

Remarks on stakeholder engagement in post-conflict countries

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Introductory remarks and personal background

I have been asked to provide some remarks on stakeholder engagement in post-conflict countries. I will differentiate what I am going to say from my excellent colleagues by saying that what I am concerned about here is not how to do participatory budgeting or how to engage civil society organisations in local management. I will leave those very important subjects to my colleagues on this panel.

What I am primarily concerned about here is an extreme situation within the remit of CEPA, namely the context where a non-state actor has been alienated to the extent that they have taken up arms against the state.

We have spent the last two days discussing a lot of technical issues related to budgeting, capacity building and training and I do not want to underestimate the importance of any of these things, but what I wanted to emphasise is that not everyone is very happy with what that entails.

To set the context I would recommend chapter 7 of the World Public Sector Report, which I think is a far more detailed version of what I can cover in ten minutes. The chapter outlines several important factors related to context that I don't have time to go in to here, but the summary basically comes down to the fact that the post-conflict context is an extreme case of the sorts of problems we have been discussing throughout this meeting. The report also highlights three aspects of the post conflict context that are very important in attaining the SDGs, namely that:

1. The need for short term stabilisation in post-conflict;
2. The need for rapid institutional re-establishment that may have long-term unintended consequences; and
3. The need for planning and execution of longer-term development goals.

In particular I wanted to highlight a number of issues that have already been included in our discussions:

1. The issue of illicit flows in situations where both sides may have been involved in illicit trade and have constructed alternative economies in some cases. The challenge here is to construct a legitimate economy whilst dismantling an illegitimate one;
2. The close links between civil servants, politicians and illicit armed groups;
3. The frequent collapse of public administration in these contexts; and
4. The establishment of alternative governance systems in rebel held areas that are regarded as being more legitimate than government.

This creates a specific set of problems for public administration that not only has issues in service provision, efficiency or effectiveness but also legitimacy. In many ways the post-conflict situation represents the case of alienated groups whose concerns have not been listened to or in many cases where they have been deliberately discriminated against, either explicitly by ethnicity, race or language or through structural discrimination.

The other important element in this context is the role of the international community which is hugely exaggerated in most post-conflict situations either as mediator, peacekeeper or just in the huge spikes of humanitarian and development aid that flows in to post-conflict countries.

As a mediator myself inside the conflict in Nepal I got a first-hand insight in to what this entails and the international community does not really come of this very well at all.

What relevance does this have for CEPA?

1. It puts real emphasis on how we engage with people on the ground, particularly people who are marginalised. Within this I would emphasise:
 - a. The use of language. We are terrible at using technical or technocratic language that we all assume everyone understands. This is just not true. Even within these walls we have emphasised the difference between academic and non-academic language, but imagine attending a meeting in Kathmandu when an international consultant turns up with a battery of acronyms like DDR, SSR, etc.
 - b. This can be extended to assumptions about where we are heading and what the eventual aims are of reform processes. The idea of 'leaving no-one behind' is a really good one, but this implies a number of things, not least that we all agree on where we are going and that we don't actually want to go in a different direction or be left behind.

2. Transformative leadership doesn't really do things for people, it does things with people. It works with communities to make them understand where it is going. The problem with talking about leadership is that people tend to forget about followers...
 - a. Within this I would emphasise the role of interlocutors who can work with local communities. Examples here would be community police structures in parts of Ethiopia where police are recruited from the community, trained by the police and then posted back in to the same community.
 - b. This same dynamic also relates to the recruitment of government servants and their level of representation of different groups in society. An example in a post conflict setting would be the recruitment norms of the Nepal Army during the war that excluded huge numbers of Nepalis, but a similar dynamic is happening in many countries in terms of where civil servants are recruited from, including in the UK.

3. Communication is as much about listening as it is about telling. We often forget about this assuming that we have developed the plan and we know what is best - it is just that we did not communicate this well enough, so what we will do next is come up with a better way of communicating what we will do so that 'they' understand it.
 - a. The first point to make is that data is not neutral and its presentation certainly isn't. Different groups may have completely different interpretations of the same data or even different ideas about what data actually is – as we do as academics.
 - b. What this demands is a way of including local people in decision making and also decision deciding.
 - c. This may be a risky process in that some values at a local level may not be compatible with international values and then a decision has to be made – do we want to negotiate, and if so then how? Gender rights are a good example if the international community is negotiating with traditional authorities.

- d. At the same time, we also need to acknowledge that the local also has its own politics and international intervention may be a positive thing for some groups and a negative thing for others.
4. What does this mean for government officers?
- a. Training is important, but it isn't just about training, it is frequently about judgement in politicised situations.
 - b. This puts an enormous pressure on government administrators to deal with groups of people who have previously been enemies and frequently to incorporate them or work under them as political leaders.

This brings me to my final point, which returns to a recurring theme of our discussions: trust.

Trust is something in short supply in post-conflict situations and any programme of work in this area starts from the situation where both sides have ceased to trust to such an extent that they have taken up arms.

This extreme situation, however, has some important lessons for CEPA and that is even in those extreme situations it is possible to create trust between former foes. The key to this, in my experience has been getting people to work together. There is no artificial way to do this. People learn to trust each other when they recognise that they are just people and they do that when they work and interact with each other.

In my view this is the essence of the thinking and working politically agenda that some of our colleagues have been developing internationally. TWP requires public administrations both internationally and nationally to make intelligent changes to the way that they do business, and this in turn requires a different way of thinking about public administration that puts greater emphasis on the ability of public servants to not just exist in a bubble, isolated from communities.