

Background Paper
PBC Working Group on Lessons Learned Meeting
Regional Approaches to Peacebuilding
8 June 2007

Introduction

Most contemporary violent conflicts occur within not among states and they have complex and deep-rooted causes. Yet, these conflicts are rarely “internal” wars. In many cases, their causes and ramifications cross over national borders and create a complex web of cause and effect that is difficult to address at the level of a single state. Recent research has increasingly drawn attention to the regional dynamics of contemporary conflicts and the need to promote regional approaches to peacebuilding. More concretely, Sierra Leone and Burundi--the two countries under consideration by the Peacebuilding Commission--have highlighted the need to underpin peace in their sub-regions as part of their integrated peacebuilding strategies. This brief background paper provides a quick overview of current research and thinking on regional dimensions of contemporary conflicts and regional approaches to peacebuilding and their implications for the work of the Peacebuilding Commission.

Regional Conflict Dynamics

It is increasingly recognized that intra-state conflicts often have far-reaching regional and trans-national dimensions including refugee movements, cross-border ethnic networks, flow of natural resources and arms, financial transactions and pandemics. From a regional perspective, it is sometimes suggested that intra-state conflicts have “spill-in” or “spill-out” effects and generate high risks of “contagion” or “diffusion” across borders to create “bad neighborhoods.” Yet, violent conflicts which engulf entire regions or sub regions are more than simply an aggregation or the domino effects of internal conflicts.

New research has been instrumental in drawing attention to the linkages between the domestic and external dimensions of contemporary conflicts. There are multiple efforts to understand the regional dynamics of conflicts, and scholars have offered important insights to explain what are variably called “regional security complexes”, “regional conflict formations” or “regional conflict complexes.”¹ While there are differences among the various approaches, they all agree on the need to view contemporary conflicts from a regional or trans-national perspective that go beyond the so-called “spillover phenomenon.” Instead, the various approaches examine a range of socio-economic, cultural, political and other factors that contribute to generating or perpetuating conflict throughout an entire region or sub-region. For example, the “regional conflict formations” approach has characterized the conflicts in the Great Lakes Region and Central Asia as forming “mutually reinforcing linkages throughout a region,

making for more protracted and obdurate conflicts.”² It should be noted, however, that current research does not focus on regions simply as geographic entities but rather as arenas for networked interactions at the intersection of local and global factors.

Regional dynamics that promote, exacerbate or perpetuate conflicts are diverse, fluid and region-specific. Some are economic in nature and, facilitated by globalization, involve the trans-border movement of arms, drugs, finances and trade—as in the case of “conflict diamonds.” Others result from the voluntary or involuntary movement of transnational ethnic groups, refugees, armies, armed groups or criminal networks across national borders. Still others are the consequence of health or environmental problems such as HIV/AIDS and hazardous air or water pollution which recognize no borders. These problems rarely lend themselves to solutions by a single state.

The recognition of the trans-national character of many intra-state conflicts is not to deny the importance of deep-rooted domestic factors that continue to fuel such conflicts. However, even conflicts that are rooted in historical grievances such as race, ethnicity or religion are inevitably affected by regional dynamics. As a result, recent approaches to conflict management and peacemaking have increasingly begun to factor in regional dimensions of conflicts. For example, the political economy of “conflict trade” in certain regions has led to a range of new policy instruments such as economic sanctions and international regulatory mechanisms that are regional or trans-national in nature.³

Regional Peacebuilding Strategies

If contemporary conflicts need to be viewed through a prism that recognizes the interlocking nature of domestic and regional factors in creating and sustaining conflicts across borders, so too should peacebuilding. However, the international peacebuilding toolkit still consists primarily of instruments targeted at the country level. With a few exceptions, governments, international organizations, donor agencies have generally developed and implemented country-specific programs without a corresponding regional framework that can effectively address the trans-national dimensions of conflict or promote regional approaches to peacebuilding.

There is, however, growing understanding of the need for approaches that go beyond single state-based strategies or solutions. For example, unable to respond to the number of peacebuilding challenges it faces, the United Nations has been encouraging stronger involvement of regional organizations in peacebuilding. Increasingly, the UN has sought new mechanisms for its peace operations such as the “UN plus formula” involving partnerships with selected regional institutions, extra regional actors and coalitions of the willing around a common framework. Similarly, the creation of the African Union and the New Economic Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) reflects an openness to address conflict management and peacebuilding strategies in Africa from a regional perspective. At the sub-regional level, economic cooperation organizations such as ECOWAS, SADC and IGAD have increasingly assumed growing roles in peacebuilding.⁴

While regional or sub-regional organizations can serve as important instruments for peacebuilding in their regions, regional approaches need to go beyond formal institutions and mechanism since many regional or sub-regional institutions remain relatively weak. Instead, the complexity, diversity and fluidity of regional conflict formations require strategies that can effectively target the full range of peacebuilding challenges in different regions.

Over the years there have been various innovative initiatives that have addressed distinct regional problems such as resettling refugees, regulating trade, promoting regional economic integration, controlling small arms and light weapons, and establishing confidence building mechanisms. For example, the International Conference on the Great Lakes region and the UN's regional office in West Africa are significant developments. Other noteworthy examples of innovative approaches include the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Kimberley Process on certifying diamonds, and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. In this context, the peacebuilding role of regional civil society networks that work across countries also deserves mention.

Policy Implications and Questions for Further Consideration

Although peacebuilding challenges and responses may differ from region to region, the need to identify effective approaches and mechanisms remains an important challenge for the Peacebuilding Commission as well as the two countries under its consideration—Burundi and Sierra Leone. Both countries have been deeply affected by complex conflict dynamics in their respective regions and continue to be directly or indirectly affected by various regional and trans-national factors in their efforts to consolidate peace in their own countries. Thus, the operative policy questions for consideration by the PBC could include:

- What are the outstanding conflict-inducing factors in the Great Lakes and West Africa that need to be addressed as part of a regional peacebuilding strategy?
- What are existing peacebuilding capacities at the regional or sub-regional levels and how can the Peacebuilding Commission support these capacities?
- What are the limitations of current mechanisms as well as outstanding gaps? How can these be redressed?
- How can the integrated peacebuilding strategies for Burundi and Sierra Leone be strengthened through a regional peacebuilding perspective?
- What lessons can be extracted from previous as well as current regional approaches to peacebuilding?

¹ See, for example, Peter Wallesteen and Margarata Sollenberg “*Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes*,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 35, no.5 (September 1998), pp. 621-634; Neil Cooper and Michael Pugh, with Jonathan Goodhand, *War Economies in a Regional Context: The Challenge of Transformation* (Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004); Barnett Rubin, Andrea Armstrong, and Gloria R. Ntegeye, eds., *Regional Conflict Formation in the Great Lakes Region in Africa: Structure, Dynamics and Challenges for Policy* (New York: Center on International Cooperation, 2001).

² Ibid.

³ For a review of various innovative approaches, see: Karen Ballentine and Heiko Nitzschke, eds., *Profiting from Peace: Managing the Resource Dimensions of Civil War* (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005).

⁴ For an illustrative bibliography, see the *List of Resources on Regional Approaches to Peacebuilding* prepared for the PBC.