Shaping the Policy Priorities for Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Early 80 percent of all violent conflicts from 1989 to 2002 can be categorized as internal conflicts or civil wars. Most occurred in underdeveloped countries plagued by widespread insecurity, bad governance, illiteracy, poor health, and the absence of basic infrastructure in transportation and communications. Peace, once obtained in these places, has proved difficult to sustain. Thirty-one percent of conflicts resume within 10 years of the initial ceasefire. African conflicts are even more prone to reignite: Half of African peace restorations last less than a decade.

In response, the United Nations (UN), the United States, and other international players revamped their approaches in the 1990s, expanding peace-building activities and adding "multi-dimensional," military-based peace enforcement to their traditional focus on humanitarian relief, infrastructure restoration, and political rehabilitation. But the policy challenges are immense. This Policy Insight examines one of the most pressing issues in post-conflict reconstruction: how to prioritize and sequence political, social, and economic policies to enable post-conflict countries to sustain peace and reduce the reoccurrence of violence.

Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Challenges and Opportunities

Peacekeeping operations that combine military, political, and development roles may be more effective than traditional peacekeeping operations. However, today's multilateral, multisectoral, multi-leveled, and multistaged interventions have created new challenges in the governance and coordination of the overlapping organizations involved in post-conflict reconstruction.

Despite these challenges, there are some real opportunities for increasing the effectiveness of post-conflict reconstruction programs, and the international community has demonstrated its willingness to engage in such efforts. Since 1989, the frequency, scale, scope, and duration of these missions have steadily risen. In the 40-year period from 1948 to 1988, the UN led 15 peacekeeping operations around the world; in the 10-year span from 1989 to 1999, that number jumped to 31. The United States, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the European Union (EU) have adapted to the new environment by increasing their responsibilities for peace and security. Since 1989, on average, a new U.S.-led intervention has been launched every other year. NATO has actively participated in the Balkans and Afghanistan; the EU has played a vital role.
in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The United Kingdom has played an important role in restoring peace and rebuilding Sierra Leone.

Maintaining and sustaining security is critical to global and regional stability. Failed states can provide safe havens for a diverse array of transnational threats, including epidemic diseases, terrorist networks, global organized crime, and narcotics traffickers. Post-conflict reconstruction can no longer be viewed solely as “charity work” because it affects national and global security.

Most importantly, the cumulative effect of all nation-building activities has been measurably beneficial. Several studies show that peacekeeping has proved to be the most cost-effective instrument when compared with the costs of continued conflict and the toll in lives and economic devastation such conflict entails. Although it is difficult to revitalize a failed state, the cost of doing nothing is often higher.6

**Lessons Learned on Policy Prioritization and Sequencing**

While there is general agreement about the cost-effectiveness of international engagement in post-conflict countries, debates continue over the question of prioritization: Where should investments be focused and in what order should they be made? Does the simultaneous introduction of political, economic, and security initiatives generate better results than sequencing these initiatives? Based on RAND’s broader research on nation-building, we conclude that how policies are prioritized and sequenced in the post-conflict reconstruction environment must be nonlinear, context dependent, and specific to the needs and requirements of each country. Nevertheless, there are lessons from many cases of reconstruction that will help guide policymakers in designing and implementing post-conflict interventions.

**Lesson 1: Comprehensive security sector reform is critical for establishing and sustaining peace.**

Security and development are interdependent; i.e., development fosters security and security fosters development. But in the early stages of reconstruction, security must be achieved first with the recognition that if higher-order objectives are not met, lower-order achievements will ultimately prove transitory. Without a sustained improvement in the security situation, other reconstruction efforts, such as relief efforts, political reforms, democratization, economic reform, and reconstruction, are likely to fail. The resurgence of violence in East Timor in May 2006 (nearly seven years after the end of the conflict) is a strong case for making security a top priority whether a conflict resolution is a negotiated settlement (e.g., Cambodia and Mozambique), a forced settlement (e.g., Afghanistan and Iraq), or

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the result of a successful independence movement (e.g., East Timor, Kosovo).

Building a new police force or demobilizing rebel forces is not enough. Security is likely to be sustained only if reform of all major components of the security sector (military, police, and judicial and penal sectors) is undertaken and an active civil society emerges with a capacity to oversee and monitor reform. For example, in a country where there is no competent and efficient judicial sector to ensure fair trials and hold police forces accountable for their actions, a newly trained police force is vulnerable to corruption, bribery, and extrajudicial punishment.

**Lesson 2: Building inclusive democratic institutions is a prerequisite for sustaining peace.**

Elections should not be viewed as an exit strategy because they do not constitute the arrival of democracy, which includes a range of other components such as civil society. Thus, the international community should not fixate on holding quick elections but rather consider elections as a means to build and promote inclusive, transparent, and democratic institutions. The major focus should be on creating electoral conditions sufficient to support an inclusive democracy, such as writing a new constitution and laws to guarantee political space for minority and marginalized groups; designing mechanisms for holding elected officials accountable; and promoting and developing a free press and a strong civil society.

**Lesson 3: Ensure greater coordination between economic and political reconstruction.**

There is insufficient coordination among the international financial institutions (IFIs), UN agencies, and bilateral donors on various reconstruction efforts. For example, UN missions are usually authorized to maintain peace and stability and are often mandated to demobilize rebel forces and reintegrate them into the state military. This results in an initial need for larger military budgets and more government positions. On the other hand, the IFI’s missions in post-conflict countries focus on reducing government deficits with concomitant reductions in staff and budgets for the military and civil service. These organizations often work at cross-purposes partly because different organizations have different mandates; however, the effectiveness of the overall reconstruction process can be significantly improved if there is greater coordination among major stakeholders on drafting the mandates of peacekeeping operations; conducting needs assessments; developing the framework for reconstruction; and developing baselines, targets, and benchmarks to measure the success of peace-building efforts in the short, medium, and long terms.

**Lesson 4: Generate visible short-term results to convey hope and optimism to a war-torn society.**

The restoration of essential infrastructure and services (e.g., roads, ports, airports, communications, energy supply, and education and health services) could significantly help normalize circumstances. Large-scale infrastructure and long-term development programs should generally be implemented only after sufficient security is achieved, vital governance institutions and capacities are put in place, and the economy is stabilized (although planning for such reform and some of the components of these policies could be an early priority).

**Lesson 5: Pay attention to vital pre-requisites before launching any ambitious reform programs.**

Sweeping civil service reform and rapid military downsizing can be counterproductive if effective compensation and assistance packages are not in place. And while interim arrangements to address land disputes during the immediate post-conflict period are essential for the settlement of returning refugees and internationally displaced persons, without appropriate laws and mechanisms, sweeping land reform in the early phase of reconstruction may hinder the effectiveness of other reconstruction efforts. In addition, some sectors or industries, if privatized or liberalized early, may contribute to economic revitalization; but without a greater political consensus for reform, sharp reductions in tariffs, liberalization of interest rates, elimination of
subsidies, and sweeping privatization may destabilize the situation politically by forcing people out of work and disrupting entrenched economic actors. In sum, doing policy “the right way” is as important as formulating the right policy.

Lesson 6: Context matters but we can make some generalizations.

It is important to bear in mind that the prioritization and sequencing of policies should not be perceived as a “blueprint” for rebuilding all war-torn societies. The specific circumstances of each post-conflict country must be carefully analyzed and the rationale behind every conflict should be properly understood for the sequencing of policies to work. However, generalization can help policymakers understand under what circumstances a policy works best and how priorities should be set. Table 1 (see page 2) offers a framework that generalizes policy prioritization and sequencing by summarizing the areas of consensus and near-consensus, identifying context-specific issues, and outlining the prerequisites needed to implement the policy.

Limitation: Policies Versus Underlying Political Problems

The failure to respond adequately and in a timely manner to underlying political difficulties may eventually result in the failure of policies, no matter how good the policies might be. For example, a political deadlock (e.g., Haiti from 1997 to 2003) resulting from political struggles can quickly thrust a country back into conflict. A crucial question is what to do if the government or the major political parties no longer remain committed to their original agreements and instead become an obstacle to progress. Politics in donor countries also have an impact on the reconstruction of war-torn countries. An ideal approach is to develop a reconstruction strategy in which donors provide generous financial support from the very beginning of the process and stay involved for at least ten years, do not lay unreasonable mandates on the countries involved, and coordinate effectively with each other. However, in some cases, the opinions of and decisions made by the taxpayers of donor countries directly and indirectly influence the reconstruction process of post-conflict countries (e.g., the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq). In other cases, international geopolitics and political sensitivities can play an important role in deciding the length of international military intervention. For example, unlike in the cases of Kosovo, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, U.S. policymakers were aware of the consequences of a longer military involvement, and thus preferred a “quick and short” intervention during the last two U.S. interventions in Haiti.

It is doubtful that the aforementioned constraints will diminish anytime soon, and thus it might be worthwhile to consider what options the international community has in a world where resources and political will are likely to remain constrained.

Further Reading


