

Local Perceptions of International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations

“When international assistance is given in the context of a violent conflict, it becomes a part of that context and thus also of the conflict.”¹ More than a decade after these words introduced the concept of ‘Do No Harm’, the international community is again examining the role of international assistance in fragile and conflict-affected settings at the 4th High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in November 2011. The Listening Project has been gathering the experiences and perspectives of nearly 6,000 people in twenty aid recipient societies on the effectiveness of international assistance. Many of these people have been affected by conflict, chronic fragility or other destabilizing influences, such as natural disasters. The following presents feedback gathered by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects on the applicability of the OECD principles for good international engagement in these difficult circumstances.²

People in aid recipient societies say that international engagement can make a difference. Following the 2004 tsunami, a recipient in Aceh noted that, “The international presence creates a pitch for peace.” However, people also recognize that there are limits on what international assistance can be expected to achieve. What assistance is provided, how it is delivered; to whom it is provided and when it is delivered has a profound impact on whether it exacerbates existing tensions or supports local capacities for peace and development. A director of a local CSO in Mindanao suggested, “Peacebuilding, gender and human rights have become such technical terms thrown around in proposals, project headings, and when talking about results and impacts. Funding agencies and implementers have to be humble about what they are able to achieve in these domains given the complexities. We can’t expect or demand too much. Instead we need to engage in an honest dialogue about what is possible and how to do our best.”

On the importance of *context analysis*, people say that international actors don’t take the time to understand the context and apply pre-packaged programming rather assistance that is tailored to their realities. An observer in Kenya suggested that “Quite often, donors assume they know every problem and can therefore prescribe solutions.” Local and international observers in Haiti commented on the misguided “diagnosis” and solutions which overlooked or undermined the social resilience and creativity that is Haiti’s greatest wealth. A city official in Mindanao observed that, “Those donors who have been on the ground longer understand the local dynamics and political context better. But people get moved around like ambassadors and that knowledge often goes with them. For example, people rarely ask, ‘Where is the source of authority and credibility within this community?’ before they enter one. In some places, it does not reside with the local government, but rather perhaps in the local rebel group or community leader. Knowing local context is important in order to bring even more change through a development process. But this takes time.”

Evidence gathered across all of CDA’s projects highlights that international actors often fail to make the important distinction between conflict-sensitive programming and peacebuilding³. Conflict sensitive assistance has at its core 1) an analysis of the context, 2) an understanding of the interaction between the interventions and the context, and 3) actions taken to avoid negative impacts and maximize positive impacts on conflict dynamics. Effective peacebuilding, on the other hand, is anchored by a thorough

¹ For more information on the Do No Harm framework and project, see the CDA website www.cdainc.com

² For more on the Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations, see http://www.oecd.org/document/12/0,3343,en_2649_33693550_42113676_1_1_1_1,00.html

³ Woodrow, Peter and Diana Chigas, “A Distinction with a Difference: Conflict Sensitivity and Peacebuilding.” Available at www.cdainc.com

conflict analysis AND an explicit strategy to affect the key driving factors of the conflict that may or may not be linked to development factors in a given context. In other words, effective development interventions may not be effective as peacebuilding interventions, and *vice versa*.

On the way international actors engage in conflict affected and fragile places, people note that international assistance often continues to *do harm*. People described instances in which international assistance reinforced existing tensions and power imbalances. A Palestinian peace advocate commented that, “People to people activities have turned into business relationships: a grant, a set of activities, reports, bye-bye...When you join a funded project with Israelis, there is a power asymmetry and it often is unbalanced. Israelis tend to dominate joint initiatives. They get funds more easily and often rush to find colleagues or partners on the other side but on their conditions, on their grounds since they are the ones coming with funds.”

People questioned whether aid rewards peace or conflict and expressed concern that external agendas can create perverse incentives. In Kosovo, where donors generally targeted multi-ethnic communities, often to the neglect of mono-ethnic communities, people remarked that, “To get aid, not only does your community have to have many ethnic groups; they have to have problems with each other too!” Similarly, a Palestinian leader in a refugee camp in Lebanon asserted that, “Where there is war, there is assistance. During war most of the people’s needs are met. The international community helps to create a war zone. If we are bleeding, money is thrown at us, so it encourages people to make war.”

On the focus on *state building as the central objective*, people suggested that international support should be broad based. They say that focusing solely on strengthening government institutions can reward unrepresentative governance and marginalize key domestic actors. In Tajikistan, people felt that control of the state by a powerful clan from one region and lack of devolution of administrative power to other areas contributed to ongoing conflict and disparities in access to economic resources. Broadening ownership of peace and development processes is also critical. Civil society, for example, has played an important role in mobilizing coalitions among advocacy groups, trade unions, women’s organizations, and youth groups, as part of concerted campaigns for change in places such as Nepal, Burundi, Philippines and in the Middle East.

In Liberia, people voiced concerns about an excessively technical approach to development with an emphasis on physical infrastructure and a largely institutional approach to peacebuilding. A local peace actor described it as, “a ‘hardware’ rather than a ‘software’ approach to building peace.” Similarly, people pointed to the results of international assistance largely focused on the technical aspects of building state capacity, rather than on democratic practice. “Cambodia has good laws, but not good practice and enforcement of the law.” People noted that most government policies have few processes for consultation with the population. Another Cambodian said that, “They [political parties in Cambodia] are also not natural democrats. They agreed to an election as demanded by their patron nations, not as an enlightened process.... and this has been proven in how democracy has developed in Cambodia.”

On *prevention*, people wonder why more investments are not made to prevent conflict and address the underlying causes of poverty and instability. As several people in Ethiopia said, “We are still poor, even though we are being helped. Aid is life-saving, but not life changing.” People also critiqued peacebuilding interventions that do not address the driving factors of conflict. A Lebanese NGO director said, “Conflict resolution concepts don’t work in Lebanon—it’s not about two people not liking each other, you need a political solution. Aid money for preventing violence is promoting a false reality.” In Sri Lanka people described the unfinished business of peacebuilding efforts that failed to transform the

contested power-sharing system that had led to civil war. They observed that, “Post CFA, funds started to come in from the donors who had no understanding of the conflict. For example, they poured money into reconciliation and political change was ignored.” In Tajikistan, people said that “Peace here is false, tenuous, a façade and there are lots of unresolved issues.”

On the links between political, security and development objectives, people remain cautious about hidden (and not so hidden) agendas of international actors. They recognize that donors have their own national interests, but they are frustrated that donor agendas seem to over-ride local agendas and priorities. A resident of Kabul said, “There was an early failure of the government and internationals to involve the people. That is why we see a gap. The people talked about the economy, while the government and internationals talked about security. They are building services that people cannot afford, like hospitals or schools. If the people cannot afford them, what is the point?”

In Ecuador, people noted that assistance provided on the border with Colombia primarily aims to mitigate armed conflict rather than support development of the area. Residents in border villages noted with irony that there is a better standard of living on the Colombian side where conflict is still ongoing. As one person pointed out, “[Ecuador] is a country that lives in peace. On the other side of the border they live in war, but the lives of the people who live on the other side are much better than the lives of those of us who are on this side. This is so, keeping in mind that on the other side, the guerrilla conflict does not allow the presence of external aid.”

On promotion of non-discrimination as a basis for inclusive and stable societies, people often have little confidence that the centralized development planning processes will address historical biases. People outside major centers feel particularly alienated from development planning processes and powerless. A local development worker in Solomon Islands suggested that, “Aid to the rural people is no issue because only people in town receive these aids [sic]. Information about aid does not reach rural people. If information does not reach them, then how much more of the real substance or concrete material does?” In several countries, women expressed concerns about the lack of meaningful participation in the management of development projects. One Afghan woman voiced her frustration saying, “I was elected as deputy head of the Community Development Council (CDC), but I have never been invited to meetings or involved in projects. I asked what was going on, but the men do not even let me participate in the CDC meetings.” In crises, international assistance often appears to ignore the plight of people who are already marginalized or impoverished. A laborer on tea estates in Sri Lanka suggested that, “International assistance should come here first, these [Estate Tamils] are the most voiceless and invisible people.”

On alignment with local priorities, people often lament the failure of aid agencies to consult directly with people affected by conflict and aid. The director of a youth organization in Mali said, “We have never met the people who give aid. They meet the big leaders and then they leave. People who can contest what the leaders say or who may have a different point of view do not attend these meetings.” Those that do attempt to consult sometimes speak to the wrong people or don’t consult those with different perspectives. A Kenyan community group leader explained that, “using existing [formal] leaders has most often tended to worsen the situation and led to more conflicts because these leaders tend to practice favoritism. Decisions concerning any particular community needs should be made after consulting the community itself, at least the communities’ recognized and accepted leaders—the popular leadership. Identifying local and deeply rooted organizations can also be very helpful to avoid exacerbating conflicts.”

People traced the effects of aligning behind national government policies and discussed ways that external aid has fueled local political or sectarian divisions and agendas. For instance in Lebanon, where political and sectarian-based divides are deeply embedded in the country's social fabric and institutions, people described an "aid as politics" phenomenon. A Member of Parliament in Beirut asserted that, "The opposition is disadvantaged by the Lebanese government's aid allocation. If you leave resource allocation up to the Lebanese government, everything is politicized, everything is politically driven, and everything is communal." Local people acknowledged that the long-standing sectarian structures serve as gateways to assistance, with few alternatives to the existing system of patronage. As a village elder in south Lebanon put it, "If you have a leader from your religious sect in the government, he will bring you aid. If not, nobody will take care for you."

On coordination, people perceive international assistance efforts to be disjointed. The head of a local NGO in Mali suggested that "Each donor has its own principles and has conditions for its assistance. There is no synergy amongst donors." A village chief in Timor Leste remarked that "to have better coordination with donors and leaders—we need to sit together and identify local needs and a plan of action. If they continue as they are, the village will not be able to support the needs of the community even in ten years time." People also questioned the effectiveness of existing coordination mechanisms. A Palestinian director of an INGO in Lebanon said that "[Donor coordination] networks become a place to compete instead of a forum for cooperation and coordination". However, coordination for the sake of coordination does not automatically bring better results. In Bolivia, people recalled the case of three NGOs that divided a community into three sections, which confused people.

On the need to act fast and stay engaged, people appreciate rapid support but raise concerns about the pressure to spend too quickly. A local NGO director in Lebanon asked, "What impact are you talking about? The 'impact' is just spending money. Goods are delivered with no sense of social development." They suggest that donors should not lose sight of their commitments to manage for development results as they hasten to deliver 'peace dividends'. A local development worker in Sri Lanka admitted, "We all knew the good development principles like participation and conflict-sensitivity, but in the rush of post-disaster relief, very few were able to uphold such principles because of requirements to spend money fast." People also note that international assistance often seems to end prematurely. A village chief in Timor Leste remarked "They need to come back to help us and finish what they started...Another project has stopped because there is no more money to be used to protect the environment... [they] paid most attention to training about natural disasters. But that already finished a year ago, and the group has not continued with the program because they stopped receiving support."

On avoiding pockets of exclusion, people are often unclear why some areas or groups get international assistance but others do not. Real and perceived imbalances in aid distributions have fueled resentment and inter-group hostility that undermines peacebuilding and state building efforts. An Angolan farmer noted that, "When the war came, many people went to Zambia and other places, but we stayed here the whole time. Today, those who fled receive aid, but we who spent the war years here are without any assistance at all." At the same time, people acknowledge the requirement to target areas that have been deprived of development opportunities. A shopkeeper in Mali suggested that, "Aid doesn't necessarily have to be 50%-50% between the north and the south. The conditions are more difficult and severe up north. Assistance can help the north to develop. Without development in the north, there will never be stability."

June 30th 2011