

Development and Conflict Prevention: Reflections on Rwanda

An Interview with Professor Peter Uvin

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Development assistance organizations are paying greater attention to the causes of conflict, asserting a link between poverty and violence and affirming the potential of designing more conflict prevention sensitive development policies and programs. The Liu Centre for the Study of Global Issues at the University of British Columbia and the Canadian International Development Agency recently hosted the Vancouver Roundtable on Development, Conflict and Peacebuilding: Responding to the Challenge, on February 14–15, 2002, where invited experts explored the possibilities of linking development and conflict prevention more effectively. Noted for his extensive field experience in following up the OECD-DAC Guidelines on Conflict, Peace and Development in 1999, as well as recent articles in 2001 and 2002 and a book in 1998 on the role of the international development agencies in Rwanda, invited Roundtable participant Professor Peter Uvin of Tufts University agreed to be interviewed by IIR Liu Centre post-doctoral fellow Erin Baines to elaborate his framework for taking action, presented at the Vancouver Roundtable.

Given that each conflict situation is “too different, too unique, too idiosyncratic to generalize across cases,” as you wrote in “Some Reflections of Good Donor Practice,” what can we expect from a Canadian strategic response to the issue of development and conflict prevention?

There are seven features that characterize a good policy on development and conflict prevention. These seven features are relevant for non-conflict prevention related development work as well. They hold for all development work, suggesting that there is nothing unique about conflict prevention work. Now it would be interesting to tease out what

would be specific only to development trying to prevent conflict, as opposed to development just doing development. But do such situations exist?

I do not believe you can come to very meaningful and strong predictors about violent conflict or what you can do to prevent violent conflict. All you can do is ask the right questions and set up mechanisms and lenses that allow you to constantly be aware and adapt.

Some of these seven features are widely accepted, while some are widely non-accepted, or non-practiced. First, you have to be prevention-oriented as a matter of total routine; it ought to be so ordinary that you do not need to talk about it any more. For example, it is now expected that, if you were to do anything in development and you totally disregard gender issues or poverty issues, people will ask you ... “what decade are you coming from?” This ought to be the case with conflict. This is both a relatively easy one, for it requires little money and time, and a very hard one, for it is at this level that much resistance exists.

Second, you have to be knowledge based; you will never be able to deal intelligently with conflict dynamics without good knowledge. I think that is widely accepted. The question is whose knowledge counts, which is a very important and totally undervalued matter. We have to put vastly more resources into local knowledge generation. But I think that is the case also for non-conflict development work.

You have to always invest in local knowledge creation to ensure that there are strong and existing dynamics for intellectual reflection and speaking out about conflict issues once they force themselves onto the agenda. This is one thing that foreign aid can do better than others, to create

the kind of spaces for people to do this, because in [cases of violence] these spaces often do not exist or are weak. So that is something that could be done better....

Third, we ought to be more flexible in financial mechanisms and administrative mechanisms, capable of making short-term change with a long-term perspective. We typically do not have much of a long-term perspective. At the same time, we aren't very good at the short term either, wherein overnight or in the course of a week we can dramatically change course. So, our focus needs to be shorter and longer at the same time. That's tough, but not inconceivable, and there are mechanisms that exist already; there just need to be more.

Fourth, your aid machinery needs to be light, and based on what exists internally. This is not simply the old "partnership" or participation approach. We need a much stronger way of working that supplements or complements people's own actions but never substitutes for them. That is a difficult rule to live by, because there is so much need out there, and consequently so much temptation to just do something. Also, we tend to be deeply invested in what we do. I am confronted with it myself because I am developing for some donor a project in Rwanda to support the *gacaca* process.¹ This project is my baby. I convinced people to fund it. But it has been difficult and time-consuming to hire Rwandans to run the project. The job may be too outspoken, too dangerous, too hard, too narrow, they are not impartial, and so on. But should we do a project if we cannot find Rwandans ready to carry it? Should we substitute for local effort? I tend to think not: we should only do it if they are doing it already. That would be my normal position in normal development circumstances. Could we make the case that conflict situations are particular? Given the danger for local people and our comparative advantage in creating space and extending protection to people who speak beyond the limited discourses that prevail during periods of violent conflict, we maybe should make some exceptions to the rule that we don't substitute. Foreigners are not Hutu or Tutsi, they are not subject to the same pressure, they are not so afraid, they do not have family or bear the psychosocial trauma around this, so here is a case to relax the rule. Still, one should have a very clear vision about how to minimize the role of the foreigners, and to ensure you promote a maximum of local and not foreign knowledge on Rwanda, because that is what Rwandans are lacking. More than food, more than anything, they are lacking space to conceive their future. So the basic rule still holds, even in an extreme case like Rwanda, that we need to create procedures and processes that are more likely to promote and engage local knowledge.

Fifth, we need to be more principled, which brings us to human rights, which are more or less the only principles

that are universally accepted. Attention to a human-rights based approach to development, which isn't about writing legal statements or creating commissions, but about instituting social practices that lead to enforceable rights.

Sixth, we need to become more self-critical. We must look at ourselves and our funding and behaviour patterns in terms of how they affect dynamics of violence or exclusion or structural violence, or human rights violations. If we cannot solve all these matters, we should at least try to do less harm.

Finally, we need to be more coherent. We need more coordination without giving up local capacities to make choices and to be in charge. It might be possible for some donor countries or agencies to occasionally create projects that seek to facilitate coordination or to pay the cost of coordination by setting up investment in knowledge creation, facilitation, negotiation, and so on, simply with the aim of creating dynamics where the total would be more than the sum of the parts. In the development business, almost systematically, the total is less than the sum of the parts. If we could just create means to change that, we could do so much more.

The OECD calls this "innovation in diversity." For example, some programs are going much further in terms of engaging people, taking more risks and being more willing to support innovative initiatives. Other donors could simply co-fund these. Joint evaluations are another possibility, where agencies try to learn together, potentially also doing joint identifications, even if they cannot get to joint actions.

When was the last time you were surprised by an international response or action regarding conflict prevention or peacebuilding? How much hope do you hold out for the international community to adopt this "package"?

It is simply doing certain things better, new tools and better knowledge management. Agencies like DFID and CIDA have made significant progress in thinking through all this. Some things go much further, I agree, such as losing our power, to not substitute, to make ethical and operational choices based on information from local people.

I am trying to think of the last time I was surprised. I am often surprised by inaction; by people I know personally and I know what they think and yet they still don't manage to do what they know is necessary. I have never been a senior policy maker so I don't really know what it feels like; I have been a guy in the field and I know what that feels like. When you hang out with senior policy makers, you see that they are greatly constrained; even if they are deeply committed to any part of the "package" they are typically so overworked, running from one crisis to another. Anything that is not a crisis is basically not going to make it onto their

agenda; by the time it does so, you have lost the capacity to do much of what we were talking about, it seems, and thus standard approaches are applied. So, I have been surprised by the sameness in response. Private corporations seem to have better ways of dealing with the challenge of change.

In the case of Rwanda, you suggest in "Difficult Choices in the New Post-Conflict Agenda" that very divergent interpretations of the nature of the RPF-dominated government guide donor policy and programs, often with incoherent results and bypassing difficult ethical questions. Why do Western donors fall into such binary camps in this case? Is there a grey area for interpretation?

There is a part in the article that I cut out for lack of space. According to me, in a case like Rwanda, it is actually both sides that are right. It's not "either/or," but "both/and." The Rwandan government can be both deeply committed to a future in which ethnicity doesn't matter any more and at the same time deeply distrustful of the other ethnic group. It can be committed to a vision of democratic involvement, and yet want to hold onto power at all costs. It can be deeply free market and liberal oriented, and yet do everything possible to ensure that no independent private sector emerges. These things seem to hold simultaneously. Real life, especially after violent conflict, is nothing but grey zones.

You could also argue that most donors act in a similar grey manner: even though they interpret and think about the situation in quite strong terms, the practice of diplomacy favours not rocking the boat. Being radical is not how you do diplomacy. Diplomats don't really speak out very loudly even though behind closed doors they tell you they are totally distressed with the government. So in practice most play in grey areas... but not because this is a conscious strategy to deal with the dualistic nature of reality, but rather because that is how you do diplomacy. So, can you as a donor work in the grey zone, based on a fine understanding of the way black and white mix to become grey, rather than as a simple result of the fact that diplomacy is all based on grey suits? That clearly is not easy, because on what ethical basis are you going to enter the grey zones and make judgments and set goals?

If you want to go grey, you must ask those whose lives are affected by it. Ask them vastly more. Think of villagization in Rwanda. For years, people in the international community had strong feelings on the matter. Some donors were deeply opposed to it, while others were willing to support it, but hesitantly. In response, most dragged their feet, so they did the grey thing. As far as I know, it took more than two years for the first organization to actually ask farmers what they thought about villagization policy themselves. Oxfam and also a Dutch group ended up doing

Selected Publications by Peter Uvin

Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda. West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998.

"The Influence of Aid in Situations of Violent Conflict." OECD/DAC Informal Task Force on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation, 1999.

"Difficult Choices in the New Post-Conflict Agenda: The International Community in Rwanda after the Genocide." *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2001): 177-89.

"Reading the Rwandan Genocide." International Studies Association, 2001.

"Some reflections on good donor practice." Paper presented at the Vancouver Roundtable on Development, Conflict and Peacebuilding: Responding to the Challenge, February 14-15, 2002, Liu Centre for the Study of Global Issues, University of British Columbia. Online: <<http://www.liu-centre.ubc.ca/liu/events/conferences/140202c-onflict-dev/overview.htm>>.

this, a fascinating piece of work. What came out of that was much more "in between": Rwandans were neither totally opposed to it, nor totally in favour of it. It depended on their own personal trajectories, their own sense of security risks, and especially the process by which the policy was implemented. It took much too long before this "voice" came to be represented at the table. Again, this gets back to knowledge creation. We need to do vastly more listening, feeding it directly and unfiltered up to policy – our own and other actors'. And the donor can play a role there; we don't expect small farmers to go to the office of the President and make a good point. But you can do it yourself as a foreigner. So do it.

In "Difficult Choices," you made the argument that "the new post-conflict agenda ... amounts to a licence for intervention so deep and unchecked it resembles colonialism..." On the other hand, you do not advocate pulling out, but rather a number of areas donor could improve, resembling "the package" proposed above – knowledge, flexibility, consultation, substance, coherence. If this occurred, would neo-colonialism be averted? Does it increase control or decentralize?

In some ways, a lot of the coherence and post-conflict discourse does sound like we are saying, "How can we gang up better on Third World governments?" – by making a united front, with no crack, as if everything is our business. Two points. One, to some extent, there is a reason to gang

up in this world. There actually are an awful lot of governments and people in governments that deserve a lot of ganging up on. They use violence, abuse, killing, stealing, lying, and so, and I see little in the name of sovereignty, partnership, and respect that could justify our complicity with that. So I don't mind ganging up a little bit.

On the other hand, it is true, for change to be more sustainable, it can't come from outside. I think the seven points I described are a way to avoid this kind of problem – especially the ones that evoke the most silence when I raise them, such as the “whose knowledge?” point and the “never substitute” one. It is true, if you do five out of seven but not those two, then we miss the crucial parts. Would that still

be better than current practice? Would principled ganging up still be better than unprincipled ganging up?

Note

1. *Gacaca* is a form of traditional participative popular justice at the local level that allows Rwandans to bring to trial those accused of participation in the 1994 genocide.

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