NGOs and conflict prevention in Central Asia

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IN A CONTEXT of declining human security and a possibly a growing threat of militarised conflict or violent social conflict, what role can non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play in conflict prevention? The answer to this question depends partly on how one defines human security. Is security understood as purely the prevention of militarised violence? In which case it belongs within the realm of 'high politics', the preserve of state rather than non-state actors like NGOs. Or can security be more broadly defined and

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involve more positive dimensions, including access to justice, political participation and sustainable livelihoods? This may take us into the 'low politics' of society and the domain of a much broader range of actors, including NGOs. Tensions between these differing understandings of security have played themselves out in Central Asia over the past decade and have been reflected in diverging and sometimes contradictory international policies toward the region. In the post-September 11th reordering of the geo-political landscape, these contradictions have been heightened.

Declining human security

The Ferghana Valley is located in the interstices of the former Soviet republics of Krygyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It is 350 km long and 100 km wide. Because of a complex mix of factors, the Ferghana Valley has

been viewed as a potential flashpoint and incubator of violent conflict. Whilst the causes and dynamics of security/insecurity vary, between and within the different Central Asian republics, some common patterns can be identified. First, there are security concerns at the regional and inter-state levels. As well as the de-stabilising influence of Afghanistan, the Central Asia republics have had to contend with a legacy of unresolved issues from the Soviet era relating to the definition of borders, and resources such as water, which straddle these borders.

Second, non-state actors, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan

(IMU) and Hizb ut-Tahrir, are challenging the legitimacy of the state and, in the case of the IMU, its monopoly over the means of violence. Such groups have access to funding, particularly with the growth of a criminalised parallel economy in the region. They also have a steady stream of new recruits, aided in part by growing state repression.

Third, there is the threat of societal violence as a result of the profound human distress caused by the political and economic transition. Secure entitlements to employment, pensions, education and health care provided during the Soviet period have been eroded. Literacy levels are declining and levels of inequality growing. Poverty by itself may not be a cause of conflict, but horizontal inequalities, such as deprivation that coincides with group identities such as ethnicity, may be mobilised by political entrepreneurs. This has happened in the past—for example, in Osh in

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Southern Kyrgzstan in 1992–and remains a threat today.

Borderland areas such as the Ferghana Valley may be particularly vulnerable to instability. They are 'contested zones' where the greed and grievance dynamics are most likely to play themselves out. Poverty, exclusion and repression have turned them into incubators of grievance. Their borderland status also means they have become zones of opportunity where the drug economy, for instance, flourishes beyond the control of the state. They have also had an historically ambiguous relationship with the state and have become a magnet for potential dissidents.

The role of NGOs

How have international policies accounted for and interacted with the dynamics of security/insecurity in the region? If one adopts a broader definition of human security, certain policies have made the context less secure. For instance, particularly since September 11th, there has been increased and unconditional support for military aid, counter-terrorism, narcotics and border controls in Central Asian regimes. A shift in focus toward hard security and 'greed' as a motivation for violence, at the expense of policies designed to address grievance, may accelerate the dynamics outlined above. Development policies may also have inadvertently opened up opportunities for self-enrichment or 'greed'–poorly conceived privatisation programmes have played into the hands of rent-seeking elites, which in turn contributes to the growing grievances of the excluded majority. Dogmatic policy prescriptions about state reform have contributed to the legitimacy crisis of the state by undermining core welfare functions, such as health and education.

Therefore, conflict prevention responses have tended to be guided by a very narrow conceptualisation of 'security', while development responses have often been 'conflict blind'.

What role can NGOs play in such a context? Can their activities contribute to conflict prevention or management? Donors certainly seem to think so. They have encouraged NGOs to extend their focus beyond 'development' or 'civil society strengthening' into conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The Ferghana Valley has become the focus for a 'cottage industry' of conflict analysts, mediation experts and conflict-related NGO programmes.

NGOs, it is argued, have distinct comparative advantages–including responsiveness, flexibility, outreach ,etc.–enabling them to address societal grievances in borderland areas. NGOs may be less constrained by sovereignty issues than governmental

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or inter-governmental organisations, and can work across borders building links between border communities. One programme taking such an approach is funded by Swiss Development Co-operation and involves a Kyrgyz and Tajik NGO partnership. It focuses on water and land issues, since both have the potential to lead to violent conflict and often require collaboration across borders. There is a dual aim of responding to concrete needs, while building capacities to manage conflict. In the longer term, the programme aims to support the development of local governance–it is assumed that by strengthening the 'voice' of communities, they will be able to make greater demands on the state, ultimately leading to greater responsiveness and accountability.

What do we know about the impact of NGO programmes on the dynamics of conflict and peace in the region? The short answer is very little.

Tracing and attributing impacts is notoriously difficult, particularly if you look beyond the local level at impacts on human security in its widest sense. Do multiple interventions at the micro level–for example mediation over water or land disputes–have a cumulative impact? To an extent, such interventions may 'conflict proof' communities in the sense that they may be less vulnerable to manipulation by political entrepreneurs.

However, anecdotal evidence suggests that NGO programmes are 'less than the sum of their parts' because they are often piece-meal, based on short-term project funding, and consequently have only transitory impacts. NGOs do have an important role to play in borderland areas, particularly in the area of information collection and early warning, but one should keep their role in perspective. There has been a tendency in Central Asia to support them on ideological grounds rather than on hard evidence of performance. USAID, for example, has made it a point of principle to avoid working with government, in the belief that 'civil society' (which in practice has meant NGOs) and the market will lead the transition to a market economy and democracy. As our analysis above suggests, violent conflict is likely to be the result of particular synergies between 'greed' and 'grievance'.

The state is at the heart of these processes; states that have been systematically undermined as a point of policy are less able to mediate tensions, manage conflicting interests and redistribute public and private goods. Ultimately, human security in the region will depend on the development of energetic, strong developmental states. ∎

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