

Strengthening global security by addressing the root causes of conflict:

The role of the European Union

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Most civil wars take place in poor countries and are fuelled through arms traded for minerals and natural resources, creating a vicious circle of underdevelopment, social exclusion and conflict. The European Union is one of a number of political bodies calling for a conflict prevention strategy focused on the root causes as the most promising way to preserve global security. This is more likely to succeed than military interventions in search of weapons of mass destruction or against supposed centres of international terrorism.

Introduction

While the world's attention was focused on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and international leaders are citing weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism as the greatest threats to world security, some 42 other countries have also been

involved in violent conflict, since 2002, half of them in Africa.¹ Insecurity and terror are already the reality for many millions of the world's poorest.

The link between conflict and underdevelopment is now well recognised by international bodies and the EU (European Union) is one of the leading institutions affirming the importance of developing a conflict prevention approach which addresses the root causes of conflict. The challenge remains of turning the rhetoric into reality and crucially, retaining the EU commitment to a conflict prevention approach in an increasingly "hard security" driven geopolitical climate.

The relationship between conflict and development

While there is no single answer to the question of why people take up arms, experience demonstrates that most civil wars are fought in countries which are poor and suffer from extreme inequalities of wealth (or in the case of many parts of the Middle East, inequalities of opportunity). Such nations also lack the political and legal systems necessary to bring about change without recourse to violence. Unequal access to limited resources such as land to farm on, access to water, or minerals and resources that offer rich pickings, have been at the root of many wars. This is particularly true of cases where competition for resources intensifies under the influence of external shocks or economic austerity programmes; for example, the sudden shift in terms of trade in Nigeria in the early 1990s halved the country's income, introduced hyperinflation and led to violence and the overthrow of the government.²

The ready availability and low cost of arms fuels and sustains conflict, creating a lucrative business of war for those who trade arms for minerals and other resources. In addition there is an increasing recognition that humanitarian and development assistance can, if misplaced, exacerbate conflict. Relief supplies can intensify and prolong wars as was the case in southern Sudan and Somalia. Development projects such as the World Bank and the EU funded large scale irrigation project in the Awash Valley of Ethiopia actually increased conflict between the Afar and Issa groups, disrupting the grazing patterns of pastoralists.

The vicious circle of conflict and underdevelopment becomes self-perpetuating: just as conflict causes poverty, so then do poverty, social and economic exclusion increase the risk of violent

conflict. This complex web of humanitarian, economic, social and political causes and costs demands a comprehensive and coherent response. If we take the Great Lakes in the early 1990s, a convincing EU response to the crisis would have been one which helped mitigate the negative effects of structural adjustment and falling commodity prices and helped stem arms flows into the area. Instead, the EU's response was to treat the symptoms with the expensive plaster of emergency relief.

Since then, however, the EU has begun to realise that the wide range of instruments at its disposal can be used as effective "carrots and sticks" and if used carefully, can reduce tensions which lead to conflict or be used to better engage with failing states or difficult partnerships. Certainly the potential is huge. The EU has the world's largest single market, the largest humanitarian aid budget and the second largest development budget, an unparalleled network of historical ties, representation at the highest levels of diplomacy, economic planning delegations in 120 countries and access to a rapid reaction force of 50-60,000 soldiers.

The EU has attempted to use a variety of these instruments to build peace in Sudan after formal cooperation under the Lomé Agreement was suspended in 1990 due to the prevailing lack of human rights and progress with the peace process. Humanitarian aid remained the only instrument of cooperation. Since 2000, however, the EU has been engaged in a process of constructive engagement through political dialogue on human rights, democratisation and the peace process. The progress made in this area has consequently been linked to the reinstatement of long-term EU development assistance and the facilitation of capacity building for civil society to enhance its ability to engage in future dialogue and development programming.

However, whilst the EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflict (2001) notes: "All relevant institutions of the Union will mainstream conflict prevention within their areas of competence" the EU has yet to fully assess the extent to which its policies and those of member states mitigate or exacerbate conflict.

EU progress towards a conflict prevention approach

Over the past 10 years the EU has developed a strong policy commitment to the prevention of violent conflict. For example, the above mentioned EU Programme for the Prevention of

Violent Conflict, developed at the Goteborg European Council in June 2001, the Council Common Position Concerning Conflict Prevention Management and Resolution in Africa, May 2001 and the Implementation of the EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflicts at the Seville Council in June 2002.

In addition to these policy commitments, a number of institutional activities have also taken place. These include the establishment of a Conflict Prevention Unit within the External Relations Directorate of the Commission which is tasked with mainstreaming conflict prevention priorities across community policy (e.g. trade, development, environment). In the Council, the Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit, (PPEWU) has provided an important capacity for analysis and initiatives in support of conflict prevention. Council CFSP (common foreign security policy) working groups such as the Political and Security Committee and the Africa Group have begun reflecting on conflict prevention, as witnessed by the increasing number of CFSP instruments used in conflicts such as the deployment of EU envoys and troikas in south-eastern Europe. In the field of development policy, Country Strategy Papers (CSPs) and the deconcentration of Commission staff to delegations equipped with practical tools such as checklists for the root causes of conflict, all provide the potential to facilitate the implementation of conflict prevention commitments. Furthermore, the implementation of the ACP-EU Cotonou Partnership Agreement (2000) which provides a framework for political, trade and development cooperation, specifically commits itself to conflict prevention and civil society participation.

It could also be argued that, if directed well, the recent merging of the Development and General Affairs Council has the potential to enable further coherence between conflict prevention activities and development cooperation with those actions in the field of CFSP. As the UK Department for International Development notes “greater coherence between foreign policy, security and development objectives is required to halt the spread of conflict”.³

However, legitimate concerns have been raised that the merging of the councils is just one of the many signals that the EU’s development agenda is under threat from an increasingly narrow foreign policy agenda. Other examples of this tendency include the possible disappearance of the Development Commissioner and installing a Foreign Minister, who is not subject to Commission collegiality and the wording of the draft

constitutional treaty which states that aid is one of the tools that the EU has at its disposal to “maximise its influence”. At a wider level NGOs (non-governmental organisations) have also gathered evidence to prove that development funds are being diverted from the poorest countries to those on side in the war on terror⁴ and that countries are loosening controls on their arms exports despite the human rights concerns of the recipients.

Arguably another indication of the EU’s emphasis on a shorter term security approach, is the significant progress it has made in the field of crisis management, as witnessed by the launch of operations Artemis in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Concordia in Macedonia. The Council has also agreed to enhance EU defence capabilities in the field of crisis management by creating a European armaments, research and military capabilities agency and a European headquarters, or operational defence planning office.

More welcoming is the development of the EU’s civilian crisis management capabilities, since herein lies the possibility of linking short-term crisis management to long-term conflict prevention. Important progress is being made with training and recruitment of civilian personnel for operations and targets have been exceeded by member states in the four key areas of police, rule of law, civilian administration and civilian protection. In practical terms this has meant that the EU Police Mission (EUPM) in Bosnia was able to take over from the UN international force in Bosnia-Herzegovina in January 2003 and that efforts are also being made towards police reform in Macedonia.

However, there remains a lack of capability, both in terms of the numbers of civilian experts actually available for EU operations, their quality (standards for recruitment and training still vary widely), and the EU’s ability to provide planning and mission support. Closer co-operation with complementary programmes managed by the Commission is also required, particularly the need to better link commitments to longer term conflict prevention. An inter-institutional European peacebuilding agency would be ideally suited to addressing these capability shortfalls and should be pursued with as much vigour as its military counterpart.

An interesting example which could potentially combine a crisis management response with longer term conflict prevention measures, is the EU’s decision to support the Africa Union’s calls for the development of a peace support operations facility

(PSOF). The facility aims to be more than simply a military standby force but also encompass a wide range of actions from conflict prevention actions such as mediation to post-conflict reconstruction. Many expressed concern that the EU should not use European Development Funds (EDF) to support the facility, but the Council has agreed that the use of EDF funds will only be an interim measure and will not be used to fund troops or military equipment. Furthermore the EDF committee will be consulted on individual operations and further work is to be undertaken while working out the objectives and implementation modalities as to which activities will be eligible for overseas development assistance (ODA) funding and which will not.

The outcomes of the support operations facility thus far represent a potentially successful collaboration between foreign and development approaches. However we should be under no illusion that whilst peace support operations, as the UN has noted “can make the difference between war and peace”, peacekeeping forces alone are not the solution to conflicts. A concerted conflict prevention approach must be pursued alongside the PSOF.

EU presidency opportunities

The holders of the rotating presidency of the European Council have an important role to play in advancing the EU’s conflict prevention agenda.⁵ The position affords them the opportunity to bring their own issues to the EU’s attention and they are committed to produce an annual report on progress in the prevention of violent conflict.⁶

The Greek and Italian Presidencies in 2003 undertook various initiatives. These included the Greek seminar on “EU conflict prevention, lessons learnt from the Western Balkans”, which evaluated the role of the EU and its partners to prevent further violent conflict and draw conclusions on how to produce more efficient engagement in the Western Balkans.

The Italians looked further afield and decided to try and reinvigorate the stalled EU-Africa dialogue and address the cycle of conflict across Africa by holding a high level seminar on “EU conflict prevention, management and resolution in Africa”. In addition to inviting representatives of EU member states and accession countries, the Italians took the unique step of inviting African civil society representatives. This offered the EU an important opportunity to listen to those with direct experience

and expertise of conflict situations. The key outcomes included the following:

- the need to maximise the potential for the EU, UN, African Union tri-lateral partnership for peace and development;
- optimising an integrated and mutually reinforcing approach to development and conflict prevention - or recognising that economic and social development and conflict prevention, management and resolution are genuinely complementary and mutually reinforcing;
- utilising the EU for the building of African capacity in conflict prevention, management and resolution;
- enabling civil society's role in building sustainable peace and development in Africa.

Conclusions

It is clear that the EU has begun to understand that conflict and development are inextricably linked and that if they are serious about poverty eradication, conflict prevention and resolution must be integrated into approaches to development. However efforts to pursue a conflict prevention agenda are being hindered by pressures to adopt a more security-led approach in response to the growing threat of terrorism.

The Irish and Dutch governments have already signaled that conflict prevention are a high priority for their presidencies. The role of both the conflict prevention and development NGO community will be to ensure that this means a commitment to a truly long-term conflict prevention approach which tackles the root causes of conflicts and addresses the human security needs of populations.

Civil society organisations in both Ireland and the Netherlands are already mobilising support for such an approach – Dóchas' campaign on human security and NOVIB's support for the "Publish what you pay campaign" are just two examples.⁷ This year's paper by Saferworld and International Alert, "Strengthening global security through addressing the root causes of conflict: priorities for the Irish and Dutch presidencies in 2004" will reflect these concerns.

Key priorities will include:

- pressing for conflict-sensitive aid and trade policies;
- addressing the role of resources and business in conflict;

- balancing military with longer term civilian responses and conflict prevention measures through the creation of a European peacebuilding and research agency;
- enhancing civil society's role in conflict prevention by developing an effective action agenda to feed into the 2005 UN conference on civil society.

Footnotes

- ¹ Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, Conflict Barometer, 2002
- ² Department for International Development, *The Causes of Conflict in Africa*, March 2001
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Oxfam has noted that levels of humanitarian aid are being provided to priority cases such as Iraq and Afghanistan but not to others. For example, nearly half of all the funds given by donor governments in 2002 to the UN's 25 humanitarian appeals went to just one country Afghanistan – admittedly very poor, but top of the list of priorities on war on terror. The remaining 24 countries had to survive on what was left: Amelia Bookstein, *Beyond the Headlines: An Agenda for Action*, Oxfam, 2003. They also note there have been increases in military assistance to countries on side in the war on terror despite human rights concerns. Post-11 September, the US government provided \$3.8 billion in military aid to 67 countries to support counter-terrorism, half of whom were criticised by the US State Department for their poor human rights record.
- ⁵ These are: Ireland, January-June 2004; Netherlands, July-December 2004; Luxembourg, January-June 2005; United Kingdom, July-December 2005.
- ⁶ Saferworld and International Alert seek to use this opportunity by producing an annual report for the presidencies, in collaboration with other civil society organisations, highlighting the areas which the presidencies, the EU, Commission and the Council should address to further enhance their ability to focus on preventing violent conflict. For a copy of Saferworld and International Alert's presidency paper please contact: Alice Hutchinson: ahutchinson@saferworld.org.uk or Lindsay Alexander: lalexander@international-alert.org
- ⁷ For further information see www.dochas.ie.