Responding to conflict in Africa
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1. In 1990, the Secretary General of the OAU presented a report to the OAU council of Ministers on the changes taking place in the world and their implications for Africa. In this, he stated that “the strongest likelihood does exist for the emergence of a new geopolitical balance of forces as well as a new international economic order that could further debilitate and marginalise Africa.” The OAU fears were well founded. Conflict became more widespread through the 1990s. Economic marginalisation weakened highly centralised states. The inability to provide minimal levels of service delivery or to provide domestic security provoked the fragmentation of the state. Internal conflict increased dramatically throughout the 1990s. In extreme cases, fragmentation encouraged the formation and proliferation of splinter groups, which in turn divided into warring factions. The very nature of conflict changed. The civilian population increasingly became the target of conflict in factional wars and subject to particularly high levels of violence and abuse. This resulted in massive displacement as well as social and economic distress.

2. Unexpected levels of ethnic violence and genocide as witnessed in Rwanda and Burundi re-emerged in the last decade of the century. The abuse of ethnicity in Africa has its roots in colonial history. In general, it is more often used as a means to sustain conflict and is rarely a primary cause. Yet, the increasing marginalisation of the poor, through the growing lack of secure access to land and the lack of opportunity to escape poverty, provided fertile ground for those promoting ethnic conflict as a means of sustaining their own control over power. Ethnic violence has now become part of the culture of conflict in Africa.

3. The phenomenon of the failed state began to emerge as a number of African ailing, autocratic leaders lost control and external support. The collapse of states such as Liberia, Somalia, Sierra Leone and Zaire created the basis for regional insecurity and African countries justified their military intervention in neighbouring states on grounds of self-protection. Conflict became increasingly regional in nature as collapsed states threatened the security of all their neighbours. A commercial element entered into the pattern of warfare. Regional forces in Liberia, the DRC and Sierra Leone sought to place war on a self-financing basis, and have exploited the natural resources of the failing state to cover the costs of their military involvement.

4. By 2000, over half the countries in Africa and 20% of the population were affected by conflict. There were eleven major conflicts with more than a
thousand war related deaths a year. The extent of conflict was greater than in any other region in the world.

The current context of conflict

5. The two longest running conflicts in the continent (Sudan and Angola) are a continuation of the anti-colonial struggle. But for the rest of Africa the nature of conflict has changed in the last decade. Four distinct types of conflict are now evident.

- Conventional warfare - wars of attrition
6. The conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea was the only conventionally fought war in Africa during the last decade. It was fought with regular troops along a defined series of fronts. Targets and objectives were primarily military and strategic. The war made extensive use of expensive technology such as heavy artillery and jet fighters. The increasing cost of such warfare has tended to make these conflicts self-limiting in Africa.

- Factional Warfare
7. Factional wars are characterised by their fluid nature. There is rarely a defined front line and fighting is frequently opportunistic rather than strategic. Warfare is low tech with a predominant use of small arms. As such, it is less costly to wage wars that can easily be self-sustaining. Frequently such conflicts move rapidly from seeking to redress the grievance at the root of the conflict to concentrate on the exploitation of commercial, mineral and natural resources. Factions will seek to involve, exploit and control a significant proportion of the civilian population in order to sustain the conflict.

Genocide and ethnic based conflict.
8. The last decade has seen the re-emergence of genocidal and ethnically based conflict. Centrally directed and involving the virulent use of propaganda, once initiated these conflicts spread like wildfire and leave a huge death toll, massive displacement, fear and confusion. Unlike factional warfare, ethnic and genocidal fighting tends to be extremely low tech using knives, pangas and occasionally small arms. A distinguishing characteristic is the speed with which genocidal attacks take place and the high degree of central organisation and planning involved.

The "new warfare" - regional conflict
9. All three elements of warfare have coalesced into what can be described as Africa's "new warfare" - regional conflict. In this type of conflict, conventional state forces are frequently engaged in the protection of key installations, or may find themselves engaged in capital-intensive, attritional warfare with other states. However, extensive use is also made of factional forces that act as proxies and as a forward line of protection
for the conventional forces. These proxy forces are encouraged to be self-
sustaining through the exploitation of natural resources. Ethnic conflict has
occasionally been sanctioned or exploited to gain support for the
continuation of the conflict.

10. The trend towards regional conflict continues and previously contained
internal conflicts spark off regional intervention. The war in the DRC
involves the armed forces of eight countries while the DRC has sought to
take the war back into Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. In the last year, the
war in Sierra Leone has developed a similar regional dimension, as has
the prolonged conflict in Angola. The Sudan conflict has retained its strong
regional dimension. Fourteen African countries are currently engaged in
these four regional conflicts - demonstrating that states remain heavily
engaged in warfare as sponsors of factional fighting using proxies.

Is intervention the problem?

11. Both humanitarian and political actors have sought to respond to Africa’s
conflict in an impatient and ultimately unrealistic manner. Confronted with
the scale and the fear caused by war, aid donors, humanitarian agencies
and diplomats have pursued strongly interventionist policies. These have
showed little sign of success for some of the following reasons;

12. Scale: Factional warfare in Somalia, Liberia and Sierra Leone have
demonstrated that larger intervention forces are required than in the case
of conventional warfare. It is estimated that a minimum force size of
20,000 would be required for any peace enforcement operation in Africa.
Such a force size, would in all likelihood, have to be sustained for more
than a year. This immediately raises questions as to the feasibility of
intervention as this scale of force requires a well-developed command and
control capacity as well as a high level of logistic support. This can only be
achieved at considerable financial cost and would require that troop-
contributing nations maintain higher levels of capacity.

13. Speed: The genocide in Rwanda has shown that speed of deployment as
well as scale is a critical issue. The recent UN report on the Rwanda
genocide highlighted the length of time taken by the Security Council in
agreeing a revised mandate for the peacekeeping operation. However,
once the mandate is agreed, there are then lengthy delays in deployment
while troop-contributing nations come forward. One proposed solution
was to maintain a UN standing force with a rapid response capacity. Other
alternatives are now being examined including the use of committed troop
contributors retaining standby capacity.

14. Mandate, doctrine and rules of engagement: This year’s peacekeeping
operation in Sierra Leone highlighted the problems inherent in
distinguishing between a peacekeeping mandate and the need for robust
rules of engagement in self-defence when involved with hostile factional
forces. Peacekeeping doctrine has not been sufficiently developed to respond to the changing nature of warfare and there are considerable problems in defining the desired military "end state" in a situation where the structures and institutions of government no longer exist. Intervention is promoted but without the mechanisms for longer engagement is unlikely to succeed.

15. Regional Peacekeeping: The ECOMOG intervention in Liberia highlighted the dangers that exist when the foremost regional power can dominate regional peacekeeping and use it to pursue national objectives.

Humanitarian Definitions of impartiality and neutrality:

16. Factional warfare challenges the current definitions of impartiality and neutrality that are critical to the concept of “humanitarian space”. The scale and fluidity of conflict necessitate that agencies make choices as to where they operate and can therefore appear partisan. The concept of neutrality based on the distribution of relief through objective identification of need is rarely understood and frequently challenged by factional forces. This has led to the introduction of ground rules and aid conditionalities - more interventionist by definition.

The loss of innocence:

17. The crisis in Zaire after the genocide in Rwanda highlighted the problems of the new victims of conflict, who were sometimes criminalised, frequently politicised and became militarised. Humanitarian agencies did not have the range of skills needed to handle this and the international community was not able to respond to the need for policing and justice.

Resources promote intervention and fuel conflict

18. Somalia and Zaire demonstrated the problems that Humanitarian agencies faced when becoming the main providers of income in a resource-starved environment. Humanitarian assistance both exacerbated and prolonged conflict and the humanitarian agencies became part of the problem rather than the solution. Humanitarian agencies have worked hard in Somalia to move away from a resource driven humanitarian agenda with greater success.

The Humanitarian Imperative:

19. The concept of the humanitarian imperative espoused the right of access to the victims of conflict, but also led to a deep suspicion of all governmental and local structures. Humanitarian action became associated with totally independent action that both created dependence and weakened the fragile basis of governance.

20. These military and humanitarian lessons should not be construed as an argument against military or humanitarian interventions, but rather to suggest the limitations and weaknesses of this approach, particularly
where there are doubts as to the scale and duration of international commitment. Interventionism pushes both the political and humanitarian actors together into unsatisfactory and ultimately unproductive relationships in which both parties blame each other for their dilemmas and failures. While there will be circumstances in which intervention is justified and the need to avert genocide provides a clear case for intervention. But then it must be rapid, to an appropriate scale and able to deal with the broader issues of the timely delivery of justice.

Responding to conflict in Africa

21. The international response to the continuing high levels of conflict in Africa has still largely focussed on making intervention more effective, rather than prevention. The Security Council and the UN have responded in part by seeking to remedy some of the more obvious problems with peacekeeping. These are well outlined in the Brahimi report. A great many of the northern countries have responded by supporting efforts at increasing regional peacekeeping capacity through military peacekeeping training and support to regional institutions.

22. There is still a tendency to favour intervention as the main means of averting humanitarian crisis, or to deal with the problems of the failing or collapsed state. The clamour for action has become synonymous with intervention, in many cases because there are no obvious alternatives and little stomach for the substantial longer-term economic and financial investments that are required. There is however, still a need to recognise that intervention if it happens, can only work as part of a wider framework of conflict prevention, reduction and resolution.

Conflict prevention

23. The key elements of an international response to conflict prevention would require:

- A commitment to dealing with the underlying causes of conflict.
- Recognising the need to help economic diversification policies in countries with a high dependence on mineral resources,
- Taking greater risks in providing support and sustaining key structures and institutions in “at risk” countries,
- Focussing more international attention on the increasing commercial aspects of war and promoting responsible business and investment practices in high risk areas.
- Providing better international regulation of the illicit exploitation of natural resources.

Conflict reduction

24. Conflict reduction could be better supported if the international community:
• Assisted regional structures such as SADC, ECOWAS and IGAD to develop a mutual security framework rather than an intervention capacity.
• Developed more proactive and forceful preventive diplomacy
• Pursued a more vigorous human rights policy,
• Took international action against human rights abuse, abuses of ethnicity,
• Used early warning systems to deploy political and economic actions through the Security Council and the OAU.
• Supported and strengthened international measures to control arms flows and private military activity.

Conflict resolution

25. Effective conflict resolution will require more sensitive and appropriate use of mediation and negotiation that: recognises where mediation may be effective but also where it may hinder other processes from establishing stability. Most significantly, the international community must demonstrate their commitment to supporting brokered solutions in a timely and effective manner and recognise the fragility of the immediate post conflict environment. Key elements will be:
• Integrated post war recovery planning that ties in investment and reconstruction and reduces dependence on mineral resources
• Rapid responses to state building which ensure an immediate peace dividend and reengagement with and support to the structures and organs of government.
• Effective and politically aware demobilisation and disarmament.
• Provision of meaningful external guarantees in the transitional post conflict period.
• Support to effective reconciliation and judicial processes.

The Humanitarian Dilemma

26. Humanitarian agencies are still faced with a dilemma. The high levels of conflict in Africa create mounting humanitarian needs yet the capacity to respond is being steadily eroded by restricted access to those in need and by international restrictions on humanitarian assistance. International Donors have imposed resource constraints and ever-narrower definitions of humanitarian assistance, (which now in some instances only cover minimal survival needs) as a simple response to dealing with the more complex reality of conflict in Africa and protecting themselves from critical exposure. But NGOs have also allied themselves to approaches that have promoted military action as a mechanism for gaining access to areas of need. As such this has changed perceptions of the role of NGOs, and has moved them into circumstances where for a period in the late 1990's, NGOs were perceived as the instigators of external and international intervention.
27. However, military intervention is unlikely to be the solution to the problems of humanitarian access. Although the MONUC operation in the DRC heralds an innovative attempt to better integrate humanitarian objectives into a peacekeeping operation. There is a danger that peacekeeping operations have become more involved in state building rather than in the process of force separation and the creation of humanitarian space. The term "humanitarian intervention" has undergone a significant shift in meaning post Kosovo. "Humanitarianism" is used as the justification for a more partisan form of military intervention rather than the creation of humanitarian space. Under such circumstances, humanitarian agencies are faced with hard choices. In order to fulfil their own mandates and principles they may wish to distinguish their actions as separate from those of military peacekeepers to retain their commitment to impartial action. However, in so doing they will need to develop new approaches for themselves that meet the challenge posed by the changing nature of warfare in Africa. NGOs will have to rethink their more interventionist approaches to develop a negotiated basis for humanitarian access. In this context, humanitarian agencies will need to be politically more sensitive and transparent to the affected parties, more engaged with local structures and recognise the need to rebuild the fabric of war damaged societies. They will need to work with broader definitions of humanitarianism, which accept social needs such as education alongside survival needs. It will be necessary for humanitarian agencies to understand the risks posed in conflict areas by being the main provider of resources and consequently work to well-defined timeframes when meeting material needs.

28. If the changing nature of conflict in Africa means that access for humanitarian action can rarely be guaranteed by military intervention. Humanitarian operations in complex emergencies in Africa are more likely to be increasingly based on negotiation and stronger recognition and understanding of the importance and value of humanitarian values as well as assistance. Negotiated humanitarian access will mean that the parties to the complex pattern of conflict in Africa understand and respect the role and activities of the humanitarian agencies. But this can only be achieved if humanitarian agencies in turn need to reposition themselves by promoting approaches that appear more sensitive to local needs and circumstances and that also seek to reinforce the fabric of society. By so doing, humanitarian agencies may reverse the trend and gain a greater acceptance and commitment from the parties to conflict to humanitarian action than currently exists.

29. The strong assertion of humanitarian by NGOs and other humanitarian actors throughout the second part of the 1990s led many to confuse their role with increasingly political areas of action. Humanitarian agencies strayed into areas such as demobilisation and reintegration of armed forces that in the new military context had become increasingly political
issues. Yet Governments and the International community as a whole were keen to address the institutionalised basis of conflict in Africa that revolved around the collapsed, fragile or predatory state. State building became a necessary precondition to re-establishing security. However, Humanitarian agencies have not as yet determined how to respond to this new agenda and the challenges that this poses to their impartial status. Nor has the international community fully recognised the task that it has embarked upon. Under such circumstances a degree of confusion is inevitable. New strategies and relationships need to develop. Humanitarian agencies will have to make judgements as to how best to square the circle between state building and impartial humanitarian action in order retain their ability to respond to the changing nature of conflict in Africa.