

# DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

## Engaging armed groups in development cooperation: a guide for development agencies<sup>[1]</sup> Jörn Grävingholt / Claudia Hofmann

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Since the end of the Second World War, civil wars and other domestic violent conflicts have dominated warfare worldwide to such an extent, that war between states has increasingly become the exception<sup>[2]</sup>. These conflicts are characterised by the participation on at least one side of non-state armed groups. These are defined as groups that, through their actions, challenge the state's monopoly on force.

Consequently, the debate on the role of and engagement with such armed groups has become increasingly relevant to development policy. Development agencies have continually increased their involvement in areas that range from combating poverty as a root cause of conflict to directly strengthening the civil components of conflict prevention, peace building and post-conflict reconstruction<sup>[3]</sup>. Even where aid agencies do not directly address violent conflicts, they often find it hard to avoid their fallout.

### How development agencies are affected

Examples of development agencies coming in contact with armed actors are manifold. They may occur in the context of demobilisation measures, crisis prevention activities or efforts to promote peaceful means of conflict management through development. The scenarios range from those in which warlords are active in the areas of activity of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) via widespread violent crime, such as in Colombia, to situations in countries like Nigeria or Afghanistan where traditional or new authorities have the potential to threaten the use of force or to actually do so. "Engagement" with armed groups in these cases takes many forms. Negotiations with kidnappers, arrangements with armed groups on aid delivery transport routes, political appeals to armed actors not to recruit child soldiers or use land mines constitute engagement just as much as deliberate cooperation with them does. For development actors, there are roughly four ideal-type motives for engaging with armed groups:

**Access to target groups:** In conflicts where a country's territory is partly controlled by armed groups, development agencies may face the choice of either reaching some form of agreement (tacit or explicit) with the group in control or ending (or not even starting) activities.

**Responsibility for personnel:** The risks to local and external development cooperation personnel can be significantly reduced if arrangements are made with the armed group either directly or through a mediator.

**Commitment to norms:** Engagement may contribute to persuading a non-state armed group to commit to following rules and norms stipulated by human rights law and international humanitarian law<sup>[4]</sup>.

**Conflict transformation:** A further objective of engagement may be to contribute to conflict transformation and shift the emphasis beyond immediate humanitarian aspects and security concerns to explicit political matters.

### **Many reasons for engagement**

Whether or not a state or non-state development actor engages with an armed group remains of considerable significance. The engagement of official development agencies with a non-state armed group is normally subject to the respective donor government's general foreign policy guidelines. Official policies are in turn bound by the principle of state sovereignty in international relations and the primacy of the state's monopoly on power. Therefore, programmes are usually agreed with the host government. Non-governmental development cooperation is less subject to the rationalities of foreign policy and international relations and, as a result, is often able to engage more flexibly with non-state armed groups. Although they too are bound by the domestic laws of the partner country, which may penalise contact with armed groups, they are freer to pursue their respective political preferences than external governmental actors. Development policy can use this variety of actors to adopt a coordinated, multidimensional approach to armed groups. Generally, three main opportunities arise from engagement:

**Achieving legitimate immediate goals:** Successful engagement with an armed group may help development agencies gain access to target groups in need of assistance, contribute to better security for local and foreign staff, and lead to a non-state armed group's commitment to observing basic humanitarian standards.

**Acquiring knowledge, reducing "blind spots":** Closely monitored interaction with armed groups is arguably the best way for a foreign development agency to acquire badly needed background information not only on the relevant non-state armed actor itself but also on the underlying conflict dynamics, the motives and rationale of the individuals involved, and the likelihood that different scenarios may materialise.

**Building up a track record for conflict mediation:** Deliberate interaction with an armed actor is a precondition for any development agency that intends to play a meaningful role in mediating between conflicting parties. Apart from increasing experience in dealing with the conflict situation, engagement can contribute greatly towards an outside actor's credibility with non-government forces and its track record as an impartial, unbiased third party.

### **Moral, legal and political risks**

Yet engaging armed groups also raises difficult questions: Is the conduct beneficial to the development objective? Is it harming relations with the partner government? Is it permissible to implement projects in an area controlled by armed groups? Can a planned programme be relevant without contact to armed actors? What distributional effects will an intervention have? Accordingly, any opportunity needs to be assessed in view of the numerous challenges. They can be roughly grouped into four types:

**Legal challenges:** A serious legal challenge arises from the fact that engaging with non-state armed groups is often illegal according to local laws, since incumbent governments will usually attempt to put pressure on their adversaries by outlawing them. Additionally, the international community's increased engagement in the "war on terrorism" and the labelling of many groups as terrorist has generally turned interaction with them into a politically highly sensitive issue. Additionally, arrest warrants issued by international tribunals against representatives of non-state armed groups may have a strong impact on a foreign development organisation's room to manoeuvre. Ultimately, both the organisation and the individuals working for it face the risk of legal prosecution.

**Moral challenges:** It may appear highly undesirable for a foreign agency to initiate contact with an armed group that is notorious for its poor human rights record – such as excessive violence against civilians, torture, the use of child soldiers and many other atrocities. Striking the right balance between a clear message of disapproval and continued impartiality is a difficult task to manage.

**Political challenges:** For a foreign government to sponsor a development agency's engagement with an armed group without the explicit consent of the government concerned involves the risk of significant deterioration of bilateral relations with that government. If nothing else, it will result in reduced influence on the government concerned with detrimental consequences for the foreign government's capacity to contribute towards conflict transformation through official diplomacy. Another important political challenge for foreign donors is to avoid conveying legitimacy upon a non-state armed group in a way that strengthens the latter's moral or political position to such an extent that this could contribute to prolonging a conflict. Contributing other material resources (such as humanitarian assistance, development projects etc.) may also eventually turn out to fuel, rather than end, an ongoing conflict.

**Analytical challenge:** Engaging with armed groups based on false assumptions may lead to adverse effects. Understanding non-state armed groups and the context they are engaged in is important because without proper knowledge of the complexity of a conflict, it is difficult to assess cross-effects and unintended consequences. Engagement on one level (e.g. staff security) may result in significant consequences on other levels (i.e. access, humanitarian concerns, or peace process).

### **Conclusion: Some tentative dos and don'ts for development agencies**

Pro-active and deliberate engagement with armed groups by development actors creates opportunities, but it also entails risks, which may vary widely from case to case and need to be assessed separately for different groups and different contexts. Nonetheless, some general conclusions can be drawn that may provide useful starting points:

- **Interaction with non-state armed groups must not be an end in and of itself.** Development actors should always be aware of the risks involved. As a consequence, it is important to define goals realistically and constantly monitor processes and effects at all levels.
- **Be able to react quickly to changing circumstances.** Windows of opportunity for constructive engagement with armed actors may open for just a brief moment then close again for a long time.
- **Communicate your own rules and values.** One's own system of rules and values should be clear to all actors involved. One's position on the use of force and human rights violations must always be above reproach.
- **Consider the issue of legitimacy of both non-state armed groups and governments.** Legitimacy is a factor that must be considered. It is often complex because it must also be viewed in relation to government actors.
- **Do not go it alone. Seek international backing for engagement.** Involvement with an armed group should be based on wide international agreement. Development actors should routinely consult with others and seek coordinated international action.

- **Invest in analysis and evaluation and learn from experience.** Acknowledging that dealing with armed actors is an important issue is a necessary first step. Using exchange forums among agencies inside a country and between donor countries to share experience and examples of good practice is a useful second step.

Taking all of the above into account, the debate on engagement with armed actors reveals that ignoring non-state armed groups in situations where development actors are involved results in a failure to seize or at least consider potentially creative opportunities for conflict transformation and security.

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For a comprehensive account of the project's results see Grävingsholt, J. / C. Hofmann / S. Klingebiel (2007): *Development Cooperation and Non-State Armed Groups*, Bonn: German Development Institute (Studies 29).

The article draws heavily on the collaborative work of all three aforementioned authors. Likewise, it owes much to interviewees from numerous organisations who shared their thoughts and insights – and usually did not wish to be cited.

**[2]** Themnér, L. / P. Wallensteen (2011): *Armed conflict, 1946–2010*, in: *Journal of Peace Research* 48 (4), 525–536

**[3]** OECD-DAC (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee) (2011): *Supporting Statebuilding in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance*, Paris

**[4]** Hofmann, C. / U. Schneckener (2011): *NGOs and Nonstate Armed Actors. Improving Compliance with International Norms*, Washington: United States Institute of Peace (Special Report 284)