



Regional Conflict Dynamics Roundtable

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Key points

- The region has experienced protracted conflicts for several decades and is still fragile with a growing number of conflicts and political challenges.
- Historically more stable countries in the region—Kenya and Ethiopia—also face threats to their stability.
- Humanitarian approaches, their funding cycles and relation to development, and the role conflict plays in them, need to be reconsidered.
- Protracted conflict, slow-onset cyclical crises and—increasingly localized—inter-communal violence are three key contributors to people’s vulnerability.
- A strengthened understanding of the relationship between peace and development is critical to the pursuit and support of both prospectives.

On 30 November 2016, the Rift Valley Forum and the Embassy of Ireland in Kenya hosted the Irish Minister of State at a roundtable with representatives from regional and international organisations to discuss the conflict dynamics in the greater Horn of Africa. This brief is a summary of the discussions.

Introduction

The region has experienced protracted conflicts for several decades and is still fragile with a growing number of conflicts and political challenges. The future of the peace process in South Sudan is uncertain after a resurgence of conflict in July 2016, leading to mass internal displacement as people are again fleeing violence. Somalia continues to be affected by conflict and drought, and its current

election process is fuelling new political tensions. Even the region’s historically more stable states are facing challenges. In Ethiopia, there are growing tensions linked to protests in Oromo and Amhara regions. Additionally, the 2017 elections in Kenya risk producing results that will be contested and could cause post-election violence.

Conflict and violence in the region

Following the signing of a peace agreement in August 2015, renewed fighting in South Sudan in July 2016 has marred the country’s peace process. The renewed conflict has seen both ethnic and gender based violence throughout the country. Although the Transitional Government of National Unity is internationally recognized, there are several armed groups that oppose it. The opposition is largely factionalized, and the Government is seen not to be inclusive. The Government must explore how to open up and create a more inclusive process and government. The dialogue should not take place in Addis Ababa or in Nairobi, but in South Sudan, and must involve local communities on the ground. There is currently a small window of opportunity that could be taken advantage of to work towards forming a more inclusive government.

The Somalia elections process has been marred by delays, corruption, vote buying, intimidation, harassment and the imprisonment of several candidates. A number of votes for specific seats have already been contested. Despite concern that the elections will fuel clan and sub-clan tensions, there is growing pressure to wrap up the process and to curb any further delays. Somaliland is due for its own presidential elections in March 2017, with growing tensions already apparent.

In May 2016, the Kenyan Government announced the closure of the Dadaab refugee camp complex. Over 100,000 refugees have returned to Somalia since the Tripartite Agreement between Kenya,

Somalia and UNHCR was signed at the end of 2013, with the majority returning after the May announcement. The Government recently extended the deadline for closure to April 2017, but Somalia's ability to absorb all of the refugees who are expected to return is yet to be assessed. The camps are being closed partly on grounds of national security—allegations of terrorist recruitment from the camps and the risk of further attacks. This discourse has distracted from the problem of home-grown extremism and radicalization. For example, the historic political and economic marginalization of Kenya's northeast and coastal regions has been exploited by terrorist recruiters—especially the Somalia-based jihadist group, al-Shabaab, which has an increasingly regional reach. The government should rethink its approaches to counter-terrorism, and should consider moving from a purely security-based approach to one aimed at reducing factors which contribute to radicalization such as youth unemployment.

Humanitarian responses and consequences of crises

The relationship between conflict and humanitarian emergencies in the region needs greater recognition. First, emergencies in the region are often political, complex and protracted. They are often multi-layered and have local dimensions but are intimately linked to national-scale political crises, as the South Sudan crises has tragically shown. Protection of civilians in a context of recurrent violent displacement is an especially acute problem.

Successive crises and emergency humanitarian responses have undermined livelihoods and increased dependence among affected communities. Humanitarian actors are looking at alternative ways of responding to the needs, with a focus on reinforcing community resilience. New approaches that empower communities to establish their own protection mechanisms may be one way of avoiding dependency. The separation between humanitarian and development funding streams, with rigid funding cycles and mechanisms, do not match the realities on the ground. Humanitarian space is also shrinking in many contexts, especially in Somalia and in South Sudan. Local partners can help expanding and reinforcing humanitarian space.

The region is also marked by slow-onset, cyclical emergencies, often linked to global climate patterns and change, including the El Niño cycle. Community vulnerability is not only linked to drought, but is also exacerbated by population growth, insecure rural livelihoods and a lack of investment. During the 2011 famine in Somalia, the majority of people who died were no longer able to rely on a rural livelihood but had become dependent on seasonal and casual urban labour. A collapse in the labour market contributed to the food insecurity of these populations. These contexts provide an opportunity for humanitarian and development agencies to revive and reinforce long-term livelihood opportunities, and link them to social protection schemes. There is a pressing need to strengthen the link between early warning systems and early action, and to develop tools at the community level so that they are better able to respond to crises.

The third type of crisis common to the region is localized, inter-communal violence, often linked to resources, which is often highly politicised. There is concern in Kenya over the development of oil fields in Turkana, and the consequences for the communities there that are affected by conflict and are vulnerable to livelihood degradation. Despite the Ethiopian government's effective humanitarian response mechanisms, there is concern that the current political unrest will interfere with an emergency response and increase existing vulnerabilities.

In Kenya, the potential conflict hotspots around the elections in 2017 are likely to be at the county-level, and land-related grievances have fuelled electoral violence in the past.

Conflict resolution and peace building efforts

A strengthened understanding of the relationship between peace and development is critical to the pursuit and support of both prospectives. Participatory, inclusive community-based approaches to peace building have been successful across the region and could be expanded. The role that civil society can play in this, as well as in intervention and mediation during times of tensions and conflict, should be explored.