Mitigating 'Non-Conflict' Violence by Creating Peaceful Political Settlements

Understanding and addressing 'non-conflict' violence is a key challenge for development. Different types of 'non-conflict' violence, such as homicide, massacres, armed robbery and gender-based violence, which occur outside of armed conflict contexts involving state or other parties, are not only reflections of social problems like youth unemployment and gang culture. They should not be unlinked from political processes. Given the weakness of formal institutions and the strength of hybrid political orders in most violence-affected settings in the developing world, the political settlements approach helps to understand the political factors that underpin and drive 'non-conflict' violence; and develop policy responses that tackle the roots of the problem, not just its symptoms.

The big challenge: Mitigating 'non-conflict' violence

Violence mitigation – as different from armed conflict prevention/resolution and peace-building – is a growing field for research and policy. While war and (internal) armed conflict remain big problems in some countries, they have ceased to be the most important risk of lethal violence faced by many people in the developing world. Instead, other forms of 'non-conflict' and/or crime-related violence, such as homicide, 'drug wars', armed muggings, kidnapping, gang strife, and gender-based violence, have seen marked increases, particularly in parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South and Central America.

Recent research highlights the dispersed, persistent and globalised nature of this spreading scourge. Commonly understood as instrumental for achieving private gains for violence entrepreneurs – such as warlords, drug traffickers and their political sponsors and constituencies – these 'new' forms of violence appear to be driven less than before by states and clearly identifiable non-state groups with political, revolutionary and/or social reform agendas, though the persistence of such agendas is not ruled out.

In this context, violence mitigation should be understood as a long-term process involving both formal (state) and informal institutions, and affected communities and citizens. Yet, interventions must not be based on the premise that 'new' forms of violence are separate from political processes and are mere manifestations of criminality or reflections of social problems, however entrenched and serious. The political settlements approach helps to guide the development of policies to mitigate violence and tackle the roots of the problem, not just its symptoms.

Beyond 'inclusive' political settlements

Political settlements can be defined as – temporary – states of political equilibrium that result from processes of formal and informal bargaining, compromise and negotiation through which – contending – political actors create the institutions (i.e. the 'rules of the game') that govern society and the distribution of power and resources.

A common assumption is that inclusive political settlements enhance the chances for political stability and poverty reduction, while exclusionary settlements are deemed to engender violence and block pro-poor development. The *World Development Report 2011*, for instance, refers to the importance of 'inclusive-enough coalitions' for enabling institutional resilience and stability and preventing or mitigating violence. Yet, there is mounting evidence that an unqualified notion of 'inclusivity' is a weak indicator for less violence-inflected and more peaceful and development-enhancing political settlements.

What is needed is clear guidance on the ways in which violence ought to be understood as: (1) a constituent element of political settlements; (2) a result of the particular configuration and functioning of a political settlement; and (3) a key element in the process of transforming political settlements.

Violence as a constituent element of political settlements

Research conducted at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) in four violence-affected African countries – Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Egypt and Kenya – highlights that a focus on violence in creating and sustaining political settlements is crucial. Violence plays a pivotal role in processes of formal and

informal bargaining and compromise between political actors through which the institutions that govern society and the distribution of power and resources are created. Citizens themselves shape and break political settlements by conferring or withdrawing legitimacy to rulers, including by taking recourse to violence.

Long-term and essentially indigenous processes of transforming political settlements in violence-affected countries and societies have to grapple with the (strategic) use of violence – or its condoning – by both state and non-state actors at the macro (state) and micro (citizen) level. The effectiveness of violence mitigation efforts hinges on the degree to which they are successful at taking violence out of the exercise of public authority and the social struggle over the distribution of resources and wealth.

Such an approach stands in sharp contrast to common (international) peace- and state-building interventions that have tended to operate on the basis of established blueprints for the institutional recovery of conflict-ravaged countries. More often than not, little attention is paid to the question of how political and power relationships shape institutions and development outcomes – a key and particularly challenging issue in violence-affected countries with weak formal institutions and strong (local) patrimonial political marketplaces.

Policy recommendations

Recognising that the transformation of political settlements to make them more peaceful operates at both the macro and micro levels, the insights from the IDS research on these four countries point to the following key policy issues:

External, international interventions

- **Outside support for violence mitigation is vulnerable to exacerbating the situation in some cases and should therefore aim at lessening the risk factors** associated with external involvement and interests, such as those of the transnational oil and mining companies. Rather than direct intervention this requires initiatives that help both local elites and citizen groups to build political settlements that are more peaceful and support development as they become less predatory and violence-inflected.

Macro or state-level interventions

- **Counter-violence measures should strengthen governance in relation to natural resource extraction**, protect the electoral/political process from violent interference, and bolster accountability from the local through to the central/federal levels of government. This would help to reign in corruption, judicial impunity, human rights violations and (state-sponsored) criminality, counter-balance patrimonial networks and remedy core problems of decentralisation or devolution reforms.
- **Interventions should be designed to operate across and between several fields of public policy**, e.g. improving education, reducing youth unemployment, increasing citizen and human security, and protecting human rights.
- **State security interventions should complement and support** – not guide, replace or undermine – policies around the reintegration of demobilised fighters, militants and youth into economic life; building capacity among civil society and community and social organisations to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes related to local and regional development; enforcing codes of practice for resource extraction, such as the Extractives Industries Transparency Initiative; and controlling and limiting the possession, trade and use of small arms.

Citizen-centred policies

- **Policy should take systematic account of the perspectives and roles of ordinary citizens** in forging and transforming social orders and in shaping political settlements, and avoid focusing foremost on influencing elite behaviour.
- **Issues of justice and 'taking control of the law' are of particular importance** to citizens in violence-affected communities in states with weak formal institutions. Ways to address this include: focusing on transitional justice, and incorporating into devolution policy a programme of restorative justice enhancing cooperation between formal and customary legal institutions (including citizen groups who are empowered to tackle 'innocent killings'), targeting different forms of violence at the local level.

IDS Institute of Development Studies

UKaid
from the British people