



Report

Expert group meeting on protracted conflict and resilience in the Arab region Amman, 21-22 May 2015

Summary

The expert group meeting on protracted conflict dynamics and resilience in the Arab region was organized by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and held in Amman on 21 and 22 May 2015, in cooperation with the West Asia – North Africa Institute (WANA).

Participants from the academic world, the private sector, Governments, think tanks and the United Nations discussed the drivers, results of and responses to protracted conflict in the Arab region.

They concluded that there were ways of building the resilience of communities caught up in protracted fighting, resolving conflicts through negotiation and power sharing, and preparing for a more peaceful future.

The group argued for an interdisciplinary approach to programming and research and focused on the need to create employment for refugees and returnees, political power sharing, security sector reform, transitional justice and regional cooperation to address the spillover effects of conflict.

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Introduction

1. Conflict in the Arab region has resulted in severe loss of life, the displacement of thousands of families and disrupted livelihoods. Conflict, instability and occupation have a profound impact on socioeconomic development, including economic growth, health and education. At its mildest, conflict lowers quality of life, compromises the ability of people to lead their lives with dignity and undermines opportunities for sustainable development.
2. Occupation and internal conflicts in the Arab region also threaten the security and socioeconomic development of neighbouring countries.
3. Conflicts have become protracted in part by erosion of the rule of law, accountability, human rights and social justice; the failure or absence of reconciliation processes; and the propagation of an exclusivist and extreme religious discourse that cancels ‘the other’.
4. The aim of this meeting was to deepen understanding of the impact of conflict and violence in the region, and of the role of underdevelopment in amplifying its repercussions. Existing policies, theories and methodological tools used to respond to conflict were examined, as were ways of building resilience and ending protracted conflict.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS

5. The following recommendations were made at the meeting:
 - (a) A genuine reconciliation process based on universal principles must be launched if the Arab region is to emerge from the quagmire of conflict;
 - (b) Conflict-affected countries need to prepare to boost employment and training opportunities, especially for young people, when the post-war period starts;
 - (c) Conflict-affected countries should devise national development strategies, focusing on basic needs, infrastructure and construction, even as conflict is ongoing;
 - (d) Many of the drivers and results of conflict require regional strategies on water, refugees, development and trade, and violent groups like the so-called Islamic State and Al-Qaeda;
 - (e) Constitutions require reforms and mechanisms to ensure that such reforms are respected by all;
 - (f) Close attention must be paid to transitional justice and the rule-of-law, dealing simultaneously with key institutions like the judiciary, police and prison services, vetting personnel and ensuring that past violators do not remain in power, and developing broad-based reform strategies for these institutions;
 - (g) Successful peacebuilding requires the formation of power-sharing institutions among the major factions, including national unity Governments;
 - (h) Trust between citizens, Governments and regional institutions must be fostered;
 - (i) Adequate funding must match any regional commitment to tackle conflict;
 - (j) The neighbourhood effects of conflict should be seen as risk indicators for monitoring possible conflict contagion;
 - (k) Innovative solutions are required to address the refugee crisis, such as investing in mobile telephony and internet access, providing education, supporting community organizations in their efforts to

foster opportunities for economic self-reliance, and facilitating access to capital and international markets to boost the local economy;

(l) Efforts should be made in the early stages of recovery to support existing small businesses and involve them in relief activities, thereby boosting employment;

(m) The international community should help least developed countries (LDCs) to ward off potential conflict by preparing for possible external shocks such as oil price volatility, climate change and the spillover effects from neighbouring conflicts.

II. TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

6. Participants in the meeting heard expert testimony on the conflict-development nexus in the Arab region and set up an expert reference group on the impact of conflict and violence. The following topics were discussed during the meeting:

(a) The developmental, environmental, social and external drivers of conflict in the Arab region;

(b) The neighbourhood effect of conflict;

(c) Global conflict patterns in middle-income countries with internationalized disputes;

(d) The global trend over time towards peace;

(e) Post-war recovery options, including power-sharing agreements and employment opportunities;

(f) The importance of starting reconciliation processes even before the cessation of hostilities;

(g) Incubating the post-war economy in neighbouring countries before conflicts have ceased;

(h) The flouting of international norms, such as those forbidding the use of chemical weapons or undermining neighbouring Governments;

(i) The relevance of the goals expressed by protesters during the Arab uprisings for regional strategies;

(j) Entrenched perceptions of victimhood, sectarianism, counterrevolution and external manipulation in the region that impede peacemaking;

(k) The situation of refugees across the region, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Yemen;

(l) Tools for 'peace advocates' using the quantification of the impact of conflict and violence on development and vice versa.

A. SESSION I

7. In session I, participants examined the causes of protracted conflict in the Arab region and how, through the neighbourhood effect, conflict patterns reinforce themselves. Spillover effects, such as refugee flows, were discussed.

8. The participants looked at the spread of narratives of vulnerability and victimization, as citizens of one country identified with the plight of co-religionists or co-ethnics in other countries, thereby increasing political tension and demands for intervention.

9. The collapse of the State in Iraq had created a vacuum in which a sectarian system had been implanted.

B. SESSION II

10. Participants discussed the impact of conflict on development and various conflict quantification methods. It was concluded that conflict and the scourge of high unemployment fuelled one another. Access to potable water deteriorated in times of war.

11. Policymakers should focus on fostering emergency employment opportunities in the post-war period. The 3x6 model of the United Nations Development Programme was discussed. Certain programmes provided for community reintegration and opening to international markets. There were opportunities for technical and ICT-based access to the international labour market.

C. SESSION III

12. LDCs afflicted by conflict in the region, especially in the Sudan and Yemen, were especially fragile. Representatives of the Economic Commission for Africa and the United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries, and Small Island Development States highlighted lessons learned from African countries making the transition from conflict to peace.

13. Factors contributing to a resolution of conflicts in Africa had included a minimum of foreign intervention in the post-conflict period; a regional initiative on conflict risk assessment, early warning and conflict prevention measures under the auspices of the African Union; and national ownership of the development process. More needed to be done globally to implement the 2011 Istanbul Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020.

14. Representatives from the Sudan said that the impact of fighting on socioeconomic development had been sharpened by economic sanctions imposed on the country. Representatives from Yemen said that food insecurity, instability and a failure to observe human rights in the country were major problems. The national dialogue process must be reinforced and more must be done to reach out to local communities, the living standards of which had deteriorated in spite of the dialogue. The country's woes were compounded by the failure to coordinate and properly distribute aid.

D. SESSION IV

15. Panels discussed means of building resilience and reversing the downward spiral of conflict, including national dialogue mechanisms, post-conflict justice, security sector reform, power sharing and job creation.

16. It was difficult to foster national dialogue in cases where conflict had become internationalized, as in Libya, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. National leaders needed to be free of international pressures. Reform of the security forces was essential but exceedingly difficult to achieve, especially while conflicts continued. Successful power sharing and post-conflict justice required the kind of political will that might not currently be present in conflict-affected countries. Post-war Governments were usually weak, poorly resourced and contested.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

VENUE AND DATE

17. The meeting was held by ESCWA in Amman on 21 and 22 May 2015, in cooperation with the West Asia – North Africa Institute (WANA).

Annex*

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