



Report

Expert Group Meeting Triggers of Transformation: Resilient Governance Institutions in Conflict-affected Countries Beirut, 1-2 December 2015

Summary

The Expert Group Meeting on Triggers of Transformation: Resilient Governance Institutions in Conflict-affected Countries was organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) in partnership with the Regional Hub for Arab States of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and held in Beirut, Lebanon, on 1-2 December 2015.

Participants from academia, research institutes, Governments, international organizations, the United Nations, and the private sector discussed the state of institutions in conflict-affected countries in the region, the prospects and necessity of institutional transformation, and the deleterious effects of conflicts on institutions.

They concluded that governance institutions in conflict-affected Arab countries must transform in order to meet present challenges. In particular, countries must reduce corruption, improve accountability, expand representativeness, and increase transparency. In order to make these transformations, the following factors are critical: resolve from political leadership, power-sharing approaches, targeted policies to address and prevent radicalization, stronger accountability of national and local institutions, urgent need of a new notion of social contract to be negotiated between the State and its citizenry, local ownership, pluralistic or citizenship-focused education, and a commitment to gender-sensitive public policy.

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Introduction

1. States in fragile settings are home to over one quarter of the world's population. Today, at least half of the Arab States are directly affected by armed conflicts of varying intensity, impeding peoples' fundamental right to live their lives free from fear and want. Conflict in the region has resulted in catastrophic loss of lives, displaced over 22 million people, and severely disrupted livelihoods. It has, at minimum, reduced quality of life, compromised the capabilities of people to lead a dignified life and severely undermined sustainable opportunities for development. Beyond the far-reaching impact of conflict on human lives and socioeconomic opportunities, it has severely eroded institutions, polarized societies and fractured social cohesion.

2. In the Arab region, external pressures aside, ill-developed social, political, economic, and administrative accountability mechanisms have for decades marginalized large segments of the population, leaving their needs unaddressed. Rising poverty, widening income inequality, high unemployment, especially among youth and women, and limited political representation are clear manifestations of the antagonizing reality. There is a growing governance deficit, particularly in the areas of rule of law, human rights and social justice, in addition to non-existing or deficient reconciliation processes coupled with the increased utilization of an exclusivist and extreme religious discourse that cancels "the other." This trend poses a grave threat to the pluralistic nature of a region known to be ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse and has contributed to the protraction of several conflicts in the region.

3. The intensity and impact of ongoing conflicts are unprecedented. The Arab region faces daunting challenges to respond effectively to the crises and to open spaces for effective national dialogue that would reflect popular aspirations, firmly anchored in universal principles of human rights. Restoring political consensus and social cohesion in order to start the rehabilitation process demands steady investment and political resolve. The development of representative, responsive, accountable, and just institutions, able to deliver services equitably, is essential for countries to respond to the immediate needs of the population and thereby create non-violent channels to prevent relapse into conflicts.

4. The aim of this thematic consultation is to test core assumptions and lay out relevant frameworks for rethinking the unique challenges that the current conflicts pose to processes of building State capacity to serve peacebuilding and prevent conflict relapse. More specifically, the objective is to identify priority issues for a conflict-sensitive approach to governance in conflict-affected contexts and discern triggers of conflict and enablers of peace that could assist the transformation out of conflict.

I. DISCUSSION TOPICS

5. Participants heard varied perspectives on governance in conflict-affected countries. Among the topics discussed were:

- (a) Conflict dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa;
- (b) Radicalization trends in the region;
- (c) Governance deficits and the ways in which violent conflict has eroded State institutions and affected social cohesion;
- (d) Best practices and lessons learned from international and regional peacebuilding, deradicalization, and State-building experiences;
- (e) Regionally relevant frameworks to assist member States in rebuilding State capacities and social cohesion, and supporting transitions in the current context;

(f) Building blocks for transition to peace against the Post-2015 Development Agenda and prioritize implications for research and programming activities.

1. *Session I*

6. Session I covered the following questions: How can State institutions in the various countries of the region be defined? How do the citizens perceive the role of the State and its institutions in the different countries of the region? How is conflict affecting the evolution of the governance system (formal or informal) in the various countries? How do current conflict and political turmoil affect the evolution of institutional arrangements in the Arab region? In what ways does the current structure of institutions in the Arab world pose challenges for nationally driven peacebuilding and social cohesion? What conditions must be present for transformation to start?

7. Participants noted a global crisis of governance, not just in the Arab world. States are having trouble delivering public goods and services. The Arab region contains States at different historical stages, with extremely diverse societies and political institutions, and with different economies. It was noted that most of the Arab people never took part in formulating a social contract; rather, it was imposed on them. This legitimacy deficit is a major factor contributing to civil strife in the region. Contributing to civil strife as well as political polarization is the tendency to turn political struggles into sectarian or religious wars, where subsequent peace settlements institute primitive identities in constitutions. Discussions also included the fight of corruption, which is influenced by political polarization or rather the settling of scores instead of being lead by able State institutions. Overt corruption by war economies or political-economic elite has been fueling popular discontent amidst shrinking means and high unemployment.

8. Most citizens view the State as serving the interests of the regime, at times down to the smallest communities within the regime. This problem will get worse as conflict in some Arab States continues, since conflict tends to weaken formal structures and privilege informal structures and networks. It was observed that the tendency of disaggregating State and regime has proven to be difficult if not impossible for the mere fact that State and regime tend to be firmly fused.

9. There is little experience in the area on consultations with the people. New types of informal institutions are emerging through the use of force claiming to be legitimate, which points out the need to focus attention on issues of legitimacy and its definition..

2. *Session II*

10. Session II addressed the following questions on radicalization: What are the drivers of violent extremism and radicalization in the region? What is the impact of radical movements on governance and transformation (to peace)? What is the role of governance frameworks and institutions in prevention of and response to extremism and radicalization (including capacity and appropriateness of current governance models)?

11. Participants offered a range of explanations for violent extremism, including underdevelopment, corruption and a lack of political and personal freedoms. Part of the problem is the legacy of authoritarianism: old regimes were good at bottling up conflicts, but not at resolving them. Once regimes became unstable, unresolved conflicts re-emerged and developed a momentum of their own.

12. There is a vast increase of violent models (as opposed to peace models) in the region, and more importantly, conflicts are becoming self-sustaining. Exacerbating the situation is the fact that radicalization and extremism are threatening to become a self-perpetuating ideology. It was pointed out that international crime organizations are sources as well as beneficiaries of extremist groups.

13. Youth confront Governments and societies that seem captured by certain narrow interests, and that fail to provide services, facilitate jobs and provide opportunities. In their state of discontent and disorientation, youth become susceptible to romantic and simplistic stories about early Islam as an era of governance that was righteous, clean, incorrupt, effective, and proud. They lack knowledge of other cases, from other periods in history, or from other parts of the world and these stories fall on fertile ground.

14. Corruption, the capture of the State or the rigging of the system, generates feelings of alienation and a lack of fair opportunities that makes frustrated youth susceptible to extremism. Curbing corruption and engaging in reform, as has been the case in Jordan and Morocco, have benefitted stability.

15. One way to address violent extremism is to rebuild trust in State-society linkages, with the aim to reduce secrecy, discretion, and impunity. National initiatives can mobilize all segments of society and instill in people a sense of community. In this sense, they are best suited to fight radicalization and their absence needs to be remedied.

3. *Session III*

16. Session III dealt with the following questions on peacebuilding: What are the lessons learned from supporting governance reform within peacebuilding efforts? What is the role of civil society, State institutions, and non-State (armed) actors? How can national dialogue ensure reform as opposed to revolution? How can a balance between national and external actors be attained? What are the linkages between inclusive political processes, accountability and social cohesion, and how can these be strengthened? What steps can peaceseeking actors take to reduce uncertainty, vulnerability, distrust, and information asymmetries, and increase commitment?

17. Panelists generally concurred that traditional peacebuilding approaches are no longer working. Peacebuilding efforts led by outsiders are no longer viable or useful, while local efforts—perhaps facilitated by outside experts—are more likely to succeed. Peacemakers need to focus on sustainability from the outset. Most peacebuilding efforts are quickly abandoned after not yielding immediate results, even though peacebuilding is known to be a long-term project. The United Nations plays a more important role as a negotiator or mediator than as an implementer.

18. National dialogues are another common tool that is no longer as effective as desired. The conflicts in the Arab region are so internationalized, so manipulated by outside actors, that a true national dialogue cannot take place. Unusual degrees of polarization—social, political, sectarian—have made national dialogues extraordinarily difficult.

19. Participants offered a few recommendations: First, reform lessons learned by Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia need to be articulated into detailed case studies; secondly, Governments should explore options for decentralization, open meetings and e-governance; and thirdly, Governments must recognize that it is indispensable to involve citizens in the entire process.

4. *Session IV*

20. Session IV tackled the following issues: Which State institutions facilitate transformation out of protracted crises? Which are the “priority” institutions that merit focus and particular support? How can institutions become more inclusive, effective, accountable, adaptable, and fair? How will the institutions collaborate to ensure sustainable transformation towards peace? Which are the infrastructural needs for States to achieve institutional reform? Which complementary measures should be taken and by whom?

21. Participants identified a set of institutions and social structures that contributed to the protracted nature of conflict in the region: unprincipled political parties, weak national identities, infirm judiciaries, toothless and praetorian militaries, rentier economies, and unsettled middle classes.

22. Participants discussed in detail one particular institution that effectively ended civil wars, namely power-sharing governance. Power-sharing approaches to conflict governance are based on a few principles: all main actors participate in governing; elites represent different ethnic or religious groups; and groups are largely self-governing and have internal autonomy. In practice, power-sharing includes reserved seats, proportionality, quotas in administration, decentralization, and local autonomy. Power-sharing is effective at establishing peace among combatants because it carefully distributes decision-making power across actors, and provides credible commitments.

23. Yet, there are serious drawbacks to power-sharing. Power-sharing can work at ending the war, but can fail at keeping the peace. Institutions created through power-sharing become entrenched and get path dependency. They tend to concentrate power into wartime elites; lock in established wartime patronage networks; and make ethnic or sectarian identities more salient than they would have been otherwise. Multiple veto points make it harder to reform and implement political agendas.

5. *Session V*

24. Session V dealt with the following questions concerning programme design and measurement: How do we ensure that institutional reforms support peacebuilding and are conflict-sensitive? How do we establish context-specific benchmarks of peace-enablers and measure their progress on priority issues such as social cohesion, safety and security (conflict mitigation), inclusiveness and participation, justice, and reconciliation? How can we best utilize existing data sources? How do we strengthen national capacities to identify gaps and support effective monitoring? In a changing societal landscape, who are the stakeholders and partners? What level of engagement should be explored?

25. Panelists argued that the Arab region needs to come up with its indigenous form of governance, rights, duties, and institutions. This does not mean rejecting established ideas and lessons learned from the experience of other countries in the world, but adapting them to the specificities and needs of the countries of the region.

26. Similarly, panelists agreed on the importance of local stakeholders and locally generated strategies in resolving conflict, including gender sensitivity. Rule of law is the most important institution to reform, peace education another necessary condition.

27. Key internal stakeholders in this endeavour include religious leaders, secular forces, educational institutions, civil society organizations, business community, media, trade unions, charities, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). External stakeholders include international NGOs, international peace centres, such as the US-Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), academics, and donor communities. This panel emphasized the role of the private sector as a main partner in restoring economic growth, promoting stability and providing employment and sources of income for the population, all essential factors to sustain peace, particularly in a post-conflict context.

28. Establishing benchmarks to measure progress is difficult. The existing governance indicators are not well suited to monitor governance reform, particularly in a conflict setting, since they are not frequently updated and there are concerns about their validity, given that they have not reflected the recent trends in the Arab region. Options for improved monitoring include: to establish an observatory to monitor institutional reform, qualitatively and quantitatively; to explore social media as a monitoring tool; internal stakeholders to identify strategic goals as the basis for measuring progress toward peace, keeping in mind the interest of the people impacted by conflict and guided by the principles of good governance.

6. *Session VI*

29. The final session looked at the role of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in conflict contexts, with a focus on unpacking the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and analysing its relevance to

countries transitioning from violence and to contexts entailing humanitarian interventions. Panelists argued that SDGs could be an entry point for ending thematic silos and highlighted recent evidence from Geneva that United Nations organizations are willing to work across the SDGs. The universal zero-based target SDG framework was commended for offering unique windows to start a conversation with Governments about quality of life in cities across the Arab region, inequality, governance, and judicial as well as security-sector reforms in post-conflict settings.

30. Panelists also proposed ways to utilize the new development agenda as a means to reform the State in fragile contexts, in particular integrating inclusive political settlements and conflict resolution, prioritizing SDG 16 on the promotion of peace, justice and inclusive societies, and tying the development agenda to human rights principles. At the process level of devising national development plans, panelists stressed that the vision of consensus-based national development inspired by SDG goals needs to be embedded in a larger political dialogue encompassing informal and non-State actors. Additionally, panelists recommended that development visions in the region should integrate State-building and peacebuilding priorities on the short, medium, and long terms.

31. A number of participants advocated the utilization of the SDGs as leverage to address the ills of the region, particularly the endemic nature of conflict. They highlighted the crucial role that the 2030 Agenda can play in emphasizing citizenship and social contracts, as well as in changing the way reconstruction and development challenges are addressed in the region. Given that the SDGs constitute a new development consensus among State leaders, they are actually opportunities to reform the way development and humanitarian aid are organized.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS

32. The meeting produced the following recommendations:

(a) Corruption should be tackled as the centre-piece of any conflict-mitigation or conflict-resolution strategy;

(b) The notion of social contract should be seen as an opportunity to renegotiate State-society relations: The international community must use such windows of opportunity as critical junctions to engage in conflict transformation and support participatory processes for reform;

(c) In addition to revitalizing economy and restoring State institutions, more attention should be paid to conflict analysis and conflict drivers;

(d) More importance should be given to locality and community, including the way people organize themselves and capacities for conflict transformation at the local level.

(e) Corruption should not be fought selectively, as a means of reinforcing regime power, but at a broader level and include strengthening anti-corruption institutions;

(f) Corruption should be tackled in order to improve Government services, reduce grievances against the State, and address feelings of alienation that contribute to the radicalization of youth;

(g) An observatory should be established to regularly monitor socioeconomic and political dynamics to qualitatively and quantitatively ascertain the state of governance/stability instead of using inaccurate governance indicators to monitor governance reform;

(h) Trust should be built among the citizenry and between the citizenry and the State;

(i) As part of the trust-building effort, the secrecy, discretion, and impunity that pervade governance in the region should be eliminated;

(j) Power-sharing approaches should be given preference to since they are still the most promising way to end fighting, even though they risk entrenching governance systems, which makes it difficult to build sustainable peace;

(k) Separating the State and its institutions from sectarianism or religion remains critical, particularly when establishing governance systems as part of power-sharing arrangements and conflict settlements;

(l) Conflict settlements should consider and address informal governance structures that tend to be closely aligned with individual actors, have a sense of self-perpetuation during conflict and often are great challenges for post-conflict phases;

(m) The major pillars of the governance system, namely, checks and balances, executive powers and judicial oversight, should be determined through national dialogue or reconciliation and not by elections to facilitate sustainable peacebuilding during the early post-conflict phase. Elections should be held at a later stage to choose the managers of the governance system;

(n) The participation of local communities or/and authorities in national dialogue processes should be secured instead of confining such processes to national elites;

(o) Mediation and peacebuilding should be integrated into development, which is vital, given the protracted nature of crises;

(p) Conflict should not be exclusively approached from a regime-change perspective since, in most instances, State institutions and regime are inseparable.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

DATE AND VENUE

33. The meeting was held at the UN House in Beirut on 1-2 December 2015.

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