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Construction for development (but also for security?)

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ABSTRACT AND KEY WORDS

Historically, infrastructure has been one of the more important drivers of economic and social progress for all countries. What is less recognised, however, is the role that infrastructure can play to bring about stability and peace in post-conflict environments. This is because there has been an implicit tendency to assume that restoring infrastructure services in the immediate aftermath of war is impossible. But recent international peace efforts, to stabilise war-torn countries, particularly in Africa, have clearly demonstrated the need to invest in infrastructure from early-on to build a peace that lasts. This is especially relevant if one considers that the lack of service delivery is commonly acknowledged to be a fundamental cause of conflict and instability in a number of African states, in so far as ordinary citizens often engage in violent activities to escape poverty and the lack of state goods and services. This paper proposes that improving national infrastructure networks and enhancing service delivery to ordinary people may be an important strategy for the international community and for Africa to help prevent, reduce or manage violent conflict. In this regard, the study highlights four major challenges that Africa should address to operationalise post-conflict reconstruction.

KEY WORDS

Construction, Reconstruction, Development, Security

INTRODUCTION

Historically, infrastructure has been one of the more important drivers of economic and social progress for all countries. Indeed, the importance of infrastructure in promoting development, trade, investment, industrialisation, and innovation is unquestionable (Black *et al.* 2005: 1-2) What is less recognised, however, is the role that infrastructure can play to bring about stability and peace in post-conflict environments. This is

because security has normally been viewed as a precursor for peace and development—that is, there has been an implicit tendency to assume that restoring infrastructure services in the immediate aftermath of war is impossible.

But recent international peace efforts to stabilise war-torn countries, such as East Timor, Kosovo, and Sierra Leone, have clearly demonstrated the need to invest in infrastructure from early-on to build a peace that lasts. Because of this, the traditional dichotomy between providing short-term security and long-term development is in question, and building the requisite capabilities to undertake better reconstruction operations has now become a fashionable policy topic. For instance, Mudawi Ibrahim Adam, head of the Sudan Social Development Organisation, a human-rights group that monitors the violence in Darfur, was recently quoted in a *Newsweek* article as saying, “Simply putting more military troops [in Darfur], or better troops, is not much of a solution....they will have some effect in lessening the violence, but only for a while” (Adam 2006: 4). Likewise, the current Deputy-Minister of Health, Ms Nozizwe Madlala-Roudledge (2004), remarked on one occasion that peacekeeping failures could partly be attributed to the international community’s preoccupation with establishing the military security of the state, whereas this effort should run concurrently with an equally vital aspect of an overall peace plan, which is the commitment to socio-economic development, infrastructure investment, and human security.

While it is encouraging to note that strategic debates on reconstruction are looking to improve the effectiveness of international responses to conflict, the situation on the ground unfortunately remains gloomy. Violent conflicts—particularly in Africa—keep smouldering below a deceptive surface of shuttle diplomacy and military peacekeeping. Often, in the immediate aftermath of major conflict, humanitarian and development aid can take months to arrive, support for international attempts to rebuild war-torn countries at the grass-roots level is jeopardised from the very start, and popular demand for peace and reform is low. Meanwhile, direct war damage to critical infrastructure, and the neglect of human capital and infrastructure maintenance during war, has left several national governments with deteriorated, sometimes non-existent capacity to provide security, health, power, and jobs—essential ingredients for any post-conflict setting (Binnendijk and Johnson 2004: 27). Importantly, the failure or inability of state institutions to provide infrastructure and deliver public services is widely acknowledged as a key cause of conflict and disorder in Africa, in so far as ordinary citizens often engage in alternative forms of wealth creation, usually violence and crime, to escape poverty and the lack of state goods and services.

With this in mind, the central theme of this study is that unwinding armed conflict means not only going after those involved (difficult enough as this is anyway), but also lifting people out of poverty and promoting real economic growth and social upliftment. This implies many things, of which

perhaps the more critical (and controversial) is that the provision of baseline infrastructure and basic services should begin promptly—ideally concurrently—with the end military peacekeeping. If not, the disillusioned and the disempowered are more likely to support ‘generous’ warlords than internationally-brokered peace agreements that may offer little but starvation and sometimes a wage.

THE PROBLEM: CHANGING THE FACE OF VIOLENT CONFLICT IN AFRICA

The importance of socio-economic infrastructure to modern society is fairly obvious: it provides the basis for human capital, the provision of state goods and services, and enables the creation and functioning of public and private institutions (Paterson 2006). That said, a number of states in Africa have inadequate infrastructure networks to support the delivery of basic services. Some have no government or army worthy of the name, no police force, and show only a limited inclination in providing any kind of public services to their citizens.

The corrosive effects of fragile, collapsed, or non-existent government in Africa (and elsewhere) are numerous and have been well-documented. Thus, to avoid the prospect of rehashing familiar arguments, it suffices to say that much attention has been given to the connection between the exploitation of resources and the perpetuation of armed conflict. This relationship has given rise to what some have called a ‘war economy’—a system based on violence in which profit is generated not out of a final military victory (much like a civilian economy in times of war) but out of war itself. Typically, violent conflict is concentrated near resources-rich areas so that warring parties can indiscriminately extract and trade resources to willing buyers on the global market for weapons and other supplies to sustain hostilities. It is also true that many destructive battles take place near income generating infrastructure, such as harbours, airports, markets, bridges and road junctions, since resources need to be transported for export.

Ordinary citizens have adapted and coped in different ways to the preoccupation of governments with financial gain and conflict and lack of concern for providing basic services, security, and employment. Some entrepreneurial individuals have relied on small-scale trading of valuable and portable commodities (e.g. diamonds, coltan, coffee,) in the black market to maintain reasonable levels of economic satisfaction. Others have sought the personal favour of corrupt leaders to secure exemption from the lack or exclusion of public goods and services. As in the case of all poorly regulated societies, the decision to support such leaders (and hence resorting to a life of violence and crime) is nothing more than a lucrative job opportunity and way to escape poverty (Nitzsche 2003: 7).

The interdependency between war and economy in Africa suggests a key strategy to rebalance the scales between conflict and peace in favour

of the latter. Peacekeeping and enforcement alone cannot bring about peace; if they did, the international community, in particular the United Nations (UN), would have already brought the problem of conflict and disorder in Africa under control. In addition to protecting civilians from harms-way, international actors should also provide alternative economic avenues for those participating in the war economy. This is a critical point, in so far as warring actors often provide informal social safety-nets for local communities to attract labour in resource-rich areas and/or to maintain sufficient levels of popular support to sustain hostilities against competing actors. A telling example of this is the recent situation in Somalia in which a loose coalition of Islamic groups, the Islamic Court Union (ICU), seized the capital Mogadishu after weeks of bloody fighting and quickly established local support by dismantled roadblocks in the city (greatly increasing freedom of movement and general security) and restoring some services (Hassan 2005)

Obviously, international sustained efforts to promote development and infrastructure investment will be difficult in areas where armed attacks are frequent. The experiences in countries, such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Somalia, where warlords and militia have controlled most of the country, and where the international community has been unwilling or unable to send a strong force, suggest that doing development in dangerous environments is simply unrealistic. But experience has also shown that the window of opportunity for reconstruction to start is very narrow: the first few months—if not weeks—following an intervention are perhaps the more critical period for laying the groundwork for development¹ and establishing the credibility of peacekeepers (Ahtisaari 2004). Conversely, credibility and political momentum lost during this critical period can be difficult to regain, especially if widespread expectations (and international promises) of improved standards of living are not sufficiently met.

In sum, changing the face of war in Africa, *inter alia*, requires understanding the importance of utilising development as both a ‘pre-war’ and ‘post-war’ strategy, aiming at both the prevention and cure of the underlying causes of conflict. In practice, this means that humanitarian and development practitioners, to the extent possible, should operate side-by-side with soldiers on the ground to create the economic incentives for individuals and communities to support peace processes over the long-haul.

¹ ‘Groundwork’ is the operative word as short-term interventions must always complement long-term commitments.

THE FIRST BIG CHALLENGE: SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS, EMBRACING NEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The idea of putting in place critical infrastructure into what has traditionally been seen as 'military peacekeeping space' raises significant issues in terms of the way the international community has normally responded to violent conflict. As mentioned before, a fundamental assumption of modern peace interventions is that military security is a priority, based on the pervasive notion that reconstruction and development can only start once fighting between warring parties has completely stopped. But a UN study of the overall effectiveness of international peace efforts in Africa and beyond reveals that no amount of diplomatic mediation or military coercion will win the peace if people, especially the youth, have no alternative livelihood to that of the army or militia groups (United Nations 2000). In other words, safe and secure environments are necessary, but not a sufficient ingredient for reconstruction; and persistent conditions of insecurity prevent sustainable reconstruction and development.

Achieving the rapid delivery of infrastructure and basic services in the period following major conflict may therefore be an important strategy to establish an enduring peace. This effort, however, poses a great analytical and technical challenge for both civilian and military planners. As Stephenson (2006) points out, "civilian practitioners of foreign assistance often take the long view, based upon years of experience. By contrast, the military is mission-oriented and tends to [resolve] a problem with the objective of overcoming it as quickly as possible". While both views are important, it may be necessary for soldiers and civilians to reconcile traditionally different planning procedures in order to make rapid and demonstrable results in post-conflict settings and win the support and trust from local residents, even if this means operating in theatres where the mix between conflict and peace is likely to shift back and forth.

To some extent, this line of thinking is supported by a study conducted by Schwarz *et al* (2004) which looked at the role of infrastructure in post-conflict countries. In essence, the authors explained that post-conflict countries usually attract a significant amount of international aid immediately after conflict and so tend to experience a period of rapid economic growth, usually within the first six years or so after conflict. Because of this, the study proposed that fragile post-conflict societies would greatly benefit from sustained investment in infrastructure during this critical time—something that the investment community has, till now, been cautious to do (Schwarz *et al* 2004: 12-13).

THE SECOND BIG CHALLENGE: ENHANCING NATIONAL CAPACITIES FOR RECONSTRUCTION

After the shooting stops, the question still remains unanswered as to who in Africa will (want to) undertake reconstruction programmes in fragile post-conflict settings. At present, Africa's capacity to plan for and undertake reconstruction is, at best, weak and ineffectual. Accordingly, reconstruction has generally involved powerful international actors, like the UN Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This has meant, for better or for worse, that reconstruction assessments have been more inclined to serve the interests and priorities of outside actors (not least, the financial requirements of international contractors and service providers) as opposed to focusing on building local and regional capacity for post-conflict reconstruction.

In Sudan, for example, the African Union (AU) was unable to make its own assessment of the country's development needs following the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement in 2004. Instead, Africa's efforts in Sudan have primarily focused on supporting the reconstruction programme, dubbed the Joint Assessment Mission (JAM), developed by the UNDP and World Bank. Today, it can regrettably be reported that the JAM has little, if any, local buy-in from local residents (especially those situated in Southern Sudan), and has not made a significant impact in addressing Sudan's development malaise.

The point is, the AU and its member states will remain at the mercy of international agendas and priorities until a concerted and sustained effort is made by Africa to develop a robust capacity for reconstruction. Unfortunately, few states in Africa have paid sufficient attention to the need to systematically enhance their capacities for reconstruction. The reasons for this lack of investment are not hard to find. The more obvious of these, perhaps, is that protecting the national interest has always been more important than responding to international humanitarian crisis. In other words: why bother developing or enhancing national capabilities for reconstruction when outside humanitarian concerns do not directly threaten the national interest? Also, in the likely event that such concerns do threaten national security, a basic operational principle underpinning international peacekeeping has been to achieve military stability, and then worry later about reconstruction. In other words: if security is a pre-requisite for development, why should public (and private) institutions concern themselves with providing developmental assistance when donor agencies and the international community can probably do a better job?

The net effect of these and other issues, amongst other things, has meant that reconstruction has not been regarded as a core *function* of government. This view is gradually changing, however. The United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) have recently formed new government units to build the requisite capabilities for international reconstruction operations. Canada, Australia, France, and a

number of other European countries are reported to following suit (Cordova 2005). Likewise, the UN recently unveiled the Peacebuilding Commission, a “new advisory body aiming to shore up wobbly peace agreements...and to help prevent war-ravaged countries from lapsing back into deadly conflict” (Annan 2006).

Unfortunately, the same sense of urgency to enhance national reconstruction capabilities is lacking in Africa, this despite the fact that issues such as corruption, bad governance, lack of the rule of law and respect for human rights, have long been considered as being anathema to the continent’s development agenda and the achievement of the Millennium Developmental Goals. The challenge then remains to translate lofty policy commitments (such as the AU’s Policy Framework for Reconstruction and Development) into concrete tools that can contribute toward preventing the outbreak or renewal of war, and transform previously weak states into viable sovereign entities. This effort no doubt will take some time to develop seeing as, for example, most countries in Africa, barring a few exceptions, have not even conducted *status quo* reviews of the quality and quantity of their construction industries, and therefore remain largely oblivious to important human resource and technical gaps for reconstruction. A number of others, furthermore, do not have any systems in place to systematically identify (let alone deploy) construction companies and experts from within or outside government that can deal effectively and professionally with broken states.

THE THIRD BIG CHALLENGE: INVOLVING THE (AFRICAN) PRIVATE SECTOR

In the last decade, there has been an increasingly strong international shift toward private sector contracting for reconstruction, mainly because governments and multinational institutions have not, until now, established dedicated mechanisms responsible for assisting countries with reconstruction. That said, private companies throughout the world chose to become involved in reconstruction for two key reasons: first, to make extraordinary profits through the implementation of major international reconstruction projects (think Iraq); and secondly, to create new environments conducive for doing business. This form of developmental assistance is similar to the practice of public-private partnerships—where government share risks and responsibility with local private firms but ultimately retain control of infrastructure assets (Farlam 2005: 1)—but differs in the sense that it includes an international capacity-building dimension .

Again, powerful international companies dominate the reconstruction playing fields. Kellogg Brown & Root (KBR), for example, has a dedicated unit, the Project Management and Reconstruction division, responsible for integrating and rapidly deploying the resources and personnel needed to plan, design, engineer, construct and manage major

reconstruction projects around the world. KBR's record in Iraq for example, though steeped in much controversy,² has been impressive. Since the invasion in 2003, the company has deployed around 50, 000 civilian contractors throughout Iraq to support more than 150,000 military troops through the US Army's Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP³). And besides the company's (more lucrative) involvement in restoring Iraq's oil and gas infrastructure, KBR has also played a significant role in rebuilding Iraq, one of the largest and most complex reconstruction undertakings of the past half century. Overall, the most striking aspect of KBR's operations has been its ability to deploy massive amounts of resources and personnel at very short notice, often in environments where only soldiers dare to operate.

Africa has no company comparable to KBR. The obvious question then is: is it only a matter of time before big international companies like KBR move into Africa to profit from the continent's fertile grounds of disorder and destruction? While it is perhaps too early to make firm predictions, one thing is almost certain: the international privatisation of local peace efforts could spell potential disaster for Africa's weakest states, not only because international companies are guided by their own needs (i.e. to maximise profits), but also because they are invariably guided by the interests of the states that back them. This is not to say that African companies are less influenced by money or politics, which of course they are. The point is rather that the latter have a vested interest in backing *African* politics and economics.

Significantly, there are some positive signs in Africa of inter-regional cooperation between governments and big businesses to improve infrastructure and enhance service delivery. A telling example of this is the work that the South African-based company Gold Fields is currently doing in Ghana. According to Gold Field officials, the company has since 2000 been actively involved in building and maintaining infrastructure networks (roads, electricity grids) and providing basic services (health, education, water) to local communities (Willie 2005). Both sides appear to be benefiting from this arrangement given that Gold Fields needs good infrastructure to operate its mines in an efficient and effective manner, and

² In 2003, KBR's contracts became a matter of public discourse when the US Congress revealed that the company, prior to the invasion in Iraq, was awarded no-bid contracts by the US Army i.e. that normal procurement procedures were bypassed to contract a single company, without competition. Moreover, these contracts are cost-plus: the US government reimburses KBR for its costs, and then KBR adds on a profit of 2 per cent to 7 per cent on these costs. Critics have charged that this arrangement creates a perverse incentive: more spending leads to more profits.

³ LOGCAP is a US Army initiative for peacetime planning for the use of civilian contractors in wartime and other contingencies. The agreement between the US government and KBR is valid for ten years (until 2011), and stipulates that the company must assure a presence in a theatre of operations within 72 hours of notification and the supply of service and logistical support for around 25,000 men anywhere in the world within two weeks.

the Ghanaian government is (ostensibly) providing critical infrastructure to its citizens. It is interesting to note that Gold Fields has partly secured local buy-in for its activities—a key principle for reconstruction—by funding the Ghana national soccer team with a donation of over US\$1 million.

THE FOURTH BIG CHALLENGE: GREATER COORDINATION

The need for the international community to look at reconstruction in a strategic way, aiming at integrated systems of planning and delivery, is widely acknowledged but generally missing. In fact, behind the current propositions for better reconstruction operations, international actors—public and private—still differ widely in terms of priority settings, resource allocation, specific objectives, and time-horizons when conducting operations. Regrettably, the lack of coordinated international efforts has prevented otherwise sound reconstruction strategies from being converted into concrete achievements. (Other problems include, as always, sustained international funding and commitment). This ongoing problem necessitates developing dedicated platforms for deliberation and decision-making around development and service delivery. To this end, the UN has already undertaken significant steps towards improving coordination among different reconstruction actors (working under very different budget regimes and planning procedures) by establishing the Peacebuilding Commission in December 2005.

Increased international cooperation for reconstruction, however, will not be an insurance policy against the threat of failed states in Africa. Of course, outside assistance for reconstruction (especially money) will always be important, but ultimately Africa should be left in charge to determine the range of tasks when rebuilding a country. However, as hinted before, many African states have limited means to coordinate and undertake reconstruction tasks. In time, they probably will, but, in the interim, something must be done to address this 'capacity gap'. A good start, perhaps, would be for national governments to encourage the private sector, universities, science councils, and other centres of excellence to become more involved in rebuilding Africa's dysfunctional states, and for these actors to work together under a common strategic framework. In this way, Africa stands a better chance of developing home-grown scientific and technological solutions for post-conflict reconstruction—a critical first step for making reconstruction a reality in Africa in the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to explain that, without post-conflict reconstruction, societies emerging from war will struggle to maintain peace and security and promote development. The provision of infrastructure has

an important role to play here. Not only is infrastructure important for development in the more general sense of the term, but also for creating an enabling environment for development to start when the shooting stops. And while the lack of security in post-conflict communities may make infrastructure providers reluctant to undertake development work in these areas, paradoxically these are often the areas which have experienced significant levels of infrastructure destruction and—critically—where violent conflict is more likely to re-emerge.

So, to avoid the possibility of people taking-up arms during peace negotiations, a timely effort is needed by reconstruction practitioners to provide employment, restore power and telecommunication systems, build or rehabilitate roads, maintain a steady supply of safe water, and supply other critical services. This effort will help to create jobs and tap local expertise, and also provide local populations with concrete alternatives other than relying on violence and crime for sustenance. This point cannot be overstressed: without sufficient local demand for peace and reform, efforts to re-build broken states will, in all likelihood, fail.

What role can the construction industry play in this regard? Although the answer to this pertinent question falls beyond the scope of this paper, the arguments presented in the discussion do justify additional research in exploring in greater detail the potential advantages of construction firms becoming (more) involved in post-conflict settings. For instance, it may be worthwhile for researchers in the construction industry to look at combining labour-intensive construction methods with rapid construction ones. This would be of particular importance for those concerned with finding practical solutions to the long hiatus that is often experienced by conflict-ridden societies in need of critical infrastructure, alternative employment opportunities, and increased economic integration.

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