MICRO CON

POLICY BRIEFING

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Collapsing 'Government', Emerging 'Governances'

A communications and bank building in Kosovo, destroyed during the fighting.
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- **Question: how can international agencies acting in the peacebuilding arena effectively promote conflict transformation collapsed states?**

Summary: Contrary to widespread belief, the collapse of 'government' does not automatically entail the collapse of 'governance'. In a setting of 'unstable' livelihoods, households' coping strategies, coupled with the social entrepreneurship of non-state actors create new local, arguably more contentious, 'governances'. In this setting, even if weakened, the role of the state is nonetheless important and a peacebuilding strategy cannot be effective if it is kept out of equation. International support to processes of state building as part of conflict transformation must involve Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) as key actors, while engaging with top, mid and grassroots levels of society, allowing CSOs to act as active intermediaries between the three levels.

Introduction

Despite a direct policy relevance, it is surprising how little is known about the precise relationships between the constantly changing realities of violent conflict, governance and institutions at a micro-level.

Contrary to the widespread belief that conflicts are little more than complex and highly intractable instances of anarchy and chaos, there is growing evidence that people and communities in conflict environments develop a range of coping strategies that aim to reduce the risk associated with poverty and insecurity. The resulting compromises and solidarities resulting from these actions lead to the provision of services by local non-state actors, as well the administration of rights and access to resources, building 'governance' even in the presence of collapsed states.

The key question is: how can an international agency acting in the peacebuilding arena effectively promote conflict transformation in situations of collapsed states?

Collapse of 'government' is not collapse of 'governance'

Even in protracted crisis, the collapse of 'government' does not automatically entail the collapse of 'governance'. Facing the inevitability of 'unstable' livelihoods, individuals and households often find themselves having to assume compromising choices and solidarities: rather than an accumulation of several kinds of 'capital', people often find themselves in restraining situations made up of contrasting financial, social and cultural needs. This gives rise to the emergence of local provision of basic public goods and services, with local actors and communities securing the administration and determination of rights. In eastern DR Congo and Sudan, countries facing long periods of low

intensity warfare, examples were found of non-state actors (businessmen, militia, youngsters, traditional authorities) finding opportunities to participate in local decision-making processes and regulate access to markets and resources. However, this local 'creativity' should be dealt with care, as the outcomes of these processes in terms of access to public goods remain uncertain, and a high degree of violence is often a decisive factor.

The notion of 'tactical agency' arises, with the continuous innovation and improvisation individuals and households have to employ – particularly if this requires morally constraining (re)actions. The unstable environments in which social actors creatively navigate is not just a field made up of a plurality of actors and institutions, but a political order configured by power relations and struggle for regulatory authority. A new governance setting therefore emerges.

Therefore, policy action seeking to contribute to conflict transformation and recovery needs to consider not only the state and its governance but also the local rules of governance bred in society due to the navigation of these 'unstable' livelihoods. This is an important lesson for institutions such as the European Union (EU).

EU engagement in peacebuilding and conflict transformation

As an international actor in the peacebuilding arena, the EU is prone to viewing and intervening in conflicts in a bottom-up and structural manner, and many of its policy instruments influence the conditions and incentives playing out at the mid or micro levels of conflict. This is particularly true of the EU's interactions with neighbouring countries.

The other failure of EU intervention may come from under-engaging the top levels of society

Civil society is, therefore, considered a key element in any conflict transformation and peace-building strategy. However, civil society organisations (CSOs) are extremely varied, as is their respective impact on conflict, contributing at times to transformation, at other times to escalation, and at others still to maintaining the status quo.

A form of engagement should then be one where a peace strategy is targeted at the top levels of society (state, parties, media, big business), through direct engagement with the mid-levels (local government and media, NGOs, research centres, unions), and, to a lesser extent, the grassroots, including community, youth and women groups, charities, combatants), allowing CSOs to act as active intermediaries between the three levels (figure 1).

Critiques – disembedded civil society or under-engaged top level

However this is not always the case. According to the disembedded civil society critique, the EU (over) engages with civil society, altering its very essence in a manner that renders civil society disconnected and disembedded from the grassroots (figure 2). In doing so, the EU not only fails to promote genuine civil society development, but also works against its own objective of pursuing peace strategies which have a transformative impact on the ground.

The other failure of EU intervention may come from under-engaging the top levels of society (figure 3). Disregarding actors such as the state, even if fragile in its societal position, does little to alter the overall political opportunity structure in which civil society operates, again doing little to enhance the positive transformative impact that CSOs can have in conflict contexts.

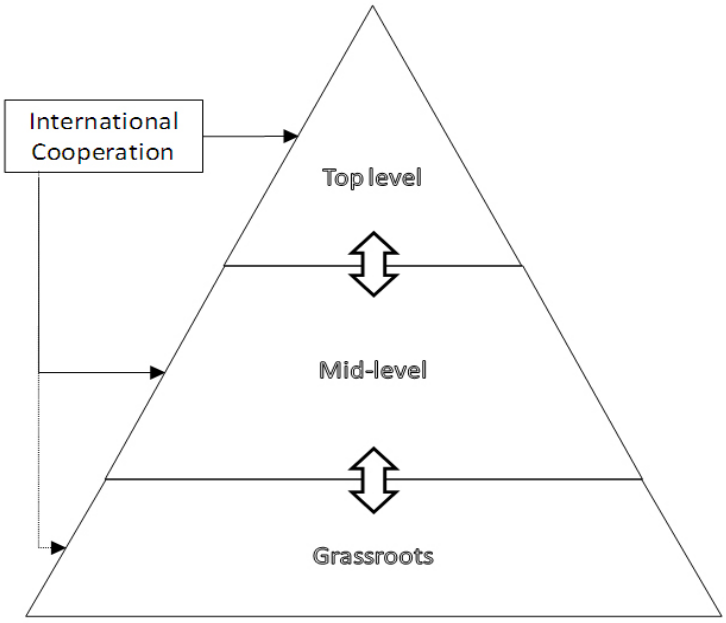

Figure 1: Adapted from Tocci 2011

More than the absence of governance in a conflict and post-conflict setting, policy intervention faces the emergence of a set of new, bottom-up, local 'governances'. Therefore, a key criterion when promoting state building efforts must be to:

- Start from an understanding of local governance conditions rather than from a top-down approach.
- Support civil society, even if it cannot alone peacefully transform conflict; particularly when conflict narratives are deeply embedded and conflict settlement processes deadlocked, it can sow the seeds of positive transformation.

But, again, one cannot lose the perspective that these approaches alone insufficient. Key criteria for international support to conflict transformation include the engagement with civil society but this must be part of a multidimensional strategy that looks into the top, mid and grassroots levels of society.

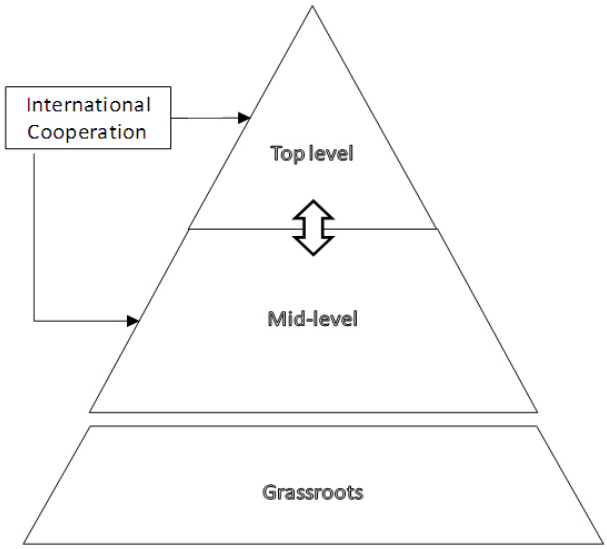

Figure 2: Adapted from Tocci 2011

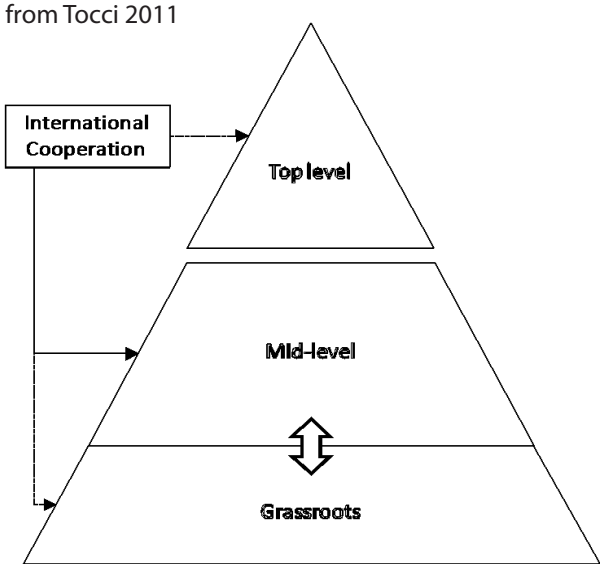

Figure 3: Adapted from Tocci 2011

Credits

This Policy Briefing was written by Nathalie Tocci, Lead Researcher of MICROCON's 'Conflict in the European Neighbourhood' Work Package, and a Senior Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), and Koen Vlassenroot, Lead Researcher of MICROCON's 'Governance and Institutions' Work Package, and a Research Fellow in the Conflict Research Group.

The views expressed in this briefing are the authors' alone.

Further reading

MICROCON Publications on Governance and Institutions
http://www.microconflict.eu/projects/governance_and_institutions.html

Tocci, N., 2011. EU, Conflict Transformation and Civil Society: Promoting Peace from the Bottom Up?. Conference Paper, MICROCON Conference 2011 proceedings, Brighton: MICROCON.
http://www.microconflict.eu/events/NTocci_July2011.pdf

MICROCON

A MICRO LEVEL ANALYSIS OF VIOLENT CONFLICT

MICROCON, or 'A Micro Level Analysis of Violent Conflict' is a five-year research programme funded by the European Commission, which takes an innovative micro level, multidisciplinary approach to the study of the conflict cycle.

Almost one third of the world's population lives in conflict-affected low-income countries. At a fundamental level, conflict originates from people's behaviour and how they interact with society and their environment - from its 'micro' foundations. Yet most conflict research and policy focuses on 'macro' perspectives. MICROCON seeks to redress this balance.

For more information on MICROCON, please visit our website:

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