

»» Promoting peace through infrastructure?

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In recent years, international development cooperation has increasingly involved activity in fragile contexts. These areas often lack rudimentary infrastructure which is urgently needed in order to provide services (such as drinking water or electricity) to the suffering population. However, experience shows that it is practically impossible to sustainably improve living conditions without reducing conflict in parallel. This poses the question of whether, and to what extent, infrastructure projects can also be used to promote peace.

The academic literature to date has produced barely any robust findings on this. Nonetheless, the fact that infrastructure can have both positive and negative effects on peace is undisputed.

Infrastructure can trigger or exacerbate conflicts

There are numerous mechanisms via which infrastructure can impact negatively on the possibility of peace, for example:

- Unequal provision of basic infrastructure across different groups or regions can exacerbate or even trigger conflict.
- Larger infrastructure projects (for example, irrigation projects, conservation areas) can spark conflict if the benefits and burdens associated with the project (at least in one party's view) are distributed unfairly.
- In violently escalating conflicts, infrastructure facilities of strategic importance (such as roads, power plants, service reservoirs) often become objects or sites of conflict.

Infrastructure projects harbour the potential to positively impact peace

At the same time, evidence from studies and evaluations points towards the potential for infrastructure projects to help promote peace, especially if they drive

processes at the social policy level which changes participants' perceptions.

- A state that can ensure its population's access to basic infrastructure enjoys greater legitimacy. Under such conditions, it becomes much harder for violent groups to find backing and support from among the local community.
- Development of infrastructure which specifically aims to dismantle existing inequalities between regions and groups can help to prevent conflict.
- Infrastructure facilities can act as a platform for constructive and institutionalised dialogue between hostile groups (e.g. village community centres, schools, youth centres, joint user group committees or joint operating companies for major infrastructure).
- Swift reinstatement of basic infrastructure services (water, electricity) can offer the population visual evidence of the "value" of peace and prevent fast re-escalation.

The conflict parties' shared interest in infrastructure can pave the way for new trust

Peacebuilding happens when it is possible to improve relationships between people or groups. Misgivings are resolved and there is a need to build and prove trust. The focus on the target groups and constructive interaction between them is decisive for promoting peace. Frequently, the first steps towards a trusting relationship must be taken before conflict parties are actually ready to speak to one another directly. This is where the potential of infrastructure projects lies, as the hostile parties often have a major shared interest in building infrastructure because it can tangibly improve the living conditions of their particular group (e.g. building new primary schools or basic healthcare fa-

cilities, better connections to the market). Cooperation creates win-win situations. For the parties, the benefits of partnership outweigh those of acting individually.

Lessons learnt: what prerequisites must infrastructure meet to have a positive impact on peace?

Some transferable "lessons learnt" can be derived from peace promotion experience to date: infrastructure projects have particular potential to achieve additional positive effects on peace when...

- conflicts are local;
- the conflict is not in an acutely violent phase (otherwise there is a high risk of potentially exacerbating conflict);
- the infrastructure will produce a swift and tangible improvement in local living conditions;
- the project will create sustainable "platforms" for constructive cooperation between opposing groups (e.g. participative planning, joint operation);
- projects are planned and implemented with sensitivity to the possibility of conflict and with the involvement of the relevant stakeholders at different levels (participative approaches).

Conclusion: the "how" of implementation is more important than the "what"

The provision of basic infrastructure is usually of key importance for improving supply to suffering populations in fragile contexts. However, it is often also very well-suited to achieving additional impacts which promote peace. Its efficacy in relation to promoting peace is less about the type of infrastructure than about how it is implemented. ■