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Reflection and commitment: How Germany can better promote peace

By Jörn Grävingholt,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 28 February 2017

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Bonn, 28.02.2017. The German cabinet is expected to approve new Guidelines on Crisis Engagement and Peacebuilding before Easter 2017. This document is designed to bring together and update the 2004 Action Plan "Civilian Crisis Prevention, Conflict Resolution and Post-Conflict Peace-Building" and a range of other German Government strategy papers.

It has been drafted with the support of PeaceLab2016, a nine-month process of discourse involving a broad-based community of German ministry representatives, policy-makers and researchers, as well as practitioners from the field of peacebuilding. As a consequence, it can be expected that the document will outline the current challenges in an appropriate and sufficiently fine-grained manner, define an ambitious yet realistic role for Germany, establish the foundational importance of international cooperation and engagement, and chart the difficult task of developing strategies and setting priorities in the midst of crises and violent conflicts.

Good intentions alone will not suffice

But what will a list of good intentions achieve in the face of the current state of our world?

The new US President is calling into question the very structures of the international order which have preserved that urgently needed vestige of willingness to cooperate at global level.

Elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany are being overshadowed by a European wave of nationalist populism that is making the collapse of Europe, something inconceivable until recently, suddenly seem like a possibility.

When it comes to major crises such as the one in Syria and old conflicts such as that in Israel/Palestine, we are at risk of seeing "solutions" emerge that more closely resemble something from a Cold War manual rather than ones that correspond to the needs of a cooperative, 21st Century world order.

Against this backdrop, it will be difficult for the Guidelines on Crisis Engagement and Peacebuilding to develop innovative momentum given the everyday political, ministerial and bureaucratic realities of crisis management. In times of global uncertainty, conventional routines create a deceptive sense of security. If impudence and zero-sum logic are considered recipes for success in international dealings, a strategy paper based on cooperation and reliability

will quickly come to be regarded as naive and out-moded. What is being overlooked is the fact that what we are now seeing everywhere are the consequences of too little, not too much effective international cooperation. So how can a set of cooperation-based guidelines on peacebuilding truly provide fundamental strategic orientation? There are two approaches that could help here: organised reflection and commitment.

Creating space for structured reflection

No strategy document can be sufficiently specific to provide the answer to every conflict ahead of time. Consequently, the relevant actors, especially the German Government and the Bundestag, cannot afford to descend into permanent crisis management mode. Instead, they need space and time for reflection. Just like in the PeaceLab2016 process, there is a need for forums in which stakeholders can discuss experiences, fine-tune their understanding and take on board new ideas. Learning platforms, such as those proposed by the Advisory Board for Civilian Crisis Prevention, could be helpful here, as could an annual peace conference for all relevant actors.

Binding commitments for a cooperative global order

In addition to well considered responses to emerging crises, it is necessary to pro-actively shape a cooperative global order which from the outset reduces the likelihood of new conflicts emerging. If this is to succeed in an international community of states now characterised by a level of mistrust unprecedented since the end of the Cold War, we must make the rebuilding of mutual trust and credibility our most urgent imperative. With their economic clout, Germany and Europe have the means of achieving this. By leading the way on fair trade agreements, restrictive arms exports and sustainable resource management, they could indicate that they view a cooperative international order as being worth something. One useful measure would be for the German Government or the Bundestag to set up a mechanism which operates across all policy areas to review the peace impact of German foreign policy and prevent any endeavours detrimental to peace. Such committed action would provide a model of cooperative peace to counteract the impending collapse of the international order into clashing spheres of interest, a model not based on the assumed economic hegemony of the West.