

2009 SESSION REPORT

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Poverty in unresolved conflict zones: Caucasus, Kosovo and Cyprus

Moderator: Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF)

Speaker: Jonathan Cohen, Conciliation Resources

Session proposed by: Eurasia Partnership Foundation

Gevorg Ter-Gabrielyan, Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), opened the session by welcoming participants and introducing the work of his organisation. EPF does not work in zones of unresolved conflict, although it does have a presence in countries where such conflicts exist. The reason for this is that investment in conflict zones is often not sustainable, especially if the conflict is overt or simmering below the surface. In general, foundations do not want to be provocative, and therefore refrain from 'interfering' in these areas. The question raised by Mr Ter-Gabrielyan, however, was whether or not this is a good thing, and whether the advantages of foundation involvement in conflict zones outweigh the disadvantages.

In response, Jonathan Cohen, Conciliation Resources, presented what foundations can do in conflict zones, what challenges they face and why it is important for them to engage in this field. Mr Cohen admitted that engagement in conflict zones is very difficult, especially if the conflict is still active. There is a need to plan carefully what shape intervention should take, and the key to this is an accurate analysis of the dispute in question. Local partners are vital in assessing the information at ground level. Foundations, like governments, must choose to either engage in or ignore conflict zones at their peril. If territories are allowed to become isolated it is much less likely that constructive paths to conflict resolution can be found. This has been evident in areas such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia as well as other conflict regions around the world.

Isolation tends to reinforce alienation between parties to a conflict, according to Mr Cohen, who cited the deepening political antagonisms between Georgia and Abkhazia and Azerbaijan and Nagorny Karabakh as evidence. While international agencies have invested extensively in Georgia their failure to devise strategies to engage constructively with Abkhazia and South Ossetia contributed to a deepening rift in relations and a perception of inequality as some areas benefitted from assistance and others became marginalised.

Foundations can be more flexible and creative than governments. Whereas states and their development agencies generally take a line that is supportive of states, non-governmental foundations can take a more creative approach and be more sensitive to the aspirations of conflicting parties, without necessarily endorsing them. As non-governmental bodies, foundations can go beyond political boundaries. Mr Cohen stated that while governments have a very narrow strategic focus, foundations can come in in the early stages of conflict and use relatively small funds to have a positive effect. Small-scale work at community level leads to tangible results, coherent growth and then at a later stage other, larger, agencies can get involved. This was Conciliation Resources' experience of working in Abkhazia where the initial support of foundations enabled work to be initiated and for more substantial donors, including government donors, to come on board at later points. Foundations are also able to take risks in promoting creative analytical approaches in ways that governmental donors might often be reluctant to do. Conciliation Resources, with the support of foundations such as the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Ford Foundation, has been able to reflect on the need to devise creative strategies for working in conflict zones.

In addition, Mr Cohen stressed that foundations are in an ideal position to remain impartial and promote patient and thoughtful interaction with both sides of the conflict divide. NGOs can be ideally placed to maintain the regular engagement and dialogue that builds trusting relationships and confidence between conflicting parties. Governmental donors do also provide support to such work but often it is more bureaucratic and less flexible than that provided by non-governmental foundations. For an NGO to engage in such work Mr Cohen reflected that a permanent local presence is not needed on the part of the foundation. In some situations this can be beneficial, especially if a more developmental and certainly if a humanitarian role is being played. However, for an NGO seeking to bridge conflict divides in situations of unequal status (i.e. in a conflict between a state and a disputed territory) it can be politically compromising to have an ongoing presence in one and not the other. Foundations, like practitioner NGOs, need to maintain their adaptability, creativity and patience in the area rather than their presence.

Trying to force conflict/disputed zones into submission is not the answer and serves merely to alienate these areas further. Smarter strategies have to be devised that respond to the underlying sources of conflict rather than a wider political agenda, which can sometimes limit the range of options that donors are prepared to entertain as means to change the conditions of intractable conflicts.

A wide range of interventions are available to non-governmental actors to make a difference in conflict zones – from community development to a focus on rights issues to promoting greater public awareness and challenging stereotypes by working with the media to engaging in dialogue processes with both civic and political actors. Fighting poverty is a key issue in unresolved conflict zones, as a number of the participants in the session highlighted. Finding creative ways to tackle poverty while incorporating the lessons of peace building is important – poverty reduction measures in isolation can feed underlying conflict tensions.

Finally, Mr Cohen pointed out that there is a need to take a long-term approach to conflict resolution – quick fix solutions are rarely effective and the duration of conflicts is often generational. However, engagement at an early stage is always beneficial. Foundations cannot and should not sit back and wait for the others to resolve violent dispute, but instead should work in partnership with people in conflict zones to provide a foundation for change to take place. Long term development and dialogue between the opposing sides are critical in resolving conflicts. Success stories such as in Northern Ireland have underlined the importance of supporting community activists on both sides of the divide. In addition, as Mr Ter-Gabrielyan pointed out in his closing remarks, the maintaining of both personal and professional relationships across the conflict divide is of great importance.