Are Conflict Prevention and Nation Building Feasible Goals?

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Over the last fifty years, civil wars and armed conflicts have increased dramatically throughout the Southern hemisphere. While the end of the Cold War may have lessened their number, it has done relatively little to secure peace and stability in the fifty or so countries that are lagging behind the general pace of globalization. For a time we thought that we could ignore these questions. What concern was it of ours if there were tribal wars of another age being waged in distant lands? In the very worst case, a paratroop battalion could just jump in and re-establish some order, even replace the occasional willful head of State, as France did in the 1970s in the Central African Republic. But things have changed: we know that we have now basically lost control of these 'events'. Gone are the days when we believed that a handful of Marines could just 'pacify' Somalia while TV cameras rolled and the world watched. At most now, we can still manage to accelerate the conclusion of a conflict and prevent the situation from heading even further south when the balance of power on the ground has already determined the winner as France did recently in Côte d'Ivoire.

These distant conflicts that affect us

Now we know that even beyond the heavy costs these conflicts exact in terms of direct casualties and the incalculable deaths due to the collapse of health and other government services, decades of development are lost for these countries, which in turn lead to new and deep-rooted instabilities. And we also realize that we now live in a globalized world where phenomena we once thought were spatially limited and independent have become interdependent. Events like the Palestinian conflict or Islamism in the Maghreb, insecurity in the Sahel or the takeover by extremists of the tribal zones in northwestern Pakistan, are no longer isolated events. After September 2001, we finally came to terms with a fundamental reality: these conflicts have a direct impact on us. They affect us through the terrorism that some of them spread, through

the soaring instances of piracy and the cottage industry of kidnapping arising from the extension of the zones of lawlessness. Last but not least, they affect us through the immigration they accelerate and which in turn feeds political extremism in the North. We are suddenly discovering that, like in some kind of bad dream, our tourists as well as our humanitarian workers in the Sahel have become fair game for trans-border gangsters acting in the name of Jihad.

These conflicts are also of concern to us for yet another reason. Although internal, they indeed tend to involve adjacent countries and like cancer, they spread to the regional level because of the flow of refugees and weapons, and because neighbouring states often support their neighbours' insurgents in an attempt to grab power and influence. This has for instance been the case for years between Chad and Sudan, where both countries have supplied weapons to their neighbour's insurgents. The zones of instability these conflicts generate then paralyze trade and hinder economic development, thus weakening even more the states concerned and spreading insecurity to the entire region. A good example of this situation is the large geographical arc that extends from the Kivu in DRC to the east of Chad, passes through southern Sudan, Darfur, the Central African Republic, and goes clear up to Northern Cameroon and Nigeria. And this is not limited to Africa. The meddling first of the Soviet Union, then of the Western Coalition in the tribal conflicts in Afghanistan has contributed to the present instability of Central Asia and even of Pakistan, a country which has both nuclear capacity and the worrying symptoms of a failed state.

Two decades of experience have taught the international community a lot about the stakes involved. We are now supposed to be far more adept at stabilizing and rebuilding countries recovering from conflict. Yet the ultimate outcome of these efforts – and I am thinking of the considerable progress made on the diplomatic, economic and military fronts – are far from certain and in some cases, warrant some soul searching about whether or not we've achieved any real gains. The well known economist Paul Collier who has become a specialist of conflict related issues, notes that nearly half of these conflicts – the average length of which is extremely long, around eight to nine years – resume within five years after initial hostilities have ceased.[1] Decisive victories are rare, Angola and (let us hope!) the Côte d'Ivoire being two exceptions, and more often than not we find ourselves trying to manage long grey stretches of low intensity warfare. In Afghanistan for instance, it's obvious that the efforts of the international community have largely failed. It's enough to make us wonder if we are truly powerless when faced with these situations.

Conflict prevention: a Sisyphean task?

When faced with such disappointing results for post-conflict situations, conflict prevention becomes a very tempting alternative. After all haven't we always heard it's better to be safe than sorry? A host of literature on precisely this topic is currently circulating. Yet here again it is worrying to note that despite the efforts of international diplomacy and those of seasoned actors, like the Community of Sant'Egidio, an organization that has been monitoring conflict

1. Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007).

mediation and negotiating compromises and solutions for over twenty years, the results are pretty slim. Of course peace has returned to Mozambique. But is that the result of conflict mediation or of the end of Apartheid in South Africa that radically altered the balance of power in that region? There have been a series of unsuccessful mediations since 1999 in the Côte d'Ivoire for instance, and we must ask ourselves to what end? It is not difficult to see why such mediation efforts are so difficult and why they are ultimately limited in scope: such conflicts are indeed not simple disputes between overgrown children pouting in corners and just in need of adult supervision. Behind each nascent conflict indeed lies real, deeply rooted political crises, and often a terrifying and brutal dynamic of power threatening to spiral out of control at any moment.

Our book *Notre maison brûle au Sud* (Fire in the South)[2] describes the infernal workings of these spirals which begin with economic failure and end in open conflict. The Media regularly focus on the visible triggering mechanisms, like rigged elections or, worse, a refusal to accept election results like in the Côte d'Ivoire. But behind the most obvious and visible aspects lurk other causes, like the weakening of nation states through the toxic combination of a strong demography – the population of the Côte d'Ivoire has risen sevenfold since its independence – and the stagnation of the real economy, a misery often masked by flourishing oil and mining activities. In some cases these situations are aggravated by an imbalance between population growth and natural resources as is the case in Rwanda, Burundi, Afghanistan and now to the north of the Sahel. The role played by historical, ethnic and religious fractures cannot be ignored either. A good example of this is the contact zone between black and white Africa which runs from Mauritania to Sudan. And of course, the flow of modern light weapons, the symbol of which is the Kalashnikov, does not help.

The weakening of these societies is not the only reason for the origin of these conflicts, which most often is brought about when a specific and often minority group snatches all political and economic power. This generally paves the way for the systematic control of licit and illicit rents, a process which can go as far as the well ordered apportioning of the whole economy. Ports, electricity companies, national hydrocarbon or mining companies, public banks, marketing boards, and all other public institutions then participate in the wholesale plundering of the economy, as is presently the case in Zimbabwe. When one stops to consider it, has the situation in the Côte d'Ivoire really been that different for the last twelve years or so? And what about many other African countries where tensions are rising and machetes are being sharpened in the expectation of regime change? Bad governance in and of itself provokes a slow collapse of the economy and allows peripheral regions to escape the state's control. When repeated pillage and plunder are accompanied by exclusion and discrimination, the risk of a progressive collapse of the state's central power looms large. A recent and cruel cartoon by Plantu in *Le Monde* newspaper, shows Lady Catherine Ashton telling the Libyan demonstrators who are being massacred, 'Now children, stop this ruckus!' The image aptly conveys the futility of simple attempts at mediation in such contexts.

2. Serge Michailof, Alexis Bonnel, *Notre maison brûle au Sud*, (Paris, Fayard/Commentaire, 2010).

Making an outward show of democracy is the worst possible remedy…

The hopes and dreams that often accompany the introduction of democracy turn to bitter disappointment in many of these cases because democracy as currently exercised fails to solve the country's problems. On the contrary, the kind of superficial democracy often imposed upon these countries by the international community aggravates the situation. The redistribution of economic rents, often skillfully implemented by some autocrats – President Félix Houphouët-Boigny was an unrivaled master in the area – becomes far more difficult, and with the collapse of such redistribution mechanisms so does the social stability and peace these mechanisms often secured. Because, in these 'democracies', maintaining political power is the key to the control of the economy, and the control of the economy is in turn the key to maintaining political power, the group in power can neither accept peaceful transition without losing everything, nor redistribute some of it without strengthening its opponents.

The resulting political crisis is so widespread that without a kind of de facto re-colonization – the futility of which perhaps is best revealed by the American adventure in Iraq – it is practically impossible to prevent the unfolding tragedies. At the end of the day, the international community often finds itself wed to a dysfunctional model of democracy we ourselves have disseminated but which turns out to be ill-suited to these contexts. As it rightly refuses military intervention and the related risks of getting bogged down, the international community is paralyzed and lacks the credibility to influence events on the ground. This is precisely what has happened in Zimbabwe and in the Côte d'Ivoire for well over a decade. We just watch, helpless in the face of rising tensions. And like watching some ancient Greek tragedy, we are forced to sit by and let the drama unfold, waiting for the opponents to exhaust one other, or for a change in the local balance of power, which will finally allow reconstruction to proceed.

But now, are we truly capable of rebuilding of a country? Is it a realistic possibility in the end? Today the West's intervention in Afghanistan, both military and civilian is at an impasse. So should we draw the obvious conclusion from this situation, and decide that 'nation building' or trying to reconstruct 'failed states' is just as vain an enterprise as trying to prevent the escalation of conflict in the first place? In other words, are we really so powerless that our only course of action is to shutter the windows and lock down our own borders?

In the past at least, we were able to stabilize and rebuild countries as diverse as Kosovo, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Timor-Leste. In each of these countries, the situation is of course precarious, sometimes highly unstable, but progress has been made. So is stabilizing Afghanistan, because of the complicated history of this country, a kind of mission impossible for us?

What have we really learned from our failures in Afghanistan?

A hard look at the origins of our collective failure in this country[3] shows that the international community's lack of clear strategy

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3. Serge Michailof, 'The challenge of reconstructing failed states, what lessons can be learned from the mistakes made by the international aid community in Afghanistan?', 2011 ; see http://factsreports.revues.org/index696.html and www.sergemichailof.fr

determined, to a large extent, the ultimate failure of the mission. The Bush administration's arrogance, and its inability to show leadership while attempting to stabilize and rebuild Afghanistan, are probably the main causes of the international community's failure to adopt an adequate approach that should have been based on lessons learned from the accumulated experience in nation building. In a way, Afghanistan is a collateral victim of the Iraq War. The coalition's post-conflict mandate remained far too restrictive at the outset, when the only real aim was to search for terrorists instead of bringing security and rural incomes to the people. Instead of the needed counterinsurgency, stabilization and reconstruction strategy, the international community's approach was plagued by missteps, mainly because we didn't fully understand what was at stake and we failed to take into account our own accumulated experience in this domain. Taking stock of these costly blunders will not fix the problem but it might help us not to make the same mistakes again.

The importance of building government institutions

In a failed state, the building of modern government institutions ought to be priority number one. Between 2002 and the end of 2007, military expenditures in Afghanistan exceeded 130 billion dollars[4]. Development aid was not negligible as it officially amounted to about $ 25 billion during the same period. However much of this outpouring of cash simply evaporated into the nebula of unfulfilled promises and subcontractor's margins, leaving only an

estimated 10 billion that was actually spent to rebuild a country of 30 million inhabitants, which is larger than France and whose infrastructure was totally devastated. But let's put aside for a moment this overall insufficiency of resources during the crucial first years. The first thing to do in this type of situation is to provide security, a minimum of local administration and rural incomes to a population dominated by local war lords and mafias. And these were precisely the measures that were the most neglected. The famous 'Provincial Reconstruction Teams', in charge of bringing security and development to the rural areas, came far too late, with predictable and disappointing results. The international community did not fully grasp the fact that foreign forces cannot meet this fundamental need for security and justice in the long term and that despite all the good intentions in the world, they are very quickly perceived as an occupation force. We neglected to support the building of efficient, modern national institutions, with the integrity and fortitude to bring law and order. The Afghan police devolved into a network of racketeering thugs, something we didn't really challenge before 2008; local administration remained without resources, local government jobs often even being auctioned off and grabbed by the local ruffians. Such practices had a devastating impact on local institutions which desperately needed to be cleaned up and properly funded.

The usual methods of aid coordination fall short

Another critical issue is that international aid is a rare commodity that must be strategically managed in order to be efficient. This requires allocating resources according to clear and coherent objectives, without being bound

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4. This is the amount that is now spent in military activities every year in this country…

to current fashions and to the bureaucratic constraints of aid agencies. In Afghanistan, the usual coordination mechanisms haven't worked and the division of responsibilities among donor countries according to sector has shown its limits. For instance, some countries which were supposed to take charge of critical areas haven't properly assumed their responsibilities. This is the case for Italy which was responsible for restoring the judicial system and for Germany which was supposed to rehabilitate the police. It has thus become apparent that designating a central authority for reconstruction is absolutely essential in such contexts. In the absence of strong central coordination, each party tends to act independently, donors behaving like a 'pack of cats' to use the expression of one ambassador in Kabul. Despite many attempts, the international community has not managed to discipline its aid agencies or to set up the much needed 'central command'. Yet the only logical solution would certainly be a central authority set up under the responsibility of the high representative of the United Nations Secretary General. But in order for this occur, the UN needs to be given a clear mandate, which is currently not the case, and needs to mobilize a neutral technical team which probably only the World Bank could provide. This approach however goes against the prevailing wind and runs counter to the will of donor countries who all want to plant their national flag on their various 'projects', however temporary and ephemeral these turn out to be. Naturally the set up of a central authority endowed with extensive powers poses obvious problems, and risks irritating political sensibilities: indeed, the target country easily resents the presence of such coordinator, and is likely to see this office as a kind of foreign governorship imposed by an outside power.

In 2007 President Hamid Karzai refused the British proposal to appoint Paddy Ashdown, the former international High Representative in Bosnia-Herzegovina, to such a position and neither the US nor other countries of the coalition really supported the proposal. Yet this is an unavoidable and needed step, at least in the short term, as it would also force the target country to better organize itself in order to assume the badly needed aid coordination.

The limits of the Millennium Development Goals

Other lessons can also be learned from the Afghanistan fiasco. To begin with, we now know that laudable goals like the fight against poverty, which has been part of the very DNA of aid agencies for over a decade now, cannot be the determining factor when aid priorities are established in a conflict affected country. For instance, we can't just run around building schools for girls when they are being raped or kidnapped with impunity by local thugs no policeman would dream of pursuing and no judge would think to put on trial. Building health centers is an equally absurd exercise if the district chief happens to rule the region through racketeering and terror. It isn't hard for us to see that the conceptual framework of the Millennium Development Goals, which focuses the efforts of international aid on social sectors, mostly health and education, is woefully ill adapted to a context where the State itself must be rebuilt in order to bring about poverty reduction. The creation of viable, modern government institutions is the cornerstone of a modern State and the existence of these institutions is a necessary condition for sustainable peace.

Traditional aid is dysfunctional

The Afghan experience also shows that building modern institutions is possible even in countries as deeply ravaged as Afghanistan, where a few energetic ministers were able to build several modern institutions between 2002 and 2006, until a mafia-like system moved in and began to corrupt most central government institutions. For example, the establishment of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) shows that there is a *right* way to proceed, one not built on corruption and nepotism – as is often the case – but on merit based recruiting, on modern methods of human resource management, and last but not least, on graduated pay scales which provide market based salaries adapted to skill levels. These successful and all too rare examples really bring home the fact that the traditional approach of aid agencies, which favors short-term solutions, is like building one's house on the sand. The systematic setting up of project implementation units (PIUs) in charge of managing donor funded projects inevitably leads to the creation of an unstable, parallel administration whose salaries are incompatible with local incomes and budgets. Instead of strengthening local institutions in the process of being created, such approaches simply weaken them by attracting all local capacities. These methods also lead to a kind of unhealthy dependence upon technical assistance to the detriment of local expertise and managers which leads to two dead ends: first, a financial impasse as technical assistance absorbs up to a quarter of aid resources; second a political impasse as tensions rise due to heavy foreign presence. At some point in the process, aid crosses a line and becomes part of the problem instead of the solution.

The real obstacles are political

Modern institutions are the bedrock of a stable state and building them demands long term support from aid agencies. Unfortunately they aren't always equipped to do this, and added to this lies an even bigger obstacle: politics. The right approach indeed challenges the ambient nepotism in these countries, and their tendency to form coalitions of power that then divvy up posts and institutions as if they were animal hides to be divided after a big game hunt. Sweeping reforms of public administrations are thus unavoidable steps on the road to success. The problem is that such reforms are both technically and politically very difficult to implement. Technical constraints and local political logic merge interests so that these issues are never addressed, even though it is usually possible to exploit the fluid political contexts that arise in the immediate aftermath of conflicts in order to fight against nepotism.

If we needed proof, Afghanistan finally confirmed the limits of what can be called 'top down' democracy, which is systematically implemented in these situations. Of course, the need to escape political impasses and the genuine desire to help legitimate governments pushes us to request national elections and to accelerate the establishment of democratic structures. But such quickly established 'top down' models encourage these democracies to merely keep up appearances. Groups with little scruples often highjack the process and reduce the entire affair to a series of periodic elections. Democratic structures and election processes are then rapidly taken over by those in power, which up ends the set up of proper checks and balances that are vital to any democracy and the possibility of peaceful transition. Past experience shows that this type of Potemkin democracy may rather increase tensions by hampering

the classic methods of rent redistribution. By raising false hope of shared political responsibility and economic power they create deep disappointments which may lead to tragic outcomes.

The urgent need to rethink our way in engaging conflict ridden countries

There is no easy solution to these very difficult problems; but one thing is clear: we must not impose political systems in haste which *in fine* allow the winner to grab all the political and economic power. It would certainly be better to take the time to build systems which enable fair distribution of powers among ethnic groups and the setting up of adequate checks and balances. In this regard I believe there is much to learn from the Swiss model of democracy. But in all likelihood we should try inverse the process as much as possible and try a 'bottom up' approach, beginning at the grass roots level, where the demand for democracy is often the most vigorous and the need most urgent.

In any event, if there is one lesson to take away from the international community's Afghan adventure, it is not that the reconstruction and stabilization of 'failed states' are always doomed to failure. It is rather that, if the international community is really serious about succeeding in an arena fraught with incredible difficulty and risks, we must radically rethink our approach. We now have enough experience to know that 'business as usual' in this field leads to a dead end. ■