

Sustainable development through sustainable peace: conflict management in developing societies

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The difference among societies is not whether conflict exists, it is how conflict is managed: whether conflict is managed in ways that lead to violence or in ways that open opportunities for innovation and positive change. In fact, the process of development almost invariably leads to conflict, as resources are reallocated according to new priorities and relations between social, ethnic or religious groups are altered. This article gives details of recent conflict management initiatives in the Commonwealth in association with the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) of the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Conflict prevention is usually associated with diplomacy aimed at resolving specific disputes. However, development experience suggests that peace can only be sustained in a society if its leaders and its institutions have the skills and processes to manage turbulent and often wrenching change, and the resulting conflict.

Over the past three years, the UN system has provided systematic support to a number of countries to build national capacities for conflict prevention. These capacities allow contentious issues to be addressed on the basis of dialogue and consensus. With these approaches, key actors find the necessary resources for mediation and constructive negotiation within their own societies. Countries receiving this support include three Commonwealth members, Ghana, Guyana, and Kenya. In Guyana, the UN's capacity building efforts have accompanied Commonwealth diplomacy.

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The transition to modernity: the experience of Ghana

Ghana has taken remarkable strides towards consolidating democratic development in recent years, with successive and successful national elections. The country faces a significant challenge, however. The rapid pace of development has led to numerous local tensions over land, resources, and chieftaincy succession, especially where traditional groups and communities have grappled with modern politics and jurisprudence. While the chieftaincy system has served as a mainstay for social cohesion in Ghana even in modern times, the politicisation of some aspects of the system has contributed to these tensions. In the recent past, an absence of new mechanisms to complement traditional means for managing these tensions has led to violent conflict.

One of the longest-lasting violent conflicts has afflicted the Dagbon traditional area of the Northern region, where each of the two major clans claims affiliation to different and opposing national political parties. In 2003, the traditional ruler of the area and a number of his followers were killed. Law enforcement agencies provided only a tepid response. Perceptions by the aggrieved clan of national authorities' ineptitude or compliance significantly ratcheted political tensions at the national level. This threatened to create instability and violence during national elections in December 2004.

In this context, the UN system deployed a 'peace and governance' programme in Ghana in mid-2004. The short-term objective was to assist national and local actors to implement confidence-building measures in the troubled Northern region in advance of national elections. The longer-term objective was to help build systematic national capacities for managing similar tensions throughout Ghana.

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From September to December 2004, the UN supported local authorities and civil society in the Northern region to anticipate and respond to emerging tensions. A number of confidence-building activities, from soccer matches to media campaigns, were also implemented. Combined with informal high-level political overtures to the major national parties, this support allowed national actors to prevent the expected violence, and to conserve national stability during and after the elections.

Subsequently, the UN has supported the parties in the Northern region in acquiring the skills for constructive negotiation. As a result, the parties have agreed to a 'roadmap' for a systematic peace process. The UN has also supported the development of a cadre of trained mediators, drawn from both government and civil society, who are available for resolving conflicts at the national and local levels. The initially encouraging results from these efforts have prompted Ghanaian authorities, with UN support, to launch the development of a national

'architecture for peace'. This plan will bring together government and civic leaders to provide an early response to emerging conflicts.

Managing ethnic diversity: the experience of Guyana

Guyana has faced significant development challenges as a result of the mistrust and animosity that has been bequeathed by its colonial past. The identification of Guyana's two largest political parties, the People's Progress Party (PPP) and the People's National Congress (PNC), with the Indo-Guyanese (49.5 per cent of the population) and the Afro-Guyanese (35.6 per cent) communities, respectively, has often caused deadlocks within key national and local political or public policy processes. It has also led to political instability and violence during or in the immediate aftermath of national elections, with the losing sides expressing a lack of confidence in electoral results.

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In 1998, mediation by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) yielded accords between the leaders of the two major parties, and an agreement for reform which was the basis for new elections in 2001. The PNC lost the election in 2001. Thereafter, a period of street demonstrations and marches took place against the backdrop of claims of economic marginalisation and discrimination against the Afro-Guyanese. This resulted in a new dialogue process between the leaders of the two parties which stalled in early 2002. There were fears among elements of the opposition that they would not be able to acquire power through the existing electoral system in which people organised and voted along racial lines. As the political system seemed to award the spoils to the victors only, the potential for conflict grew proportionally. By 2002, views of politics as a zero-sum game had led to a deadlock in the political system.

In August 2002, the CARICOM summit was held in Guyana against a backdrop of increasing violence. While the insecurity was often inspired by criminal elements, it had political overtones. The racially tense coastal township of Buxton saw sustained violence including a standoff with law enforcement authorities.

In 2002, the PNC also withdrew from parliament, and hence from the constitutional and political reform processes agreed upon in the leaders' dialogue. Following a civic initiative led by the private sector, and the activities of a Commonwealth special envoy invited by the parties, the two sides signed a memorandum on 'constructive engagement' in May 2003. Under this memorandum, PNC was allowed to return to parliament and implementation of reforms resumed. The UN also launched the Social Cohesion Programme (SCP), at the invitation of the government and other key stakeholders, in May 2003. This programme had been developed in the aftermath of the violent tension in mid-2002 to build the capacities of key national actors – government, political parties, civil society, local governments, media, and the uniformed services – for the peaceful settlement of disputes and sustained negotiation and dialogue.

In 2004, the process of 'constructive engagement' hit significant roadblocks over complaints regarding the pace of implementation of the agreed reforms. In 2005, however,

following a major workshop of key political and civic leaders hosted by the Ethnic Relations Commission (ERC) with the support of the SCP, the President issued a call for a 'national conversation', which was well received. This dialogue was launched in early 2006, as a part of a wider strategy for supporting national actors in preventing violence during elections later in the year. These dialogues were facilitated by mediators trained under the auspices of the SCP. In early 2006, the SCP launched an intensified schedule of training for a network of local government officials, civic leaders, and police officials who could constitute a national resource for the peaceful management of disputes during national elections later in the year. It was also hoped that the 'national conversation' would provide a venue for political and civic leaders to build consensus on further government reform.

Resource conflicts and democratic consolidation: the experience of Kenya

The development process in Kenya has been characterised by recurrent violent conflict over scarce resources and land, especially in the country's arid northern regions bordering Somalia and in the Rift Valley. These conflicts have been fuelled by a mix of politics and ethnicity in recent years. Political parties have promised special gains to select ethnic groups in return for their support, and have been defined by their affiliation with these groups. The resulting systems of patronage have also led to pervasive corruption within the system of government.

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These challenges have also complicated Kenya's efforts towards consolidating its democratic institutions in the past four years. Violence at the local levels has adversely impacted the tenor of national politics, making it difficult to find consensus on key questions of reform. Efforts to combat corruption have taken much of the government's time and energies with only partial success.

In early 2005, the UN supported the government and civil society in developing and launching a programme on 'Strengthening National Capacities for Conflict Prevention and Conflict Transformation in Kenya'. This programme focuses on building the capacities of provincial and local officials for working with civil society to anticipate and respond to potentially violent conflicts. At the national level, the programme supports members of parliament, senior government officials and civic leaders, to acquire skills for negotiating, managing conflict, and forming consensus.

The Kenyan government has responded positively to this support. The Office of the President has established the National Steering Committee on Peace-building and Conflict Management (NSC). The membership of the NSC comprises representatives from government, civil society, UNDP, and donors. In select districts in the more violence-prone areas, 'peace and development committees', consisting of local leaders, have been formed with the support of the UN and other partners. These committees assist the provincial administration in managing conflicts. Currently, the UN is supporting the members of the NSC with the drafting of a national policy on conflict management. The Kenyan government has invested significant resources and staff in the work of the NSC, making conflict management a top national priority.



Common experiences

The UN support for Ghana, Guyana and Kenya is among the first of a series of efforts towards building national capacities for conflict prevention. In all these activities, various agencies in the UN system are cooperating together to an unprecedented degree. As a result, the programmes that are emerging are highly innovative and responsive to needs of the countries. However, the real impact can only be measured over a significant period of time, and the programmes in all three countries are still in their early stages.

Some initial indications can be seen in all three programmes. Violence was prevented in Northern Ghana during national elections in 2004. The government's subsequent willingness to invest in a national 'architecture for peace' is also an early positive sign. In Guyana, the launch of a 'national conversation' despite initial reluctance among the concerned actors, and the renewed commitment by the police to train its members in the conflict-sensitive management of violence, are encouraging. In Kenya, the greater investment of resources by the government in the development and implementation of a national conflict management strategy is a good sign.

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The question of how success is measured in conflict prevention remains a perplexing one. First, determining why a violent conflict event did not happen is always difficult. Second, even if key factors are identified, abstracting them to specific actions is not always clear. Understandably, participants in all three programmes discussed in this article have asserted the need for better ways to measure the impact of their work.

While the programmes are being implemented in a gradual manner to conserve participation and national ownership, some of the problems they seek to address have immediate consequences. For that reason, the programmes need to demonstrate similar short-term impact. In the case of Ghana in 2004, and Guyana in 2002-3, the UN was able to work with other partners – especially the Commonwealth in Guyana – in order to achieve such immediate impact through a de-escalation of tension.

Finally, the success of these programmes can only be measured by the transformation of attitudes and responses to conflict among participants. Nonetheless, the three experiences detailed here suggest that building national capacities is a concrete entry-point for international partners to engage with local actors on conflict management issues. It provides a basis for future efforts aimed at securing development by securing peace, a peace generated – and sustained – by national actors and institutions.

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The **Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR)** assists UNDP country offices to set up and provide a quicker and more effective response for natural disaster reduction, justice and security sector reform, small arms reduction, disarmament and demobilisation, mine action, conflict prevention and peacebuilding, and recovery. BCPR strives to ensure UNDP plays a pivotal role in transitions between relief and development; promotes linkages between UN peace and security and development objectives; and enhances governments' responsibilities and technical and national capacities to manage crisis and post-conflict situations.

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