Conflicts in Africa: peace-building, conflict prevention and beyond - a personal perspective

Watching the child soldiers’ film ‘L’Oeil du Cyclone’ on a flight in to Dakar was perhaps not the best preparation for a meeting with the Dr Ibn Chambas, UN SRSG for West Africa. It left me feeling less
than optimistic about the work we do to prevent and reduce conflict in Africa. It is a story of a brutal conflict in a fictional West African state apparently caused by the pure evil of the child soldiers but which is actually driven by collusion between a kleptocratic political class and diamond mining corporations. The film (supported by ACP Culture funds) is certainly worth watching and brings to life the resource curse thesis researched in great detail by Tom Burgis in his book ‘The Looting Machine’ which shows how corporate and state interests, including European, are complicit in the hollowing out of African states. Perhaps not a film for a first date.

Happily Dr Chambas was in refreshingly good spirits having just returned that day from escorting the newly elected (and now undisputed) President of Gambia to his Presidential palace in Banjul. The scenes of cheering crowds greeting President Barrow on his arrival have been hailed as a poster image for preventive diplomacy. The resolve shown and action taken by neighbouring states and ECOWAS, with behind the scenes support of the UN, EU and others, gives some hope in the region that investments in mechanisms and institutions for conflict prevention and peacebuilding have paid off.

Headlines for the start of the year elsewhere in Africa however make for grim reading: 57 killed by two Boko Haram suicide bombers on 9 December in Nigeria, renewed fighting in South Sudan, a precarious situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo, an Al Qaeda In the Maghreb attack on a military camp in northern Mali killing 60, conflict in Libya dragging into its sixth year. Meanwhile much of the continent from Eritrea to Swaziland and Zanzibar to Gabon barely registers in the political consciousness of global policy makers. Success stories such as Gambia seem the exception rather than the rule.

Making sense of this complex and constantly changing picture is central to conflict and peacebuilding work. I get a range of reactions when I tell people I have worked on conflict prevention and peace mediation within, and on behalf of, the EU for fifteen years. Those uninterested or uninvolved in international relations may remark ‘what has that got to do with the EU’ or ‘you’re obviously not doing a very good job, just look at the mess in [Syria/Libya/Somalia]’. Those with experience and knowledge of development and diplomacy are usually very interested but ask out of curiosity ‘what is it you actually do?’, more profoundly ‘preventive diplomacy is a nice idea in principle but never seems to deliver in practice’, more provocatively ‘that stuff is nice for NGOs to play in unimportant places but doesn’t address the geopolitical conflicts and terrorism of today’ or more worryingly ‘it would be good if the EU developed a policy on conflict prevention/peacebuilding/stabilisation/’. Let me offer some of the ways I respond.

Firstly, it is always worth gently reminding that the EU is anything but a newcomer to policy development and concrete support for conflict prevention. In fact, on 6 March 2017 I hope EEAS Africa Department had a small birthday party as it will be twenty one years to the day since the Communication “The EU and the issue of conflicts in Africa: peace-building, conflict prevention and beyond”. Here are some excerpts as aide memoire:

“The growing number of violent conflicts in Africa represents a major challenge to the international community. Most of these conflicts are intra-state wars, directed mainly against civilian and often fought by militias that are difficult to control. These conflicts result in increasing human suffering and loss of life, the creation of massive movements of refugees, devastating effects on local and regional economies as well as on the environment, and serious threats to the viability of neighbouring countries and populations. They can even lead to the implosion of states and major humanitarian tragedies.

While the international community is continuously called upon to handle these conflicts, the usual ad-hoc employment of its traditional instruments, in particular UN peace-keeping
operations and humanitarian aid, has proved costly, sometimes ineffective or even counterproductive in relation to the longer-term goal of return to a non-violent, stable and self-sustainable situation. At a time of increasing donor fatigue as far as financial commitments are concerned, much needed international development assistance is thus channelled into emergency aid and, even in the longer term, concentrated on measures like mine-clearance, demobilisation of combatants and re-building of infrastructure...

While the European Union has to be prepared to respond to situations of violent conflicts in Africa rapidly and in a reasonable manner, it goes without saying that effectively preventing conflicts is better than responding to their consequences. As no amount of humanitarian aid and no effective peace-keeping operation will solve a crisis of peace and security, justice and resources in a sustainable way, there is a need to try to go beyond ad-hoc decisions and a policy of damage limitation. Furthermore, responding to the effects of violent conflicts in Africa has become an extremely costly endeavour.

In view of all these considerations, the prevention of conflicts should be at the centre of a comprehensive response of the European Union towards the issue of conflicts in Africa...

A basic pre-requisite for optimising the Union's instruments is a high degree of information exchange, common analysis, coordination and cooperation within the Union but also with other members of the international community and in particular with the recipients of assistance...

Given the fact that (i) experience shows that lack of development is not the only major source of violent conflict; that (ii) the EU policy aims concerning Africa might be summarised as helping to foster peace and stability, development, democracy and the respect of human rights; that (iii) those aims are interdependent/mutually re-enforcing; and that (iv) sustained development is often interpreted in a narrow economic sense, the ultimate policy goal could be summarised under the term structural stability.

So twenty years ago the EU already had set itself an overarching strategic objective of stabilisation and had a policy framework, a definition of structural stability (later adopted by the OECD and influential in subsequent UN policy debates), and a methodology focused on information exchange, analysis and the utilisation of all the Union’s instruments in a comprehensive approach. For the record, the Council further decided that this approach should not be limited to Africa and should be extended to all regions. Subsequent policy documents such as the 2001 Conflict Prevention communication and related EU Programme for the Prevention of Violent Conflict, the European Security Strategy, the Comprehensive Approach communication up to and including the Global Strategy of last year brought important updates to reflect the changing EU institutional setting and shifting emphasis within the policy mix. In my view, however, there is continuity in the fundamental approach. The assertion by HR/VP Mogherini’s following the adoption of the Global Strategy that “Wherever there is an attempt to promote mediation or reconciliation, Europe has a role to play,” and the UN SG Guterres’ call for a ‘diplomacy for peace’ are not new departures but build on a long tradition.

The second point to address is the apparent difficulty to translate this longstanding policy into visible success. In part this is because ‘we all hear a tree falling but we don’t hear the forest growing’. One response is to draw attention to situations, such as Gambia, Malawi’s 2009 elections, the Kenyan elections of 2013 or arguably South Africa’s transition. In each case there were expectations of violence that did not materialise. It remains difficult however to demonstrate international action was the critical factor determining the absence of a phenomenon, ‘the dog that didn’t bark’ dilemma. Furthermore it may be the case that unknown behind the scenes work plays a decisive role. I give an
example from some recent work I was involved in on behalf of the EU in Zanzibar. The Delegation in Tanzania together with EEAS Mediation Support Team designed a dialogue project to prevent violence around the 2015 elections. Activities were deliberately low profile. In the event the October 2015 elections that the opposition claimed to have won were nullified and subsequently re-run in an environment that was not judged to be inclusive, genuine and credible. On the face of it this is hardly a ‘success story’ yet there was limited violence and no deaths during a period of tense political stand off. Should the EU claim some credit for a conflict prevention initiative few have heard about and where direct causality is impossible to establish? If on the other hand events had unfolded differently and there had been large scale violence we can be sure that the international community would have been criticised for not having acted early. This type of low profile political engagement that seeks to strengthen the capacity of societies to manage change is a constant feature of the diplomatic work of EU Delegations and the activities of implementing partners such as HDC, CMI, EIP, Conciliation Resources and Search for Common Ground. Those initiating such actions in political or operations sections usually have an intimate understanding of the countries they work in. This illustrates one of the key fallacies of conflict prevention work. There is no lack of political awareness within the EU system. EU Delegations around the world, and none more so than those in Africa, invariably have a very good understanding of local dynamics and risk factors. The issue is that information does not get to the right people at the right time whilst any investment in prevention is a high risk venture with no guarantee of success, and it requires counterfactual reasoning to prove success.

This brings me to the third and last point I want to make concerning the nature of conflict and whether our approach is appropriate to the type of conflict we see today. From the end of the Cold War until 2010 interstate conflict almost disappeared and deaths in intrastate conflict were in decline. Since 2010 however this picture has gone in reverse with increasing numbers of deaths, conflict incidents and terrorist attacks. Meanwhile basic principles and values that underpinned the international system and that had appeared unassailable as basic tenets of global order are under siege. Not to say that there was consensus – where Europeans may have seen the global system as a guarantor of a level playing field and neutral arbitor for upholding international law, left wing African academics have long pointed to the hypocrisy of US exceptionalism and an inequitable representation in global bodies. This critique in the past has been met with resolve to reforms to make the system more equitable and fair, a commitment reiterated in the EU’s Global Strategy. However the challenge to the international system now is a far more profound questioning and even deliberate efforts to demolish the system.

So where does this picture of increasing conflict and a precarious international system leave the conflict prevention proposition? Certainly it reveals the hubris of some of the bolder claims to be able to transform societies. It is also a reminder that engagement needs to be essentially political and cannot simply be treated as a technocratic issue. Conflict is ultimately the struggle over who wields power. Poor people do not fight because they are poor but rather because they want to redress perceived or real grievances.

It also calls for an effort to reconceptualise conflict within a contested international system. Here the EU’s Global Strategy has an important emphasis on the need to understand the world as complex networked system and to seek to build resilience. This is certainly true when thinking about conflict. We want to have a linear rational world where we will see outcomes directly proportional to inputs. The world today is not like that, it if ever was - which creates a problem for our logframe approach. If we accept that there is no direct linear cause and effect we are working with a theory of change where conflict comes to an end through the interaction of many elements. Furthermore, we may find surprisingly large outcomes from small inputs and the reverse. We can and should act as a catalyst but we need to move away from solipsism that places the EU at the centre as the sole agent of change.
Preventive diplomacy should then be understood as building (some of) the necessary rather than sufficient conditions for peace. It needs to be experimental and creative. I am constantly amazed at the lack of self confidence and self awareness within the EU institutions of existing policy frameworks and the depth of experience. The EEAS needs to continue to strive to capitalise on existing expertise within the network and overcome the impulse to ‘reinvent the wheel’ in Brussels driven policy discussions. Success in catalysing responses that address the underlying dynamics of conflict is not easy to measure but mechanisms to reward good performance could be considered. Why not an annual preventive diplomacy award for the Delegation/EUSR/division with the most innovative approach to bring attention to the issue and spread best practices?

The core focus of EU preventive and peacebuilding action should be to strengthen endogenous capacities for the peaceful management of change at all levels of societies, based on a thorough and regularly updated analysis of the actors, their motivations, the conflict drivers and trends, and of how external interventions impact on those drivers. The newly reconstituted EEAS HQ Division for Prevention of Conflicts, Rule of Law/SSR, Integrated approach, Stabilisation and Mediation (PRISM) supports this work. External partners can also help. It is my conviction that this is not only an option but a duty given that EU actors (member states, corporations, banks) not only have a deep knowledge but are furthermore profoundly implicated in the political dynamic that underlies conflict. A theme that was well captured in the film I watched on my flight in to Dakar.

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