

Conference Report

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2017

sef:

Exclusion as a Cause of Violent Conflict. Strategies for International Cooperation

Larissa Neubauer

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community pledged to promote peaceful, equitable and inclusive societies, guided by a commitment “to leave no one behind”. However, with so many wars and conflicts making marginalised groups often hard to reach, turning this vision into reality is a major challenge. This is clear from figures provided by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD): two-thirds of the states now considered fragile failed to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). “Joined-up thinking” about peace and sustainable development is therefore essential.

To what extent do inequalities and exclusion play a role in the emergence and perpetuation of intra-state conflicts? This year’s Berlin Summer Dialogue explored this issue with reference to various forms of exclusion in the economic, social and political spheres. It also considered the contribution that international actors can make in addressing inequalities that pose a risk to peace.

Ethnic exclusion has conflict potential

In his keynote, Professor Lars-Erik Cederman, Professor for International Conflict Research at the Center for Comparative and International Studies (CIS), ETH Zürich, outlined how individual unhappiness and exclusion can be found “in every bush more or less” but do not necessarily trigger civil war. Together with his research group, Professor Cederman has identified a significant correlation, however: ethnic groups with little or no access to power have a very high probability of rebelling against the ruling elite. Here, it is important not to underestimate the “feeling” of being politically excluded: in some cases, this feeling may be stronger than the reality of exclusion. Economic inequalities are another important factor in the emergence of violent conflict. Ethnic groups that are significantly more impoverished than the rest of the country are more at risk of becoming embroiled in a civil war.



Berlin Summer Dialogue 2017: Véronique Dudouet, Thomas Helfen, Angelika Spelten (Chair), Ute Finckh-Krämer und Oury Traoré (l.t.r.)

Helping young people into work

Economic exclusion has complex causes and is shaped by conditions in the country concerned. Often, however, there is a lack of the structures needed to facilitate people's economic participation. In Cambodia and other developing countries, for example, there is a wide urban-rural divide, resulting in exclusion. Young people in rural communities have less opportunity to access education and therefore less chance of finding work that pays a regular income. As a result, their poverty risk remains high. Jonathan Cohen, Executive Director of Conciliation Resources in London, pointed out that radical groups in the Middle East and in many African countries are increasingly exploiting this economic exclusion for their own purposes. They offer young people cash and kudos for joining their organisation, and this progressive radicalisation of young people fuels



Berlin Summer Dialogue 2017: Jonathan Cohen

further conflicts. Positive economic incentives from external sources are needed in order to break this system and its spiral of violence.

SPARK is one of the organisations seeking to address young people's economic exclusion, as Michel Richter, Co-Director of this Amsterdam-based NGO, explained. SPARK works in conflict-affected countries in Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East. It develops higher education and entrepreneurship to empower young people to lead their societies into prosperity. The focus is on project ideas which generate long-term self-sustaining incomes based on market demand. SPARK's programming is coordinated at every stage with local stakeholders in-country. As Michel Richter pointed out, it is not an easy task to work in conflict countries with governments whose legitimacy – and therefore to some extent the legitimacy of SPARK's work as well – is contested.

Intra-state conflicts and wars impact on national economic development in a variety of ways. In Sri

Lanka, for example, economic growth remained steady at 6-7 per cent despite – but also because of – the war. However, external influence worsened the conflict and widened economic inequalities at the same time. Professor Indra de Soya from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Dragvoll explained that migrants' remittances had a critical impact here. Some families in the conflict areas received so much cash from outside the country that young people had no incentive to go out and look for work and earn their own living.

Political engagement by all social groups

In addition to economic exclusion, the political marginalisation of certain social groups can cause conflicts. Professor Cederman identified three political responses to ethnic diversity: predominance (e.g. in Syria), partition (e.g. Sudan and South Sudan) or power sharing. Neither of the first two options tends to be peaceful in the long term, as their respective examples show. But while power sharing with excluded groups is the option most likely to avoid conflicts, the level of ambition of inclusive processes is often at odds with the reality.

Aurélien Tobie, a Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), explained how Mali is pursuing a highly inclusive agenda, at least on paper. The “real” Mali, however, is a fragile state which sometimes lacks the capacity to provide basic services for its citizens. The situation in Mali has been complex for years, oscillating between insecurity, a lack of economic opportunities and Islamist promises. There is also something of a geographical divide between the hard-to-reach Sahara regions in the north of the country and the areas in the south, and this presents additional challenges.

The difficulties potentially associated with external influence were highlighted by Luxshi Vimalarajah, Programme Director Dialogue, Mediation and Peace Support Structures at the Berghof Foundation in Berlin, with reference to the national dialogues in Yemen. The process received intensive support from the international community and appeared to be a model of best practice, not least in terms of its inclusivity. Even so, it became apparent that the main conflict stakeholders were not well-integrated into the process. What's more, participants in the dialogues did not necessarily represent local people or address local problems.

Dr Sabine Kurtenbach, Senior Research Fellow at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, therefore called for a greater focus on small local peace initiatives – an approach which is particularly important when major national processes fail or stall. At the grassroots level, local peace

committees are exploring very practical solutions to enable all social groups to live in peace. Dr Marianne Beisheim, Senior Associate in the Global Issues Research Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin, expressed support for this approach and called for international stakeholders to give more backing to this grassroots work. A way must be found, she said, to network and expand these local processes so they can ultimately contribute to peaceful development at the national level as well.

Dr Ute Finckh-Krämer, MdB, a member of the German Bundestag's Subcommittee on Civilian Crisis Prevention, Conflict Management and Integrated Action in Berlin, focused on international actors' "impatience" in peace processes and pointed out that building new structures takes time. She underlined the importance of local politics, making reference to Germany's own history. Just after the end of the Second World War, there was no national government in place in Germany at first, but from day one, there were mayors and local politics. It is important not to lose sight of this experience when we engage in external intervention in other countries today, she said.

The social impacts of violent conflicts should not be overlooked

Political and economic solutions are not enough, however, to overcome the social impacts of violent conflicts. In the long term, peace agreements and the participation of all social groups can only be successful if mutual trust is restored in society – and that takes time. Building a lasting peace not only means implementing elements of a peace accord: it means re-establishing society as a whole on a new footing. Jonathan Cohen cast the audience's minds back to the end of the Northern Ireland conflict. Although 19 years have passed since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, mistrust and social divisions are still deeply ingrained, right down to the level of the schools, and are a major challenge. After the peace deal in Colombia, too, it will take years, if not decades, for social, economic and political transformation to start – if, indeed, it happens at all.

Achieving a balance between dealing with the past and the question of how communities can live together and look to the future after a conflict is a challenge. Marcos Smith, Coordinator for the Civil Peace Service Programme in Cambodia, described how difficult it is to deal with the past in any meaningful way. The breach of trust caused by the Khmer Rouge weighs very heavily on society even today; every Cambodian lost family members to the system. Surveys show that 90 per cent of Cambodians see themselves as victims of the Khmer Rouge. The question of who was a victim and who was a perpetrator is still a highly sensitive political issue. There is very

little "dealing with the past" in any genuine sense. For external actors, too, it is difficult to look critically at what happened during that period. One question which often arises is whether the victims are really being listened to in the processes and whether the perpetrators are accepting responsibility, said Marcos Smith. Sabine Kurtenbach drew a comparison here with Latin America, where elites are often still above the law, preventing a genuine "dealing with the past" process from taking place. The risk that societies will fall back into the structures of violence is considerable even now.



Berlin Summer Dialogue 2017: Sabine Kurtenbach

Jonathan Cohen warned about pursuing a social cohesion strategy at the expense of a deeper analysis of the past and assumption of responsibility. Trust must be earned, and that takes time. In his view, the idea of bringing people together through projects such as sports initiatives pushes the issues at the heart of the conflict – and efforts to resolve them – to one side. This in turn may encourage those political leaders who are reluctant to address these issues to entrench their position.

International actors' responsibility: the exclusion/conflict nexus

The role of international actors in conflict situations was viewed with ambivalence. Luxshi Vimalarajah pointed out that external actors can be a neutral party; in situations in which there is substantial mistrust within society and between the conflict parties, external actors can mediate and bring marginalised groups to the table. International engagement also offers the opportunity for stakeholder groups with an interest in social transformation to gain a voice.

Viewing the issue from a local perspective, however, Oury Traoré, Executive Director of the Madiba Institute for Leadership in West Africa (MILWA), Dakar, was critical of the international engagement.

She called for international organisations to focus much more intensively on local needs and to develop and implement projects together with local people. However, these organisations often preferred to lead the processes themselves, rather than simply supporting them. The need to consider local conflict management mechanisms to a greater extent and build on this experience was also underlined by Dr Ute Finckh-Krämer, a Member of the German Bundestag. She conceded, however, that identifying the right stakeholders is not always an easy task. What's more, it would often be necessary to negotiate with the "bad guys" in order to move closer to a peace agreement. Dr Thomas Helfen, Head of the "Peace

and Security; Disaster Risk Management Division" at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), Berlin, emphasised that official development cooperation must always take a critical look at itself and ask whether its own programmes have the potential to trigger or worsen in-country conflicts.

Outlook

The Berlin Summer Dialogue 2017 made it clear how important it is, in every context, to show sensitivity towards exclusion and possible conflict developments and escalations. In general, the inclusion of all conflict parties is desirable, but this is not always put into practice in the right or proper way.

It takes time to deal with exclusion and manage conflicts. Development project cycles are often too short to bring about long-term changes within society. It would therefore be sensible to make more intensive use of resources and experience already available at the local level. Through targeted support of constructive in-country forces, more sustainable project results can be achieved.

Focusing on the causes of conflict and violence is not enough, however. In order to move closer to the Agenda 2030 goal and build peaceful and inclusive societies, it is essential to address the question of which factors safeguard a durable and positive peace.



Berlin Summer Dialogue 2017: Heike Kuhn, Aurélien Tobie, Thomas Nehls (Chair), Luxshi Vimalarajah (l.t.r.)

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