

Assessing the Peace and Conflict Impact of Development Projects



1998-07-24

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[Photo: African refugees carrying their belongings.]

"It is quite possible that a project may fail according to limited developmental criteria but succeed according to broader peacebuilding criteria ... It is (also) possible that a project may succeed according to pre-determined developmental criteria but fail in terms of a beneficial impact on peace."

— From: *"A Measure of Peace: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) of Development Projects in Conflict Zones" - Working Paper #1, Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Program Initiative and the Evaluation Unit, IDRC, March 1998.*

International development and aid organizations are starting to think hard about the ways their projects may trigger conflict or advance peace in the world's unstable regions.

"There is increasing recognition that development and humanitarian initiatives can have negative impacts," says Kenneth Bush, author of the working paper on Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA). On the other hand, they can also have positive but unintended peacebuilding impacts, which are therefore "undocumented and unable to inform future development work."

Dr Bush, a Senior Research Associate in the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s [Peacebuilding and Reconstruction Program Initiative](#), defines PCIA as "a means of evaluating .. and anticipating .. the impacts of proposed and completed development projects on: 1) those structures and processes that strengthen the prospects for peaceful coexistence and decrease the likelihood of the outbreak, reoccurrence, or continuation of violent conflict, and; 2) those structures and processes that increase the likelihood that conflict will be dealt with through violent means." He explains that while there is increasing awareness of the need to consider the potential impact of the conflict environment on a development project, it is equally important to consider the ways in which a project affects the dynamics of peace and conflict — directly and indirectly.

Potential impacts

The paper argues that any development project set in a conflict-prone region may reduce, create or intensify violent conflicts by: changing access to individual or collective resources, especially nonrenewable ones; creating or exacerbating socioeconomic tensions; changing the material basis of economic sustenance or food security; or changing the content of, or control over, existing political, economic or social systems.

Dr Bush began working on the PCIA concept in 1996, while conducting research for the [OECD-DAC](#) (Development Assistance Committee) Task Force on Conflict, Peace and Development Cooperation. He proposed that for some development projects, peace and conflict impacts could be assessed in the same ways that gender and environmental impacts already are.

The idea was first tested on his word processor. Searching an OECD template document on environmental impact assessment, Dr Bush simply replaced references to *environmental* with *peace* and *conflict*. "Ninety-five per cent of it actually made sense, which to me indicated that there was something there," he says. Soon, OECD-DAC task force members had placed PCIA on their agendas. In 1997, IDRC's Evaluation Unit recruited him to further develop the concept.

Field research

Supported by the Evaluation Unit, Dr Bush traveled to "hot zones" in Mozambique, South Africa, and Uganda to interview IDRC partners and field workers. He also visited the headquarters of government, multilateral, and United Nations organizations to interview policy makers and program officers. His aim was to understand the dynamics of conflict, the challenges of post war reconstruction, and both the positive and negative of development projects in conflict zones.

The resulting paper provides "an approach to guide our interpretation and assessment of the impact of the widest range of development projects in a more systematic manner than is currently the case." Dr Bush outlines the logic of PCIA, discusses pre-project and post-project considerations for anticipating and evaluating development impacts in conflict-prone regions, and provides a series of sample questions to help spark further debate.

He says the next step for the development community is to develop formal evaluation tools for use by different actors. "International donors might rely on [PCIA] to guide project selection, funding decisions and monitoring, whereas implementing or operational agencies might well use it to design projects and to guide operational decisions. The PCIA may also be used by communities themselves within violence prone regions as a means of assessing the utility, relevance and efficacy of outside-sponsored development initiatives," suggests the working paper.

PCIA toolkit

Dr Bush stresses that any PCIA toolkit must be more interpretive than a simple checklist, because of the complexity of most development projects and conflicts. He notes that current projects often fail when administrators judge results against narrow preset goals.

"If a PCIA tool is to be useful, it will have to be the product of the interaction and synergies of the full spectrum of the peacebuilding community," his paper concludes.

And "if the argument for the need to integrate peace and conflict issues into mainstream development work is to stand a chance conceptually and programmatically, then it will first need to make a convincing case for its necessity and its utility." In other words, PCIA tools must be easy to buy into and to integrate into development programs.

Since January 1998, IDRC has held two major workshops to discuss the PCIA framework and to advance PCIA from a concept to a programming reality. Meanwhile, the challenges of assessing the impact of international initiatives in conflict-prone regions are also being addressed by working groups at the [World Bank](#), the [US Agency for International Development](#), the [Overseas Development Council](#), the United Kingdom's [Department for International Development](#), and the [Canadian International Development Agency](#).

Further development

Building on the growing interest in the potential of PCIA, IDRC intends to support its further conceptual development in closer consultation with Southern researchers and development practitioners. Simultaneously, the Centre hopes to work with other donor and implementing agencies to promote the integration of PCIA tools and approaches into their current policies and programming.

Keane J. Shore is an Ottawa-based writer and editor. (Photo: UNHCR)

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Additional References:

Bush, K. D. "Beyond Bungee Cord Humanitarianism: Towards a Developmental Agenda for Peacebuilding." *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*. 17: (Special issue — December 1996), pp 75-92.

Bush, K. D. "Towards a Balanced Approach to Rebuilding War-torn Societies." *Canadian Foreign Policy*. 3: 3 (Winter 1996), pp 49-69.