

Improving conflict prevention and peacebuilding assistance through evaluation

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Evaluation and peacebuilding experts have been working together to encourage more and better evaluation of conflict prevention and peacebuilding programmes. Draft guidance has been produced and used over a two-year test phase to evaluate donor support for peacebuilding in southern Sudan, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Haiti and elsewhere. This article looks at what has been learned from these experiences in terms of both policy lessons and how evaluation can be managed and carried out in these challenging settings. This series of evaluations has shown that progress is needed on a number of fronts – institutional, political, managerial etc. – to make development co-operation more effective in conflict affected and fragile states.

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Introduction

The OECD Network on Development Evaluation and the International Network on Conflict and Fragility have developed guidance on evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities. The guidance has been used for evaluations in southern Sudan, Sri Lanka, the Democratic Republic of Congo and elsewhere.² This article looks at what we have learned from these experiences in terms of both policy lessons and how to undertake evaluations in these challenging environments.

The need for a better approach to evaluation in conflict settings

The astoundingly high human, societal and financial costs of recent violent conflicts led to a marked increase in international interventions intended to avert or end conflict and strengthen the foundations for sustainable development in fragile states in the early 2000s (OECD and Collaborative for Development Action (CDA), 2007). At the same time, concern has grown over the efficacy and value of such efforts. Concerns about the performance of pro-peace initiatives were exacerbated as many countries once thought to be emerging from conflict slipped back into war. There is also mounting alarm about the lack of development results – including slow to no progress on the Millennium Development Goals – in conflicted affected states and countries with weak or failing governments (International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, 2010).

Coupled with these concerns are a number of practical and methodological challenges which make evaluating these types of programmes difficult and resulted in a dearth of rigorous evaluations. Data are scarce, objectives frequently ill-defined and the logic underpinning interventions often murky – to name just a few of the barriers to evaluation in conflict settings.

In 2007, two networks of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) working on evaluation and on conflict prevention and peacebuilding began a collaboration to support practitioners and policy makers in their efforts to enhance their work, by helping to improve evaluation practice in these fields. The two groups worked together to develop guidance on evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities² and to encourage more and better evaluation in conflict-affected areas.

While this collaborative initiative hoped to tackle some of the methodological challenges facing evaluators, it was also an attempt to address a broader strategic gap identified in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding (OECD and CDA, 2007). Despite massive (and growing) investment from international partners in fragile and conflict-affected states efforts to prevent conflict and build peace have been hampered by weak programme design and management, and a dearth of rigorous evaluations (Smith, 2004). Broader interest in and use of evaluation would provide much needed hard evidence about the role of development co-operation in transforming conflict and spurring development in settings of state fragility (Böhnke *et al.*, 2010).

The OECD published the *Draft Guidance on Evaluating Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding* in 2008 and launched a two year application phase to try out the suggested approach in real conflict settings. The testing phase aimed at producing policy insights as well as feedback on the guidance itself. This article takes stock of the outcomes of this process, highlighting interesting policy findings and lessons learned on how to approach these evaluations.

Learning from recent evaluations

On the invitation of Norway, some 70 experts and policy makers, from a range of OECD member states and international development research institutions met in February 2011 to review experience with the draft guidance.³ The guidance was intended to help strengthen professionalisation and fill a strategic gap in these fields, at a time when the international understanding of conflict and fragility was relatively limited with little agreement on how donors should work on conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The outcomes shared at this event demonstrated that, while many challenges remain, quality evaluation is possible and it can provide useful insights to improve donor support to peacebuilding and statebuilding processes.

During the application phase, the guidance was used by a variety of actors: programme managers, embassy staff, training institutions, evaluation managers, evaluators, and research institutions (both development and military). It was employed for three major joint donor evaluations, in southern Sudan, Sri Lanka, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Norway's evaluation department used the draft to assess the Norwegian contribution to peace in Haiti. The Swedish military commissioned an independent evaluation of its Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan. At the same time, the European Commission began a review of its entire peacebuilding portfolio. Germany looked at the impact of aid in Afghanistan and evaluated its civil peace service programme.

Since the completion of the draft guidance, much progress has been made in the development community to improve understanding of conflict and peace as well as the intertwined challenges of fragility, governance and statebuilding.⁴ Such work has strengthened the analytical framework for conflict prevention, peacebuilding and statebuilding activities – and their evaluation. The evaluations carried out during the application phase also contribute further evidence to help advance knowledge in these fields.

Despite these advances, the evaluation findings presented in Oslo demonstrate that donor policies and programmes in this field are still falling short. There is considerable scope for improving how donors engage in conflict settings. Highlights of emerging policy recommendations and evaluation lessons are outlined below, with specific examples provided in Boxes 1-3. Outcomes from these evaluations are also being compiled and disseminated for use in national policy forums and international discussions on statebuilding, peacebuilding and aid effectiveness.

Findings from the evaluations: How donors can better support peace

Ground interventions in solid conflict analysis

There is a pressing need to ground interventions in better, more strategic conflict analysis. Good conflict analysis includes analysis of the political economy, context and stakeholders, and should be used flexibly, monitored and updated regularly. Numerous tools for analysis are already available; the guidance provides an overview. Incentives need to be strengthened and adequate resources provided to ensure the integration of strong conflict understanding throughout the programme process.

The need for better conflict analysis was supported by the finding – shared by all evaluations – that donors lacked (to a greater or lesser extent) strategic prioritisation in terms of aiming programmes and funding at addressing core peace drivers/conflict mitigating factors. A focus on providing humanitarian aid or basic services tends to be driven by the

flawed assumption that all development activities will somehow contribute to peace. This assumption was not supported by evidence in the evaluations. In fact, in some cases, the lack of strategic targeting seemed to undermine peacebuilding prospects by diverting attention and resources away from more critical elements such as security and justice reform in southern Sudan or land ownership issues in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Box 1. Are donors aiding peace in southern Sudan?

In January 2011, citizens of southern Sudan voted for independence, six years after the peace agreement that ended the civil war with the North. What can the international community do to support the new government? A recent joint evaluation sheds light on how donors have done so far, and what changes are needed to better support peacebuilding in this young state. The evaluation concludes that support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding has only been partially successful. Donor strategies did not fully take into account key drivers of violence resulting in an overemphasis on basic services and a relative neglect of security, policing and the rule of law, which are essential in state formation. Insufficient assistance has been given towards preparing southern Sudan for secession. There was an over-use of nominally “good” practice – particularly with respect to ownership and harmonisation – at the expense of much needed in-depth knowledge and field presence. While harmonisation, co-ordination and alignment are not *contradictory* to conflict prevention and peacebuilding *per se*, they are not sufficient responses to state fragility.

Focus on statebuilding and legitimacy in the long term

Long-term peace and development are critically linked to the capacity and legitimacy of the state. Recent work by INCAF and others has led to a closer linking of the concepts of peacebuilding, conflict prevention and statebuilding. These processes are now understood as being inextricably linked; efforts to support such processes – whether they are labelled peacebuilding or statebuilding – are essentially moving towards common ultimate objectives. Donors need to base their interventions not only on the need to support short term stability (or the cessation of hostilities) but on a broader understanding of how their interventions affect state-society relations and the longer term prospects for the development of a functioning, legitimate state.

More realistic objectives for interventions (using conflict analysis, scenario planning and assessments of absorptive capacity, for instance) are needed to improve the impact of peace and statebuilding activities. The evaluation findings highlight that donors are too often operating on unrealistic expectations for the rapid creation of a functioning state. There are often equally unrealistic hopes for the role of international partners in influencing countries’ long-term trajectories. Recent conceptual progress on statebuilding, political legitimacy and political settlements – by the OECD and the Norwegian Agency for Development (Norad), among others – should help policy makers and management build more realistic understandings of the contexts in which they work and the prospects for change. Evaluation teams looking at the contributions of donor interventions to “peace writ large” should keep in mind longer term goals related to state functions and legitimacy.

Adopt more flexible approaches

Donor policies should allow for greater flexibility of engagement in fragile and conflict-affected states. Instruments used for implementation are often not tailored to the challenges faced in these contexts. For instance, the evaluation in southern Sudan found that donors were locked in by three- to five-year spending plans that reduced their ability to shift geographical or sector focus in response to the evolving conflict. Similarly, in the case of Sri Lanka, many donors did not have the strategic and financial flexibility needed to change approaches and implementation channels once the parties pulled out of the ceasefire.

Box 2. Norwegian support to peace in Haiti

The Evaluation Department of Norad evaluated Norwegian peace efforts in Haiti to assess whether Norway has contributed to increased security and stability, and whether gains achieved are likely to be sustainable.

The evaluation team found that the Norwegian support to dialogue between political parties in the period of political stalemate from 1998 to 2005 was relevant and has contributed to reducing tensions in Haiti. Norwegian flexibility, perceived neutrality and ability to rapidly disburse transition funds are commended. The weakness of the engagement is linked to planning and sustainability. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has lacked a systematic, programmatic approach beyond one year agreements, which risks making interventions less sustainable.

To implement more flexible strategies, donor agencies should find ways to deploy more and better qualified staff in the field for longer periods of time. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for instance, managed to deploy more long-term field staff in southern Sudan, which improved the performance of their programmes.

Findings from the evaluations: Strengthening the use of evaluation in conflict settings

Evaluation managers and evaluators have provided extensive feedback on their experiences and insights to improve evaluation practice in these fields.

Understand the political dimensions of evaluating in conflict settings

It was widely recognised that evaluation – like all aid-related work – is not simply a technocratic process, but also has highly political dimensions. Evaluators often found it difficult to defend a credible and safe evaluation space in contexts where donors and country governments were wary and evaluation questions highly sensitive – and even potentially dangerous in some settings. Defending the integrity of evaluation findings in conflict settings can pose problems for evaluation teams, particularly where there are worries that evaluation findings may be misused by different parties to the conflict. More concrete advice is needed on managing these identified risks.

The evaluation teams in several countries dealt with tensions between the need for conflict sensitivity and the good practice of involving country stakeholders in evaluation.⁵ When the government is party to an ongoing conflict, its involvement may compromise the credibility and independence of the evaluation process. Likewise, donor governments commissioning evaluations (and their military or diplomatic missions) may also be engaged in

the conflict, as was the case in Afghanistan for Sweden, the United Kingdom and Germany. Creating and maintaining independent evaluation space is particularly challenging for those managing and conducting evaluations in such settings.

Assess peace programmes' theories of change

One of the core evaluation elements suggested in the guidance is the identification and assessment of the “theory of change” underlying the conflict prevention or peacebuilding intervention in question. A theory of change describes the assumed (or hoped) causal relationship between the activity or policy and its (intended) effects on larger peacemaking goals. A theory of change can also be described as a set of beliefs about how and why an initiative will work to change the conflict (OECD, 2007).

In many cases, particularly in the fields of peacebuilding and statebuilding, such theories are unclear or unstated. This may be due to a lack of clarity and strategic direction at the design stage or it can also be a reflection of donors' political agendas and the high sensitivity of working in conflict settings, as in Sri Lanka and southern Sudan. The Government of Sri Lanka did not want donors working on conflict; any programme that had “peacebuilding” as an explicit objective would not have been welcome. Such programmes therefore had to be framed otherwise, for instance as “promoting equitable growth”. Similarly, in southern Sudan from 2005-09, it was thought to be inappropriate for donors to presume the outcome of the 2011 referendum on the creation of a separate state and donors therefore ignored (or at least were careful not to explicitly describe) how their interventions would build capacities for the future state of South Sudan.

The result is that evaluation teams had a very difficult time identifying theories of change in order to evaluate peacebuilding programmes. Evaluation teams should take into account that aid policy and programmes are the product of political and institutional processes with different interested parties, and strategies may be deliberately left unsaid or open to allow a broad interpretation. An inception phase in evaluations may be used to identify and understand how the evaluation will analyse underlying programme theories.

The workshop also highlighted challenges around using theories of change analysis in multi-donor evaluations or cross-country analysis. Teams working on cross-country (thematic) analysis, including the assessment of the European Commission's peacebuilding portfolio and the evaluation of the German Civil Peace Service, found it difficult to amalgamate multiple theories across conflicts to assess how effective programmes (or portfolios) are at a strategic level. Participants debated whether it is useful to try to identify a common theory of change across many international actors, as was done in the Sudan evaluation, or to elicit individual theories of change based on an analysis of donor policies, as in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

However, most evaluation teams found the use of theories of change to be useful in framing their analysis and an introduction to the use of this approach in assessing peacebuilding programmes was considered one of the most valuable contributions of the guidance.

Applying evaluation lessons across different conflicts

Tensions remain on the external validity of evaluation findings – that is, whether or not the findings of one evaluation could be applied in another country or different conflict setting. The evaluation findings all pointed to the need for deep contextual understanding and continuous analysis. The discussions highlighted the importance of grounding

interventions and policy in conflict realities and having a flexible, profound understanding of the context, change processes and the role of donors. How can this need for context and conflict specificity (“groundedness”) be translated into strategic-level lessons applicable across countries? The guidance should provide more concrete information on its use for multi-country or thematic evaluations and how conflict analysis and other tools can be used for cross-country evaluations.

Box 3. The impact of aid in Afghanistan

In 2009, Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development (BMZ) commissioned an independent evaluation of the impact of development co-operation in North East Afghanistan and put forth a series of evidence-based policy recommendations for the German authorities. Based on a rigorous and innovative methodology, the impact analysis provides a major input to German strategy development and has already fed into the Government’s new “Afghanistan Concept”, finalised in January 2010.

The impact analysis does not directly assess the effects of development co-operation on economic and social indicators, but looks at two of the key variables for stabilisation: the perceived legitimacy of the international actors and of the Afghan state. The analysis shows that aid has no impact on people’s attitudes towards foreign military forces. Rather, respondents’ feelings are driven by their concerns about security. Aid positively influences attitudes towards the peacebuilding mission only in secure environments. Basic security is a prerequisite for progress in all other areas of stabilisation and development. Aid is therefore more efficiently and more effectively spent in more secure regions. Addressing the immediate security concerns of Afghans is the single most important task for the Afghan mission.

Conclusion

Through the collaboration of evaluation and peacebuilding experts, guidance for evaluating donor support for peacebuilding has been produced and used to evaluate programmes in a range of conflict settings over a two year test phase. The outcome of this process is improved knowledge on how evaluation can be managed and carried out in these challenging settings. The evaluations also provide insight for policy makers and development practitioners seeking to make peacebuilding and statebuilding strategies more effective. The OECD DAC will continue to advocate for improved use of evaluation in this and other emerging fields of development co-operation, while supporting further policy development in the interlinked fields of peacebuilding and statebuilding.

However, while evaluation contributes to improving knowledge, it is just one part of the puzzle. Evaluation is not a replacement for good analysis, solid programme design and a professional approach to strategic management of peacebuilding and statebuilding activities. As this series of evaluations has shown, progress is needed on a number of fronts – institutional, political, managerial, financial *etc.* – to make development co-operation in conflict affected and fragile states more effective. It is also evident that these solutions will not be purely technical, but must also respond to the political realities of donors and partner countries.

Notes

1. All of the evaluations mentioned here and many other relevant reports and evaluation resources are available from the DAC Evaluation Resource Centre (DEReC): www.oecd.org/dac/evaluationnetwork/derec.
2. Some confusion remains around the definitions used in these fast-evolving fields. Conflict prevention and peacebuilding interventions are defined here as any programmes, project or policy that adopts goals and objectives aimed at preventing conflict or building peace (OECD and CDA 2007). This is a working definition used to focus attention specifically on programmes targeting conflict/peace dynamics (and to distinguish from broader concepts of conflict sensitivity).
3. Workshop on evaluating conflict prevention and peacebuilding: What have we learned?, Oslo, Norway 16-17 February 2011. Proceedings and presentations available online at: www.oecd.org/dac/evaluationnetwork under *current work: peacebuilding*.
4. Including the OECD DAC Policy Guidance on Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility, the Principles for Engagement in Fragile States and the work of the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding.
5. See, for example, the *OECD DAC Quality Standards for Development Evaluation*, which point to the emerging good practice of supporting country ownership and systematically involving relevant stakeholders in evaluation work.

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