despite the overriding evidence and logic about the positive benefits of inclusion for sustainable peace, we see little of this in the review. For example, while girls' education is important for gender equality, conflict and insecurity hit women first. A more comprehensive approach to addressing the effect of conflicts on women and their meaningful participation in peacebuilding and peace processes is needed.

Likewise, young people are consistently excluded from decision making and seen as a conflict problem. Yet we have seen how, in places such as northeast Nigeria, they can be a force for peace. Here, UK NGOs have worked to establish Youth Peace Platforms (YPPs) across the region, which target the most vulnerable and excluded youth in communities under the control of Boko Haram or those that have faced repeated attacks. The YPPs provide space for young people to talk, listen, and learn. They provide new practical skills for employment but also in resolving conflicts in the community. This may seem a way off the global insecurity in the review but it is what conflict prevention is about.

Foreign and security policy is an uneasy balance of interests and values. Conflict prevention and resolution sit across these; in this interconnected world we are only as secure as the most vulnerable. Through its implementation of the Integrated Review, the UK government must narrow the gap between rhetoric and reality, and prioritise the reduction of conflict and all its disastrous human and global consequences.

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