Engaging with local communities to prevent violence: what role for ICTs?

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The peace-building field is full of examples of technology use that failed to live up to expectations. Effective conflict early warning and prevention approaches depend on building and strengthening relationships. Research – carried out in South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda – shows that, at best, information and communications technologies (ICTs) can support relationship building, but that they are not a substitute for the human element that is essential to creating trust, dialogue and shared goals.

The research was coordinated by the ACTION Support Centre, the Africa regional hub of a network of organisations and individuals committed to transforming conflict. It brought together four project partners – three African civil society organisations (CSOs) working on conflict resolution in South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda, and a team of UK-based researchers from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University. They worked in communities in Guateng (South Africa), Zanzibar (Tanzania) and Gulu (Uganda), documenting a number of conflict scenarios where lack of communication was part of a dynamic of rising tension.

Understand what is already there

Analysis of how local people communicate in each location showed that in each there was a very different mixture of and balance between ICT and non-ICT communication methods. This illustrates a fundamental point about the potential use of ICTs to prevent and mitigate violent conflict: understanding the technologies that are already being used in that context. The research concluded that it is always best to work to improve relationships between conflict stakeholders before introducing or even discussing ICT innovations.

Build on existing channels

Weaknesses in communication are not the result of either the presence or absence of cutting-edge technologies – they are about relationships between people. What is needed are location-appropriate methods that can build on existing communication channels and strengthen trust between the people communicating. This can allow ICTs to be applied effectively. Three examples from across the research illustrate this.

- In Gauteng, during an outbreak of xenophobic violence in 2015, members of Diepkloof local peace committee used WhatsApp as a cheap tech tool to mobilise members of their own existing networks of trust in the community to counter mobs of youths intent on looting foreign-owned shops. But word of mouth was also important: as activists went door to door, they were able to trigger the formation of barricades that prevented mobs from accessing the streets where the shops were located.

- In Gulu, tensions around government appropriation of traditional Acholi tribal grounds were rising quickly during 2015. An established communication channel – which includes representatives of central and local government, tribal leaders and CSOs – met twice in quick succession to respond to these tensions. During this period, local people used SMS to update their own trusted leaders about land disputes, a contribution that enabled a fruitful engagement between policy-makers and local leaders, resulting in a response that addressed the issues at hand instead of sparking violence.

- In Zanzibar, the Youth Interfaith Forum of Zanzibar used two very different methods to communicate their messages about violence and coexistence to young people: video and

RESEARCH SUMMARY

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sport. In the run-up to the 2015 elections, members made a short film about the role of youths as perpetrators of electoral violence, encouraging young people not to be misused by candidates for their own political ends, followed by a second film encouraging youths to develop an agenda for the election. Their football kit also carried a message of peace, which they believed made people support them even though they were not one of the best teams. A great strength of this mixture of digital and analogue communication tools was that it was audience-appropriate.

Trust and relationships are the most important ingredients

Conflict is not solved by finding the correct solution; it is a complex and messy social phenomenon, embedded in wider systems of inequality, grievance and power dynamics. Conflict is inevitable in human societies, but violent conflict can be mitigated and reduced.

The potential of ICTs such as mobile phones, social media or blogs for mitigating and reducing violent conflict is greatest where there are existing channels of communication and good inter-organisational trust.

High cost and low literacy levels mean that ICTs are out of reach of many people in the contexts where this research was carried out, and similar locations. Simple, low-cost communications tools – banners, posters, flyers and blackboards – can have significant impacts, promoting messages to defuse conflict tensions and reaching audiences that may not use ICTs.

If ICTs are imposed externally to find a 'solution' to 'conflict', they are likely to be ineffective, unsustainable and do more harm than good.

Recommendations

- Where ICTs are used to develop communication channels they should build on local people's existing engagement with technology – introducing equipment, software or practices outside of people's comfort zone will require significant groundwork and adds risk to the sustainability and viability of projects.

- External agencies should be wary of introducing ICT innovations and avoid short-term 'fixes'. Instead, they should support local partners who enjoy trust and respect, and plan for longer-term relationship-building and support to locally driven mechanisms to strengthen communication – which may or may not include ICTs.

A longer research briefing is available on the Making All Voices Count website, with all our other publications.

About Making All Voices Count

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