



BUILDING PEACE AT THE NEXUS OF ORGANIZED CRIME, CONFLICT, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

INTERNATIONAL EXPERT FORUM ON TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PEACE-BUILDING

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Organized crime, armed conflict and violent extremism are all becoming increasingly intertwined. Fragility, weak institutions and conflicts provide an attractive environment and breeding ground for illicit networks and extremist organizations and these connected groups can seriously impede peace-building efforts and threaten human security.

SUMMARY

- *Organized crime, conflict, and violent extremism all thrive when any state is weak or its structure is absent. Where there is a lack of security, a want of access to justice, and poor service provision, then organized crime often fills the void by taking over certain functions of the state.*
- *Traditionally, crime and violent extremism have not formed a part of the peace-building agenda but instead have been treated as separate matters for law enforcement strategies.*
- *Dealing with organized crime and violent extremism in countries and societies emerging from conflict requires a multidimensional peace-building approach that includes the perpetrators of organized crime and those involved in armed conflict and violent extremism. UN Security Council mandates for peacekeeping operations must be so arranged that they include the fight against organized crime.*
- *Strengthening social cohesion and inclusiveness, trust and legitimacy of the government concerned and its institutions must be at the centre of peace-building strategies, together with realizable peace dividends.*
- *The UN, the EU and other actors must meet such challenges with comprehensive policies and approaches because military, diplomatic or police methods alone will not suffice.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years threats to peace, security, and stability posed by transnational organized crime and violent extremism have attracted increased attention. Research and experience from the field show that the nexus between organized crime and conflict constitutes a major test for twenty-first century peace-building.¹ In latter years the United Nations Security Council has repeatedly emphasized the threats posed by organized crime and violent extremism – stating, for instance:

“terrorist groups benefiting from transnational organized crime may contribute to undermining affected States, specifically their security, stability, governance, social and economic development.”² Conflict is fuelling crime and its organization is undermining post-conflict peace-building, stability, and human security by altering the dynamics of conflict and exploiting weak or fragile state structures.³ Armed groups that adopt criminal agendas and form illicit networks may also reach out for political power in order to maintain control, thus posing a serious long-term

1. See, for example, Jessie Banfield (2014): *Crime and Conflict. The New Challenge for Peacebuilding*, International Alert; Walter Kemp & Mark Shaw (2014): *From the Margins to the Mainstream: Toward an Integrated Multilateral Response to Organized Crime*, IPI; James Cockayne (2011): *State Fragility, Organized Crime and Peacebuilding: Towards a More Strategic Approach*, NOREF Report; Wibke Hansen (2011): *The Failed State-Organized Crime-Terrorism Nexus*, SWP Comments 40.

2. S/RES/2195 (2014), p. 2. See also: S/PRST/2010/18, S/PRST/2012/2, S/PRST/2012/29, S/PRST/2013/22, S/2013/359.

3. While the focus of this brief is on post-conflict and fragile states, the effects of organized crime are by no means limited to this group of states. See Francesco Strazzari (2014): *Captured or Capturing? Narcotics and Political Instability along the “African Route” to Europe*, The European Review of Organized Crime 1(2).

threat to stabilization efforts. While these challenges are not new, focusing on the convergence of armed conflict, violent extremism, and organized crime helps us both to understand and better identify how current peace-building strategies can be adapted to increase the positive impact of peace-building interventions on long-term peace and stability. Crime, extremism and armed conflict are all part of the same story and it is necessary to properly understand both the nature of these links and their effect on conflict dynamics. The UN, the EU and others need to address such taxing demands with comprehensive policies and approaches because they are beyond the means alone of diplomacy, the military, or the police.

THE NEXUS OF ORGANIZED CRIME, CONFLICT, AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Many of the challenges that confront peace-building in the 21st century have their origins in the major geopolitical changes that have occurred since 1989. Despite many positive developments, such as the decline in armed conflicts and battle-related deaths since the early 1990s,⁴ the international community still faces a number of recurring and seemingly intractable conflicts, as well as having to deal with fragile states. A diverse range of conflict drivers can explain such multidimensional and amorphous conflicts. These include, for example, political, economic, social, and environmental difficulties or contentious issues related to resource distribution, jobs, injustice, and human rights abuse. The nexus between organized crime, conflict and violent extremism, with blurred boundaries between rebels, gangs, and politicians, all form part of the picture.

UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS

There is a need for a better understanding of how conflict, crime and violent extremism interact. One example is that of criminal organizations taking advantage of former combatants as a potential pool of trained recruits for criminal activities, and vice versa. Other examples are those of low-cost corruption in order to gain influence over politicians and weak authorities, or a political discourse of grievances against government. The latter example can be employed specifically to create political legitimacy and to disguise criminal activity.

In fragile situations marked by insecurity and an absence of the rule of law, combined with little or no access to public services, organized crime can fill the void by taking over certain tasks of the state – for instance, by providing health care services. Similarly, conflict hotspots and violent extremism often converge geographically, with violent extremism being a driver of conflict just as much as being a product of the latter. Syria is a case in point, where many of the foreign fighters who have joined extremist groups fighting in the struggle stem from countries with a track-record of conflict and fragility. With the influx of violent extremism the ability to draw a distinct line between conflict and terrorism becomes difficult. However, the attraction of violent extremism does not necessarily require radicalization. It is often related to social pressure, identity, and prestige.

4. Lotta Themnér & Peter Wallensteen (2014): *Armed conflict, 1946-2013*, Journal of Peace Research 51(4).

› WHAT IS THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERT FORUM?

The International Expert Forum (IEF) is a global gathering of leading academics, experts, and policy makers focused on the next generation of peace and security challenges. How can peace be resilient to new threats? What should twenty-first century peace-building look like?

The first IEF began with a series of four meetings on the conflict cycle in 2012-2013.¹ The second round of IEF started in November 2014 with a meeting held in New York at the International Peace Institute (IPI).² The meeting focused on how organized crime, conflict, and violent extremism interact and undermine peace, security, and governance in fragile and post-conflict states, and the different ways in which peace-building needs to adapt in order to become more effective.

1. For more information and reports from the previous IEF: <https://fba.se/en/Activities/Research/International-Expert-Forum/>
2. For the agenda, please go to: <https://fba.se/en/Activities/Research/International-Expert-Forum/>. To watch the keynote speech and first session, please go to: <http://bit.ly/19CCjHv>

The interests of illicit networks are transnational and form part of globalized market structures of demand and supply – for example, in narcotics and human trafficking.

But it is also important to recognize that the nature of crime often remains local. In weak and vulnerable states local authorities inevitably find themselves in a downward spiral where their frail institutions become easy pickings for illicit networks and war participants aiming to extend their influence on politics. Incentives for individuals to join criminal gangs and networks in fragile contexts can be strong if they are promised access to power and money. According to UNODC estimates profits generated by illicit networks amount to 1.5 per cent of the global economy.⁵ When one considers the difficulties of obtaining accurate figures the true profits might be even higher.

Furthermore, the co-penetration of politics, business and organized crime erodes the already weak state. The people's trust in the state diminishes as illicit financial flows drain it of the resources required to build resilient institutions and provide essential services. In weak states and in precarious circumstances local authorities lack the means to deal with the negative consequences of organized crime, such as high homicide rates,⁶ widespread insecurity, violence and corruption.

5. UNODC (2011): *Estimating illicit financial flows resulting from drug trafficking and other transnational organized crimes*, Research Report, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

6. According to the GBAV 2011 database, intentional homicide accounts for 75 per cent of lethal violence worldwide, whereas direct conflict deaths amount to 10 per cent. According to the same source, many countries that classify among the most violent countries with more than 30 deaths per 100,000 population are not currently affected by armed conflict. Examples are El Salvador, Jamaica, Honduras, Venezuela and South Africa. Global Burden of Armed Violence 2011, p. 70. Available at: <http://www.genevadeclaration.org/measurability/global-burden-of-armed-violence/global-burden-of-armed-violence-2011.html>

ORGANIZED CRIME AND POLITICAL POWER

As an established practice crime has not formed part of the peace-building agenda. Instead it has been treated as a separate matter of law enforcement strategy. This division is based on the misconception of organized crime not being about political power. However, we now know that an important feature of organized crime is its intimate relationship with complicit political actors.

Criminal organizations pursue political strategies to gain control and power. The difference between political and criminal protagonists might in some cases lay in their strategies rather than in their objectives. It is a part of the strategic logic of illicit networks to gain influence over government resources and branches in covert ways rather than in competing for political power publicly. In the long term such veiled influences and methods of wielding power have damaging consequences for the institutional quality of democratic governance and the legitimacy of authorities, as well as in states or regions not directly affected by armed conflict.

In conflict or post-conflict situations these effects can be even more detrimental because organized crime impedes peace-building and lowers incentives for peace. There is an interest in perpetuating armed conflict, fragility, and weak institutions that serve as a cover and provide breeding grounds and an environment where illicit activities thrive. Colombia is a case in point, where the agendas of illicit networks and their leverage on politics and government, as well as rebel groups, have distorted peace processes and complicated mediation efforts.

Africa's Great Lakes region represents an example of how transnational activities of illicit networks can incentivize international interventions to fight transnational organized crime, thus further contributing to the internationalization of armed conflict. Given the intimate relationship between organized crime and politics, the political legitimacy of such networks must be acknowledged. Thus to deal successfully with organized crime and violent extremism in the long term demands a political strategy.

THE NEED FOR A REVISED PEACE-BUILDING APPROACH

In light of the far-reaching implications that the nexus between organized crime, conflict, and violent extremism has for peace-building, it becomes clear that technical approaches based on law enforcement alone are not enough. On the contrary, research and experience illustrate that a multidimensional peace-building method is necessary that encompasses the whole of government and does not treat organized crime and violent extremism as separate matters.

A peace-building approach that confronts organized crime, conflict, and violent extremism is required with the clear objective of preventing violence. The approach should focus on the intended outcomes of peace-building: this is discernible change, social cohesion, trust and the legitimacy of government and its institutions. In order to strengthen a consistent social order and deal with marginalization (as one potential cause of extremism) peace-building should include the people by talking to them and getting involved in their communities. Institution-building is another essential component.

Organized crime, conflict, and extremism thrive when any state is weak and where there is a lack of access to justice, and poor service provision. The international community's responsibility should therefore be to promote responsible and resilient states that are able to provide both security and public services to all citizens. With regard to peace dividends, institution-building requires a clear focus on development, education, and employment so as to remove the economic incentives of illegality and the attraction of violent extremism. Because of the close relationship between organized crime and conflict, transitional justice procedures must be in place in order to make it possible to investigate and prosecute cases of organized crime when they relate to war crimes, or crimes committed by the same perpetrators.

CHALLENGES FOR IMPLEMENTING A PEACE-BUILDING APPROACH

Even where there is recognition of the need for a revised peace-building approach to organized crime and violent extremism, such interventions are often insufficiently prepared to meet the demands involved. They also face considerable obstacles relating to the design of mandates and missions. Several of the challenges listed below are not specifically or solely related to organized crime and violent extremism. However, they gain even more in importance when considering the specific context at hand.

MISSION MANDATES

It is essential to recognize the fact that to date (despite the attention of the UN Security Council) only a few mandates include the fight against organized crime as a mission priority. Failure to include organized crime in mandates results in missions being prevented from taking action to stop it when the security forces of the host government are unwilling or unable to do so. Peacekeeping missions are also generally country-based and lack the necessary mandate to work across borders with regional strategies. When one considers the transnational dimension of organized crime this represents a fundamental obstruction to eliminating criminal networks. There are a few notable exceptions that indicate that different approaches are possible. For instance, the UN's West Africa Coast Initiative (WACI) in its targeting drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra-Leone and Côte d'Ivoire.⁷ But there is still a long way to go.

RESOURCES

Even where a mandate allows a mission to engage with criminal organizations, allocating resources and recruiting staff with the expertise and knowledge for dealing with them is often difficult. Despite the frequently recognized need for a comprehensive peace-building approach, missions often lack the technical capabilities to respond effectively to organized crime and the demands of law enforcement. In contexts where criminal organizations replace the state by providing certain services, the unintended and potentially harmful consequences of taking

7. WACI is a joint initiative by UNODC, UNOWA/DPA, DPKO and INTERPOL in support of ECOWAS action plan addressing organized crime in West Africa that was launched in July 2009. For more information on WACI see: <http://unowa.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=841>

action against them must be taken into account. As with the case of the UN and the EU missions in Kosovo, the nexus described above and the scale and impact of organized crime on conflict dynamics are often underestimated from the beginning. Missions lack not only the analytical capabilities for investigations but the operational means to mount covert operations. Improving coordination and cooperation between different international actors and UN agencies and UN country teams is therefore indispensable. The ongoing review of the UN's peace-building architecture and the High-Level Panel on Peacekeeping Operations, as well as fairly new tools such as the UN's Global Focal Point for Police, Justice, and Corrections,⁸ all provide opportunities for improvement.

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

Another testing ground is that missions are poorly prepared for the required long-term commitment to build capacities and relationships of trust with local actors, especially where criminal networks have become 'partners in crime' with public and the private sectors. Contributing factors to this challenge are in many cases security conditions that prevent mission staff from leaving their compound, thus making it difficult to talk to local representatives and the people.

Even without a mandate enabling action against illicit networks, missions need analytical capabilities in order to identify trustworthy partners. Institution-building will not succeed when such networks infiltrate and undermine government institutions. Failure to establish trusted relationships might easily result in support for those engaged in organized crime with no interest in peace-building or any form of legitimate government. This will ultimately undermine peace-building efforts and the legitimacy of the state, as well as that of the international mission.

NON-STATE ACTOR ENGAGEMENT

Last but not least, interacting with non-state actors is also a question of definition and legality. How international actors can engage non-state actors largely depends on such definition. Categorizing groups as rebels, terrorists, or criminals has far-reaching consequences that go well beyond semantics. Interaction with (former) rebel groups that are part of a formal peace process and negotiations is accepted, even though the same group might also be involved in drug-trafficking to fund its political struggle. At the same time, there is little support for offering talks to actors regarded as being part of illicit networks or violent extremist groups – let alone terrorists. The labelling of non-state actors has immediate consequences on the ways that international actors can approach such groups and represents a considerable obstacle to the constructive engagement required for a comprehensive peace-building approach.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the importance of rebuilding a state and its institutions, the focus of the UN on the state and its affairs at

country level gets in the way of efforts to deal with the dynamics that relate to organized crime and violent extremism, which play out at either subnational or transnational levels. Community-based approaches with a focus on civil society organizations are often difficult to implement because of the strong emphasis on rebuilding the state concerned. Moreover, enhancing community peace-building is also becoming more difficult because UN missions are targeted in conflict areas.

Nonetheless, procedures that strengthen social cohesion that are inclusive and pay attention to the particular needs of women and youths are unlikely to succeed if they do not begin at community level, where many extremist groups and illicit networks have their bases. This includes the creation of proper opportunities for education and employment that reduce incentives to join criminal organizations.

Furthermore, issues of inequality and marginalization between groups in society must be addressed, since horizontal inequality is often linked to extremism. Again, the provision of social services through the state and its institutions is a crucial element in building confidence. The more a state is in a position to dispense good social services to all its citizens, the less room there is for extremists and illicit networks to step in and replace the functions of the state.

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8. See also the 2014 progress review of the GFP conducted by FBA, Stimson Center and Clingendael Institute, available at: <https://fba.se/sv/Publikationer/Independent-Progress-Review-of-the-Global-Focal-Point-for-Police-Justice-and-Corrections/>