

»» Crisis prevention: where can international development cooperation achieve an impact?

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In previous years, the donor community has allocated around 65% of all official development assistance (ODA) to implementation of projects in “fragile contexts” (according to the OECD definition). The majority of these funds were used for acute crisis response and management. However, development bodies, experts and politicians are increasingly pressing to invest the funds in crisis prevention. This not only avoids a lot of human suffering, it also makes better economic sense: according to the “Pathways for Peace” study by the UN and the World Bank, every euro invested in prevention saves several times that amount in money that would have needed to be spent subsequently on responding to and managing crises.

Aim: to avoid violence in conflicts

Crises can have a wide variety of causes: governance deficits, economic upheaval, climate change, etc. In the context of development policy discussion, crisis prevention usually involves avoiding outbreaks of violence in socio-political conflicts. However, conflicts of this type are generally unavoidable during change and development processes, because these almost always involve a transfer of power and resources that does not benefit all stakeholders to the same degree; there are (relative) winners and losers who usually oppose the processes of change. Crisis prevention therefore aims to identify and address the conflicts underlying the development processes in good time, such that violence is avoided.

The role of causes and drivers of conflict and resilience strengthening

“Causes of conflict” generally refers to the longer-term structural factors underpinning a conflict, in particular:

- conflicts of interest in relation to access to power and resources;

- insufficiently effective state actors and structures;
- lack of involvement of certain population groups in political decision-making processes;
- inequality between population groups (horizontal) from a social and/or economic perspective.

Drivers of conflict, on the other hand, are the dynamics that contribute to an acute escalation of (latent) conflicts. These may be very specific factors, such as suspected electoral fraud, high-profile corruption cases or human rights breaches like political assassinations or restrictions placed on freedom of speech. Often, however, they also include large-scale phenomena, like enduring economic crises or a widespread lack of future prospects, that eventually tip people over the edge. The result: escalating violence, often in conjunction with forced displacement and migration movements. In reality it is often difficult to differentiate clearly between causes and drivers of conflict.

As well as managing the causes and drivers of conflict, strengthening crisis resilience can also aid crisis prevention: in essence, this covers measures that put the population in a better position to deal with the consequences of a crisis. However, these measures can also have an impact before a crisis breaks out, preventing situations from escalating to a crisis point.

Specific approaches international DC can use to prevent crises

International development cooperation (DC) can have an impact on the causes and drivers of conflict, and on the strengthening of crisis resilience. A key prerequisite for DC measures to have an effective impact on crisis prevention is always a thorough understanding of the

specific contexts, especially the relevant lines and dynamics of the conflict. Depending on the context, DC measures in the following areas can aid crisis prevention:

- if there are fundamental deficits in governance: strengthening of participation, transparency and social cohesion (e.g. through promotion of institutions, processes and political reforms that support the rule of law, inclusion and a peaceful reconciliation of interests);
- in contexts where state actors lack effectiveness or legitimacy, exacerbating violent conflicts: support for the provision of basic public services (healthcare, education, supply of water and electricity) and strengthening of local administrative structures;
- in situations where a lack of economic prospects is a significant driver of conflict: employment programmes for young people and promotion of the private sector in order to quickly create opportunities to generate income and make a living;
- if socio-economic inequalities between population groups are a key element of the conflict: dismantling of infrastructural inequities and creation of social compensation mechanisms (e.g. social security systems).

Conclusion: exploit potential opportunities

Even if it is often the case that DC can only have a limited impact on the deep-rooted causes of conflict, DC measures can help to prevent crises in many contexts. It’s about seizing these opportunities.■