AusAid and conflict prevention: a case for mediation

By Nate Shea, John Langmore and Aran Martin
28 August 2012

We write this post with a concrete proposal in mind: that AusAID establish a mediation unit to support peaceful conflict resolution, a necessary precondition for effective development strategies and aid programs.

Improving its preventive diplomacy capabilities would not only be a gesture of goodwill by AusAID to Australia's neighbours and the international community but an exercise in improved aid efficiency. Consensus has emerged that effectively managing and preventing violent conflict is an integral component of reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development, as noted in the World Bank's 2011 *World Development Report*. It has also been shown that to take action to resolve or prevent conflict at an early stage is more cost effective than attempts to resolve, restore or repair once conflict has erupted.

Roughly three quarters of Australia's $4.8 billion in ODA in 2012 will be put to use in the Asia Pacific region. Such prioritisation is warranted; 18 of Australia's 20 closest neighbours are developing nations, 12 are viewed as fragile by the OECD DAC. Seven of the top ten recipients of Australian ODA are considered fragile. To maximise the long-term effectiveness of Australia's aid expenditure, greater resources need to be allocated to expanding AusAID's conflict resolution and prevention capabilities. Deficiencies currently exist in this vital portion of the agency's skill set, particularly in the area of mediation.

Mediation is not a new concept. It is enshrined as a key tool for pacific conflict resolution in Chapter 6 of the UN Charter. Since the end of the Cold War it has gained in prominence, first through the invigoration of interest in preventative diplomacy as championed by former UN Secretaries-General Boutros-Ghali and Annan, and second through the mediated peace settlements of a number of high-profile conflicts, including: the *Oslo Accord* in 1993, the Aceh *Memorandum of Understanding* in 2005, and the Kenyan *National Accord and Reconciliation Act* in 2008. In the previous two decades the field of mediators and facilitators has expanded to include a diverse range of actors, including individual states (e.g. Norway in the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Accord), global and regional intergovernmental

organisations (e.g. the African Union and the UN in Kenya) and civil society (e.g. a Helsinki-based NGO in the Crisis Management Initiative in Aceh).

An opportunity exists for AusAID to adopt and develop its own capacity for mediation, with a particular focus on working to resolve and prevent intrastate conflict within Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. The practice's value has been identified in AusAID's recently published *Framework for working in fragile and conflict-affected states: Guidance for Staff* [pdf] report. In a compelling depiction of the fragility and conflict that impedes the effective provision of development assistance, the report outlines how Australia's ODA could help build robust and inclusive political settlements by supporting mediation and negotiation efforts.

Though this is encouraging in theory, greater investment in Australia's practical capacity should be made. Further, while AusAID has previously funded both targeted mediation programs and broader peacemaking initiatives, they were ad hoc investments that lacked a dedicated support capacity for dialogue and mediation. While a limited capacity is included within the broad operational directive of the Fragility and Conflict Branch of AusAID's Humanitarian and Stabilisation Division, the proven utility of mediation as a tool for conflict prevention and resolution, coupled with the unique circumstances that Australia faces regionally, supports the view that AusAID's policy towards fragile and conflict-affected states could be strengthened through the development of a mediation unit.

We encourage the adoption of a greater commitment to mediation and dialogue within Australia's foreign policy. AusAID, being well-resourced and intimate with the region, is best placed to develop a formalised approach to mediating and resolving intrastate conflicts. And with such a high percentage of our ODA going to fragile states, a dedicated mediation capacity would be both practical and effective.

Such a unit could establish in-house mediation knowledge and the capability to provide both direct mediation and indirect office support in regional intrastate conflicts and; provide expert advice on the effective allocation of ODA across regional organisations, the UN and NGOs for targeted and broad mediation activities. Through a dedicated mediation capability Australia would play an enhanced role in ending and preventing deadly conflicts within its neighbourhood.

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Between 1963 and 1976 he worked in Papua New Guinea as a public servant and university lecturer where he led the preparation of the first national plan.

Between 1976 and 1984 he was an economic advisor to the Australian Parliamentary Labor Party and with Ralph Willis proposed the negotiation of the Accord. In 1984 he was elected to the House of Representatives and was later re-elected four times for the ACT seat of Fraser. He chaired the committee which planned the first comprehensive committee system for the House of Representatives. Amongst the Caucus and House committees he chaired were inquiries on the national infrastructure, the Bretton Woods institutions, Australia's current account; the environment; and the Australian Capital Territory.

He retired from parliament in 1996 to become Director of the UN Division for Social Policy and Development in New York for five years and then Representative of the International Labour Organization to the United Nations for two. He was responsible for the organisation of the 24th special session of the General Assembly which was the first world conference to agree on the global target for halving serious poverty by 2015.

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