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Regional Approaches to Peacebuilding

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The importance of regional approaches to peacebuilding is often recognized in policy documents and public statements, but rarely acted on.[i] Three considerations explain the relevance of regional approaches to peacebuilding, namely: (1) conflicts are rarely isolated within state borders, (2) those who are closer to the problem are often in a better position to understand and influence it, and (3) their proximity ensures that they have a long-term interest in its outcomes. However, this does not mean that regional approaches are automatically benevolent. In some cases those with an interest at stake tries to influence the outcome in their favour, often through a local proxy, and in so doing become part of the problem.

Regional conflict Dynamics

The international system, and the international legal framework on which it is based, relies on sovereign states as the building blocks of global governance. The dynamics that drive conflict are, however, rarely limited by the official recognized boundaries of sovereign states. Even when a conflict is essentially a contestation for power in a sovereign state, i.e. a civil war, it is influenced by external dynamics. The parties to the conflict usually have their own respective champions in the region and beyond, and they may draw support from ethnic or religious communities who are spread across sovereign borders.

However, many conflicts today are not in the civil war category, where the regional dimension is contextual. Many conflicts are essentially regional in the sense that their geographical manifestations are not limited or defined by states or state boundaries. It may be useful to think of these as conflict systems whose dynamics are influenced by shared ethnic, language or religious identities, such as the Tuareg people in the Sahel or Somali speakers in the Horn of Africa. In some cases these groups share common political goals, or have a shared experience of marginalization in their respective states.[ii] Often there are regional dynamics that feed on and further modulate these tensions, such as the current spate of narcotics-based trans-national

organized crime syndicates in West Africa, that use these shared identity networks to smuggle goods and people across national borders.

Another manifestation across North Africa, the Sahel, around Lake Chad and in the Horn of Africa is the inter-linkages between center-periphery marginalization and the growing popularity of radical Islamist movements. These border regions are often poorly governed, if not abandoned, which makes it that much easier for these groups to organize themselves in total disregard of the (in reality non-existent) national borders between these countries.

Regional Approaches to Peacebuilding

In these contexts regional approaches to peacebuilding makes sense because these conflicts are interlinked and interrelated. Many of the effects of these conflicts, such as refugees, international migration, and the smuggling of weapons and other illicit goods, are also regional in their manifestation and neighbours are often most affected, and thus also have the most direct interest to see them resolved.

Sovereign state-based approaches to analyse, prevent, manage or resolve these conflicts cannot succeed on their own as it is the inter-linkages between the various regional actors and the dynamics in the regional conflict system, that drive these conflicts. International and regional responses need to be informed by analyses that take these regional dynamics into account, and political and programmatic responses need to be designed to influence and leverage these complex conflict systems.

Risks of Regional Approaches

However, in some cases neighbours are party to the conflict or benefit from it in ways that may not make them desirable partners in a peacebuilding initiative. The most documented case is probably that of the Charles Taylor regime that exported diamonds from

Sierra Leone via Liberia in the late 1990s, and that thus tried to manipulate the conflict in Sierra Leone via proxies and Liberian mercenaries in their favour. Neighbours or others in the near neighbourhood should thus not automatically be assumed to have the best interest of the country or region at stake.

As a general rule, however, those closer to the problem are likely to have more insight into the local and regional dynamics at play. The further away one zooms out from the locus of the conflict, for instance to continental and international organisations, the more additional factors and interests come into consideration. These higher order interests, such as the "global war on terror" can cloud the understanding of local and regional conflict dynamics.

In the case of Africa, for example, there will never be a stark choice between the United Nations and the African Union, but there must be decisions on how to balance local, regional and international initiatives. The international and regional bodies are more powerful in setting the global and regional agendas, and if the local and sub-regional voices are not protected and safeguarded, then there is a danger that top down approaches may ignore the nuance that regional approaches may offer. Top down approaches tend to produce the opposite of what peacebuilding aims to achieve; they may interrupt local feedback processes, prevent local social institutions from learning, generate dependence, and undermine self-sustainability.[iii]

A rule of thumb for regional approaches to conflict resolution would be to assign the most tactical and practical mediation and peacemaking roles to those closer to the problem. The regional and international levels could coordinate operational support and ensure that international strategic effort is aligned to a coherent framework that encompasses international, regional and local initiatives.

Regional approaches are not automatically better than international approaches, nor will they always be the preferred or primary approach. However, the tendency

of the international system to favour larger, better-known and more visible international and regional organisations may not be the best approach either. Each situation is unique and requires independent analysis. The UN, in particular, should guard against assuming that it, or its traditional partners, is either the only or the best actors in all circumstances. Where there are existing or new regional approaches, these should be analysed, and if promising, empowered and protected. The larger regional and international organisations can play an important role in further legitimizing these regional approaches, by giving them the political recognition and support they need to be successful.

Examples of Regional Approaches to Peacebuilding

There are several examples available that exemplify the ways in which regional approaches to peacebuilding contribute to international peace and security. In this section we will introduce a few, namely: the regional mediation and safeguarding of the Burundi peace process; the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR); the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC); the AU regional cooperation initiative for the elimination of the LRA (RCI-LRA); and the IGAD mentoring initiative in South Sudan. In all five these cases regional and sub-regional entities have mobilised themselves to respond to regional peace and security challenges with some positive outcomes that are worth nothing.

The region became involved in the mediation of the conflict in Burundi when President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania initiated the so-called Arusha initiative in the 1996. Tanzania was not just a neighbour, it was also home to large numbers of refugees from Burundi and Rwanda. When President Nyerere passed away, in 1999, President Nelson Mandela of South Africa carried on in this role. Several South African ministers supported President Mandela over the years and eventually Deputy President, now President, Jacob Zuma took over the mediation role. When an initial

agreement was reached under President Mandela in 2000, and security guarantees was necessary for opposition parliamentarians to return to Bujumbura, South Africa provided for their personal protection, under the authority of the African Union (AU). In 2003 the first AU peace support operation – the African Union Mission in Burundi (AMIB) – was mandated with South Africa as lead nation, and with contributions from Ethiopia and Mozambique. AMIB was re-hatted into a UN mission, ONUB, after a cease fire was signed in 2006 between the new CNDD-FDD Government the last remaining rebel group, Palipehutu-FNL. The Burundi case is an example of a neighbour that initiated a peace process, and a regional power that, through sustained engagement, saw the process through, including by providing security guarantees when necessary.[iv]

The International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) was formed in 2008 to create a platform for dialogue among the countries affected by the regional conflict dynamics centered around Rwanda, Burundi, the eastern DRC and Uganda. In recent months it played a key role in forging regional political coherence around the disarmament of the M23 and FDLR rebel groups in the eastern DRC. Although the UN Security Council has the legal authority to authorise the UN mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) to forcefully disarm these rebel groups, it has chosen to work with the ICGLR, SADC and AU to ensure that a broad political coalition is developed and maintained to seek a peaceful solution, and to backstop the use of force, where it proves necessary. The ICGLR is a sub-regional grouping, close to the problem, that has helped to stimulate dialogue among countries in the immediate region, and it has used its convening power to ensure that the various regional and international initiatives underway over the years to try and resolve the conflict in eastern DRC are coordinated and pursue a common coherent approach.[v]

The Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC) was formed in 1964 by the countries bordering Lake Chad. The aims of the commission is to regulate and control the use of water and other natural resources in the basin. It came to international attention in 2014 when the

members of the LCBC decided to create a Multinational Joint Task Force (MJTF) to contain and counter Boko Haram. In January 2015 the AU Summit authorized the MJTF to establish a force of 7,500 troops and sought UN Security Council authorization for enforcement action. The LCBC is a group of countries, that facing a shared sub-regional threat, have come together to create new, or use existing, institutional frameworks to coordinate themselves and take joint action. These arrangements appear to be more nimble, and thus preferable to the countries involved, than the existing AU - and in this region the ECOWAS - standby force arrangements.[vi] At the same time the UN, AU and ECOWAS seem to recognize the value of this sub-regional arrangement and are supporting it by providing it with higher strategic level political legitimacy, credibility and legal authority.[vii]

The AU regional cooperation initiative for the elimination of the LRA (RCI-LRA) is an initiative of the countries directly affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and coordinated by the AU. It was authorised by the AU Peace and Security Council in 2011, with a strength of 5,000 troops. It is not an AU peace operation in that each country acted mainly in its own territory, but it a jointly coordinated action. The RCI-LRA was in the news in December 2014 when its actions led to the capture of a senior LRA commander, Dominique Ongwen, who was subsequently transferred to the International Criminal Court in the Hague to face charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The RCI-LRA is a further example of a sub-regional arrangement that brought together a group of countries that share a common challenge in a coordinated framework. The countries are supported by the AU, UN and international partners, who are providing political legitimacy and a legal framework, as well as additional resources. It is a limited, context specific, largely military, regional approach to contain an identified spoiler – the LRA. At the same time Uganda is attempting to deal with its centre-periphery issues with the North, and there are thus political and medium to long-term development initiatives underway to address the political interests that has led to the formation of the LRA.[viii]

Lastly, the IGAD mentoring initiative in South Sudan is an example of a triangular South–South-North cooperation initiative aimed at capacity development in South Sudan. Through bilateral agreements, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda have seconded 199 civil servants to South Sudan, where they were 'twinned' with counterparts across a range of ministries and sectors, over a two-year period starting in 2012/2013. The initiative was coordinated by the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), financially supported by Norway and programmatically managed by UNDP. The project was interrupted by the lapse into violent conflict in South Sudan in December 2013, but it remains an example of a regional peacebuilding action designed around the principles of south-south cooperation, including the assumption that peers from the region may be better suited to transfer appropriate governance skills than mentors from further away.[ix]

There are many other similar examples that could not be covered here, including the Mano River Union[x], South Caucuses, the Jamu and Kashmir region, etc.[xi] What the examples discussed have in common are that the countries in these sub-regions have found ways to self-organise around common challenges, and that these cooperative frameworks – sometimes new, sometimes using existing arrangements designed for a different purpose – have been recognized and supported by their regional and international peers. At times these regional initiatives are in the lead, supported by international partners. In other cases, they deal with a particular aspect of the problem that has taken on a regional dimension. Overall, these examples are meant to illustrate that regional and sub-regional approaches to conflict management and resolution is, and has been, part of the international conflict resolution toolbox.

Concluding Recommendations

In those cases where conflicts have a regional dimension, or where the conflict is essentially regional, it makes sense to add a regional approach to peacebuilding. In practice this means that the analysis

of the conflict, and any actions designed to respond to it, needs to include an understanding of the regional dynamics and inter-linkages at play. It also implies that neighbours, sub-regional and regional actors need to be considered in the analysis and designed responses.

In most cases sub-regional and regional bodies will already have a history of engagement with the conflicts, but often they have also dealt with them in the past as manifestations of national rather then regional conflict systems. A special effort thus need to be made to involve sub-regional and regional bodies in joint-analysis and joint-planning initiatives, that can result in the emergence of new shared understandings of the regional dynamics of these conflicts.

Neighbours and others in the near neighbourhood should not be assumed to have a positive role or interest. In many cases neighbours and others further afield are part of the problem. Careful analysis thus need to be devoted to identifying who are potential positive change agents and who have an interest in protecting the status quo or spoiling international or regional peacemaking efforts.

Such analysis and responses also need to tackle the complex inter-linkages between local, national, sub-regional, regional and international actors and interests, across the political, social and economic spheres, and need to develop responses that are designed to influence these complex conflict systems simultaneously at all levels.[xii] More research and policy efforts need to be devoted to develop the tools necessary to analyse complex conflict systems, and to design peacebuilding interventions aimed at influencing such complex systems.

However, a rule of thumb for regional approaches to conflict resolution would be to assign the most tactical and practical mediation and peacemaking roles to those closer to the problem. The regional and international levels could coordinate operational support and ensure that international strategic effort is aligned to a coherent framework that encompasses international, regional and local initiatives.

ENDNOTES

i   Note for instance this list of resources for regional approaches to peacebuilding prepared by the UN Peacebuilding Support Office for a Peacebuilding Commission Lessons Learned Working Group meeting on the topic in June 2007:
http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pdf/doc_wgll/mtg_regional_approaches/08_06_2007_key_references.pdf

ii   Morten Bøås and Liv Elin Torheim, "The Trouble in Mali – Corruption, Collusion, Resistance", *Third World Quarterly*, 2013, p. 1280.

iii   Cedric de Coning, "Understanding Peacebuilding as Essentially Local", *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol 2, No 1 (2013), available at: http://www.stabilityjournal.org/article/view/sta.as

iv   ACCORD, *South Africa's Peacekeeping Role in Burundi: Challenges and Opportunities for Future Peace Missions*, Occasional Paper Series: Issue 2, 2007.

v   For more on the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), see: http://icglr.org/index.php/en/

vi   Cedric de Coning, "Enhancing the Efficiency of the African Standby Force: The Case for a Shift to a Just-in-time Rapid Response Model?", *Conflict Trends* 2/2014, ACCORD, available at
http://www.accord.org.za/publications/conflict-trends/downloads/1225-conflict-trends-2014-2

vii   For more on the Lake Chad Basin Commission, see: http://www.cblt.org/en/lake-chad-basin-commission-0, and for the AU authorisation of the MJTF mission against Boko Haram, see:
http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-484th-meeting-of-the-psc-on-the-boko-haram-terrorist-group

viii   For more one the RCI-LRA, see: http://bit.ly/1CN0XvP (http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/the-african-union-led-regional-cooperation-initiative-for-the-elimination-of-the-lord-s-resistance-army-enters-its-operational-phase#)

ix   For more on the IGAD mentoring initiative in South Sudan, see: da Costa, Diana F. et al. et al. *Friends in need are friends indeed: triangular co-operation and twinning for capacity development in South Sudan.* 2013. Oslo: Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre & NUPI.

x   Dorcas Ettang, Grace Maina and Warigia Razia, "A Regional Approach to Peacebuilding, The Mano River Region", *ACCORD Policy Brief*, May 2011, available at:
        http://www.accord.org.za/publications/policy-practice-briefs/875-a-regional-approach-to-peacebuilding

xi   For more on these examples, see for instance the cross-border peacebuilding webpages of *Conciliation Resources* at: http://www.c-r.org/theme/cross-border-peacebuilding

xii   Caty Clement and Adam C. Smith, "Managing Complexity: Political and Managerial Challenges in United Nations Peace Operations", International Peace Institute (IPI), 2009, available at:
        http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?lng=en&id=126777