DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACHES IN CONTESTED STATES: Extreme Caution Required

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The 'peace dividends' theory of change: A reduction in violence and progress towards lasting peace will be helped by a rapid reconstruction of vital public infrastructure (roads, schools, health posts, urban water and sanitation systems etc.); a renewed delivery of essential services, especially by the state; and the initiation of development-type projects! This has been a long-standing assumption among especially governmental and multi-lateral policy makers working on peace agreements, stabilisation, state (re)building and peacebuilding. The strapline summary of this theory of change is '*peace dividends*': if people start seeing tangible benefits, they will be less inclined to continue with or support further violent confrontation.

Often missing from that theory-of-change is the political economy of rehabilitation and development. In simple words: whose interests are mostly served, who benefits? If this is a relevant question in post-agreement situations, it is even more acute where national power and the nature of the state remain contested.

Questioning the assumption: The first challenge to that assumption, for me, dates back to my years in the Ogaden, now Somali Region 5 in eastern Ethiopia. Then I learned that the indigenous Somali population, during the revolt against the Mengistu regime, had destroyed many schools and health posts. Perplexing: Why would a population living in such harsh region destroy what we consider essential services, the *lack* of which is often one grievance contributing to civil war?
Recent work in different contexts is sounding the cautionary note again, at project but also at broader, strategic level.

Rehabilitation as potential driver of conflict – Libya

In several Libyan towns and cities, international organisations are repairing and rehabilitating such essential public infrastructures. The Libyan people need them. But there at least three ways in which these interventions can increase tensions and potentially trigger new confrontation:

Divided towns: In towns with multiple social identity groups that distrust each other and do not share easily anymore, each group may demand a service post of its own (e.g. school, health post), and may be wary of its service (e.g. the town water supply) being under the control of another group. A Libyan

peacebuilder even gave me an example of dispute over the rehabilitation of kindergartens in a city, when the first ones were done in a wealthier part of town, raising suspicions among the residents of other neighbourhoods. This is a classical situation requiring strong competencies to operate with conflict sensitivity. One conflict sensitivity principle adopted by international aid agencies working in Libya speaks to this: "*Assistance should be delivered in an inclusive and impartial way.*" This is a solvable challenge.

Underrepresentative local authority: The aid agency may wish to work in close cooperation with the municipal council, which is supposed to be closest to the town population and has the first responsibility for service provision. What to do however, if it turns out that the municipal council is not representative of the diversity of social identity groups in the town, but controlled by one? Working with it will be perceived as strengthening the position of one group against the others; bypassing it does not help the restoration of public authority at local level, prolonging weak local governance. This is a more difficult challenge. It can be overcome but will require some creative programming that wisely navigates local politics and resists the temptation to aim for 'quick results'. Another conflict-sensitivity principle for Libya applies here: "*Assistance should strengthen the ability of our partners to be accountable to their own communities and constituencies.*"

Contested central authority: However, a problematic situation exists in the relationship between national and local authorities. In 2012 the then provisional government promulgated Law 59, establishing a new local administrative system in a spirit of decentralisation. Elections for municipal councils followed. However, as if often the case in decentralisation processes, the new local administrations do not have formal authority over service provision, which remains the responsibility of central line ministries. Nor do they have budgetary control, which remains with the central Ministry of Local Administration, in coordination with those of Finance and Planning. This only provides the local administrations with a budget for their basic operating costs – while not allowing them to raise any local taxes. A third conflict-sensitivity for Libya could be invoked here: "*Assistance should be delivered in a way that strengthens the connection between central institutions and development activities in the regions of Libya.*" Programmes could indeed be designed to help reduce this incoherence in the public administration, if they take a broader perspective than simple 'project delivery'. But there is a deeper political problem: There are currently three Libyan entities claiming to be the national government. The international community stands by the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. In practice, this has limited implementation capacity. More problematically, it is contested by segments of Libyan society, especially in the north-eastern part of the country known as 'Cyrenaica'. The result is a serious political dilemma for aid agencies: If they carry out rehabilitation projects separate from the GNA, their official permission to operate in Libya may be revoked. If they work in cooperation with the GNA, in parts of the country they may not get a 'social license to operate'. How this political -and military - standoff will evolve, cannot be predicted. Aid struggles to be impartial

and conflict-reducing here, and the assumed link between *rehabilitation of public services-improved local governance- national stability and peace* is a hope-line, by no means a clear trajectory of positive change.

Peace dividends in ceasefire economies: who benefits? - Myanmar

In Myanmar, the 2015 elections brought victory for the National League for Democracy, the long-time political opposition movement to the military regimes. It followed shortly after the signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with eight armed opposition groups from ethnic minorities. Two more joined later. Some of the ethnic armed groups had already reached bilateral ceasefire agreements before: The Karen National Union (KNU) for example in 2012. On the other hand, a 17-year long ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Organisation/Army and the military junta, signed in 1994, broke down in 2011. The result has been intensive fighting that has received nowhere near as much attention as the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya population in southwest Myanmar.

Negotiations between the NCA signatories and the new, partially civilian, government in Myanmar, have been going on for 3 years now, but a political agreement that could bring sustained peace is not in sight. The fighting in Kachin continues, the other ceasefires meanwhile have held. The situation on the ground however is changing.

In south-eastern Myanmar for example, where the Karen historically have been the dominant group, the Myanmar state has been able to significantly expand its presence during the ceasefire. That is certainly the case for the army, dominated by the Bamar ethnic group. It has penetrated into territories formerly held by the Karen National Liberation Army, establishing new military bases, accessible through repaired and new roads, and turning some sites of forcibly relocated populations into new urbanised centres. The improved security of the ceasefire period has also encouraged multiple companies to set up business in the south-east, often facilitated by the Government or directly by the army, senior officials of which have very extensive business interests. These supposedly bring 'development'. In practice, as in Kachin state, many of these are extractive industries or agro-businesses, leading to land grabs and new displacement, or the inability of refugees and IDPs to return to their original areas now taken over by such companies – all without consultation or compensation.

The Government has also been extending administrative and social services, for example sending teachers to areas where for years the education and health services were provided by ethnic movements,

some of which have a decent administrative and governance presence (including police and a judiciary). These now bring (exclusive) Burmese language education in schools that previously operated in the mother tongue of the ethnic minority, and potentially a Burmese/Bamar view of history and the nation. In areas of mixed control, there can be double taxation, two police forces, mixed language instruction, creating new complexities for the local populations.

Worryingly, one of the biggest current threats to many rural populations in Myanmar is the Law on Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Lands Management, amended in 2018. This affects almost a third of the total land area, and risks increasing land conflicts and dispossession of large numbers of rural people without formal land titles. This is certainly the situation in many ethnic minority areas where people have relied on customary land arrangements.

It doesn't take many conversations with Karen leaders, to realise the very mixed feelings this causes. While some argue that the current peace process is the best opportunity they have had in decades (almost since the independence of Burma/Myanmar in 1948), and that patience is required because "*it is more difficult to make peace than war*", others are deeply worried. Should the ceasefire break down again and fighting resume, the Karen movement and forces will be in a much weaker position. Not surprisingly, there have already been some serious clashes to stop road repairs or new road construction.

This presents a complex situation for the international aid organisations: Following the 2015 political changes in Myanmar, broadly seen as a historical opportunity for democratisation and peace, many aid organisations– bilateral, multilateral and nongovernmental – strengthened or shifted their centre of operations to Yangon and Naypyidaw. Most donor funding followed. Since then, they have been pursuing recovery and developmental programmes under the authority of the Government of Myanmar. Funding and support to the social services of the ethnic opposition movements, and independent ethnic CSOs like e.g. the Karen Human Rights Group or Karen Women's Organisation, has shrunk.

The political vision of several armed groups, for decades, has been of a federal democratic Burma/Myanmar, with a high degree of autonomy of the constituent states. While the re-positioning of the international aid actors to may be very appropriate when there is a political agreement with broad support, this is not a 'post-conflict' situation. Turning Naypyidaw and Yangon into the centres for international assistance may unwittingly be supporting a unitary state. It is in any case contributing to the expansion of the state - and its military apparatus – into ethnic minority areas. And this while the military remain a 'state within the state', controlled by hard-line senior officers, whose brutal tactics remain unchanged, as their operations against the Kachin and Rohingya demonstrate.

Several international actors in Myanmar still hold the assumption that economic development, jobs and livelihoods will contribute to peace, and operate with spending targets. As if throwing money at a problem is always a good way of solving it. They seem to ignore that any concrete benefits here are not '*peace dividends*' but '*ceasefire dividends*'. The biggest strategic winner of this are the Myanmar authorities, particularly the military. We must recall that the renewed fighting in Kachin followed a

similar period of business and development under a '*ceasefire economy*'. While some Kachin leaders shared in the profits, Kachin communities largely did not, and continued to experience threats from the military, forced displacement and land grabs. With no progress those 17 years on the fundamental issue of marginalisation of non-Bamar identity groups, and their inclusion via a federal constitution.

Not surprisingly, many Karen activists are not that trusting of international aid agencies that have so quickly put themselves on the government side. "*The internationals are going too fast*" comments one Karen leader.

This situation might have been difficult to foresee, though there was the precedent in Kachin. But it cannot now be ignored. International aid agencies need to seriously reflect how they are going to position themselves in this uncertain situation. Burying the easy assumption that rehabilitation and development intrinsically contribute to peace, must be part of that.

Somali political economy advisors?

Oh, and what about these Somalis in 1991? Well, they saw these schools and health posts as instruments for the penetration of an oppressive state controlled by Ethiopian highlanders, not as basic service provision. That's why they destroyed them when they could.

If local populations without formal education can understand the politics of state-formation and state-expansion, surely the well-educated staff of aid agencies can too?

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