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Non-state Conflict Management

Opportunities and Limits of NGOs Engaging Non-State Armed Groups

For a successful treatment of contemporary wars and conflicts the engagement with non-state armed groups has become of central importance. Non-state armed groups of different type, be it rebel groups or criminal networks, dominate the environment during and after armed conflict in manifold ways: They are responsible for violence against unarmed civilians in breach of international humanitarian law as much as for the establishment of criminal and informal economies typical for post-war societies. On the other hand non-state armed groups are often the expression of social problems for they see themselves as representatives of distinct interests and may build on broad support within the populace. Therefore, non-state armed groups often bear the potential to disturb, undermine, or completely truncate processes of peace and state building, leading violence to flare up again.

A glance at the data delineates the dimensions of the problem: The Uppsala Conflict Data Program registered a total of 122 armed conflicts between 1989 and 2006, of which 89 were intrastate and 26 internationalised intrastate conflicts (Harbom/Wallensteen 2007). In these conflicts at least one non-state actor – such as a rebel group – is involved but normally multiple militant groups will be implicated. Thus, the Human Security Report 2005 and the Human Security Brief 2007 mention “non-state conflict” as a category, which involves violent encounters between non-state actors only (Human Security Centre 2005, 2007). There is no database that sheds light on the approximate total of armed groups but the IISS Military Balance 2007 serves as an indicator: It lists 345 armed non-state actors in all regions of the world (Hackett 2007: 422-438).

In view of this it becomes indispensable for peace studies to learn about the possibilities and chances of success of strategies and concepts regarding an interaction with non-state armed groups. The aim is to systematically analyse the existing experience with such interaction. The project seeks a contribution to this aim and focuses on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in this arena. Non-governmental organisations are active in the world's crisis or conflict regions in multiple ways: They provide humanitarian aid, facilitate between parties of conflict and spread distinct norms and values. In their work they are always confronted with non-state armed groups; they need to come to terms with them or are looking for direct contact in order to influence these actors. How this takes place and particularly how this may take place successfully has not been analysed up until now.

Formulation of the Research Question

The planned research project, therefore, analyses the possibilities and limitations of internationally active NGOs to positively influence the behaviour of non-state armed groups in order to support peace processes. The starting point in the argument is the assumption that it is "easier" for NGOs – compared to governments or international organisations – to interact with non-state armed groups as they face questions of state sovereignty and non-intervention to a lesser extent. Therefore, the central questions of the empirical research are:

Under which circumstances and with which methods may NGOs affect non-state armed groups in a way that leads to a change of behaviour and possibly to a renunciation of violence? In how far do forms of non-state conflict management arise from the interaction between NGOs and non-state armed groups?

Furthermore, we expect answers to the following questions:

- (1) Which advantages do NGOs have in comparison to state actors or international organisations in particular?
- (2) What are the limitations of NGOs in the interaction with non-state armed groups? Which are the risks for NGOs as well as for other actors within the peace process?
- (3) What lessons can be drawn from the experiences of NGOs – first and foremost by governments and international organisations – about the interaction with non-state armed groups?

Based on these questions and by means of case studies the project will analyse how international NGOs interact with non-state armed groups in order to on the one hand systematise approaches and strategies of NGOs, and on the other hand derive a basic framework for success on the basis of a comparison between successes and failures. By NGOs we generally understand non-profit organisations, which are formally independent from directions of a state, operate for a specific timeframe, follow declarative goals in the public interest, and dispose of a distinct organisational structure (Gordenker et. al. 1996: 20-21). International NGOs (or INGOs) are additionally defined through transnational operations and connections.

Objectives and Hypotheses

The aim of the research project is the better understanding of the potential that NGOs have for the interaction with non-state armed groups. For this it is necessary to process the manifold positive as well as negative experiences made by NGOs in this area, which are rarely documented or systematically analysed within the organisation. From such an examination we hope to gain generalisable conclusions on the conditions under which NGOs can influence non-state armed groups relatively successfully. This knowledge should also be of meaning to governments and international organisations that work together with NGOs in conflict regions and hot spots, and need to be aware of their possibilities and limitations. Furthermore the question will be posed whether distinct forms of interaction may be transferred to other settings that state actors are involved in and how a sensible “division of labour” between NGOs and others may look like, respectively.

The project, thus, leads to various recommendations relevant for practice with regard to the cooperation between different external actors in view of non-state armed groups.

The following hypotheses lead the analysis, based on the above mentioned questions:

- (1) We assume the development of private-private partnerships based on cooperation between NGOs and non-state armed groups, which go beyond selective contacts or agreements, are established over a longer period of time, and result in a form of trusting cooperation.
- (2) We assume that the success of such constellations is dependent on four groups of factors – firstly, on the general environment; secondly, on the particular attributes of the NGO; thirdly, on the attributes of the particu-

lar non-state armed group; and fourthly, on the quality of interaction between both sides.

- (3) We assume that the chances of success for NGOs is not least dependent on the type of non-state armed groups, meaning that NGOs are more successful in view of some actors (such as rebel groups) than of others (such as criminals).
- (4) We assume that NGOs dispose of special access, instruments and methods, which are not at the disposal of state or intergovernmental actors, which is why NGOs have comparative advantages (for example through their long-term commitment in hot spots or through their cooperation with local NGOs).
- (5) We assume that NGOs are restricted in their possibilities and in need of implicit or explicit support by other actors because they may not have the capability to assure the implementation of agreements.
- (6) We assume that NGO operations bear certain risks and dilemmas, which may affect others and influence the whole process counter-productively. Among those risks and dilemmas are the instrumentalisation by non-state armed groups, the political-symbolical upvaluation of armed actors, the ambivalent effect of neutrality and impartiality, as well as questions of legitimacy and the mandate of NGOs in such contexts.

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