Conflict and Development

Organisational Adaptation in Conflict Situations

Mark Adams and Mark Bradbury

An Oxfam Working Paper
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PREAMBLE

The growing incidence of armed conflicts in Africa and Eastern Europe, and their devastating impact, has placed conflict at the forefront of policy debates on aid and development. In the last years of the millennium the protection of human rights and livelihoods, the promotion of development in situations of conflict, and the building of 'sustainable peace' are, perhaps, the major challenges facing the global community.

This paper was prepared as a background document for the Development in Conflict workshop, held in Birmingham, UK, 1–3 November, 1994. The workshop was convened by ACORD, Birmingham University's School of Public Policy, and Responding to Conflict. Funds for the preparation of the paper were supplied by the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, and the Development Administration Group, Birmingham University.

The theme of the workshop was Organisational Adaptation in Conflict Situations. The escalation of armed conflicts since the 1980s, the collapse of governments and the weakening of sovereignty, have created new, often life-threatening, operating environments for non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and bilateral and multilateral agencies working for the alleviation of poverty and the relief of suffering. Many of the agencies working in this new environment are adapting policies, practices, and organisational structures to meet the new challenges. The aim of the workshop was to bring together development practitioners, policy analysts and makers to share experiences and analysis of the current adaptations that organisations and institutions are making when working in situations of armed conflict.

This paper draws together current thinking on the causes and impacts of current armed conflicts. Many of the ideas presented in this paper are unlikely to be new to readers. It was hoped that the workshop would identify the gaps and develop some new lines of analysis.

The paper is illustrated with extracts from case studies on the work of the ACORD in Africa and much of the paper focuses on current NGO experience in Africa. It was hoped that workshop participants with knowledge of other parts of the globe would add their insights and broaden the discourse. In addition, it was intended that the workshop would also move beyond the experience of NGOs to incorporate the strategies of the United Nations, donors, governmental agencies, and human rights organisations working in situations of conflict.

As the debate on aid and conflict cannot be held in isolation from discussion of mainstream development policy, there is a need to broaden the debate on development in conflict beyond the large-scale wars and 'complex emergencies' to the daily conflicts, disputes, and insecurities that people face in 'peaceful' situations.

The workshop suggested a series of questions that aid organisations working in situations of armed conflict need to address. These are found in later sections of the paper. Discussions during the workshop highlighted the uncertainty and doubt
that exist within agencies over recent responses to the growing incidence of armed conflict. As a result, the conclusions were tentative, and it was felt that we are still some way from a full understanding of this new environment.

A conference report is to be published shortly, but it was felt that the theme paper would serve as a timely and useful resource for those grappling with the problems of working in situations of armed conflict. Oxfam has published the paper in its Discussion Paper series, as offering a valuable contribution to the debate on these difficult and urgent issues.

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