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Conflict Mapping: Innovation in International Responses in Post-Conflict Societies

by Wendy S. Betts and Gregory Gisvold*

During 2002, as part of its ongoing efforts to move past the ravages of its brutal civil war, the new government of Sierra Leone issued a request for the assistance of an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) to perform a "Documentation and Conflict Mapping Program." It was envisioned that this effort would help the local populace develop a sense of ownership of, and partnership in, the government's attempt to establish a just accountability for past wrongs. The program would pursue two related objectives: presenting basic information about the government's accountability efforts, specifically regarding the Special Court for Sierra Leone, and documenting the individual and collective experiences of Sierra Leoneans to create a balanced, accurate picture of the events of the civil war, specifically those occurrences that may constitute crimes within the jurisdiction of the Special Court.

This move by the Sierra Leonean government to seek NGO participation in governmental functions is remarkable in that it is indicative of a development in the manner in which international organizations respond to societies torn by conflict. One of the most important features of this development is the possibility for cooperation, both among nongovernmental organizations and between the nongovernmental and intergovernmental communities. An evaluation of the origins, benefits, and opportunities of "conflict mapping," including a mapping project recently undertaken in Kosovo, is useful to assist the improvement of initial efforts already undertaken in anticipation of future projects, such as in Sierra Leone.

A paradigm shift is underway with respect to international responses to conflict. The international community has renewed its interest in holding perpetrators of mass human rights violations accountable for their actions. The 1990s saw the establishment of two ad hoc international tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, the deployment of international judges and prosecutors in East Timor and Kosovo, and now the development of the joint international-domestic Special Court in Sierra Leone. The other side of the accountability coin, the establishment of the "truth" of the past, which is often undertaken through a truth commission, has seen growth as well. From groundbreaking work during the 1980s in Latin America, truth commissions have been established in South Africa as well as in East Timor and now, in parallel with the Special Court, in Sierra Leone.

In the last decade, the international community has sought accountability for human rights violations more aggressively and has significantly reworked its efforts to redevelop societies fractured by conflict. The international community, through the United Nations, has responded to several recent conflicts with expansions of peacekeeping responsibility. Intergovernmental monitoring missions have likewise expanded, as evidenced by the European Community monitors in Bosnia, the Kosovo Verification Mission of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations missions in Bosnia and Sierra Leone. To greater or lesser extents, the territories of Bosnia, Kosovo, and East Timor have also come under the jurisdiction of international administrations.

In short, in a multi-polar, post-cold war international environment, governments and multilateral institutions are more willing to intervene in or otherwise become part of the affairs

of states and regions. One result of this willingness to intervene will likely be more missions in more post-conflict regions. As many scholars have noted, the tasks, responsibilities, and risks of doing so are enormous. With increasingly scarce resources, the international community must develop more strategic means of responding to violent conflict and its aftermath. The international community should adapt its responses to such conflict to include among its available resources the information, skills, and experience of NGOs.

The effectiveness of the international community in post-conflict prosecution and reconciliation depends in large part upon its access to accurate, verifiable information regarding the events that occurred. This information must be credible and comprehensive, thereby allowing the international community to target manpower and funds where they are most needed. Without such information, it is difficult for the international community to make these resource allocation decisions.

As the international community becomes increasingly willing to address conflicts more aggressively, the rapid response capability of international and national NGOs is also expanding. However, the ability of multilateral institutions to work with, and incorporate the resources of, NGOs into the overall effort is relatively undeveloped. The need for improvement in this area is especially pointed in the cases of accountability and rule of law endeavors. NGOs have substantial experience promoting justice and human rights. If, as has happened in Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, and now in Sierra Leone, multilateral institutions and intervening governments take the lead in accountability and rule of law development, they must work harder to bring the innovation, experience, and dexterity of NGOs into their efforts.

Conflict Mapping Revisited: From Political Science Analysis to Practical Accountability Solutions

The Sierra Leonean government's decision to request the assistance of an NGO to undertake its conflict mapping exercise is hopefully indicative of a developing understanding of the expertise and efficiency the nongovernmental community can provide to post-conflict societies. In publishing its request, the government of Sierra Leone may have recognized that there are some aspects of judicial and legal reform that governments or intergovernmental organizations are not well suited to perform. Nevertheless, the choice of the term "conflict mapping" is significant in that it is being used in an accountability context, as opposed to its traditional application in political science analysis. Sierra Leone has thereby taken the first steps towards providing a foundation for joint international-national as well as intergovernmental-nongovernmental cooperative efforts to promote accountability and the rule of law in Sierra Leone.

The term "conflict mapping" may or may not have been chosen deliberately by the members of the Sierra Leonean government's task force that created the organizational outlines of the Special Court. It is, however, gaining new currency in an age that is seeing a new iteration of the melding of politics and law. Originally, as the writings of political scientist Paul Wehr indicate, the term was part of the lexicon of political science; it was a methodology for studying conflict through

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separating the constituent parts of a conflict, such as the historical background, parties, issues involved, and context within which the conflict is occurring so as to better devise means of resolving it. This sort of conflict mapping was largely an intellectual exercise with practical benefits once serious efforts to resolve the conflict had begun. Decisions about intervention and mediation could be made on the basis of a well documented map. Such a map allows parties who may be too invested in particular details of a conflict to understand a larger process with which they may not be familiar.

The original purpose behind the idea of a conflict map echoes today in the accountability and development objectives of the international community. Specifically, multilateral institutions now promote justice and reconciliation as mutually reinforcing goals to help a society move past a conflict. The United Nations has endeavored through the international tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia to hold those most responsible for atrocities during conflict accountable and thereby give the populations of those regions a measure of justice. The underlying idea is that if the international community holds these individuals responsible in an impartial manner, there will be no need for retribution and the conflict cycle can come to an end. Likewise, truth commissions serve a similar goal: assembling a picture of the past, of what happened, and publishing it for all to see and hear, creating a space for society to acknowledge what occurred and thus contribute toward ending the conflict. Both of these goals contain the implicit assumption that a society that benefits from such international accountability assistance will take the opportunity to develop, re-invigorate, or strengthen its domestic means of nonviolent conflict resolution through the rule of law.

Accountability mechanisms must begin their work with a sense of who did what to whom and where. Whether performed by a court or truth commission, the inquiry that leads to accountability begins with the actions, orders, and omissions of individuals and the resultant impact on those victimized. Thus, a conflict map is crucial. In cases of mass human rights violations during armed conflict, a conflict map of the sort contemplated by Sierra Leone outlines the universe of events and provides a verifiable starting point for a society overcoming impunity. This information is the foundation of either bringing indictments or of concentrating scarce investigative resources. The results of the mapping can be used in the establishment of an accepted national history that acknowledges the past, helping to enable and embolden the public to call for a new way forward. Likewise, the same results can aid the effort to bring perpetrators to justice by providing evidence for courts and tribunals. It also provides a roadmap to humanitarian assistance needs, a basis for targeting reconciliation projects, a guideline for judicial reform, and a platform for civil human rights education.

Recent examples of the need for this sort of mapping information abound. In the course of investigating the Kosovo conflict, it was accurately anticipated that the answer to why Kosovar Albanians fled the province in 1999 would figure prominently in subsequent efforts to hold individuals accountable for crimes committed during this time. Likewise, in the aftermath of the terrible events in Guatemala during the 1980s, the question of whether or not genocide had been committed against the country's highland Indian population

became fundamental both to ending the conflict there as well as to the success of the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission. Sierra Leone now represents the next example of this need. Its experimental combination of a domestically based judicial accountability mechanism, the Special Court, and non-punitive investigative accountability mechanism, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is more likely to be successful if provided with the information generated by conflict mapping.

NGOs and Conflict Mapping

The conflict mapping project contemplated in Sierra Leone and its antecedents provide important examples of the possibilities that arise from cooperation between development and human rights NGOs and between governments or multilateral institutions and NGOs. Conflict mapping requires close cooperation between these two important types of NGOs that respond to conflict situations, and between the NGO community and international multilateral institutions. The NGOs responding to conflict situations generally include a few having a human rights focus and many having a development mandate. Human rights organizations, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Federation des Droits de l'Homme, are often first on the ground in regions

likely to experience or already experiencing conflict, gathering information for their narrative reports. These human rights organizations are also at the forefront of ensuring that human rights principles and standards develop in response to the inevitable capacity of individuals and governments to create original means of repression. From the genesis of United Nations human rights treaties through the current day, human rights organizations have provided crucial impetus and information to support the development of the international law of human rights. Along the way, they have developed substantial skill in advocacy, education, fact-finding, and information dissemination.

Development organizations are also active in human rights work, particularly in building local capacity and encouraging societal change toward a culture of human rights, such as through the promotion of the rule of law. In post-conflict environments, development and human rights NGOs find common ground. Indeed, both types of NGOs have collaborated to assist accountability efforts of the international community. NGOs have provided the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) with significant documentary, statistical, and testimonial evidence. They have also worked closely with the ICTY's Outreach Programme to increase awareness of the ICTY, its mission, accomplishments, and limitations. Truth commissions have benefited as well. NGO assistance to the Guatemalan Historical Clarification Commission and to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was central to those organizations' very existence as well as to their efforts to interview deponents about human rights violations, manage the volumes of data collected, and accurately report them. Indeed, without the assistance of NGOs, these particular bodies would have been significantly less successful.

Conflict mapping is fundamentally different from human rights reporting. Narrative human rights reporting—that most common to “first reporter” human rights organizations—

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usually involves portraying a situation through a few particular instances of grievous human rights violations. The reporting organization thereby calls the attention of its targeted audience to the likelihood that others are suffering similar wrongs, someone is at fault, and something can be done by the audience. This is the basic premise of human rights reporting: highlight a larger problem with a few significant examples, and suggest a course of action to ameliorate the problem and prevent its recurrence. The power of these reports lies in the implications of the shocking nature of what they report. While valuable, such narrative reports have a fundamental drawback: they can give concrete information about few events and individuals.

Creating a conflict map involves data collection and reporting on a larger and different scale from more common forms of human rights reporting. It includes a quantitative analysis that can identify trends and patterns of abuses not readily apparent from narrative reporting. This aspect of conflict mapping enables it to help verify the extent and distribution of alleged atrocities. It is a more comprehensive representation of the conflict—the forest, not the individually impressive trees. As Dr. Patrick Ball of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) has illustrated, this relatively new manner of human rights reporting utilizes established statistical methodologies to help answer the important questions of what happened to whom and who did what when. The answers to these simplistically stated but complex questions have evidentiary value not only in the crucible of courtroom proceedings, but also in the more reconciliation-oriented efforts of truth and reconciliation commissions. Whether the goal is retributive justice or the promotion of a kind of national healing, the starting point is nearly always “what can we say for sure?” Obviously, conflict mapping will not and should not displace mainstream human rights reporting; rather, they should complement each other. In a more interventionist world, international actors will benefit from the collection and presentation of large amounts of data from a variety of sources. Human rights and development organizations should find new opportunities for collaboration therein.

Providing Important Evidence for Accountability Mechanisms: The Conflict Mapping Project in Kosovo

Perhaps one of the most recent and comprehensive examples of this collaboration is the conflict mapping exercise recently undertaken in Kosovo by the American Bar Association Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (ABA/CEELI), AAAS, and their partners. Immediately following the cessation of hostilities of the Kosovo conflict, many organizations moved into Kosovo to report on events that occurred there. These organizations, which included human rights organizations as well as more development-focused organizations, collected interviews and other information regarding the terrible events that occurred during the conflict. Ultimately, most published their findings in narrative reports.

After the publication of their individual reports, a number of these human rights organizations agreed to pool their data with that collected by development organizations to form the foundation for creating a statistical analysis of the conflict. What

emerged was a powerful form of conflict mapping that brought together in a comprehensive format information about the events of the conflict: the migration of Kosovar Albanians from Kosovo; killings committed around the province; and the NATO bombing campaign. These events were analyzed as they occurred geographically as well as over time, thereby forming a picture of how these complicated events interacted with each other during the conflict. In a subsequent report, the original foundation of data was expanded with the addition of information gathered by the OSCE and the ICTY.

The resultant conflict map had significant evidentiary value. The report, like any high-quality scientific study, analyzed the data in an effort to determine whether it supported or contradicted hypotheses regarding whether the exodus of Kosovar Albanians from Kosovo was related to the actions of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the bombing campaign conducted by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), or the actions of Yugoslav forces. These hypotheses dealt with the most prominent political and legal issues implicated by the Kosovo conflict, which in turn made the answers to these hypotheses fundamental to the work of the ICTY.

ABA/CEELI and AAAS found that killings and refugee flow occurred in a regular pattern characterized by three phases. In each phase, a high volume of killing and refugee flow was followed by a much lower level of killing and refugee flow. Moreover, killings and refugee flow tended to occur at the same times and places. Using common statistical methodologies, the authors were able to demonstrate a supportable estimate of 10,356 Kosovar Albanians killed during the conflict. The authors were able to state that the data was inconsistent with the hypotheses that KLA activity or NATO air strikes were causes of the refugee exodus from Kosovo, but was consistent with the assertion that the activities of Serb forces caused the refugee flow. The information was eventually presented as expert evidence in the trial at the ICTY of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.

As the international community responds to future internal and international conflicts with peacekeeping missions, transitional administrations, and accountability mechanisms, having an understanding of the important political and legal issues means understanding where and when who did what to whom.

Building Local Capacity

In addition to the evidentiary value of conflict mapping, by its very nature, it can have an important capacity building impact on the local community. Capacity building is an organizational goal human rights and development NGOs share, though it is perhaps more fundamental to the work of the latter. It is also a goal NGOs are uniquely qualified to meet and intergovernmental institutions are relatively unprepared to pursue. Analysis of the progress of the intergovernmental institutional efforts in Bosnia, East Timor, and Kosovo suggest strongly that, by comparison, NGOs are making steadier advances in capacity development. Through close work and cooperation with local institutions and organizations, international development and human rights NGOs ultimately seek to leave an organizational legacy. They work to promote the development of indigenous institutions that can carry on the work begun together.

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Again, the Kosovo conflict mapping project provides a useful starting point. First, it is important to note that the project was founded in nongovernmental organization cooperation. Human rights and development NGOs pooled their data and were able to achieve an effect that they likely could not have achieved individually. In addition, these NGOs all worked with local organizations. For example, ABA/CEELI helped develop and improve the operational capacity of three local partners while working alongside them to gather data. Its first interviews were conducted with Kosovar refugees in Albania with the Albanian umbrella NGO, The Center for Peace Through Justice (The Center). Later, ABA/CEELI worked closely in Kosovo with the Albanian human rights NGO, Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and with the Croatian NGO, Partnership for Social Development.

Each of these cooperative projects involved crucial assistance to these regional NGOs. Interviewing projects involved training the regional NGO personnel in international law, project design and implementation, and financial management. In addition, the regional NGOs were able to work with their international counterparts to create a “foundation”—such as technology, publications, and a track record of experience—that will be important for their future development. For example, to support the work of the ICTY Outreach Programme, ABA/CEELI and The Center created a short brochure outlining the basic principles of international humanitarian law. The Center continues to use the brochure today, long after the conflict mapping project has ended.

Capacity Building through Technology Innovation and Transfer

Ultimately, the basic mission of any international effort in a post-conflict society is to establish the conditions necessary for withdrawal of the international personnel, which requires capacity building among local personnel. While transfer of experience and training is important, it is equally vital to equip local NGOs with the modern tools employed by international organizations and the expertise to use them. Accountability mechanisms, especially those established with international assistance, will utilize modern methodologies and tools. Providing a local organization with training in financial project management and a few computers is a useful endeavor, but teaching its personnel to use sophisticated database or Web publishing technology as part of their operations enables these organizations to work effectively after the internationals have departed. The former is the initial development step of providing basic tools for operations, while the latter is a step toward promoting the local organization’s fundamental independence.

By way of example, consider database technology. Modern database technology, when applied with the correct protocols, can be utilized to identify trends in the often chaotic settings in which war crimes and incidents of human rights violations occur. Therefore, modern database technology is a basic requirement for indigenous nongovernmental actors and organizations to continue the work begun by and with international NGOs to document the events of the conflict. Initially, in their project in Kosovo, ABA/CEELI and AAAS trained their local partner organizations in the basic skills necessary to accomplish the project: interviewing skills, project management, and financial record keeping. These are important skills for any nascent organization; however, AAAS has since taken this effort one step further in other post-conflict soci-

eties. In Sri Lanka, AAAS is working with a coalition of NGOs, providing technical assistance to establish a local capacity for sophisticated data collection and analysis. As part of this effort, AAAS is using and will leave with this local NGO coalition database technology developed by AAAS and ABA/CEELI during their Kosovo project. As a result of this technology transfer, the Sri Lankan groups will have the human rights information management techniques and technology to contribute to their peace process through the eventual establishment of a “massive, objective and undeniable statistical record of human rights violations” in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

As international involvement in conflict mitigation has increased, the nature of the information required and demanded by the international community has also expanded and changed. A growing need now exists for comprehensive quantitative studies to complement more traditional narrative human rights reporting. The manner in which such conflict mapping is undertaken should serve not only to express the conflict and its major trends and effects in quantitative and statistical terms, but also to transfer important skills and technology. The very process of the study should include a concerted training and transfer effort to empower local NGOs in communities affected by the conflict.

The growing interventionist tendencies of the international community and its concomitant emphasis on accountability require a focus on both documenting mass human rights abuses and building local capacity for seeking accountability. This focus must engage the efforts of human rights and development NGOs. The success of, and lessons to be learned from, projects like the CEELI/AAAS project in Kosovo suggest that closer cooperation between multilateral institutions and NGOs is crucial. Prospective projects, such as the one in Sierra Leone, also demonstrate the need for this cooperation if multilateral institutions and NGOs are to effectively assist conflict mitigation efforts.

That a sea of change in international relations and the application of international human rights principles is upon us is no longer the subject of debate. Rather, the challenge now facing governments, multilateral institutions, foundations, and nongovernmental organizations around the world is one of collaboration and innovation. Intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations must begin to explore new means of collaborating, even if doing so means opening previously closed bureaucracies. The decision of the Sierra Leonean government provides both an example and opportunity to begin this exploration. Within the nongovernmental community, organizations and individuals must pursue technological solutions and other original ideas and mechanisms as a means of making this type of collaboration more efficient and effective. International actors should share their experiences and innovations widely and promote the creative use of their advances in support of international accountability mechanisms and the rule of law generally. Parochialism in human rights reporting and development dilutes scarce resources in the field and undermines shared goals. 🌐

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