Adapting Agricultural Extension to Peacebuilding: Report of a Workshop by the National Academy of Engineering and the United States Institute of Peace: Roundtable on Technology, Science, and Peacebuilding

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Conflict in Rural Settings

Conflict affects agricultural communities in multiple ways. Disagreements over rights to land, water access, and water quality can act as flashpoints, and in the aftermath of conflict those who return, whether refugees or demobilized soldiers, may create further conflict by increasing demand and thus stress on a community’s economic and social capacity.

Extension agents can help to prevent or reduce conflict, as described by three speakers in the first session of the workshop. The presenters considered the potential roles of extension agents in conflicts over land in rural settings, challenges associated with postconflict reintegration, and experiences providing training for mediating disputes between farming and pastoral communities in rural Afghanistan.

Several possibilities emerged from the speakers’ remarks. Speakers observed that extension agents can act as honest brokers between groups or between a group and the government. Agents can provide information—or access to information or other resources—that, directly or indirectly, reduces conflict. They can provide a variety of services, such as training or organizing producer associations, that can serve both agricultural and peacebuilding purposes. Through these and other means, extension personnel can promote peacebuilding, with the understanding that transparency and accountability are essential in all activities to avoid the appearance of favoritism and to foster trust.
CONFLICT OVER LAND IN RURAL SETTINGS

Wars often involve land, said Jon Unruh, Associate Professor of Human Geography and International Development at McGill University. In fact, according to the United Nations War-torn Societies Project, in 40 percent of postconflict countries clashes eventually resume, and land is the leading cause.

There are numerous reasons for land-related conflicts. Groups may struggle for control of lands with high-value resources, such as diamonds, timber, minerals, or cash crops. The identity of individuals, tribes, or factions may be attached to land. Wars may involve forced dislocation, land confiscations, or legalized evictions. Deeply held grievances that are not resolved by a peace accord may be related to land issues. Displaced people may return to areas that are occupied by others, endangered by land mines, or agriculturally damaged. Returnees may have little ability to prove their claims to land, and opportunists may make claims with little justification.

Land tenure in crisis situations is very different than in stable settings, Unruh said, as are solutions. What may work well in stable, peaceful settings can be very difficult to implement and enforce in societies recovering from war. People may lack fair access to courts or knowledge of the law and their legal options. People may pursue their land rights in aggressive or confrontational ways. These and other factors can lead to a buildup of competition, inequity, grievance, resentment, animosity, and violence.

Informal and Formal Legal Systems

A major problem, said Unruh, is that countries beset by conflict often do not have legitimate and fair ways of managing disputes through their legal systems. After a war, the state may not be trusted because it took one side during the conflict. Institutions may have collapsed, including the judicial system. Deeds, titles, and records are vulnerable to destruction, disorganization, looting, and fraud.

In such cases, informal or customary land rights may conflict with other forms of land tenure. Without a way to be legally validated, the customary tenure may degrade, collapse, or be abusively manipulated in a crisis situation. It then becomes a major challenge to establish, reestablish, secure, defend, prove, or confront claims to property, land, or territory, often in parallel with the splintering of society into postwar communities bound by factors such as dislocation, identity, ethnicity, or religion.
A fundamental need in such situations is to connect informal legal pluralism in postwar scenarios with formal law. Informal legal pluralism operates quickly, does not wait for formal legislation, and functions in an isolated manner (Figure 2-1). Formal law, in contrast, operates slowly and depends on a complex set of institutions. It can also be confrontational, both internally and with the diverse actors common in fractured postwar societies.

The Need for an Honest Broker

What is needed in this situation, according to Unruh, is someone who can broker differences both within and between the formal and informal systems (Figure 2-2). This actor should be present in the rural area but not seen as an agent enforcing the power of the state. Although extension personnel may be agents of the state, they lack the authority to enforce—their
function is primarily educational—and so may be more easily accepted by local communities.

Agricultural extension agents may know where to go and whom to see in government to start the process of dealing with a complaint, dispute, or registration, said Unruh. They may know which government offices or staff to avoid or work around. They can serve as a go-between among factions or between a particular group and the government. Agents from the regions where they are working may have local contacts and be familiar with local needs and opportunities.

These brokers, whether extension agents or other individuals, need to be able to package evidence to be usable under state law. They need to be familiar with customary means of claiming land tenure and know how to upgrade them to more formal claims. In this respect, an important function is to encourage processes that make customary institutions relevant to state law. The broker may thus combine evidence such as agricultural improvements, oral accounts, inheritance claims, past allocations by traditional leaders, long-term use or occupation of land, and other means to make a

FIGURE 2-2 Agricultural extension agents can act as honest brokers between the formal and informal systems and among groups in a postwar society, as represented by the double-headed arrows. SOURCE: Unruh workshop presentation.
more formal land tenure claim. As a particular example, Unruh cited the use of a mobile phone to take a picture of a grandfather’s tomb or a boundary marker to serve as evidence. Honest brokers of information can also help to make parts of state law understandable and workable for local communities.

Such assistance in upgrading claims from informal or indirectly relevant documents, Unruh observed, encourages a transition from legal pluralism to more formal methods of making and appealing decisions.

Use of extension agents as facilitators of dialogue in land disputes could be faster and more effective than edicts from national capitals, Unruh said, although he added that it is important not to overburden extension agents with responsibilities.

A more purposeful and pervasive effort can take advantage of existing beneficial systems and build on them, bearing in mind that what is possible will likely differ in a risk-averse postconflict society versus one that is ready for development.

**POSTCONFLICT REINTEGRATION: PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Caroline Hartzell, Professor of Political Science at Gettysburg College, discussed two aspects of the reintegration of individuals and groups into societies after conflicts. The first centers on reintegrating former combatants into civil society—the last phase of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR).

**Reintegration of Combatants**

A major problem, said Hartzell, is that the reintegration phase of DDR tends to get much less emphasis and funding than the other two phases. But a failure to reintegrate former combatants can pose very serious problems, including the resumption of conflict. In Angola, for example, repeated peace settlements have failed because combatants stay armed and remain in the bush. Failure to integrate armed combatants also poses problems for societies when members of these groups prey on communities, engage in illegal economic activity, or maintain connections to former commanders. Even if such activities do not lead to a recurrence of conflict, they threaten the quality of peace.

Many communities are reluctant or unwilling to reintegrate former combatants back into the community, so DDR efforts have begun to address
Reintegrated members of communities need to make a living but often have few skills and little or no capital. The agricultural sector is an obvious possibility for earning a livelihood, especially since many former combatants are from rural areas. DDR initiatives have sought to encourage this option through the provision of microcredits, training, or other forms of assistance. In Liberia, for example, ex-combatants in regions susceptible to the resumption of conflict received several months of training, psychosocial counseling, and a start-up agricultural package. They also had the opportunity to resettle in different areas, which helped break up combat-oriented networks.

A comparison of ex-combatants in Liberia who went through the program with a control group found that the former had a higher engagement in and commitment to agriculture. They also experienced a rise in durable wealth, although they had little actual change in income, which was not surprising, said Hartzell, given the ebbs and flows of the agricultural cycle. In addition, they experienced some improvement in social engagements, citizenship, and stability. However, their engagement in illicit or illegal economic activities did not change. This was a period of high gold prices, Hartzell noted, which led to considerable illegal mining. The treatment group continued to engage in this illegal activity but devoted fewer hours to it because of their commitment to farming.

Reintegration of Communities

Communities and parts of countries often need to be reintegrated into the state after a conflict. If a region was marginalized or ignored by the central government, its residents may feel little loyalty to the state and instead support nonstate actors challenging the government. They also may become involved in the illicit economy. Hartzell pointed to Afghanistan and Colombia for examples of such regions; in Colombia, entire regions of the country were controlled by nongovernmental entities and devoted to coca production, with an attendant loss of other agricultural skills and knowledge.

In these cases, it is necessary to reintroduce government authority in areas where it has been minimal or absent for an extended period, reintegrate the region into the nation, and replace illegal economic activities. In Colombia, for example, a program funded in part by the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID’s) Office for Transition Initiatives provided technical assistance to agricultural producers to help them make the transition from the illicit economy to legal income-generating activities, such as the production of milk and pork for sale in local markets. The program
emphasized community participation in defining needs and priorities, and worked with existing producer associations and encouraged the formation of new ones. These actions fostered a sense of citizenship and empowerment among the formerly marginalized communities, said Hartzell, and agricultural extension services were a central component of the effort. In addition, community building led the occupants of these regions to think of themselves as Colombians once again and not to be denigrated for their production of coca.

Programs need to be sustainable, said Hartzell, which means the country’s government needs to be committed to them, even if occupants of cities are not enthusiastic about government investments in rural areas. Such investments can increase land values and give rise to tensions if claims to land are not secure or if people are pressured to sell their land. Furthermore, metrics of success in these programs are not easy to devise or assess, which poses a challenge to the commitment necessary for sustainability. The most appropriate and effective model will differ depending on the context.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG AFGHAN HERDERS

The nomadic herders in Afghanistan known as the Kuchi demonstrate a fundamental lesson of the application of extension to peacebuilding, said Michael Jacobs, Co–Principal Investigator and Chief of Party for the Afghanistan Pastoral Engagement, Adaptation and Capacity Enhancement (PEACE) project. Initially, Jacobs, a range ecologist, came to Afghanistan to improve livestock production. But he and his colleagues quickly understood that improved land management or veterinary practice was not possible for the Kuchi without addressing the conflict issues that limited their ability to manage land use. Being able to resolve conflict and negotiate passage to new pasture was the principal barrier to improvement in Kuchi productivity.

The Conflict: Sources and Effective Approaches

A survey of Kuchi herders showed that insecurity along migration routes was the number one risk for their livelihood. Jacobs explained that if the herders cannot get their animals to the mountains to graze, they cannot make a living, the sheep and goats suffer, and so does the rangeland on which the herds graze.

The conflicts that have arisen along migration routes, driven partly by population expansion and land conversion, are very complicated, Jacobs
noted. Some are politically motivated; others result simply from a lack of communication. Most important, relationships between herders and villagers were very poor after years of war. But leaders of both groups have been united in wanting peace, which has been encouraging.

The PEACE project approached the challenges along migration routes by training and supporting Kuchi leaders to resolve land conflicts for their people. Project staff also sought to reestablish the relationship between villagers and herders, in part by seeking out local village and Kuchi leaders who would work together to resolve conflicts and build peace. Under the Independent General Director of Kuchi, 31 provincial directors are responsible for representing and assisting Kuchi communities. As part of this effort, young Kuchi leaders have been intensively trained to initiate peace *shuras* (consultations) in their communities. In addition, the PEACE project has been working with the Sanayee Development Organization, a local NGO experienced in delivering culturally appropriate peacebuilding and conflict resolution skills that go beyond the traditional methods used in Afghanistan.

As word spread of the PEACE project’s successes, President Hamid Karzai’s adviser on tribal affairs asked the project’s leaders to try to solve a particular issue related to Kuchi and Hazara in Wardak province. The leaders agreed, but in return asked to expand the project to other migration areas. Today, said Jacobs, 75 peace ambassadors, including both village and Kuchi leaders, are working in seven regions of the country to resolve land and resource conflicts, including more than 900 conflicts in the past year. To build sustainability into the program, young Kuchi leaders are being trained to teach other Kuchi the PEACE project mediation and communication techniques.

**Lessons Learned**

Jacobs drew several lessons from his experience with the PEACE project. First, it is better to facilitate a conflict resolution effort than to appear to be directing it. PEACE took this route by partnering with a local Afghan NGO to implement a training curriculum. Related to this, Jacobs emphasized the importance of working with people whom the community already trusts. For example, working with local people may be preferable because they are trusted more than are people from the central government. Often, he said, people working in Afghanistan do not pay sufficient attention to this.
OUTSIDE GROUPS COMING INTO AN AREA NEED TO PICK THEIR PARTNERS WISELY, especially government partners, Jacobs said, as they can make the difference between a program that is sustainable and one that goes nowhere.

Finally, development projects that involve agriculture and natural resource management can create as well as resolve conflicts. These projects need to be thoughtfully designed and provide services equitably to avoid doing more damage than good.

DISCUSSION

Three broad topics emerged from the participants’ comments: (1) the tasks expected of extension agents, (2) the need for trust between extension personnel and the people they serve, and (3) the most effective model for extension services.

In response to a question about the potential number of different roles for extension agents, Unruh spoke of extension agents as a “user-friendly doorway” to alternatives to violence, offering advice or information or providing contacts to people in government or other organizations. Agents cannot necessarily be general purpose problem solvers, he said; if, for example, they become judges in disputes, they can become connected to power brokers in ways that are problematic. But in a bottom-up extension approach, information brokering and facilitation roles can be part of an agent’s job description, and peacebuilding activities can be integrated into this role rather than being taken on as additional responsibilities.

Siddhartha Raja, Analyst with The World Bank, observed that extension agents should focus either on rights and laws or on economic development, and that trying to do both may lessen their capabilities in each area. Jacobs reiterated that extension agents must be careful not to exacerbate a conflict—for example, by failing to deliver services equitably. Cindi Warren Mentz, Director, External Relations, Middle East and North Africa, for CRDF Global, returned to the fundamental observation that extension agents provide jobs and contribute to stability by building agricultural capacity and increasing productivity.

Closely related to the tasks of extension agents is the nature of their relationship with the local population. Jacobs observed that extension personnel must be trusted to be effective. Being from the community they serve can contribute to this trust. Unruh, too, pointed to the advantages of training people from local communities to be extension agents. These people may not have the agricultural expertise of an outside expert, but they will be well
respected and legitimate in that setting. Mike McGirr, National Program Leader for the National Institute of Food and Agriculture at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), confirmed that to change behaviors, an extension agent needs to be seen as a credible person by the community, and even more so when dealing with contentious issues.

However, Gary Alex, Farmer-to-Farmer Program Manager for USAID, cautioned that extension agents from local areas may be from an elite group or have social links on one side of a conflict that make them less trusted. In that case, extension work done by an agent from a different region, an NGO, or some other neutral body may be more effective.

Unruh pointed out that a community just emerging from war typically has very different needs from one that is several years removed from a crisis. Immediately after conflict, a country or region may be very risk averse and focused on not making things worse, whereas economic development often requires that a population be willing to take some risks, whether trying a new variety of seeds or accepting an extension agent’s advice. Thus an extension agent may be able to engage in more traditional activities in the latter situation and may need to devote more attention to peacebuilding and stability in the former.

Hartzell added that the capacities of extension personnel differ greatly from country to country. In Liberia, for example, few people are available to serve as extension agents, whereas more people have those skill sets in Colombia. Unruh added that a significant challenge can be to convince a person with a university degree to serve as an extension agent in a war-torn part of a country. In such situations, a more effective approach is to identify the local problems that need to be solved and work toward local solutions.

Hartzell concluded that the adoption of a single model in all cases is not appropriate. Rather, the nature of the conflict and the capacity that exists in a country or region will determine what kinds of extension services will be most effective. And the model adopted for those services will affect both the tasks in which extension personnel engage and the degree to which they are trusted.