Policy brief

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Fragile states: beyond quick wins

Key points

- The transition from war to peace needs to be embedded in legitimate political settlements

- Concerted efforts are needed to better analyse contexts of fragility and ensure that policies and programmes are realistic

- Donors like DFID need to improve and increase the human resources needed to engage effectively in fragile states

- There is an urgent need to reform the international architecture, including UN peacekeeping operations

'Traditional interventions and "business as usual" are no longer viable, and donors need to re-think their approaches'

Over one-third of the world's poor live in fragile states, and violent conflict and political instability threaten development goals. Rightly, the international community has made fragility a top priority, but building peace remains a daunting challenge. Traditional interventions and 'business as usual' are no longer viable, and donors need to re-think their approaches.

Policy recommendations

ODI research and a recent meeting series have highlighted the lessons to be learned.

First, it is vital to understand the nature of fragility and resilience to develop policies and programmes that support the transition to peace and stability. Neat categorisations such as fragile/resilient or conflict/post-conflict obscure more than they reveal, defining contexts according to what they *are not* rather than what they *are*. More and better political economy analysis is required and donors need to ensure the findings inform and shape policies and programmes.

Second, based on this analysis, donors need to be much more realistic about what is achievable in short timeframes. The desire amongst external actors for 'quick wins' can be at odds with the steps needed for genuine and lasting change. Quick wins, if ill managed, can also feed unrealistic societal expectations, leading to disappointment, the de-legitimisation of the recovery process and, ultimately, instability.

Third, political settlements can serve as a foundation for stability and development outcomes. The importance of

Southern Sudan

Decades of conflict and human suffering have focused the attention of the international community on Sudan. But efforts to support a peace process, provide humanitarian assistance, strengthen the capacity of the state, improve security and enhance development outcomes have been hindered by simplistic understandings of the context as a result of not taking into account conflict analyses.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement was seen as the arrival of peace and support for Southern Sudan saw a shift from humanitarian assistance towards development and state-building strategies. However, the weakness of the newly created state, coupled with the cumbersome bureaucratic procedures of the pooled funding mechanisms meant vast and unmet needs.

The international community emphasises the use of development to create 'peace dividends' and enhance security. This has not worked in practice as important security issues, such as disarming civilians, have been neglected or delinked from development interventions. The limitations of 'peace through development' are only now being discussed by donors, including the risks of a narrow application of the Paris Declaration/Accra Agenda vision of national ownership and state building in a context where national capacity is still limited. Far greater understanding of these dilemmas is needed, and soon.

fostering legitimate and stable political settlements in peace and state-building processes has often been overlooked by the international community. This is especially so when under time pressure to produce results or in the face of perceived terrorist threats.

Fourth, tackling fragility and promoting recovery from conflict is not strictly a humanitarian, security or development issue – it is a shared responsibility and different instruments are needed simultaneously to ensure that the basic needs of the population are met while, at the same time, the state and other actors are supported to take on their full range of responsibilities and functions. The challenge is to align these very different agendas. An improved international architecture is needed to ensure more integrated and coherent approaches among different actors, recognising and tackling the many tensions and trade-offs that exist in war to peace transitions. Significant reform of UN peace-keeping operations is also necessary to ensure that missions have the resources, strategies and support to carry out their mandates.

Finally, donors like DFID need to strengthen the human resources at the field and headquarter level, including committing to keeping staff on the ground for longer terms and developing processes to ensure that staff have sufficient knowledge of the context.

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References and useful resources

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