Sustainable Development Goal 16: The Challenge of Sustaining Peace in Places of Crisis

Acknowledgements

About the African Policy Circle

This publication is a joint output of the African Policy Circle, a group of civil society organizations and think tanks from Africa whose goal is to strengthen Sub-Saharan voices in global, continental, regional, and national development debates as well as to promote good governance through critical reflection and innovative ideas. The African Policy Circle is supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi).

Introduction

After much deliberation and wide consultation with stakeholders, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) came into effect in September 2015. Deliberations were historic for the fact that they included the input of grassroots organizations and other non-state actors from all over the world. Equally unprecedented was the adoption of "Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels."

This is a milestone because it frames the promotion of sustainable peace and security as a development issue. This reflects what many leaders have long known: development is impossible without peace. However, inasmuch as SDG 16 is a step forward and has set the right agenda, it still remains unclear how it should be implemented in countries experiencing crisis.

Much of Africa, a continent in dire need of structured development, remains besieged by internal crises and outbreaks of violence that undermine the SDG agenda. While it is important that governments respond to these crises, SDG 16 is unique for the fact that it calls for a multi-stakeholder response to implementation. It calls on civil society organizations (CSOs) and other non-state actors (NSAs) to take a more active role in implementing the SDG commitments even when governments are unable to do so.

To unpack the role that civil society and other NSAs can play in implementing the SDG agenda in times of crises, this paper will first sketch the evolving nature of conflicts in Africa. The paper will then elaborate on some of the main root causes before outlining a nexus between the UN, the SDGs, and conflict prevention as an important policy framework for addressing violent conflicts. It will then look at the role of the African Union (AU) and its policy responses to crises on the continent. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations for how the AU and the UN could synergize their interventions and/or responses to crises in the region in order to improve the implementation of SDG 16 in conflict-affected countries.

Augmenting State Legitimacy: A Case for Involving Non-State Actors in Promoting Peace

NSAs in African conflicts are increasingly resorting to religious extremist rhetoric to justify their actions. It is also not uncommon for religious extremist groups in Africa (examples include Al-Shabaab in Kenya or Boko Haram in Nigeria) to receive support from affiliate groups in other regions of the world who are keen to expand their reach, influence, and impact. However, overall, insecurity remains mostly intrastate in nature as NSAs compete with established political elites for access to power and government. This is demonstrated by the fact that, while the root-causes of many African conflicts remain similar they are finding different expressions.

Factors that perpetuate conflicts in Africa include weak state institutions, opaque governments dominated by "strong men", and personalized politics. For instance, weak state institutions in Somalia, South Sudan, Central African Republic (CAR), and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), to name just a few, have been the cause of protracted violence. Weak states are unable to provide adequate social services, while unequal delivery of services perpetuates perceptions of marginalization among minority ethnic groups and fuels a lack of buy-in for peacebuilding processes at the grassroots level. This, in turn, tends to contribute to a lack of legitimacy of states, and this legitimacy deficit is often the source of grievances and the kind of political opposition mentioned above.

When weak states with weak institutions are not able to meet the needs of all their people equally, or provide them with effective channels for articulating discontent, this creates fertile grounds for sewing insecurity. Women and children have traditionally been the most vulnerable groups in the conflicts stemming from these situations, necessitating special attention in peacebuilding and humanitarian responses.

Given that in many African contexts the legitimacy of the state is threatened, or states are sometimes predatory actors themselves, it becomes important for NSAs to consider ways of engaging the SDG agenda outside the framework of functioning states. This short paper will review the UN-driven vision for conflict prevention against the SDG agenda (and SDG 16 in particular), and compare it with relevant AU policy processes. It aims to provide insights into how NSAs – and civil society in particular – can approach the SDG agenda in crisis contexts.

The UN, Conflict Prevention, and the SDGs

The nature of conflicts in Africa is complex and most are protracted. Many result from post-colonial liberation struggles, others from struggles for good governance, marginalization, and resource control. Most recently, African countries have been faced with mostly political violence emanating from weak electoral processes and violent extremism. The longest conflicts in Africa – in countries like Sudan, South Sudan, DRC, or CAR – have taken a toll on the UN's peacekeeping infrastructure.

For example, the UN mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) is the most expensive UN peacekeeping mission, with nearly 20,000 soldiers and an annual budget of $1.4 billion.[1] Despite this huge investment, violence in the DRC continues, with no clear exit strategy by the UN. In other countries like South Sudan and Burundi, violence continues despite several efforts by the UN and AU to bring the warring parties together to resolve the conflict. Given that many of these long-term conflicts are proving difficult to resolve, the populations in these countries have continued to

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1   MONUSCO, "MONUSCO Facts and Figures", accessed August 17, 2017, http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/monusco/facts.shtml.

suffer from violations of their rights as well as the destruction of state institutions. The perpetrators continue to enjoy impunity. In addition, the UN's peace operations staff have often not been able to adequately protect civilians.

Since the new UN Secretary-General (UNSG) António Guterres assumed his office in January 2017, the organization has been fueled with new impetus, particularly in the realm of conflict prevention. Guterres has a long history of working within the organization and has introduced a much-needed reform initiative to streamline the work of the UN in order to allow it to focus more on preventing conflicts.

During his inaugural address to the Security Council's debate on "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Conflict Prevention and Sustaining Peace", the UNSG charged the UN's member states as the principal implementers of preventative action. Importantly, he also pointed out that "prevention is best served by strong sovereign states, acting for the good of their people." This is particularly significant for thinking about the implementation of SDG 16 which is concerned with the promotion of "peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development", "provid[ing] access to justice for all", and "build[ing] effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." In light of the impact of war on achieving development, the importance of this goal can hardly be overstated. Sustainable peace is the backbone of development, and there is a need to re-focus peacebuilding efforts on addressing the root-causes of conflict, including a stronger preventive dimension. Furthermore, the SDG agenda is driven by an imperative to 'leave no one behind'. This imperative underscores the necessity of providing for the most vulnerable members of society.

The SDG framework foresees a more active role for non-state actors by incorporating an element of working with "major groups and other stakeholders" (MGoS). This is rooted in the axiom that true sustainability in development can only be achieved through engagement with all sectors. As such, the SDG agenda envisions the engagement of women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technological communities as well as farmers through the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). However, and crucially, it also stipulates the following: "Member States ultimately decide upon the modalities of participation of MGoS. Thus, the engagement and participation of MGoS in intergovernmental processes related to sustainable development varies depending on the particular sustainable development topic under discussion."[2]

Emphasizing the role of member states is perhaps inevitable given that the UN is an intergovernmental organization. This emphasis, however, also dilutes the SDG's commitment to creating and enabling a multi-stakeholder environment. This is

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2   Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform, "Major groups and other stakeholders", accessed August 17, 2017, https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/mgos.

especially concerning as so many conflicts in Africa are a consequence of sovereign states that do not act for the 'good of their people'. This, then, raises important questions around how 'sustainable peace' might be achieved in the absence of (and sometimes in opposition to) responsible political elites.

Missing from the UN's list of MGoS is the important stakeholder group of regional multilateral organizations. This is unfortunate given that the AU is also equipped with instruments that could enable it to assist in the implementation of SDG 16 in Africa. The AU, the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), and the continent's development agenda (Agenda 2063) offer many synergies with the UN's SDG agenda.

The AU, APSA, and Agenda 2063

One of the aspirations of the AU's Agenda 2063 is 'a peaceful and secure Africa'.[3] It aims to strengthen mechanisms for and promote the dialogue-centered prevention and resolution of conflicts as a means to silence the guns by 2020. It further identifies good governance, democracy, social inclusion, and respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law as necessary pre-conditions for a peaceful and conflict-free continent. The Agenda 2063 also regards peace as a prerequisite to sustainable development.

In response to efforts at the UN level, the AU established the APSA. The APSA consists of the Peace and Security Council, the Continental Early Warning System, the African Standby Force, the Panel of the Wise, and the Peace Fund. The AU's role in building peace in Africa is mixed. While the organization has played key roles in most African conflicts, many of these countries have relapsed into violence after five to ten years of relative peace. The AU's poor track record in ensuring sustainable peace raises questions about its capacity to adapt to new threats that are emerging on the continent. However, criticism levelled at the AU in this regard must be tempered with the understanding that the UN (and the UN Security Council) remains the primary organ responsible for resolving global conflicts. Regional instruments like the APSA are required to play a supportive role, or deploy upon receiving a UN mandate.

The AU's Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development framework (PCRD) provides a roadmap for peacebuilding and reconstruction in Africa. The framework offers guiding principles and activities that conflict-ridden countries could undertake to achieve sustainable peace. An evaluation of the framework's implementation that was undertaken after 10 years (in July 2016) indicates that limited progress has been made, considering the scale of conflicts in Africa. The assessment also notes a shift of the programmatic nature of peacebuilding to more of a political tool. This could be attributed to a number of factors, most importantly the high cost of peacebuilding and the long-term nature of both peacekeeping and peacebuilding interventions. In the

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3   African Union, "Agenda 2016: The Africa We Want", accessed August 17, 2017, https://archive.au.int/assets/images/agenda2063.pdf.

early years, there was an assumption that one of the benefits of peacebuilding is the inflow of development resources to conflict-affected countries. However, this resulted in a peacebuilding narrative that often reflected donor nomenclature and reduced peacebuilding to something technical and programmatic, rendering peacebuilding approaches less relevant to non-Western countries. Thus, peacebuilding is today viewed more as a political process given both the failures of the largely top-down 'technical-programmatic' approach to peacebuilding and state-building, and the relapses experienced in countries like CAR and South Sudan.

The implementation of the PCRD framework suffered from pre-occupation with resource mobilization, as most conflict-affected countries in Africa lack the resources to address the impact of conflict. Most peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction efforts in Africa have been funded externally. Therefore, pushing the mandate for such efforts to these states is not feasible as they lack the resources to sustain them. Other challenges have included: a lack of conceptual clarity and shared understanding across the AU Commission and Regional Economic Communities (RECs); a lack of adequate assessments to determine the needs of conflict-affected and post-conflict countries; and a lack of engagement with civil society organizations who are better positioned on the ground to support peacebuilding efforts.

Working Together: Creating Synergies Between the UN and the AU

These are challenges not only for Africa but also for the UN, which has been responsible for peacekeeping missions in Africa. The majority of missions on the continent are overstretched as they perform a wide variety of activities that differ from their original mandates. Many of these missions are struggling to find strong support among the local populations and to provide security, especially given the broad array and fragmentation of armed groups emerging in many of these settings.

This paper calls for greater partnership with CSOs and other NSAs, and proposes harnessing resources in order to address the wide range of issues relating to peacebuilding in Africa. CSOs have played and continue to play vital roles in different aspects of development and peacebuilding. Engaging with them, particularly women's organizations, will not only add value to peacebuilding but also enable the accomplishment of the many dimensions that need to be addressed as part of peacebuilding and sustainable development.

Lessons learned and recommendations to the UN on how best to support Africa:

- Many African countries have developed mechanisms to engage with non-state actors. Kenya, for example, has an SDG Forum that brings different stakeholders together. However, due to the wide range of CSOs and the different communities they represent, having one individual organization representing other CSOs has not been effective. Countries in Africa need to strengthen the mechanism of engagement on the SDGs to ensure inclusivity of all groups, particularly those that are usually marginalized. It is obvious that the process of localizing the SDGs has been more constructive in countries where leaders have the political will to engage.

- While it might be true that the prevention of conflict is both less costly and more sustainable, we cannot discontinue peacebuilding given that many of the long-term conflicts are proving very difficult to resolve. The UN and the AU should increase their collaboration and define distinct roles for each aspect of the peacebuilding spectrum. A significant number of countries that did not achieve the thresholds set by the Millennium Development Goals were countries in conflict. To avoid repetition of this with the SDGs, special attention must be paid to countries in conflict, many of which are located in Africa. Beyond the New Deal for Fragile States, which has failed to deepen the analysis and address the root-causes of fragility, there is need for a more robust, inclusive, and accountable mechanism to ensure peace in fragile countries as a prerequisite to achieving the SDGs.

- The AU needs to find more efficient ways of centralizing decision-making on peacebuilding issues so as to speed up development. The challenge is how the AU will adapt state commitments to the regional level. A monitoring mechanism that uses a bottom-up approach and empowers citizens to monitor and report directly to the AU may be required. CSOs already have the structures and capabilities to support such a process. The monitoring framework must develop data that will enable the tracking of progress as well as the analysis of impediments to facilitate adequate responses. The RECs in Africa have an opportunity to assume a leadership role in the monitoring of the implementation of the SDGs in Africa by working with CSOs.

- National governments should establish SDG committees or working groups that will mobilize all stakeholders in support of government efforts and also monitor the implementation of the SDGs to enhance reporting. CSOs should collaborate with each other through thematic working groups, as is already the case in Uganda where the National NGO Forum is taking the lead on organizing CSOs, to ensure inclusivity and visibility of civil society in the SDG mechanisms at country level.