

Knowledge for What: Policy Research on Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building

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Rapporteurs' Notes

Background

On September 12-14, 1999, the Center on International Cooperation at New York University, the International Peace Academy, and the Peace Implementation Network of the Fafo Institute for Applied Social Science sponsored a workshop to discuss the state of the art and application of policy research in conflict prevention and peace-building. Participants included representatives from academia, research institutions, foundations, non-governmental organizations, donor governments, and intergovernmental agencies. The objective of the meeting was three-fold: to examine frankly the purpose and role of research in relation to official conflict management policies; to identify opportunities for more effective collaboration among researchers, with the objective of greater coherence in setting and carrying out a research agenda; and to explore ways that research in this field might increase its practical relevance and policy impact.

The workshop was structured to address three themes in successive breakout and plenary sessions. The first topic, "Research for What?" focused on the purposes of policy research, both explicit and implied; the respective roles of independent and "in-house" research efforts; and obstacles to as well as opportunities for linking research and policy communities more effectively. The second topic, "Setting the Agenda," assessed the role of different actors and forces in shaping the research agenda. The third topic, "From Research to Action," explored measures that might leverage high-quality research to greater practical effect, including the possible creation of a consortium or network uniting researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. The paragraphs below outline some of the major points that emerged from these discussions.

Research for What?

Research Takes Different Forms for Different Objectives

Research takes many forms in the self-described "policy research community," with distinct objectives, methods and implications for the nature and extent of its "impact." One can readily distinguish, for example, between the following:

- 1) **Basic research**, which focuses on the causes and nature of armed conflict. Emphatically analytical, basic research to date has tended not to address issues of obvious operational significance to international actors, although there is much here to be tapped by practitioners. Examples include: Gurr, Marshall, Collier, Stewart.
- 2) **Applied Research, Evaluation, and Active Learning**, which emphasize the causes of policy success and failure. There are analytically "heavy" and "light" versions of applied research, depending on methodological rigor. Examples of the former include: the multi-donor study of Rwanda, CIC Pledges of Aid project, CISAC-IPA study of peace implementation. When conducted explicitly as "evaluation," there is greater emphasis on agency performance and the building of human capital and

expertise within institutions. More heavily analytical applied research tends to focus more on strategic-level causes and effects; its lighter cousin tends to focus more exclusively on tactics.

- 3) **Research as Action**, which uses research as an instrument for conflict resolution. A particularly compelling example of "participatory action-research," is the War-Torn Societies Project (WSP), which seeks to transform sensitive, volatile political issues by bringing antagonists together as partners in cooperative, applied research. Analogously, research among competing international organizations, if properly designed, may be able to build bridges.

Research as Agenda-Setting, which can use various techniques, from data collection through action-research to different forms of dissemination, to give a neglected issue new priority. As one example: the Machel Study Group on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children

The Research - Policy Nexus

A number of factors -- temporal, organizational, political, and strategic -- limit the impact of policy research on practical policymaking in the fields of conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

- a) Collaboration between researchers and policymakers is hindered by the different time frames within which each group operates. Whereas persuasive research generally requires long-term, in-depth analysis, national governments and international organizations grappling with practical questions of conflict prevention and peacebuilding are typically (and often necessarily) crisis-driven. Harried policymakers subject to severe time pressures and responding to fluid environments are rarely able to formulate long-term strategies, much less to internalize the findings of the research community.
- b) Ironically, this first constraint has been worsened by the explosion of research on conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The proliferation of information channels itself presents an obstacle to busy policymakers even when they want to keep up with the latest findings. The research community needs to make knowledge available in more easily digestible formats; it might also consider periodic culling and consolidation of its findings.
- c) Large organizations are resistant to change, particularly when the research points to holistic or multidisciplinary lessons that may overstep formal lines of bureaucratic authority, responsibility, mandates or standard operating procedures.
- d) Policy researchers dramatically underestimate - or flat-out ignore - the barriers to change within organizations, which range from the personal through the bureaucratic to the political. Instead, they tend to assume a technocratic approach to policy in which new knowledge is easily accepted on its technical merits alone.
- e) Few recommendations are likely to be applicable to multiple situations, with the possible exception of process-oriented recommendations. Researchers who are trained to emphasize generalizable results will find it difficult to formulate broad lessons relevant to the diverse circumstances of conflict and post-conflict environments and are more likely to arrive at only conditional generalizations.
- f) The incentive structure within academia does not typically reward policy-relevant research, much less efforts to investigate the connections between such research and subsequent policy impact. In addition, scholars serious about establishing their academic reputation shy from fields where, as just noted, generalizations are hard to come by-and in which theory building may not be the primary objective.

The research community also has only a frail understanding of how "lessons" are actually "learned" within organizations. Scholars have devoted tremendous energy and resources to distilling guidelines for policy-makers from past experience on the assumption that there exist a set of actors and institutions capable of implementing these recommendations. What is needed still is much more nuanced understanding of how the process of policy development, decision and implementation takes place within organizations, both national and multilateral. The research community would do well to add such questions about organizational process and change to its agenda. It might, for example, examine prominent cases of institutional change in the fields of conflict prevention and peace-building, tracing the process of institutional learning that brought this about. From such a foundation, researchers can then design and carry out work more likely to gain a policy audience and become incorporated into policy formulation.

The Importance of Impartiality and Independence in Policy Research

Research is rarely a politically neutral undertaking, particularly in this field, and researchers should remain conscious of the political pressures and dividing lines motivating the study of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The nature of research will be strongly influenced by the institution or organization that undertakes it, with the strongest pressures exerted on analysis undertaken internally. To date, the performance of most "in-house" research entities and lessons learned units has been disappointing. This appears partly to be a factor of the inherent limitations of conducting objective research in-house, and partly a factor of the relatively marginal role of research and evaluation units within organizations.

As a result, outside researchers appear to be in a stronger position to offer objective analyses of (and to make ethical judgments about) the consequences of policy decisions. Unfortunately, external researchers often lack access to full information on which their analysis turns. As noted, they also often under-appreciate unavoidable dilemmas of policymaking and can tend to hector rather than help. Alternatively, external research can easily serve to validate particular policies, meaning that researchers need to exercise strenuous critical judgment and intellectual independence, especially when commissioned by donors to study research questions not solely of their own design.

The relationship between the research community and policymakers (or practitioners) is a delicate one. Independent policy researchers rely on official agencies and organizations for access and information (and increasingly for funding), but their ultimate findings, however constructively intended, can be quite critical. Researchers must weigh the advantages of public versus private criticism and package and disseminate their findings in ways that will promote constructive institutional change. Overall, the implication is that more fruitful forms of collaboration between outsiders and insiders should be developed.'

Setting the Agenda

What Drives Research?

No single actor (or event) has set the research agenda in the fields of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. A number of forces and actors have played a role, including the rise of complex

' For example, in Canada, Internet links were established between academics and foreign policy-makers so that the formers' research could inform policy. An unforeseen but welcome benefit has been the reciprocal impact of practical policy dilemmas in informing the formulation of research agendas.

emergencies in the 1990s, advocacy efforts by transnational and national NGOs, competition between humanitarian and development actors, intellectual entrepreneurship by prominent individuals, collective agenda-setting in multilateral forums, and changing academic fashions.

One major impetus for research in these fields was the advent of complex emergencies following the end of the Cold War. Observers began to recognize that such crises were intertwined with political conflict and were not amenable to purely humanitarian responses. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali helped to redefine the international agenda with the document *An Agenda for Peace*, which gave wide currency to the concepts of conflict prevention and peacebuilding. The proliferation of multidimensional peace operations during the early 1990s reinforced these trends, as state governments began to be concerned with the sustainability of such operations and their own "exit strategies." Operating within the DAC forum, for example, OECD member states have commissioned research on particular themes, such as "development cooperation incentives for peace." Within the aid community, institutional competition played a role, as development actors concerned with the diversion of resources to emergency relief began to stress the "continuum" between relief, recovery, and development - and to devote greater energy to issues of conflict prevention.

Non-official actors have also shaped the research agenda in these fields. Transnational issue advocacy networks and intellectual entrepreneurs have raised the salience of particular challenges, as demonstrated by the role of Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy and the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, which (in addition to their political impact) helped to put the issue of land mine proliferation and removal on the research agenda.

The research agenda of the academic community may differ significantly from the agendas of policymakers. Much scholarly research on peacebuilding is shaped by notions of what is "fashionable," and it has tended to lag behind real world events. The research topics of "conflict prevention" and "peacebuilding" have been welcome within academia, since these intellectual concepts are more amenable than humanitarian assistance to theoretically driven research.

It is critical to have an evolving set of research activities that respond to changing external circumstances. There may also be a practical necessity to invoke certain touchstones and to mention certain themes and concepts to gain political or policy traction. At the same time, it is healthy to cast a skeptical eye over the latest fads and trends and to be sure that the research is remaining intellectually honest. Finally, the research agenda has been defined almost entirely by the US-European research community, raising the possibility that a host of practical questions relevant to local partners has been ignored. It is critical to involve a range of perspectives, particularly from affected countries.

From Research to Action

Making Research Relevant to Policymakers

To influence policy, research on conflict prevention and peacebuilding must pass the test of relevance. It is more likely to be consumed if it addresses the actual difficulties that policymakers confront and suggests viable solutions to these. Researchers should aim for specificity by detailing precise, targeted recommendations that can be implemented in a straightforward manner.

The impact of research on institutional learning and practical policy is likely to depend on a constellation of several factors: the generation of persuasive and useful knowledge, the presence of coalitions within relevant agencies capable of receiving and internalizing these lessons, and the ability to mobilize political coalitions. To have practical influence and change institutions, in other words, new ideas need to demonstrate the following:

- a) analytical viability - by winning over the research community with new, persuasive knowledge;
- administrative viability - by winning over bureaucracies, including congenial agency and field personnel; and
- political viability - by gaining traction among political decision-makers at the highest level. The research community has only begun to exploit the proliferating technologies for disseminating findings to the policy community in order to maximize the impact of lessons learned.

Timing and contingency will obviously play a role in the receptivity of organizations to new knowledge. It may be easier for researchers to make a difference when policymakers are insecure about how to define a situation and uncertain about what decision to take. Such an unsettled environment can provide a window of opportunity to present new research touching on the matter at hand and to make recommendations for change.

To maximize the impact of its findings, the research community must be sensitive to the political and institutional environment in which conflict prevention and peacebuilding policy is made. Researchers often assume that the intellectual will trump the political, but this may not be the case. Proposed reforms are more likely to be credible and effective if they are informed by "insider" appreciation of how the relevant institutions actually operate and are susceptible to change. In addition, researchers should be aware that practitioners and bureaucracies may be inclined (or instructed) to skip over the analytical portion of reports and to respond only to the recommendations section. The research community must also take steps to increase the relevance of its work to action-oriented NGOs.

To increase the political relevance of research, it may help to build official support for such investigation from the outset. Fafo's Peace Implementation Network (PIN) shows the potential of researchers to shape the policy process in this fashion. PIN set out less to undertake primary policy research than to generate information useful for policymakers. The Fafo report, *Command from the Saddle*, resulted from collaboration between policymakers and researchers to evaluate the experiences of past Special Representatives of the Secretary General (SRSGs). Central to the success of this initiative was the participation of "insiders" who were familiar with the informal and formal structures of the relevant organizations and who possessed field experience.

Research can also have an impact at the tactical (or micro) level, being designed to address concrete policy issues in specific circumstances (for example, issues of refugee compensation or the potential economic trade-offs of different peace accord packages for the Palestinian Territories).

The research community needs to consider different formats for packaging and disseminating its messages, as well as strategies for timing initiatives and targeting audiences. The method in which research findings are delivered can influence the means by which they are used. Often, the crisis-driven nature of conflict prevention and peace-building privileges instant analysis -- from op-ed pieces to CNN interviews -- over thoughtful analysis.

Creation of a Consortium - or a Network?

Participants debated the relative merit of formal and informal means of collaboration, both among researchers and between researchers and policy-makers.

There was some discussion of creating a consortium uniting researchers, practitioners, and policymakers working in the areas of conflict prevention and peace-building. This might provide an institutional framework to facilitate long-term collaboration between "insiders" (possessing intimate operational knowledge and an action-oriented approach) and "outsiders" (possessing perhaps greater objectivity and a long-term research orientation).

Any such plan, however, would need to address the following issues or concerns. First, it would be important to define the community to be involved, including the scope of membership and the intellectual and policy boundaries. Second, participants would need to determine the constituencies that it would seek to serve, including the role of advocacy NGOs.

Third, it would be important to be clear about who sets the agenda for the consortium. It may be a mistake to assume, *a priori*, that the research community and policymakers/practitioners are united by common interests and purposes. Any such grouping would need to address fundamental questions about the appropriate ends of policy, the range of policy options and the instruments chosen to advance these goals, and the long-term consequences of these choices. A consortium would be advisable only if it contributes to open debate and permits the questioning of ends as well as means. In this light, it would be critical for the consortium's research agenda to be influenced by "Southern" as well as "Northern" representatives.

The advantages of formalizing a consortium might be outweighed by certain disadvantages, including bureaucratization, rigidity, and turf battles over membership. The goal of any linkage among researchers and practitioners must be to facilitate communication of information and fruitful collaboration while at the same time ensuring the continual generation of diversity in approaches and insights.

The participants in the discussion seemed to conclude that a formal "consortium" might be less appropriate than a *network*. Such a network would have an important role to play in a) information sharing; b) the identification of gaps in policy research; and c) encouraging the formation of more specialized, fluid, and ad hoc groupings on particular issues as needed. The envisioned network might be built around the existing multi-donor forum on Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction (CPR), which currently holds semi-annual meetings. The CPR forum might be broadened to include members of the research community.

The envisioned network on conflict prevention and peacebuilding might be built around two central methodological questions: First, how can research be designed to influence policy? Second, how can policy concerns be incorporated into research agendas? Within this overall framework, it might be appropriate to subdivide the network into two separate fields of investigation: conflict prevention on the one hand, peacebuilding on the other. While these two sets of activities clearly overlap in some circumstances, there may be some justification for distinguishing between the two for analytical purposes.

