

A conversation with Darren Kew on September 13, 2013 about conflict prevention

Participants

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Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Dr. Kew.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Darren Kew as part of its shallow investigation of fragile states and conflict prevention. Conversation topics included: the history of conflict prevention work, the relationship between state fragility and conflict prevention, and funders in the conflict prevention space.

History of conflict prevention

Recent international conflict prevention efforts

Interest in conflict early warning systems and conflict prevention strategies developed during the early 1990s. The Secretary-General of the United Nations at the time, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, was interested in such systems because he thought that the UN should use preventive diplomacy to limit conflict. The Council on Foreign Relations and the Carnegie Corporation of New York funded early studies of conflict prevention strategies.

The Center for Preventive Action at the Council on Foreign Relations, where Dr. Kew used to work, was representative of conflict prevention organizations at the time. It sent researchers to potential conflict areas to write reports about the likelihood and sources of conflict and to develop a blueprint to prevent the conflict. If it found a significant risk of conflict, it would use its powerful contacts at the Council on Foreign Relations to advocate that the U.S. government, the UN, and other government actors adopt the blueprint and work to prevent the conflict from developing.

If advocacy efforts like these were successful, government actors would work to prevent conflict by:

- Having diplomatic discussions with the country at risk
- Carrying out military peacekeeping operations
- Working out peaceful power sharing arrangements

Typically, during diplomatic discussions, many other aid organizations entered conflict areas to aid refugees and to carry out other development initiatives.

Decline of early warning organizations in the late 1990s

In the late 1990s, decision-makers in some of the key conflict prevention organizations like the CFR, and some funders in the field, concluded that advocacy-oriented conflict early warning organizations were unnecessary because the pre-existing diplomacy system functioned sufficiently well in its early warning capacity. Rather, the key problems for early warning organizations were gathering political will and gaining the attention of governments, but these are difficult issues that face policy initiatives in general, and early warning organizations were not specialized in addressing them. Ultimately, the early warning system approach was seen as helpful but generally not important enough to justify additional funding, although some NGOs and academic programs in the area managed to stay afloat.

Recent resurgence of conflict prevention, with shift toward local work and integration with other development initiatives

In the last several years, many early warning scholars, activists, and organizations have shifted their focus toward the local level. Instead of producing national-level reports, organizations enter localities where violence is emerging and work with local communities to prevent further violence.

The advantages of local conflict prevention work include:

- National governments are generally more receptive to organizations that work locally than organizations that try to influence power arrangements at a national level.
- Emphasizing local responses prevents organizations from being overwhelmed by large-scale problems. For example, when early warning systems focused at a national level, they often saw economic development and political reform as the solutions to conflict, but large systematic changes such as these can be nearly insurmountable from the perspective of a single organization.

Recently, conflict prevention has become more integrated or “mainstreamed” with local development programming. Many people involved in conflict prevention have recognized that broader development projects may be effective at reducing conflict. For example, if a charity plans to build a road in a community, it can convene a discussion with community members about where and how the road should be built. If the conversation is structured appropriately, it may increase collaboration and reduce tension within a community, and thus build early warning/early response architecture without necessarily calling it such. Some conflict prevention funders have followed other actors by supporting conflict prevention in conjunction with general development activities.

Other modern approaches to conflict prevention

Some organizations, such as the UNLock Project at the Fund for Peace, work locally but try to gain global attention. The UNLock Project, which works in Nigeria and Kenya, uses spatial technology to map where conflicts are happening and then works with local activists to analyze the data and to use it to reduce conflict.

Groups in Nigeria are trying to harness data from Facebook and other social media sites as an early warning of conflict in addition to interviews with local activists.

Connections between state fragility, civil society, and conflict

Lack of state capacity and state fragility contribute to conflict. Conflicts between groups often become violent because they cannot address their issues through peaceful, democratic means. Conflict resolution and prevention requires democratization and governance improvement.

Governments are often weak because of corruption. For example, Nigeria has more than \$100 billion in oil wealth, but corruption drains 75% or more of its oil revenues, sapping funds that could be used on development initiatives.

Civil society work is often focused on organizing members of society to improve government. Civil society groups are often nonpartisan, but many are deeply vulnerable to government influence. Some conflict-related activities include:

- Persuading the established government to support development policy and to foster relationships with civil organizations.
- Studying particularly peaceful and politically engaged neighborhoods in order to replicate their successes.
- Holding sessions to help people recognize their common bonds.

However, it is difficult for local civil society groups to have a large-scale impact. To maximize impact, civil society organizations should try to work in key “fault line” neighborhoods for political change and coordinate with each other to ensure that as many people as possible are reached. Training in negotiation, facilitation, and mediation skills will also improve civil society impact.

Evidence of impact

There have been many conflict prevention success stories at the local level. For example, conflict early warning systems have been instrumental to reducing conflict in many parts of Nigeria. However, Dr. Kew is not aware of a systematic collection of such examples, although UNLOCK is now trying to play a coordinating role among as many of these organizations as possible and may soon have such data on successes.

The Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI)

The Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI) increases oversight of lucrative sectors, primarily the oil sector, which is aimed to decrease corruption and increase government spending on development programs.

Organizers in Nigeria set up their own EITI-like initiative. However, the Nigerian government had a large resource advantage over the local civil society sector. The

government over time used its funding of NEITI “watchdog” groups to moderate or blunt their impact.

Funding in the conflict prevention space

Early funders

Early funders of conflict prevention work included:

- Carnegie Corporation of New York
- Winston Foundation
- Pew Charitable Trusts
- Twentieth Century Foundation (which later became The Century Foundation)

The Carnegie Corporation still works on conflict early warning, but it has shifted its focus.

U.S. Government

USAID funds conflict prevention work in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Other governments

The U.K.’s Department for International Development (DFID) made a large conflict resolution grant in northern Nigeria, partly in support of Mercy Corps. DFID is planning to set up an early warning system or strengthen the existing early warning network.

Scandinavian governments and the government of Netherlands fund conflict prevention work.

Intergovernmental organizations

The UN tried to develop its own conflict early warning system in the 1990s, but found it to be too politically difficult because countries with emerging conflicts were typically unwilling to submit to UN investigation.

Today, the UN system has conflict units that have early warning components. The UN sees itself as doing preventive diplomacy, which often involves conflict prevention.

Large NGOs

The International Rescue Committee is a large humanitarian organization that works closely with refugees. It and other humanitarian NGOs are interested in supporting early warning systems to be aware of conflicts and obtain provisions for the aid of refugees.

Mercy Corps does humanitarian work with refugees and has an in-house conflict resolution component. Eight years ago, it absorbed a conflict resolution group called Conflict Management Group.

Other NGOs

- International Alert
- International Crisis Group
- Foundation for Co-Existence in Sri Lanka
- Regional networks, such as the West Africa Network for Peace building (WANEP)

There are also many—typically smaller—local organizations around the world working on these issues.

Suggestions for others to speak with

- Michael Lund, Management Systems International
- Barnett Rubin, Center on International Cooperation at New York University

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