



BRIEFINGS

ALL-OF-GOVERNMENT CONFLICT ASSESSMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY CONSULTATION: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS FROM BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

ANDREW SHERRIFF

Introduction

During the past eight years, conflict assessments have become more common within all international agencies (bilateral and multilateral agencies, and international NGOs) as they seek to inform strategy and programming (Africa Peace Forum 2004). However, national governments and indigenous NGOs in conflict settings very rarely use them. For the international community, conflict assessment is seen as a critical tool in the promotion of conflict prevention and peacebuilding more widely, as has been noted in articles on related topics in publications such as this journal and critical discussions detailed in the Berghof Handbook for Constructive Conflict Management Dialogue Series (Austin *et al* 2003) and (Schmelzle 2005).

Yet conflict assessment processes usually fail to promote change in donor behaviour because they don't link to strategies, and strategies usually fail because they don't link to programming. This may be because strategies are developed during programming processes, are undertaken with limited buy-in from key stakeholders, or they are seen merely to be a bureaucratic

requirement. Also, change may not occur because priorities have been politically or bureaucratically defined.

This briefing describes a conflict assessment process undertaken in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2006 to develop the integrated country conflict prevention strategy of the United Kingdom government. The government has prioritised conflict prevention more generally, and in BiH and the Western Balkans specifically; its overarching goal is for a stable and democratic BiH within its current borders on a clear path to membership of the European Union.

The views expressed are those of the author, who was the lead facilitator in the process.¹ The process represents a donor trend towards 'light' conflict assessments that are better linked to strategy and programming rather than longer analytical or academic assessments conducted by external experts. The process involved limited civil society engagement in setting priorities for projects resulting from the strategy. This briefing seeks to provide a technical description of and lessons learned from the process and to raise more fundamental questions about what assessments can and cannot achieve.

Designing an All-of-government Conflict Assessment Process

In 2001, the UK government created the Global Conflict Prevention Pool (GCPP), a funding mechanism for conflict prevention designed to be strategised, managed and implemented jointly by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) in an 'all-of-government approach' to conflict prevention in BiH.² Many international initiatives and organisations in the peace and conflict field have been funded by the UK conflict prevention pools and they are viewed as one of the most

innovative donor government responses in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Prior to 2006, the UK government did not undertake a specific conflict analysis; nor did it have a written and agreed strategy for conflict prevention in BiH. While it did fund a variety of projects, they involved neither a specific conflict analysis nor an overarching strategy. This type of 'strategic deficit' in the peacebuilding field has been documented (Smith 2004). In 2006, the UK Embassy in BiH decided to appoint a consultant as an external facilitator to design and lead a process from analysis through to strategy and implementation rather than simply write a conflict assessment. While they agreed on the need for an external facilitator, the embassy and the consultant sought to ensure that the strategy was 'owned' by the three departments rather than used as a consultant's report without the buy-in or the responsibility to implement it.

Although it is cited as good practice, the development of an integrated donor strategy for conflict prevention that actually involves civil society consultation rarely occurs. Limited time, political sensitivities, donor control and a lack of commitment to consultation are all cited as reasons for this. Thus, while the UK government's process in BiH was not flawless, it does represent an effort to include a civil society consultation component which, albeit limited, was the first such consultation to take place.

The goals of the process agreed between the facilitator and the UK government were to:

- Agree strategy, priorities and themes for BiH GCPP;
- Develop a strategy informed by a conflict analysis jointly owned across the UK government departments;
- Ensure the strategy prioritised key areas for programming and projects;
- Ensure effective interdepartmental management and oversight of strategy and, to a lesser extent, individual programmes and projects;

- Once priority areas had been agreed, to consult civil society in BiH on the best ways to engage with these priorities.

The first step in the process was to consult the stakeholders from the MOD, DFID and FCO, and local staff in the embassy in BiH. These consultations determined what these stakeholders wanted from the process and identified potential roadblocks.

The second step was an initial conflict analysis session involving international and local staff from the embassy drawn from across government departments. The local staff of the embassy, who were members of the major communities in BiH, contributed almost half of the participants and acted as full and equal members of the process, adding insight and greatly improving the quality of the analysis.

The guidance in preparing a strategic conflict assessment produced by DFID (2002) was observed in the spirit if not to the letter. The analysis undertaken for the strategy was therefore something of a participatory 'conflict scan' rather than a full analysis that uses rigorous social scientific method. Indeed, the ability to use some of the better-known, complex and comprehensive donor-designed tools for conflict analysis in a fully participatory manner within a tight timeframe remains in question.

Also complicating matters was the need for DFID, FCO, and MOD staff to better understand basic analytical concepts that are used daily in their work. For example, the terms 'civil society' and 'sustainability' are well understood by DFID, 'defence diplomacy' by MOD, and 'political dialogue' by the FCO, yet many of the concepts used by one department were not well known to the others.

Strategic priorities were developed in two more conflict analysis sessions. More consistent engagement by key stakeholders with insight into particular thematic areas of analysis and implementation and more

detailed feedback during the process of drafting the strategy would have improved the output. However, these stakeholders are busy individuals and the conflict prevention pool is still often an 'add-on' to bureaucratic commitments rather than a core component. The internal conflict analysis and related strategy were then sent back to the departments' headquarters in London for sign-off and agreement.

This collective conflict analysis and process of initial prioritisation led to the identification of five key conflict risk areas in relation to BiH:

- Weakness of the state – its institutions, agencies, systems and processes – means that it cannot manage and mitigate conflict risks effectively;
- The political culture reinforces rather than challenges the divisions and attitudes that led to conflict in the past;
- The failure to address critical issues from the past means that the legacy of conflict remains strong and the society cannot move on to a more just and stable future;
- The weakness of the economy and the economic marginalisation of certain groups contribute to a sense of grievance and instability; and
- Education is conducted and used in ways that perpetuates attitudes that make future conflict between different identity groups possible.

The prioritisation exercise helped the participants assess the five conflict risk areas against criteria such as: the amount of resources available (ability to make an impact); presence and action of other international actors (added value); findings of the GCPP strategic review for the Western Balkans (lessons learned); lack of availability of other sources of UK government funds (ensure efficiency of limited resources); UK government capacity and expertise, possibility for cross-

departmental integrative programming (added value and expertise); and UK government comparative advantage.

Based on this analysis and the prioritisation of conflict risks, it was agreed that the overarching strategic goal of the GCPP in BiH should be to reduce the causes of instability and potential conflict by enhancing the effectiveness of the state and assisting the transformation of the political culture. Specific aims were to support, first, a more effective state by strengthening the capacity of the BiH justice and security sectors, and second, the transformation of the political culture by improving inter-ethnic relations and the quality and nature of dialogue and oversight on justice and security issues.

This conflict assessment process was designed to overcome a common problem: failing to follow the analysis through to programming. A critical step to its success was the agreement to establish a joint committee to manage implementation. It also helped that the ambassador was involved and that the process was concluded before a new programming cycle. The agreed implementation process involved a rotating secretariat among the three departments, which was chaired by the deputy head of mission in BiH, and committee meetings minutes were shared with London and other British diplomatic missions in the region.

Civil society engagement

Once the UK strategy had been developed, the focus turned to BiH civil society perceptions about the 'political culture' relating to security and justice and inter-ethnic relations, areas regarded as critical for funding by the Global Conflict Prevention Pool. Consultations took the form of two one-day sessions with 30 participants and of discussions with knowledgeable individuals involved in human rights advocacy, conflict transformation, gender and initiatives campaigning for greater accountability, transparency and civil participation. One-on-

one consultations were also held with civil society members about process design.³ Many of the participants had never been consulted by a donor about priorities and appreciated being made aware of the GCPP and becoming involved in the process, although some were sceptical that it would result in funding support. A recurring comment was that the consultations should have been conducted more widely across civil society.

As a 'best practice', the consultation provided new insights, and a transparent call for proposals, rather than simply funding projects through direct links to implementers helped to identify projects of interest to civil society. Projects were assessed against the priorities of the strategy and insights from civil society; they were also measured against criteria such as the strategic use of limited resources, clear links to conflict risks, their ability to fill a gap in programming, sustainability, promotion of diversity, and coherence with other donors' programmes.

Outcomes from the all-of-government process and civil society consultation

Specific outcomes can be ascribed to the overall process:

- An agreed and operational conflict analysis and strategy for BiH that was jointly owned across UK government departments;
- A invigorated cross-departmental governance structure for the GCPP in BiH;
- Civil society had an influence on priorities and areas of engagement, and projects funded;
- The UK had clearer and more transparent criteria and approach for funding conflict prevention interventions in BiH.
- In May 2008 during a strategic reflection on GCPP in the Western Balkans, the experience was presented as a possible 'best practice' case study for the region.

Lessons Learned and Critical Reflections

Important lessons about managing the UK government process emerged from this process that may be useful for others:

- Meet stakeholders before launching the process. It was useful to meet key people individually to build trust and understanding of departmental interests and contentious issues.
- Balance rigour with ownership and 'usability'. The DFID conflict assessment process was complex to introduce to a new audience; breaking issues down into political, development and security boxes would have reinforced rather than challenged boundaries between DFID, FCO and the MOD. There are minimum standards for all such processes and outputs. For example, a longer, 'expertly' prepared analysis may be more rigorous, but at the cost of accessibility, 'usability' and buy-in.
- Never assume that officials know the basics of conflict prevention or peacebuilding. It is a challenge to manage capacity building in conflict analysis as well as the analysis process itself in a group of people with different levels of knowledge of and exposure to issues of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. It may be useful to front-load any process of conflict assessment with training in the basic concepts.
- Try to ensure continuity of the individuals involved throughout the process: it helps to build joint ownership of the strategy and the priorities.
- Have accessible output from the process that links analysis to strategy and programme management. Synthesising the analysis, lessons learned, strategy, and programme management plans in a 20-page document was considered useful by

the key stakeholders, agencies and BiH staff of the embassy. The process avoided strategic drift by identifying areas of conflict risk that would not be funded.

Critical Reflections

Several critical reflections on process are worth considering. First, the process of conflict analysis sacrificed rigour for joint UK departmental buy-in. Was it a worthwhile trade-off? Any analysis, however rigorous, is pointless if it cannot be used. A 'good enough analysis' is more effective in promoting implementation. Second, how well is the full 'menu of options' in terms of peacebuilding and conflict prevention responses understood by any actor engaging in conflict analysis? Any such process that is unduly limited by the input of stakeholders and the quality of their ideas can expect to encounter serious flaws in the responses to conflict.

The process engaged civil society in a way that led to some changes: interest groups and community-based organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina enjoyed more influence on policy and financing choices than most comparable conflict analysis processes of DFID and the U.S. Agency for International Development would allow. Yet the question remains what constitutes legitimate and representative civil society in any conflict context and BiH in particular (Fischer 2006).

Whatever difference the changes made, however, civil society in BiH primarily served the needs and interests of the UK government. Clearly such donor-led processes of conflict analysis that serve the needs of the commissioning agency will always be somewhat constrained in what they can achieve.

Hopefully some incremental improvements in rigour and functionality can be achieved that will lead to more relevant programming without wasting participants' time in elaborate processes of consultation that do

not lead to changes in donor behaviour. Yet locally owned and locally led processes of conflict assessment that engage and inspire a wider constituency and offer some promise of change are ultimately more useful, because they have ownership and consensus building built in.

ANDREW SHERRIFF is Senior Programme Officer at the European Centre for Development Policy Management. He has worked for International Alert and lived in Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2004 to 2006.

Endnotes

¹ The author is writing in a personal capacity. Nothing in this article should be seen as the official position of European Centre for Development Policy Management or the United Kingdom government or any of its agencies. The author thanks Sarah Bayne, Peter Sampson and anonymous referees and the editors for their critical comments.

² On 1 April 2008, the Global Conflict Prevention Pool and Africa Conflict Prevention Pool were merged to become the Conflict Prevention Pool.

³ The civil society consultations were facilitated by the author (see Sherriff 2006).

References

- Africa Peace Forum** 2004, *Conflict-sensitive Approaches to Development, Humanitarian Assistance and Peacebuilding, A Resource Pack*, London: International Alert & Saferworld.
- Austin, A., Fischer, M. & Wils, O.** 2003 eds, *Dialogue Series – Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment: Critical Views on Theory and Practice*, Berlin: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management; available at www.berghof-handbook.net/dialogue.htm
- DFID (Department for International Development)** 2002, *Conducting Conflict Assessments: Guidance Notes*, DFID: London.
- Fisher, M.** 2006 ed., *Peacebuilding and Civil Society in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ten Years after Dayton*, Münster: Lit Verlag.

Schmelzle, B. 2005 ed., *Dialogue Series – New Trends in Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment*, Berlin: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management; available at www.berghof-handbook.net/dialogue.htm

Sherriff, A. 2006, 'Report on Global Conflict Prevention Pool, Bosnia and Herzegovina Conflict Prevention Workshops', September, Sarajevo.

Smith, D. 2004, *Towards a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding: Getting Their Act Together*, Oslo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Peace Research Institute.