A Failure of Dedication: International Development NGOs in the Field of Violence Prevention

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Abstract

Most development NGOs have not explicitly committed themselves to the task of violence prevention in African armed conflicts, even though a growing number of the organisations are somehow active in this field. The article summarizes a study about the reasons behind this lack of commitment, which becomes visible in the discrepancy between NGOs' limited practice and their far greater potential and also harms the quality of the organisations' activities. NGOs face difficulties that relate to the characteristics of violence prevention; however, these obstacles are not only a cause of the NGOs' hesitance, but also a consequence of it. This insight, together with the undeniable linkages between violence prevention and development and the account of a number of good experiences, call for an explicit and comprehensive commitment by the organisations to preventive action in violent conflicts. Such a commitment must involve an advocacy strategy that complements NGO field activities, mobilising donor governments for peaceful conflict resolution instead of facilitating their disengagement.

Introduction

Most development (and humanitarian) non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have still not explicitly committed themselves to the task of violence prevention in African armed conflicts. Ironically, while NGO headquarters seem to be stuck in policy debates, theoretical reasoning and workshops, their field offices take on a steadily increasing lot of violence prevention activities on the ground. Are there difficulties associated with violence prevention that can explain this discrepancy? This article summarises some key findings on this issue[1] with special attention to its practical aspects. It argues that the hesitant approach of NGOs should be replaced with a strong and explicit commitment to develop their violence prevention activities. This could mitigate the harmful effects of the hesitance, and help to address many of the problems that will be identified below. At the same time, a clear and more coherent dedication to violence prevention, including profiled conflict advocacy, would respond to critical discussions over the 'normalising' effect that NGO activities might have for certain conflicts. Increased public awareness is indispensable to tear political fig leafs off those donors who use NGO activities as a welcome alibi to disengage themselves from the promotion of non-violent conflict resolution.

Violence Prevention Activities of NGOs

Violence prevention generally encompasses activities aimed at preventing and/or countering violence-prone processes. For the purpose of this article, the term identifies all those measures intended to impede or intercept acts of physical violence of groups or individuals who pursue their interests in the course of intra- and inter- state and society conflicts (Debiel 1996:3).

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To critical minds, this may sound like a minimalist approach, only looking at violence rather than conflict when and where it surfaces. However, the focus on physical violence is meant to identify the main and overall driving force behind this kind of work—to prevent forceful fighting, injury, death and the human suffering related to these processes. But violence prevention is understood as a holistic and long-term process, thus it addresses early any conflict with the potential to develop to such excesses.

The term also draws a clear demarcation from 'conflict prevention', the notion that makes too many people believe that conflict as such needs to be abandoned. This is not the case, for conflict, defined as a principal divergence of interests, is an essential and necessary part of everyday life (Ropers 1995:3). However, to avoid violence and human suffering and to bring about a conducive environment for development, conflict needs to be addressed and to be used effectively to further social change. In line with the holistic nature of the approach, violence prevention needs to take place at every stage of conflict—in pre-violence phases, at the height of 'hot' conflict, in transition phases and after a settlement of the conflict has been achieved. It paves the ground for and accompanies longer-term peacebuilding, which can in fact be regarded as part of violence prevention.[2]

Let's look at four examples to make the matter more practical, and to further explore the scope of the term.

- ***Micro-lens — the project level:*** Oxfam Great Britain (GB) was planning to construct a new water scheme in Shebelle, a village in eastern Ethiopia. The two main clan groups inhabiting the area were both speculating to benefit from the project — through water supplies, and, perhaps more importantly, the water fees that can be collected at water points on one's territory. After consultations with the elders and other community stakeholders, it was decided to build water distribution points on either clan territory. This design helps to avoid every-day quarrels among the people queuing for water. However, there still was the greater task of jointly maintaining the borehole on which all distribution points depended. In order to set up a water management committee comprising members of all clans of the area, Oxfam called about 80 people from all branches of the community to a more than week-long training workshop in the major town of Dire Dawa. The group had to develop a community action plan on how it intended to collect and administer water fees (needed for the maintenance) and on how to manage the technicians, the operators and hygiene of the scheme. Another crucial task was to prepare for community training, which had to be conducted jointly by representatives from all sides. The plan was to progressively sensitise the whole population concerned. The mixed nature of the sensitisation team would in turn lead to a series of community exchange visits.[3]

  It is quite unique that community representatives converge in a place distant from their homes (and thereby to some extent detached from their usual environments and pressures). The organisation tries to use such opportunities to make competing or even opposing elements of a community focus on a common issue, thus enhancing community cohesion and peaceful resolution of conflict. In the case of the Shebelle project, this agenda was pursued using the positive slogan 'water is life'. Instead of dividing the community, water as a shared resource became a connector (Anderson 1999) — a point of co-operation, where the different groups maintain their bonds and in this case even address questions linked to their general relationship. Activities such as these primarily aim to prevent a project from aggravating tensions and to use the opportunities for violence prevention in the immediate context of the development project.

- ***Wider perspective — conflict resolution and capacity building:*** Addressing a larger area and context, various NGOs have supported community capacities for conflict resolution and facilitated practical efforts. For example, this has involved assistance to women peace groups or the facilitation of peace meetings between community elders. Nowadays, these activities exist all across the Horn of Africa Region. For instance Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and Oxfam America funded efforts of the Research Center for Civics and Human Rights Education (RCCHE) (a local NGO) to facilitate a local peace process in the Borana area of Ethiopia (RCCHE 2001)[4]. RCCHE commissioned a basic study of the conflict with the intention to inform a series of peace conferences in various locations of the area. As a result of this process, elders from both sides signed an agreement between some of the main conflicting ethnic and clan groups. Peace committees were formed in the follow up to respond quickly to future tension. The process however, has shown a number of serious weaknesses and one may therefore remain skeptical about the sustainability of this particular agreement.

  Such activities aim to promote peaceful resolution of conflict by morally and logistically supporting local institutions. In view of the weakness if not virtual absence of state structures, NGOs increasingly resort to assisting traditional authorities such as councils of elders or other local community actors to prevent violence. Among other factors, these institutions tend to have greater legitimacy, acceptance and impact than the larger political systems of states concerned.

- ***Macro-lens and facilitation/mediation:*** Early in 2002, the Swedish NGO, Diakonia sponsored a peace mission of 35 individuals 'from all sectors of civil society' of the self-declared Somali State of Puntland and its diaspora. The group gathered in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi where it held a seminar on peace and reconciliation as well as high-level talks with major embassies and international organisations. The group later proceeded to Puntland and lobbied for a peaceful resolution of the armed conflict between two parties which both claim to be the region's legitimate authority. Diakonia funded travel and facilities and promoted the effort in statements to the press. The mission was intended to provide 'a forum for a peace dialogue on the current political and constitutional crisis' (IRIN 14.03.2002).

  In a similar effort, NCA has struggled to bring together religious leaders from Ethiopia and Eritrea on the soil of the two countries. This effort succeeded in February 2002 and received a lot of public attention. The public by and large perceived it as an encouragement to bring about a reconciliation process between the two states which fought a bloody war after May 1998 (IRIN 14.02.2002 and 15.02.2002).

  Such activities are generally undertaken to address violent conflict on a broader level (as opposed to e.g. practical reconciliation efforts at the community level in a given local context). The direct support to the search for a political settlement is often combined with symbolic gestures to lobby support.

- ***Speaking out — Violence prevention through advocacy:*** The British NGO ActionAid has used the means of advocacy to support Somalia's bottom-up struggle for peace and publicly advocated against US military intervention in the country. At the end of 2001 and again in April 2002, the agency warned of the effects of the threatening military action and called for a lift of the US economic pressure on Somalia, particularly of the freeze on the assets of the main banking and telecommunication company Al-Barakat. ActionAid argued that these measures were having a destabilising effect on Somalia and alienated the local population.

'Imposing government from above and by military powers — whether by internal warlords or external forces — has failed the Somali people, who need support to sort out their own future free from the interference of powerful vested interests', one statement said (ActionAid 2002a).

Other examples of conflict advocacy involving development NGOs include campaigns against the trade of natural resources from war zones. Fatal Transactions, the International Diamond Campaign, strives to prohibit the illicit trade in diamonds from war-torn economies like Sierra Leone. The European Coalition on Oil in Sudan (ECOS) calls for action by European governments and oil companies to ensure that Sudan's oil wealth ceases to fuel war. The aim of both campaigns is to cut the access of parties to the conflicts to external resources that pay for the implementation of violent conflict strategies. The specific character of conflict advocacy lies in the aim to influence (at times very powerful) internal and particularly external factors that fuel a violent conflict. These are often issues that could or would not be addressed by the parties to the conflict themselves.

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These are just a few of many examples to illustrate the wide range of activities that NGOs pursue in the field of violence prevention. They obviously vary greatly, particularly in respect to the size of territory and number of people they affect. The types of intervention are very different, too. In the example of Oxfam, the effort was limited to the organisation's project environment, indirectly inducing an enhanced community dialogue. The various activities to support local, often traditional institutions across the region include a strong capacity building element. They are aimed at bringing about solutions to existing conflicts in a wider area, beyond the immediate environment of an agency's projects. Diakonia's assistance in Puntland has a higher profile and is more direct, where it is publicly facilitating and promoting a concrete conflict resolution and reconciliation process. With an equally high public profile, ActionAid uses the means of advocacy to assist peace in Somalia. This engagement differs insofar as it does not really require an NGO's project presence in a given conflict — it may even make such projects very difficult because it is likely to have a politicising effect on the relationships an international NGO maintains in a host country. However, it is important to stress that effective conflict advocacy takes its credibility and thereby its effectiveness from close links between peace-seeking elements at the 'grassroots' level of conflicts (local capacities for peace in Mary B. Anderson's (1999) terms) and the ones who speak out in/about a given conflict.

Violence Prevention and Development

At first glance, violence prevention appears to many like a task beyond the 'traditional' mandate of international development NGOs. It has indeed often been questioned *why* these NGOs should devote energy to violence prevention work at all. The debate started in the early nineties, triggered by the Somali civil war and the genocide in Rwanda. It had produced a lively debate among some organisations and experts (Anderson 1996,

African Rights 1994, Adams/Bradbury 1994, Buell 1996, Macrae/Zwi 1994 and Prendergast 1996), but in 1996 my interview questions were still often put aside with a reference to the humanitarian (i.e. 'non-political') roots of the NGO business. Four years later, the link between peace and development had been recognised in the aid business and had indeed become a 'marketable' item *vis-à-vis* institutional donors (Bennett/Kayetisi-Blewitt 1996). This has not, however, made a practical difference. **A**lthough 'conflict prevention', 'conflict mitigation', 'root causes' and other fancy buzz words have entered the official rhetoric of the NGO scene, the organisations still keep a distance to the issue and are hesitant to accept a strong political commitment.

The question why development NGOs should be active in violence prevention can firstly and best be answered by looking at the motivations of those development organisations that already do work in this field nowadays. For example, ActionAid tries to 'develop mechanisms to sustain peace in order to rebuild lives and livelihoods.' (ActionAid 2002b) The underlying argument of this NGO (and most others) is that recovery and development activities cannot be pursued unless 'some peace' as a basis of these efforts can be achieved and maintained. Conflict-related violence is the worst enemy of development work. It undermines any longer-term planning perspective, puts assets and achievements at risk and redirects community resources and attention from development work to conflict mobilisation and armed fighting.

Secondly, violence prevention in the form of support to local capacities for peaceful conflict resolution (as in the example of NCA, Oxfam and RCCHE quoted above) can be viewed as an integrated element of sustainable development. The proper functioning of these institutions/mechanisms, which are also structures of governance in the wider sense, is a precondition for sustainability. Basic requirements such as a minimum of law and order, viable systems for an appropriate distribution of development benefits or the 'taxation' of project benefits to maintain facilities (see Oxfam project above) would not be possible without the existence of such local institutions. The same applies for natural resource management in a pastoral environment.

Thirdly, in many cases th**e** 'conflict' and the 'development' dimension of a project are two sides of the same coin, such as it would be the case for example with efforts to repatriate and rehabilitate conflict-displaced persons. The fact that such activities qualify as part of violence prevention often remains in a state of sub-consciousness for the NGOs. There is a challenge for some agencies to properly analyse their own activities, and to develop the skills and mechanisms to deal with conflict professionally. In any case, such 'dual purpose' activities underline the need to scrutinise the role that these NGOs can and do play in violence prevention.

Fourthly, as a consequence of the 'do no harm' debate, one can conclude that development work always has an effect on conflicts in their environment — either exacerbating tensions or assisting a peaceful resolution of conflicts. I am consciously overstating the case here — there may be projects with a remote or minimal influence on conflicts. However, it is rather the rule than the exception that development projects, and particularly their resource inputs into resource-scarce environments in Africa, become integrated in war economies and 'coping mechanisms' of warring factions. Thus, there is a need to consciously use the influence of NGO activities to promote non-violent conflict resolution instead of sustaining the economic foundations of war.

And finally, it should be noted that apart from these immediate linkages between the two sectors, the nature of work that development NGOs undertakes places them in a

unique position to contribute to violence prevention efforts. Development NGOs are among the few outsider organisations actually working in conflict areas. In general, they have strong community relationships[5], and therefore a good deal of legitimacy and knowledge to take constructive action against violent conflict. Their access to networks of multipliers (such as professional associations, interest groups, key community stakeholders, and of course the media) further provides them with the means to communicate de-escalating messages or non-violent options of conflict resolution to a broader public. Moreover, these organisations are often in place while conflicts emerge and escalate. Unlike other outsiders who tend to come into play in response to acts of violence, these bodies can act proactively, provided they have 'their ears on the ground' and are willing to take timely action. Arguably, development NGOs' general drive to alleviate human suffering and the devastating impact of armed conflict make it a humanitarian imperative for these organisations to explore their great potential in the field of violence prevention.

Obstacles to NGO Preventive Action

Clearly, development and humanitarian NGOs *can* help to prevent conflict-related violence in Africa. NGOs are indeed involved in this field and there is a range of accounts that testify to the positive influence of non-governmental efforts in violence prevention (i.e. Van der Linde and Naylor 1998). As a consequence, and judging from their actual activities on the ground, many of these organisations also seem to have concluded that they *should* be engaged in violence prevention. However, taking a closer look at the quality and extent of what the NGO world as a whole is contributing to violence prevention in African conflicts, the picture is not all that rosy. As already mentioned, much of the work in this field takes place although the respective agencies have never altered their mandate or reviewed their core aims. This discrepancy between practice and policy of NGOs is based on a hesitation to endorse violence prevention more systematically and comprehensively. Preventive action on conflict is characterised in the following ways by NGOs and NGO experts which explains part of this hesitation to act. In the following sections, concrete examples are not cited because I do not want to cause trouble for particular NGOs. Violence prevention:

- … *is a delicate matter*. Conflict involves interests, and often the interests of powerful actors in the field country. It is easy to burn one's fingers by messing up relations with national or local governments who do not want outsiders to interfere with their matters or who worry about their own stakes in a conflict. Example: one NGO started a 'Cross Border Conflict Mitigation Project' in one country of the Horn of Africa with components operating in two neighbouring countries in 2000. Four months after it had commenced operation, the government of the host country shut down the project because its cross-border character allegedly was not in line with the NGO's country framework agreement.
- … *is generally difficult to fund.* Although some donors have established new, specific budget lines over the past few years, their volumes are limited, their prescriptions often considerable, and their informal conditionality high. In other words, if NGOs use these funds, they may either have to omit politically sensitive activities or might face pressure from the donor governments to conform to certain political expectations. Example: One German NGO wanted to support a South-African women's network that was lobbying for the compensation of Apartheid victims. At first, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs encouraged the NGO to apply for funds from the Ministry.

After a visit of the German Minister of Foreign Affairs to South Africa, the NGO's application was rejected. It is suspected that this happened under pressure from the German industry, which saw the activities of the network as a threat to South Africa's 'climate for investment'. German companies are engaged in the export of a steel production plant to the Cape, which compensates for South Africa's acquisition of German submarines.

- … *is a complex and lengthy process.* It requires time, flexibility to try different approaches and political backing to permit learning from failures. However, NGO funding (or survival) is often on short-term basis, tied to budget line regulations, and dependent on 'guarantee-like' success prospects. In the face of tough competition among NGOs, donors might not tolerate failures — they would rather switch their support to other organisations. These circumstances also determine the degree of internal political backing that violence prevention work tends to receive.
- … *has to follow a co-ordinated, multi-pronged approach to be able to address the complexity of conflicts.* Individual NGOs are usually too small to do this on their own. However, co-ordination and co-operation among NGOs tends to be weak and the willingness to jointly engage in politically sensitive areas is limited. The organisations often lack the confidence in each other and are predisposed to their individual media profile.
- … *is a difficult activity to raise private donations for.* Most NGOs (with certain variations) get their donations on the basis of rather emotional appeals to assist children, feed the hungry, pay for school education, etc. Violence prevention as by and large a political matter is hard to 'sell' to private individuals in Europe or elsewhere in the rich countries. It is particularly difficult to visualise the successes of this work. For one, it is not easy to know whether an NGO's activities have prevented a war or a massacre etc., but it is even harder to display this 'prevented violence'. It takes a big effort to communicate these projects to Northern constituencies, but even if NGOs succeed to do that, it is still not known whether violence prevention can be a marketable item on the donation market.
- … *requires professional skills that NGOs have to newly acquire.* Only few agencies actually have well-documented experience in this field. Learning has been weak at this point and NGOs often lack the evaluation capacity to run sufficiently and continuously informed programmes.
- … *sometimes demands NGOs to speak out about certain policies that fuel violent conflict.* However, since these organisations are largely dependent on the goodwill of host and donor governments, their willingness to publicly confront these institutions tends to be rather limited. Many NGOs have lost their accreditation in host countries in the past, sometimes for really minor statements. By comparison, and perhaps not surprisingly, the number of NGOs known to have actually lost their donor funding is very low.
- … *can be a challenge for an NGO's relationship with local partners and staff.* These conflict insiders, not least as individuals, may have to pay a high price for their work in violence prevention because they are part of the conflicting communities. Furthermore, they are not necessarily able to distance themselves sufficiently from a conflict, which makes violence prevention activities even more difficult. Overall, many NGOs do not have local staff and partner relationships that are reliable and strong enough to withstand the tensions that arise between the outsider and the insider role in conflict.

Fatal Hesitation

Apart from the above obstacles to action, the cautiousness of NGOs in the area of violence prevention and their hesitation to make broader commitments must be overcome because of their negative impact on the quality and reach of current NGO work in violence prevention. For instance, NGOs often address conflicts in an isolated fashion, limited to the local contexts of their projects. A firm commitment to violence prevention would have to broaden the scope of development NGOs' violence prevention activities beyond project-related activities and the project-centred perception of violent conflicts. In the best case scenario, the current approach leads to the establishment of 'islands of peace'. However, in many cases, these localised efforts are simply not sustainable. Certain settings get artificially detached from their surrounding conflict environment, or the relevance of other layers of conflict is neglected. Unless these are also addressed, perhaps by other actors, tension and violence will sooner or later return to the area of the NGO's intervention. Another consequence of the current project-centred approach of NGOs is the often narrow analytical basis of their interventions. Violence prevention requires a comprehensive conflict analysis to avoid harmful activities. If several NGOs jointly produced such an analysis, it could also serve as the basis of fruitful cooperation between them (see below).

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As a way of dealing with their limited independence (particularly in the host country), NGOs sometimes tend to portray a conflict in rather inaccurate or misleading terms, so as to make their work appear less sensitive. This is harmful when it provides cover for actors who are involved but are portrayed as being outsiders because the NGO does not want to upset them. For instance, conflicts are often referred to as ethnic or tribal 'clashes' over water or access to land, when in fact much bigger issues are at stake or at least crucially involved. Such misrepresentation of a conflict can help interested parties to 'handle' it on the political level. A clearer commitment to violence prevention has to develop mechanisms to protect NGOs without misinforming the public or worse, sending out implicit messages that might affect the conflict situation (Anderson 1999).

As another consequence of NGOs' lack of priority for violence prevention, only a limited range of violence prevention 'tools' is applied to individual conflicts. This misses out the combined effect of, for example, one NGO building capacity at the grass roots and facilitating peace negotiations, and another NGO assisting in the implementation of a peace agreement (e.g. in a rehabilitation project). Yet another NGO could be speaking out about violations of the agreement or the policies of outsiders that fuel the conflict. In other words, the efforts often remain sketchy and do not combine to a critical mass that may effectively help to change a conflict.

In addition, activities are often limited to the 'soft' tools such as reconciliation or inter-community projects. The tougher confrontations in the area of advocacy or support to non-violent direct action are left aside. Public statements undergo self-censorship to avoid trouble. In effect, NGO interventions are often restricted to areas where the conflicting

parties are already more or less willing to opt for dialogue. The very limited amount of conflict advocacy by development NGOs and the focus on activities that are less risky to the organisations is perhaps the clearest expression of their lack of commitment and its effects. This is not meant to overlook the risks that field staff often takes. What is striking is the lack of agencies to take political risks, and/or the failure to organise advocacy in such a way that the NGOs are more willing to take the risks.

The sketchy, temporary, inconsistent and often unreliable action of half-hearted NGOs in violence prevention may further frustrate or disappoint local partners and peace activists. There have also been reports of NGOs that abruptly terminated their activities, leaving their partners on their own. Such performances are not only futile but may in fact be harmful. Once a conflict insider has exposed him/herself publicly with a call to disengage from violence, s/he may come under heavy pressure when the international partners pull out. This can put at risk the life of people who relied on such a partner. Furthermore, it damages the 'capacities for peace' in a society by discouraging other individuals or groups to advocate for non-violence.

Overcoming the Difficulties

The difficulties related to violence prevention discussed above in part explain why development NGOs hesitate to wholeheartedly incorporate violence prevention into their mandate. It is a summary of the reasons that are rooted in features of violence prevention. Adding to this, there are many aspects of the organisations' internal culture, such as the unwillingness to experiment or innovate, etc. that make up for the hesitation to adopt violence prevention.

The impeding characteristics of violence prevention are not only a cause but also a consequence of NGOs' hesitation. If more development NGOs started to work seriously and publicly on violence prevention, the risk taken by individual NGOs vis-*à-vis* host governments and private and public donors would decrease. 'Mainstreaming' violence prevention means broadening the lobby for this field!

Under such conditions, the possibilities of forming alliances would improve, capable of countering threats by the above-mentioned actors and allowing for a co-ordinated and multi-pronged approach to individual conflicts. This could also help to ensure that work on a specific conflict would continue even if one or the other NGO has to terminate its work.

If more of the organisations wholeheartedly took the initiative in the field of violence prevention, the overall NGO know-how of violence prevention would increase and the threshold to initiate work in this field would decrease. Options for mutual exchange of experiences would multiply.

On the basis of a broadened lobby for violence prevention activities, there might also be more room to educate private donors about the relevance of this type of work. If it was no longer the tough competition between the bluntly compassion-riding majority of NGOs against two to three more ambitious organisations with refined programmes and footnote-prone pamphlets, there could be better chances to build a constituency of supporters for violence prevention.

A Failure to Commit

Besides these rather practical arguments, strengthening NGOs' commitment to violence prevention could also address important debates that surround this sector on a more

'political' level. The 'do no harm' approach (Anderson 1999) and other NGO efforts to work on conflict resolution and development in situations of armed conflict have been heavily criticised for their 'normalising effect'. Duffield (1998) and Bradbury (1998) argue that the focus of these approaches on the local level of conflicts makes such events politically manageable for donor governments by keeping conflicts below a critical threshold at which these governments would be forced to respond. A clear-cut commitment by development NGOs to violence prevention could help them return to their original mandates: to raise attention for existing problems in Africa rather than politically accommodating them. A coherent approach to violence prevention *must* involve an advocacy strategy that complements the field activities of NGOs by mobilising donor governments for peaceful conflict resolution instead of facilitating their disengagement. This may at times include demands to change the donors' own policies when they contribute to continuing violence. And, perhaps most importantly, advocacy has to keep reminding governments that it is primarily their responsibility to prevent violent conflict.

A coherent approach to violence prevention *must* involve an advocacy strategy that complements the field activities of NGOs by mobilising donor governments for peaceful conflict resolution instead of facilitating their disengagement.

On the field level, a strengthened commitment to violence prevention should increasingly involve activities that exist independent of development projects. This requires political alliances in and outside the respective country which can form the basis of a more comprehensive and coherent approach to the conflict. Such an alliance should also raise the public visibility of violence prevention efforts to counter their 'normalising' effect for the donors. At the same time, an integration of NGOs' individual efforts into a wider violence prevention strategy would also help to overcome the selective/isolating character of the 'projectifying' approach that NGOs tend to practice nowadays. The development of such a strategy would force the agencies to exchange and consolidate the insights they gained in their individual engagements. It would also allow for the identification and coordination of complementary activities.

After all, the question is whether the international NGO community as such is willing and courageous enough to take on a higher degree of genuine political responsibility for violence prevention. Otherwise, the task will remain a stepchild for development NGOs, despite their great potential to contribute.

Beyond the points raised above, picking up the challenge will also require measures to maintain or reinstall the particular qualities that are commonly ascribed to NGOs as actors. More than any other type of NGO activity, violence prevention depends on transparency, consistency, accountability, independence, flexibility, innovation, a strong grass roots involvement, core values, openness to and efficiency in learning.

Altogether, a clear and firm commitment to violence prevention is needed to seriously move this area of work forward. That has to include a greater willingness and courage to 'invest' politically for this goal and to face the disadvantages that an organisation might suffer from changing its course of action. If need be, the motivation to start off on this road could be taken from a sober analysis of the consequences of the current approach

and the shortfalls to the NGOs' real potential in this field. A few elements of such an assessment have been provided above, which offer a starting point for further examination and action.

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Endnotes

1. For deeper and more extensive research, see Forberg/Terlinden (2002, in German). The data collection for this research involved about 20 informal interviews with NGO headquarter staff in London, New York, and Washington in 1996, and another 20 structured interviews in Germany and London in 2000. Another telephone survey to update this information was carried out in April 2001. In the field, data were collected in Somalia and Sudan in 1998 and in Ethiopia in 2001/2002.
2. The focus of this research has totally been on the perspective of international development NGOs.
3. For deeper discussion of the term, see Forberg/Terlinden (2002:29-40).
4. Information about this project was collected during a visit to Dire Dawa in December 2001.
5. A few other examples include Save the Children's support to the role of traditional elders in Southern Somali Region of Ethiopia (Donovan/Regasse 2001), and Oxfam GB's assistance to peace councils and local NGOs in the Northern Frontier District of Kenya (DFID Kenya, nd).
6. I do not ascribe all these features to all NGOs. To the contrary, the relationship of some NGOs to local communities is far from satisfying. Nevertheless, it *can* be really good.

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