Hollow Words: Foreign Aid and Peacebuilding in Peripheral Conflicts

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Abstract: Many foreign aid agencies promote peacebuilding as a global policy objective. This paper considers how they have fared in practice in subnational, “peripheral” conflicts in Asia that have relatively low international profiles, using case material from Aceh in Indonesia, the Far South of Thailand, and Sri Lanka. Foreign aid has supported long-term economic growth in these countries but typically failed to address peacebuilding concerns or associated inequalities between ethnic groups. Many barriers limit the scope to promote peacebuilding, stemming from recipient governments’ reluctance to accept external involvement and from aid agencies’ own limitations. Those agencies that do address conflict concerns tend not to use technical peacebuilding tools or methodologies. Instead, they prioritize the root causes of conflicts, recognizing human rights protection and equality of opportunity as policy aims. They also devise responses locally, build good relationships with governments, and work incrementally from a strong knowledge base. Wider adoption of similar policy objectives and practice would enable further small-scale peacebuilding initiatives.

Keywords: Aceh, conflict, development, foreign aid, Indonesia, peacebuilding, Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, Thailand

Providers of International development assistance—non-governmental organizations, bilateral government donors, multilateral development banks and

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United Nations agencies—continue to stress the importance of addressing civil conflicts and promoting justice alongside reducing poverty. The summary of the 2011 World Development Report that addresses conflict, security, and development describes “the negative impact of repeated cycles of violence on a country or region’s development prospects.” This review considers the barriers that foreign aid agencies confront when trying to turn such policies into practice, concentrating on examples of conflicts in South and Southeast Asia.

The merger of development and peacebuilding makes good political sense to developed nation policymakers. It is hard to oppose without sounding callous, and it provides a relatively cheap way to address concerns over instability in foreign countries. Addressing conflict and peacebuilding through aid provision is not a new idea: foreign aid was used by both sides during the Cold War as a policy instrument. The wider adoption of an ostensibly neutral peacebuilding agenda is a more recent phenomenon, however, and it has spread fast. Many development agencies have specialist staff and dedicated departments to help implement peacebuilding policies. United Nations reports and international commissions are joined by good practice guides, academic journals and a consultancy industry in what amounts to a thorough institutionalization of peacebuilding. Various concepts aim to guide uses of foreign aid for peacebuilding, including human security, peace conditionality, conflict sensitivity, statebuilding, and rights-based programming.

Most of the related academic literature on international peacebuilding concentrates on large-scale interventions and high-profile wars, often in what are termed “fragile” or “failed” states—Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, and so on. This paper focuses instead on a different form of conflict: sub-national unrest that occurs commonly and persistently in peripheral regions of countries in South and Southeast Asia, here called “peripheral conflict.” By considering these relatively small but long-term conflicts in what are often middle-income nation states with relatively strong sovereign control, the paper takes a different look at how international policies affect the dynamics of conflict and development. It asks whether the peacebuilding policy objectives of foreign aid agencies are realized in practice when they address such conflicts.

Researching aid flows and peripheral conflict emphasizes the role of the recipient state as well as the donor agency, something often underplayed in analyses of international peacebuilding initiatives and in aid practice itself. Stressing the recipient state also encourages analysis of the main dynamics of foreign aid provision rather than focusing solely on peacebuilding initiatives, given that much foreign aid continues to flow along conventional lines to governments in countries undergoing peripheral conflicts. Foreign aid is approached here as an aspect of international relations and not a technical tool or an apolitical product of international benevolence. It is one element of a wider set of peacebuilding interventions that also includes military peacekeeping forces and third-party mediation. Foreign aid is politically and economically significant,
reviews that it should further localize responses by committing staff to longer international postings and investing in language skills, yet it has not done so. A desire to maintain directive control in order to implement centrally derived policy is effectively counterproductive, restricting the agency’s ability to turn its global peacebuilding policies into practice in many conflict environments.

There is a need for closer understanding of how development assistance can support peacebuilding in specific contexts and of the institutional changes that aid agencies need to make to take advantage of arising opportunities to engage. Clearer assessment that avoids politically motivated expectations, and explains the practical limits of using development programming to promote peace, can highlight what steps might be viable and what policy statements are likely to remain little more than hollow rhetoric.

NOTES

5. Adam Barbolet et al., The Utility and Dilemmas of Conflict Sensitivity (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2005).