



World Public Sector Report 2018

Realizing the SDGs in post-conflict situations: Challenges for the State

Chapter brief



Background

Chapter 7 of the World Public Sector Report 2018 explores the challenges to realizing the SDGs in post-conflict situations and their implications for integrated approaches that advance both sustainable development and peace.

The term “post-conflict” continues to lack a universally accepted definition. The difficulty is defining the “conflict” conditions and establishing when a conflict starts and when it ends. More recently, the essential links between institutional weakness, governance, and violence have been captured in the concept of “fragility”.

Conflict and its aftermath make the realisation of all the SDGs more difficult than in countries not affected by conflict. In particular, each of the targets of SDG 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies is made more difficult, because public institutions and public administration have usually suffered heavily from conflict. Conflict can completely disintegrate institutions that are taken for granted in stable contexts (e.g. central bank, civil service, etc.). In some cases, the reach of the central government may not extend to the entire country. Even if institutions exist, their functioning is challenged by the destruction of human capacity and physical infrastructure.

Importantly, the realisation of sectoral SDGs also needs to be approached differently in post-conflict countries. Sectors such as education, infrastructure, health, social protection, and basic services are not only likely to be affected by conflict; they can be critical tools that contribute to addressing grievances from different groups and help re-start economic and social development on a sustainable path.

Challenges of prioritization in post-conflict contexts

In general, post-conflict countries have to deal simultaneously with three categories of issues: securing quick gains; restoring basic functions of the State; and progressing toward sustainable development. The three sets of priorities are interrelated, and have to be considered simultaneously. However, adopting integrated strategies and policies is more complicated than in other contexts. The task of prioritizing and allocating resources among SDG areas faces competition from the two other sets of priorities. This happens in contexts of low national budgets, linked with narrow fiscal space, lower fiscal base due to destroyed assets and low revenue mobilization capacity in public administration, often coupled with extensive debt, all of which limit the ability to address multiple priorities. Limited resources may be compounded by corruption and illicit financial and capital flows, which themselves may fuel further conflict.

The primacy of politics and the critical importance of inclusion

Experts underline that inclusion, in a political sense, is at the center of all efforts to build sustainable peace and development. If exclusion generated conflict in the first place, not addressing it is likely to lead to recurrence of conflict. Thus, inclusion stands out both as a goal and an outcome-driven “strategy” for achieving development and sustaining peace.

A critical test to the sustainability of post-conflict settlements is whether the terms of peace agreements are effectively translated in the national legal framework. Beyond the “deal-making” aspect of political settlements processes to end conflict, in the long run the most important is to transform the national political culture. If the political culture remains unchanged, or if political institutions are captured by elites, new institutions are not by themselves going to change political outcomes.

National ownership of the post-conflict development path needs to be inclusive and involve a broad set of stakeholders to create a sense of belonging and inclusion, regardless of political differences. Moreover, promoting institutionalized capacities and collaboration to identify, and address grievance can help avoid relapse into conflict.

Using the SDGs to align strategies and actions

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda may facilitate integrated approaches to post-conflict situations. This is because of the broad scope of the SDGs, which encompasses areas that are critical to all the components of post-conflict interventions, from humanitarian action to rebuilding of the basic capacity of the State to longer-term development. Yet, developing integrated policies that build on the synergies among the SDGs is daunting in post-conflict contexts. Countries may prioritize and sequence SDG adoption in their national and local development plans based on ‘suitability’, with potentially negative effects if the ‘suitability’ picking is driven by political economy imperatives and is not decided in an inclusive manner.

Several countries have used the SDGs as a framework to align their long-term development strategies and plans, as well as other instruments such as budget processes. Among countries having suffered from conflict, Chad, Colombia, Sierra Leone, the Solomon Islands and Somalia offer examples of how linkages with the SDGs were made in national plans and strategies.

Rebuilding public administration after conflict

Capable, effective and inclusive institutions and public administration, in addition to being consubstantial to a fully functioning State, are also instrumental to addressing both short-term and long-term development challenges. They help to shape

an integrated national vision for sustainable development and peace, ensure responsive public service delivery (including justice and security) and look beyond post-conflict peacebuilding.

Building or reforming institutions can affect existing power structures, which makes it de facto a political process. In peace-making processes as well as post conflict, significant power lies in the hands of the actors that control state institutions. Elites often have a vested interest in keeping economic and political power – this can be offset by building coalitions to get a critical mass of agents of change.

Departing from past approaches that encouraged focusing efforts on institutional capacity before addressing institutional challenges, countries in post-conflict settings have addressed effectiveness and accountability alongside other key recovery efforts, including anti-corruption efforts.

Even more than in countries not affected by conflict, public institutions and public administration in post-conflict countries must be committed to inclusion and to the imperative of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. Public administration constitutes a key instrument and channel for inclusion. Public servants have to be open to the idea of co-production with civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders. In doing so, they need to leverage on champions within society who may be ready to take risks while promoting dialogue and inclusion.

The critical importance of budget processes

Particularly in post conflict settings, effective management of the national budget is critical to ensure policy implementation, as well as for enhanced state legitimacy and accountability. A coherent, country-owned national programme that promotes integrated financial management approaches and directs investments to typically underserved areas of the administrative backbones of ministries (such as human resources, administration, procurement, operations, etc.) was found to be key in bolstering national capacity, for instance, in Timor-Leste and Afghanistan.

External actors all have different agendas, which may not match the government's or other stakeholders' priorities. Because of their systemic importance in post-conflict settings, this often creates an additional challenge to integration. A coherent country vision, national sustainable development strategy and implementation plan can help aligning external intervention to country priorities.

Horizontal integration in post-conflict contexts

Adopting horizontal policy integration strategies is critical in post-conflict contexts. Rwanda, Timor-Leste and Nepal, for example, have promoted institutional coordination across sectors for implementing more integrated national sustainable development strategies. The Colombian Government has created a high-level inter-ministerial commission for developing the SDG implementation strategy and action plan at national and regional levels. In the Solomon Islands, the Ministry of National Unity Reconciliation and Peace was specifically created to emphasize the importance of peacebuilding for the country's social and economic development.

Vertical integration in post-conflict contexts

Ensuring coherence and integration between national and sub-national levels of government is more challenging in post-conflict contexts, where local interests and powers may resist central authority. Building coalitions at the local level where the State works with community leaders may help prevent further violence.

Devolving power to local governments - decentralization - is not always a solution to vertical integration. Supporting local governments at the expense of strengthening the central government may in the long run lead to negative outcomes. If decentralization is implemented, it should be well managed (impeding local elites capture among others) to support improved linkages between central and local authorities and cohesion. The integration of action at the national and sub-national levels may be enhanced through compacts or other accountability frameworks between the central government and local authorities.

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a key factor in successful post-conflict governance. Engaging all social groups allows shaping a common vision for a country's future that reflects people aspirations and needs. The development of national SDG implementation strategies and action plans provides an opportunity for non-State actors to be involved, and to hold governments answerable for their implementation them. Participatory budgeting, in particular, has been promoted in some post-conflict contexts to empower local communities.

The United Nations has been emphasizing the importance of giving voice to the minority groups, enhance their participation in reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts and become invested in post-conflict public administration. Public administrations, at all levels, have a key role to establish institutional arrangements in this respect.

Gender equality is also critical for preventing armed conflict and attaining peaceful and sustainable development for all. Effective engagement strategies ensure equality of rights and power relations and opportunities between men and women. This includes addressing socio-cultural barriers and barriers posed by lack of education, access to land and other productive sources, disproportionate care burdens women face in the aftermath of conflict, and promoting women empowerment.

Allowing youth to express their needs and aspirations and engage in decision-making on reconstruction and SDG implementation is key to sustaining peace and development efforts. Experience shows that in post conflict settings, youth can be engaged as champions for SDG implementation and positive agents of change to build sustainable peace, ensure that their aspirations are integral to SDG prioritization processes and have a strong potential to build bridges between communities.

More information

The World Public Sector Report 2018, its Executive Summary and other materials are available on the following website: <https://publicadministration.un.org/en/Research/World-Public-Sector-Reports>