



The Ploughshares Monitor

Winter 2008, volume 29, no. 4

Advancing development while reducing violence: Lessons from the field

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Living free from the threat of armed violence is a basic human need. It is a precondition for human development, dignity and well-being.

—The Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, June 2006

Over 90 countries have endorsed a political declaration that calls on states to reduce armed violence while working toward the Millennium Development Goals. The challenge is to find effective development and peacebuilding strategies in the field. Recent Project Ploughshares research with World Vision Canada will document examples.

Armed violence and development

Armed violence is a global problem creating widespread devastation. Beyond its direct victims, armed violence can profoundly affect prospects for development. Violence can erode development in rural or urban settings in countries in conflict or nominally at peace. At the same time, armed violence is often linked to or shaped by poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment. Recognizing this connection has led more than 90 states to endorse the 2006 Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development.

Although there is a growing commitment to tackle armed violence in tandem with development at the policy level, there is little documentation of how it works at the program level. Arms control specialists typically study and advocate methodologies for reducing armed violence through supply-side measures to reduce the availability and flow of weapons. Arms control is understood separately from the demand for weapons that often arises from inequities.

Meanwhile, development practitioners may be well aware of the impact of armed violence on development programs, but still shy away from anything that may be considered disarmament, hesitant to delve into “security” issues. As a result, the two communities maintain separate working cultures and methodologies and there has been limited programming that seeks to advance development while reducing armed violence. There is even less experience in obtaining “measurable reductions” in armed violence, an objective of the Geneva Declaration.

Working with World Vision in East Africa

To support the case for joint armed violence reduction and development programming, Project Ploughshares is working with World Vision Canada—a member of the international network of national World Vision relief and development organizations—to document and analyze World Vision’s peacebuilding programs in East Africa. World Vision has implemented peacebuilding programs using evolving tools based in part on the “Do No Harm” framework of Dr. Mary Anderson for humanitarian aid in conflict zones.

In September, Ploughshares Executive Director John Siebert and I, accompanied by World Vision Canada staff person Suzanne Cherry, traveled to East Africa to conduct comparative field research in World Vision peacebuilding and development projects in Kenya, Uganda, and Sudan. With the assistance of the respective World Vision national offices, we traveled by plane and truck to “area development programs” in the Rift Valley of Kenya and in the Kitgum and Soroti districts of northeast Uganda. John and I also visited local projects in Warrap State in Southern Sudan.

We conducted several community interviews with participants in the World Vision programs. We also interviewed World Vision workers, local government officials, and representatives of other nongovernmental organizations. We visited pastoralist communities in Kenya and Sudan that are experiencing violent cattle raiding as well as communities devastated by Lord’s Resistance Army incursions in Uganda. Some interviews with individuals and groups—including women’s and youth groups—were conducted in English but most were in local languages, with the assistance of translators. Core interview questions covered three major themes: security in the community, weapons available and used, and the impact of World Vision peacebuilding activities.

Initial research findings

While the research report is not scheduled for release by Project Ploughshares and World Vision Canada until Spring 2009, initial findings from the research include the following:

- The disarmament process for civilian populations is not simply a matter of recovering guns. Many factors in the acquisition and use of small arms must be understood first. In conflict-affected regions, people need to feel secure before they will voluntarily give up guns. In Sudan, members of one community that was subject to a government-enforced disarmament program spoke of its vulnerability to neighbours who had not been similarly disarmed. In Uganda concerns were expressed about the inadequate training of government-sponsored local defence units, members of which have recently used their weapons against people they were supposed to protect. Other communities, faced with cattle raids by young “warriors” with automatic weapons, felt too isolated for timely protection by security forces. “Protection” was consistently identified as a powerful incentive for acquiring and retaining small arms.
- Civilian disarmament cannot be effective in isolation from measures to reduce both the supply and the demand for weapons. There were persistent reports of the ready availability of small arms throughout East Africa and especially of the ease with which

they crossed borders. Interviewees called for better border controls as well as other government action to address weapons supply, such as more attention to security personnel who rent their guns to civilians. To attend to weapons demand, necessary measures include the provision of alternative livelihoods, most clearly in pastoralist cultures where young men feel compelled to steal cattle to provide a dowry for a wife. There is also a role for training people in conflict mediation to settle their own disputes and to look for ways to find common ground with their enemies. Many people spoke positively about local peace committees and their work, for example, in settling land disputes among people returning to areas from which they had been displaced by conflict.

- Development initiatives can be structured to reduce tensions and the demand for weapons. There were positive references to World Vision's work in drilling boreholes for water, and in constructing schools and health clinics, whose use brought together antagonists to share needed resources. People called for more of these projects by World Vision. In Sudan there were repeated pleas for construction of roads as a means to improve both security (allowing easier access by government forces) and trust-building exchanges among rival groups and communities.
- More generally, there is strong evidence that the World Vision peacebuilding projects we visited have contributed to recent reductions in armed violence, especially in areas of the North Rift Valley in Kenya and in the Tubur district near Soroti in Uganda. We heard consistent reports of lower levels of violence, higher levels of trust within and among communities, and, perhaps most importantly, more opportunities to resolve disputes and differences without the resort to violence. The changes were attributed to the integration of World Vision "peace" activities with development programs.

The research report resulting from this trip will be made available to a wide range of actors and policymakers in the intersecting worlds of disarmament and development. The intention is to demonstrate that effective work can be done to advance development while reducing armed violence. The East Africa research may stimulate greater support for this work within the World Vision network, other civil society organizations and networks, and government development agencies such as the Canadian International Development Agency. If the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development is to have meaning, it must be implemented through effective grassroots projects like the peacebuilding work of World Vision in East Africa.