

Development and Peacebuilding: Reforming the Foreign Assistance Act

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Washington, DC – December's **Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum (CPRF)** was held at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) on December 8th, 2009. Over 150 individuals from government agencies, think-tanks, non-profits and local universities attended the event. The CPRF is organized by the non-profit organization **Search for Common Ground** and is co-sponsored by the **Alliance for Peacebuilding, American University, Council on Foreign Relations, George Mason University, Johns Hopkins University, Partners for Democratic Change, United States Institute of Peace, and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars**. The Forum followed Chatham House Rule and none of the comments were for attribution.

The discussion began with an evaluation of the current state of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA) and how and why it needs to be updated. The conversation then moved to the status of the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) ongoing at USAID and the US Department of State. Finally, there was consideration of recommendations for resolving the problems that were identified.

Developing countries are conflict prone, but conflict is still treated separately from development. The linkage between the two, while implicitly understood, has not been fully reflected in policymaking. In the past few years, The US Department of Defense (DOD) has expanded its role in foreign assistance and development, which had previously been under the purview of civilian agencies. Progressive stages of conflict are handled by separate offices and agencies in an uncoordinated way, resulting in vast inefficiencies and gaps in coverage.

Funds for development are also inflexible, making it difficult to address unanticipated contingencies. There is a lack of human and financial capacity to properly address conflict issues. This results in a structure where every conflict is treated as though it were the first and the last crisis US foreign policy has ever encountered. Those closest to the ground are often not trained in conflict and those with peacebuilding experience often lack country-specific expertise.

Part of the solution is a rewrite of the Foreign Assistance Act (FAA), which was written in 1961 and says little about conflict prevention, resolution, mitigation, or any other aspect of peacebuilding. There is a need to increase the capacity of peacebuilding and development agencies and to elevate and strengthen USAID. Very little coherence exists for peacebuilding within the structure of the US Government. It is easy to see the problems but far more difficult to develop specific proposals. The current FAA reform effort seeks to address this issue by developing a comprehensive framework for addressing conflict, through a new title of the Act which would be called, "Advancing Peace and Mitigating Crisis."

USAID and the Department of State have been partnering on the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) and have just finished three months of work, having handed in their initial findings of current gaps and capabilities and briefed the Secretary of State two weeks ago. This is a separate initiative of reform of foreign assistance spearheaded by the Administration rather than by Congress.

Among other things, the QDDR has sought to address the gaps in USAID and State's conflict mitigation policies. Preliminary findings identify a lack of financial and human resources, a lack of understanding of conflict, a need for

strong policy leadership, and a need for a response system that would enable that leadership to make decisions and take action. There is a lot of information available, but no real structure to turn that information into action.

In light of these findings, the QDDR working group on preventing and responding to crises and conflicts made five significant recommendations related to peacebuilding and development:

1. Allocate flexible funding resources both on the country-team level and on a contingency level in DC that would allow for flexible and fast-moving responses. Without these resources, the military has been filling in the gap.
2. Manage risk aversion: accountability makes colleagues on the ground more risk averse and need to find ways to get “outside the wire” of the embassies.
3. Turn analysis into action by creating a structure to enable decisions to be made quickly and by training those on the ground to take action when necessary.
4. Work with multi-lateral institutions, such as the UN, that have more resources and training available.
5. Deploy civilians into conflict and pre-conflict areas. Specialists are needed to help in conflict and/or fragile situations and these specialists need to be linked into their new environments in order to marry technical and country expertise. In order to accomplish this, there needs to be a deeper look into roles and responsibilities and an ability to look at issues regionally rather than just locally.

Regarding peacebuilding and development in the FAA Reform, a number of guiding principles were put forward:

1. *Civilian control*: DOD is getting too involved in foreign assistance, now controlling 22% of foreign assistance funds (up from 3.5%), whereas USAID’s share has fallen from 65% to 44%. This trend needs to be reversed and authority should be returned to civilians.
2. *Do no harm*: Mary Anderson’s principle should apply to all foreign assistance. More attention should be paid to the effect of assistance funds on conflict and USAID’s efforts to this end need to increase.
3. *More funding and flexibility*: We need increases at both the country level and in DC. Proposals for this include funding new channels through existing accounts for conflict and setting up a complex conflict fund.
4. *Money can’t buy you love*: Humanitarian assistance has increasingly been used as a tool of warfare in an effort to “win hearts and minds” in places like Afghanistan. However, research has shown that this not only fails to win hearts and minds, it results in poor development.
5. *More guns will not bring more peace*: The United States, as a major global producer of weapons, needs to work to reduce the flow of guns into conflict areas. There needs to be security sector reform that better incorporates traditional justice and local security processes.
6. *Peace is a group process*: US government agencies and NGOs should learn lessons from others and actively seek to work closely with local communities as partners. This principle is already recognized as an important part of development and needs to be incorporated into peacebuilding. Locals are best positioned to understand the conflict they are living in and the cultural structures within which peacebuilders must work.
7. *Planetary priority*: We must keep in mind the impact global climate change will have on development and conflict scenarios as resources become more scarce.

Ideas discussed during the Q&A included the need for foreign assistance to work more closely with the host country. Embassy and USAID staff, as well as visiting legislators, need to be able to get out of the capital cities in order to see development issues and projects up close. Capacity must be built among local staff so that they can sustain progress even after international aid efforts are terminated. The audience also drew attention to the importance of providing incentive and support structures for foreign service officers working in peacebuilding, and the possibility of creating mandatory mid-career training in peacebuilding for the foreign service. There was a strong sentiment that peacebuilding should remain a civilian-controlled activity. This requires more flexible budgets and programs, and the political will in the US Government and population to see to it that legislation is passed and carried out to support these initiatives.