conciliation resources

Supporting local capacities for handling violent conflict: a role for international NGOs?

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The explosion of intra-state conflicts is challenging those international agencies which, directly or indirectly, offer assistance to people affected by disasters. International interventions in intra-state conflicts have become more complex, and the humanitarian mandate of such agencies has expanded beyond emergency relief interventions. Some agencies now insist, not only that they must do something to relieve the effects of armed conflicts, but that they must also respond to the conflict itself. This is a challenge, not only for the relief and development community and its grant-making partners in governments and inter-governmental agencies, but also for a growing number of specialist agencies which offer assistance in the field generically referred to as conflict resolution. Britain is home for a growing number of diverse international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) specialising in conflict resolution and prevention. In this article I highlight a few of the key issues for INGOs supporting local peacemaking capacities.

Conflict resolution: old field, new actors

Conflict resolution as a specialised and professional field of work is difficult to sketch with any precision. The first point to note, however, is that there is a global trend for all kinds of agencies, from community-based organisations to the United Nations Security Council, to redefine and make explicit their role in directly or indirectly responding to conflicts. This trend is not just a fad, and suggestions that increased funding for such activities amid, otherwise withering donor aid budgets, represents a lucrative option for undertaking conflict resolution work have been hugely exaggerated. It is a reflection of real challenges and the deep crisis of development.

The second point is that the field is, of course, not new. In Britain, it has a rich history. Significant members of this community include the Quaker Peace and Service and the International Section of Amnesty International, agencies which have led the way in redefining the possible roles and relationships between peoples and organisations across national boundaries (Williams 1994). The large relief and development NGOs which, without exception, are now undertaking significant policy work in this area, are recent actors in this field.

Conflict analysis

The professional agencies working in this expanding field bring with them a wide variety of skills and abilities. They also bring a notorious inability for strategic co-ordination. This is, at least in part, a result of the insecure and

competitive marketplace in which they operate.

Another common problem - particularly for relief and development agencies - is the lack of an adequate understanding of the conflict dynamic to inform their interventions. Readers will have heard the saying: ‘When the only tool in your toolbox is a hammer - all problems start to look like a nail.’ This logic characterises many INGO interventions in conflict, that is, ‘we do what we can’ - which is not necessarily what most needs to be done.

Several factors mitigate serious investment by these agencies in conflict analysis. The humanitarian agencies are bound by an awkward self-imposed myth, entrenched in British charitable law, that what they do is not ‘political’ but humanitarian. This insistence on the non-political nature of aid has contributed to some profound failures by humanitarian agencies to understand adequately the conflict contexts in which they operate, as interventions must be framed in non-political terms. Information and analysis is generally seen by aid agencies as a means to an end - that of fulfilling the self-proscribed mandate of the organisation. Thus, humanitarian relief agencies may perceive that it is not within their mandate to understand fully the dynamics of a conflict, the nature of human rights abuses or other social inequities.

There are, of course, additional factors at play. There is often an absence of authoritative and objective information in armed conflicts, or accessible and practical analysis which could inform a response. Moreover, in responding to a violent crisis, many of the participatory approaches developed in non-violent situations are overtaken by the sense of crisis and emergency. When people are dying, suffering the violence of hunger, disease and displacement, it hardly seems an appropriate time for participatory workshops, or promoting indigenous perspectives and capacities.

However, the process by which we gain an understanding of a conflict can often be the first truly constructive response or intervention. Depending on how it is handled, the process can be empowering (or disempowering) for local actors - making a concern for participatory approaches vitally important. Developing approaches to conflict handling may seem a soft science, in contrast to the rather macho world of relief assistance. However, it is in a climate of ignorance that mistakes are made. Examples abound. One such example is the now infamous use of existing leadership in camps in Goma, Zaire, for the delivery of food to Rwandan refugees. This inadvertently strengthened the power and control of these same Hutu militia leaders who had led the genocide (Anderson 1996). Short term relief interventions may save lives, but the vicious cycle of violence rolls on, sometimes reinforced by ill-informed emergency responses. Opportunities for building inter-NGO co-ordination based on a developed consensual analysis are missed. So are the opportunities to help local people negotiate a common understanding of their situation, and thereby begin the process of rebuilding their lives.

Conflict analysis, in one form or another, is absolutely central to conflict prevention and transformation activities. An example is drawn from Sierra Leone where Conciliation Resources (CR) is pursuing a strategy of supporting 'community peacebuilding'. In this acutely violent situation, the primary concerns of many civilians are for security and survival. Rural communities are seeking to make themselves less vulnerable to the violence by attempting to better understand the conflict better and thus develop strategies to defend themselves and cope with its consequences. As with many violent conflicts, civilian populations are at the mercy of rumour. The parties to the conflict deliberately use misinformation to mobilise support, confuse opponents, and create environments of chaos and panic to dehumanise their enemies. Information and analysis, however, can be a potent instrument of peace, reconciliation, justice and reconstruction. A shared or consensual analysis of a conflict, and the process by which consensus is reached, can help overcome social barriers, 'rehumanise' former opponents, and identify alternative avenues to violent conflict. CR is supporting this through a series of workshops, seminars, international exchanges, and sponsored studies with local civil groups, including the churches, a women's movement, journalists and the Sierra Leone diaspora.

The role of local organisations in peacemaking

The international community, in all its diversity, appears so overwhelmed with the tasks of responding to the needs of the victims of the conflicts, and dealing with the perpetrators of violence, that supporting the conflict transforming role of organised, unarmed civilians takes a poor third place. The argument that so-called check has a central role to play in responding to conflict - not just as the employees or proxy employees of external agencies, nor solely as a check to balance the abuses of state power or the power of armed groups, but as meaningful and direct part of people's participation in their own governance (Garcia 1993) - has not yet been won.

A case in point is Liberia. In the capital, Monrovia, ECOMOG regional peacekeeping troops and a range of humanitarian organisations sought to secure a 'safe haven' for civilian groups (religious, commercial, media, human rights, academics etc.) and the crippled state. However, this was undermined by a series of regionally sponsored peace agreements which eroded and eliminated the authority of civil society. The twin track approach, of assisting the victims of this ruthless war while diplomatically seeking an accommodation with the warring factions, resulted in an agreement (The Abuja Accord, 1995) which divided the spoils of the state among the armed factions. The renewal of fighting in Monrovia in the spring of this year, while largely understood to be the result of new strategic alliances between the most powerful factions, is also a consequence of the failure of the international community to support the moderate voices, those agents for democratic change who have consistently

spoken out on human rights and non-violent alternatives to war. With the independent print media shut down, and advocates for human rights and democracy driven out, the space for civil initiatives has been all but closed (Conciliation Resources, 1996). Without these essential elements, what kind of sustainable peace does Liberia have to look forward to?

However, while popular and civil participation in peace and conflict prevention processes does offer some hope of transforming conflict situations, they require international support. Civil groups operate from a position of extreme vulnerability when they challenge the activities and interests of armed groups.

Moreover, we should avoid the tendency to romanticise local and indigenous capacities for peacebuilding. While they are vitally important, it is often overlooked that traditional capacities for conflict management have failed (for a myriad of reasons) to manage or contain the conflict from becoming violent in the first place. Some traditional approaches to conflict management reinforce undemocratic patron-client relationships, and may have contributed to the conflict.

More significant are the external international and global dimensions to most internal conflicts. Indigenous capacities are often unable to mitigate the wrecking effects of regional and international influences. These may be political and military interventions, or regional and global trade which underpins the economic interests of armed groups. Indigenous or traditional capacities for dispute resolution or conflict handling are not always commensurate with the demands of contemporary conflicts. Consequently, there is a legitimate role for INGOs in supporting - but not supplanting - local organisations in peacebuilding.

In this respect, Conciliation Resources' work with the Citizens' Constitutional Forum (CCF), in Fiji, is pertinent. In Fiji, a long and sometimes painful history of racial separateness has deeply communalised its political and social institutions. The CCF, a civil society initiative, is working as both a facilitator and an advocate of democratic social change. The CCF has sought to create a space for dialogue on a number of contentious national issues which simply would not otherwise have been addressed. The very multi-cultural make up of CCF cuts across the communalist tide in Fiji. However, it is also advocating and articulating a progressive civil consensus to move away from Fiji's constitutionally race-based political system. Its work challenges much of the conventional thinking on the role of civil society in conflict prevention and democratisation. Conflict prevention, or preventative diplomacy is increasingly used to refer to conflicts which are already violent and moving up the list of countries generating international concern. Conflict mitigation efforts in Burundi are referred to in this sense. In Fiji, the conflict is acute, but the situation is not (yet) violent. The preventive work on the ground rarely, if ever, uses the language of conflict and conflict resolution. Instead, the national discourse is

one of inter-cultural understanding and problem solving, and the promotion of human rights. Of course, the space for such popular initiatives in countries such as Liberia will be entirely more constrained, and at extremes non-existent. Thus, the design and tactics will differ, and may involve work outside the country. However, the importance of civic participation in peacemaking remains.

There are dangers in international support for local peacemaking capacities. There is the danger of offering the kinds of support we can provide, rather than what is needed, or of encouraging the creation of local partners, often in the image of INGOs, in order to meet our own institutional needs.

We make a mistake, moreover, if we narrowly interpret the concept of local capacities for peace to represent non-governmental organisations, and do not encompass wider institutions of the state (and beyond) which traditionally mitigate, manage or channel conflicts. Supporting local capacities for peace might include building appropriate electoral systems (as is lacking in Fiji), judicial reform, integrated educational systems, appropriate language and human rights legislation, and so on.

In other words, INGO support for local capacities for making and sustaining peace cannot afford to confine itself to the traditional welfare spheres of relief or development aid, or to working exclusively in the non-governmental sector.

Conclusion

If not a new field, INGO involvement in conflict resolution is certainly in a state of rapid expansion and on a steep learning curve. This article has sought to raise a few key issues for agencies working in this field. How this growing field will itself be monitored remains, as yet, an open question. The essential questions are: have we got our approach to conflict analysis right? are we asking the right questions? In the face of wars and complex emergencies there can be no doubt about the urgency to support and invest in agents for constructive social change: the independent media, human rights monitors and advocates, and community-based peacemakers and processes. Of course, this is not an argument for blank chequebook diplomacy. It is essential that as we come to understand more clearly the economic dimensions of so many of today's violent conflicts, that we are more transparent about the marketplace for peacemaking activities.

References

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Footnotes

1. These include International Alert, Responding to Conflict, the International Crisis Group, and my own organization Conciliation Resources, to name a few.