

## Development as a Tool for Conflict Resolution

*"Development agents working on the resolution of conflict need to carefully assess structural factors and catalysts, and not simply focus and respond to triggers that result in conflict."*

Long term neglect of problems which compromise or cripple the basic functionality of social systems necessary to sustain core levels of human existence will rarely continue without consequence. While these problems may proceed undefined or unnoticed for months or even generations, their corrosive influence will only fester until tolerated no longer, as they will not simply go away. Instead, these unattended problems become the root causes of conflict, and whether by apathy, ignorance, societal impotence, malicious intent, or worse, their neglect breeds horrific human suffering.

This neglect is too often tolerated, if not outright condoned, and must be understood further to ensure its eradication by those in positions of power, influence, and potential implementation of remedies. Acknowledgement of these fundamental problems is the important first step. Development agents, both native and "imported" from afar, must embrace a professional and moral responsibility to reject this neglect.

These agents must resist the seductive lure of any and all "quick fix" development that ignores the existence of less tangible yet far more potent problems. This difficulty lies in the blunt truth that "squeaky wheels are most often greased", a reality rooted somewhere within the human need for both expedient convenience and self-aggrandizement.

The problem, of course, is that development funding frenzy unleashed by headline grabbing international incidents is a reaction to the trigger, not the structural cause or catalyst for the event. In short, too little, too late; a band-aid at best. The challenge for development practitioners and their funders is to somehow capture the same enthusiasm, satisfaction, convenience of effort, and even "profit" if necessary and ethical, to lure intervention activity into the solution equation at a much earlier stage of infestation.

A thorough approach to better understanding the root causes of conflict must be characterized as an analysis of the complex matrix of forces which enable the breakdown of social order. An organized assembly of these often disparate forces into a logical summary depicting the cumulative effect of denial, and the high cost of such denial to the most vulnerable populations in any given community, is critical. The cruel reality of the disproportionate burden borne by three distinct population groups: children, elder men and women, and women of all ages as a distinct group, must be given particular and appropriate focus.

Positive development initiatives, initially conceived and throughout their subsequent evolution from well intentioned creative idea to executed final product, must incorporate comprehensive investigation and raw candor to achieve sustainable success. Truthful objectivity and responsible actions, as a byproduct of the knowledge gained during preliminary project design, must underpin the work of all development agent efforts. Shallow probing, generalized assumptions gleaned from careless inquiry, and sloppy deadline driven haste will certainly ensure a superficial understanding of the substantive proximate issues which are the very basis for the development effort itself.

Many seeds of the problems which sprout are subtle, and not easily recognizable to both native and outside development actors. The resultant implications and negative effects are often elusive as well, as they may develop slowly over lengthy periods of time through static and turbulent periods of a community's growth. As with the evolution of constructive change with positive effect, problem growth cannot be measured daily or easily. The issue is compounded because this measurement is particularly difficult for those in the midst of the degeneration, as the necessary preoccupation with short term events, challenges, and survival will obfuscate their long term detrimental impact.

This perspective is exacerbated for individuals living in abject poverty, with discernible disadvantage and disenfranchisement, and those in substantially unstable communities, regardless of the cause, making effective reactions to adverse conditions much more difficult to initiate. Clearly, as one struggles daily to secure basic food, clothing, and shelter, the luxury of a long term lens with well thought out decision making opportunities is difficult to afford. An environment supportive of critical objectivity in assessing the existence of significant problems, at an early stage, is difficult to support in and by communities struggling to merely survive.

It is for this very reason that development actors can and must play a unique role in mitigating this inherent handicap when proposing to intervene with an infusion of significant "expertise" and capital resources. When these same communities become the recipient of attempts at positive intervention through community development activities, a unique opportunity for external and multidisciplinary objectivity is presented. It is imperative that these relatively rare

moments are fully utilized not only for successful implementation of the specific and immediate development initiative, but also as a portal for responsible evaluation of the structural and proximate causes of conflict already at work.

The notion of "Development as a Tool for Conflict Resolution" is an ambitious proposition. Yet it is so potentially plausible and potent, that the premise must be enthusiastically embraced, lest development practitioners resign themselves to a career of cynicism about the value of any effort expended to create positive effect. In the broad spectrum of individual experience, from inane to magnificent, there are many miniscule voids rich with opportunity. The serious and dynamic practitioner will recognize these as the seemingly insignificant spaces that, if used creatively, may sustain an individual and community life replete with freedoms and human rights, not merely condemned to inhuman pain and suffering.

In development, these void targets must be assertively filled with solid solutions culled from an informed understanding of the societal forces gone awry, viewed through a prism of the cultural, religious, and historical influences that shaped those forces. It is also crucial to obtain an understanding of earlier conflicts endured by a community, whether it is a small local skirmish or a full blown escalation into warfare. Understanding conflicts in adjacent and tangentially related regions will also provide invaluable insight into the forces that may or may not take hold in the confluence of certain and unpredictable future events.

An overview of the primary root causes of conflict would reasonably include the following issues:

- a. Legitimacy of the state in its governance role is a factor in much civil strife. Equal access to and representation by the ruling government remains an area of shortcoming and conflict in many emerging democracies, and nations which purport to be democracies. The reconciliation between formal and informal institutions of governing power, left unresolved, fuels social instability.
- b. The role of the rule of law further dictates stability and reliability in all aspects of civil society. Absent an accepted and enforceable legal structure, and an instinctive respect for the institution itself, lawlessness and the violent exploitation of the most vulnerable population groups is left unchecked, subject to the whim of the armed and physically powerful few.
- c. The control of state security forces, or in some instances the sanctioned proxy mercenary forces controlled by the state, is a powerful mechanism for repression with a long history of effective means to intimidate, violate, and exterminate those who would dare to challenge state authority.
- d. Respect for human rights currently exists in sporadic and random exemplary cases. The United Nations, for example, has evolved since inception with an agenda designed to rein in state abuses in this area, with substantial success. The counter view, however, is that the pace of abuses sprints ahead of the ability to effectively eliminate its practice. Respect for civil and political freedoms, along with religious, cultural, economic and social rights, remains elusive in many parts of the global community. Extreme examples of abuses remain, such as torture and Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), with the latter having reached epidemic proportions particularly in conflict and post-conflict areas. Ongoing examples of illegal detention and subsequent torture can be found, committed most recently in the name of the "war on terror", in a disheartening regression of support for the fundamental principles of human rights.
- e. Suppression of civil society and the media will quickly erode social stability, and that same suppression will frequently camouflage the actual degree of suppression, driving the fermentation of unrest underground to gather momentum until the breaking point. Fractured communities with suspicion of friend and foe alike are often the byproduct of this root cause, and cohesive opposition is particularly difficult to muster without media in primarily rural and undereducated population areas. Aggressive regimes historically use this suppression vehicle both overtly and discreetly to great effect, often in conjunction with an iron fist, to squelch discontent among population groups.
- f. The absence of sound economic management practices catalyzes the dissolution of financial security for populations barely surviving even when economic governance is solid. The distribution of wealth, or lack thereof, and myopic strategic fiscal planning, particularly in primarily agrarian economies subject to radical shifts due to trade and climate forces beyond their control, quickly causes unrest. Poor economic policy and governance can lead to significant malnutrition and death among the most vulnerable, particularly children and elderly. Cycles of drought and famine can be especially devastating and volatile in developing agrarian communities, when little planning and foresight is brought to bear to harness at least the predictable portions of the weather and agricultural productivity equation.
- g. It is difficult enough to manage the forces at work in creating unrest and conflict within sovereign borders. External provocations and the nations invaded by colonial or neighboring powers throughout history are extensive, as is the turmoil and conflict wrought by such excursions and warfare. The geopolitical situation relative to natural resources

exploitation, border disputes, and unrest in contiguous nations, can quickly and profoundly alter the character of a society, with long term recurring ramifications outside the control of the nation itself. The greedy lust for resources and domination exerted by external entities creates volatility not easily managed. The consequences of these exploits become deeply entrenched in the fabric of society, leaving most outside the profit and power sphere, and desperate over the conditions that result.

A more practical understanding of pre-emptive conflict mitigation and resolution through more purposeful development intervention is emerging through a new prioritization of multidisciplinary, longer term approaches to problem solving. Successful development strategies, the methodology for which begins with a broad and expansive approach enlisting individual and collective practitioners, all community actors, stakeholders, and beneficiaries, en route to a distilled focus on a specific problem solution, must effectively leverage the strengths of the international framework in seeking sustainable solutions.

Conflict is a complex dynamic force, and it is important to note that the conspicuous absence of actual violence in underdeveloped nations can be a modern day Trojan horse. "Peace" and "the absence of war" are not synonymous. The ability of the human spirit to endure remarkable pain and anguish actually masks accurate readings of the pulse in simmering communities. This is particularly true when blatant government repression, human rights abuses, and fear of retribution paralyze the natural instincts of citizens to rise up and defend self and family. Ironically, then, and tragically, it is the people most in need of intervention at multiple levels of their society that are forced to live in environments which incubate frustration, resentment, and desperation. Even the most extraordinary examples of stoicism by extraordinary, albeit vulnerable and under resourced individuals, cannot be sustained indefinitely.

Root causes of conflict are broad and intertwined, and are more easily enumerated in text, than found and understood by even the most experienced field practitioners entering into the local arena. Although well equipped with best intentions, development agents too often bring limited cultural and political context wherewithal. Therein lies the primary challenge, quickly followed by the need to accurately impart newly acquired wisdom and insight to funders and donors at their decision making desks far away from local realities. Long term patience in the absence of tangible and immediate results is a difficult situation to sustain. Unfortunately, those willing to maintain an ongoing investment interest in obscure underdeveloped communities with identifiable latent conflict are outnumbered by those willing to risk funds only within a more finite time frame for discernibly safer results.

In an ideal world, with remarkably enlightened funders devoid of the need for a quick investment return fix or congratulatory pat on the back, the root and proximate causes for those problems which blossom into conflict could actually cue up and determine the investment and return discussion. The cost benefit analysis, therefore, would be premised on an entirely different set of criteria, which in turn would facilitate a more efficient and strategic view of cash flow infusion, project replicability and sustainability, community impact, and collaboration with other funding resources. A long range time frame for both planning and implementation of development would facilitate deeper penetration into local social and political systems, providing opportunities for cooperation with existing political players in efforts that might otherwise be deemed non-viable in a more constricted timeframe. The converse is also true, of course, as the prospective risk increases proportionately with an investment committed in an unstable political climate. Yet, as in the private sector, the greater risk can also yield the greater profit, if one is willing to accept that profit can also be rewarding and satisfying as a non-monetary commodity.

In instances where development agents are actually able to effectively assess and accommodate structural factors and catalysts for conflict while designing their intervention, it is nonetheless difficult to presume a risk free comfort level for the duration of the project. The presence of these problematic conditions requires additional contingency planning and funding, along with lateral and subordinate strategies to buttress specifically those programmatic areas of intervention most likely to experience disruptive impacts during implementation, due to the latent conflict already in place.

The project team, inclusive of all funders, logistical support agencies, and implementation entities, must be willing to proceed despite their knowledge of the additional obstacles and slow churning progress. The pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict reconstruction phases of turmoil are all uniquely disruptive to all aspects of ongoing daily life. Without question, the presence of conflict in the development sphere is a defining and challenging parameter to be negotiated throughout. Risk averse actors need not apply, but those seeking to achieve significant and sustainable improvement in the lives of very real people, on a uniquely larger scale, must be encouraged to jump into the somewhat controlled chaos of the development fray, and see what is actually achievable.