A Warning Against ‘Social Engineering’: Every Peace Process First Needs the Involvement of the Conflict Parties

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Here are some comments on the introductory statement by Conni Hauswedell.

In most aspects of her presentation, I agree with Conni Hauswedell. But I would like to make three comments and pose some additional questions we have to deal with if we want to help external actors to make successful interventions in internal conflicts.

I agree with Conni Hauswedell, especially when she argues that we should differentiate, first, between various forms of domestic involvement; second, between different actors who could develop strategies to promote peaceful ways out of internal conflicts; and, third, that conflict escalation processes contain eight or even—oh, at least, a better and worst—moments for successful outside involvement.

Comment 1

To concentrate first on the questions about external actors and the concept of a master plan for external crisis management or conflict resolution, this does not mean that it would be an advantage if external actors could be made active. Such an approach would lead to a situation where the political actors concerned would be able to provide the necessary resources and coordinate their activities. Such a plan might outline what is needed, but it cannot guarantee that the political will for implementation is there.

And third, if any success in crisis prevention and conflict resolution is to materialize, the conflict parties and the people affected by conflict and violence must be involved in any plan and strategy for peacebuilding. This was already a major aspect in Conni Hauswedell’s presentation.

In today’s crisis prevention policies, we should be happy to meet 20% of these three preconditions. But this is not to say that we should give up any efforts at crisis prevention, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding from the outside, quite the contrary. Every external activity determined by conflict resolution strategies and not by the selfish interests of external actors could help to solve these conflicts if we could prevent escalation and violence. But these goals could not be reached by external actors alone, even if they were perfectly coordinated and acted in a coherent manner. Such a masterplan approach would come close to what is referred to as German ‘legal nationalism’ or social engineering. Conflict, and especially the conflicts in which we are not involved, are areas where such an approach could not work.

Do not get me wrong! I do not want to argue against any external influence or against coordination for enhanced coherence. But by focusing on conflict and violence as the central problems, we probably underestimate the importance of the actors involved in the conflict and their interests and strategies. This leads me to my second comment.
Comment 2

Comment Howeswell asked: "Are some issues in peacebuilding easier to tackle, with more prospects of success by outsiders, than others?" I do not believe that conflict, conflicting parties, and external actors with the will to influence the conflict process are so similar that the conditions for successful peacebuilding activities are the same in different conflicts, and that we could come up with general answers to the questions of external peace-building. And to highlight only one argument for this skeptical view:

A large majority of the impact of activities managed from the outside depends on the perceptions of the external actor held by the conflicting parties. This means, I think, is underestimated in many cases, and Iraq and Afghanistan are relevant examples: Even the best intentions of external actors and the sight strategies would have been unable to overcome distrust of the form of weapons offer to the external actors. And as a consequence, in my view, must be that conflict analysts considering external activities for conflict resolution or peacebuilding must include detailed findings on how potential outside actors are perceived by the conflict parties and the societies in which conflict resolution activities are set to start.

Comment 3

And finally, I would like to comment on one aspect of the blunted picture of military and civilian forms of intervention. I agree with the categories into which the activities are broken down: Those categories—military and civilian activities under the term 'civilian' forms of intervention—come from international—or to put it in a more precise form—from interest relations: Interactions between states are under the jobs of the military or diplomatic actors intended to avoid violence. But conflict resolution today is more a field of international than international relations. The conflict parties in internal conflicts are in many cases non-governmental actors. And looking to the external actors, too, we find more and more important non-governmental organizations and non-military personnel. Their activities may be very different in nature, for example security agents or policemen, on the one hand, and teachers in conflict management or conflict mediators, on the other. Both are called as forms of intervention, although there are major differences between such activities in the field of civil conflict prevention. The only common ground is that the actors themselves are not from the military, but aside from this they have nothing in common. To overcome the dichotomy between military and civilian forms of intervention in conflicts, we need more differentiation, especially in the field of non-military conflict prevention activities. We need better concepts and precise terms to map the diversity of conflict resolution activities. This could also help us to handle the chances and the risks of civil military cooperation better than we can at the moment.

Quelle: