

Non-State Conflict Management Opportunities and Limits of NGOs Engaging Non-State Armed Groups

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On Wednesday 22nd October 2008, the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform hosted its first informal lunchtime seminar. This type of event, as part of the Platform's roles as a knowledge platform and forum for dialogue, showcases relevant peacebuilding work and research to the Geneva community. In this case, the work showcased was that of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP – from its German name Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik), who are beginning a research project into NGO engagement with Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs).

Two of the project researchers, who were visiting Geneva in order to meet with various NGOs as part of the study, gave a short presentation introducing their work. It was emphasized that the project is still at a very early stage, and so rather than discussing findings, they focused on the definitional and theoretical frameworks within which they would be working. Thus, they outlined a broad definition of Non-State Armed Groups, within which a more detailed typology of Weberian ideal-types was suggested. Parallel to this was a typology of NGO engagement with such groups, categorized both by time scale and by directness of interaction. The study will deploy these within a third framework – that of the nature of the environment in which the interaction takes place, in terms of state action, the nature of the conflict, and other factors.

The initial presentation was followed by a lively discussion with the large audience, which included academics, representatives of UN bodies and a wide variety of NGOs, including many with direct experience of engagement with NSAGs. The discussion was varied, with many different topics addressed, at several different levels of analysis.

Much discussion focused on the ideal-type frameworks outlined in the presentation, particularly the categorization of NSAGs. It was pointed out by academics and NGO workers that the typology suggested was overly neat – for example one of the distinction made was between 'politically' and 'economically' motivated groups, a line which is notoriously hard to draw. The question of 'de facto authorities', such as Somaliland, was also raised – whilst these are not recognized states, it is sometimes inappropriate (analytically and politically) to lump them together with rebels and warlords. Indeed, these very terms – which are used as subcategories of NSAGs by the SWP – were challenged as being too politically loaded to function analytically. The SWP representatives pointed out that their ideal-types were intended, not as final theories, but precisely as a starting point for these kinds of discussions and hypothesis-building processes.

Another thread of discussion was around the nature of the research itself, in particular how NGOs were being chosen to speak to. Although an initial list of large international NGOs involved in very direct engagement with NSAGs has been drawn up, the SWP presenters explained that these were simply chosen as a convenient starting point, and that they were also keen to speak to smaller, local NGOs.

Building on the question of the usefulness of the research, one NGO participant asked whether the researchers had yet developed a sense of which strategies for engagement with NSAGs were the most likely to prove successful. This, the researchers said, was not quite the point of the study, which rather intended to examine which strategies worked where and when, and in what context. Thus, the importance of environmental factors – small arms availability was raised as a major issue here – and the motivations of various actors, are the central concern of the study, as these are likely to shape the successes of different forms of engagement on different occasions. As was discussed, however, this is complicated by the interdependence of the various factor influencing success – the motivations for NSAGs to engage positively with NGOs vary from genuine desire for change through to political instrumentalisation of the engagement process, and this depends not only on the nature of the NSAG, but also on the nature of the conflict, the political actions of other parties, environmental factors such as the economy and arms trade, and indeed the actions and nature of the NGO concerned.

It is clear, then, that the issues being studied by the SWP are complex in the extreme, and it was for this reason that they were keen to take part in this seminar, in order to showcase their ideas to a varied and knowledgeable audience. The discussion, as outlined above, was dynamic and provided some insights that will be useful as the SWP take forward their research.