

ActionAid

Policy Discussion Paper

On

Violent Conflict

October 2003

Introduction

The primary objective of this policy paper is to identify a distinctive approach to conflict, reflecting ActionAid's characteristics. This will make it possible to align programmes around a common understanding, develop new programmes focused on agreed priorities and take a coherent public position on conflict issues.

The process was initiated because ActionAid has been increasingly engaged in conflict issues but lacked an adequate policy framework in *Fighting Poverty Together*.

This policy statement is the result of a process of research and consultation, which culminated in a 3-day international workshop on conflict and human security. Attached to this policy statement are-

- Annex 1: Review of ActionAid's past work on conflict
- Annex 2: Review of external thinking on 'Conflict and Human Security'
- Annex 3: Conflict analysis tool using a human security approach – 'Human Security Framework'

1. ActionAid's Values and Understanding relating to Conflict

ActionAid asserts that poor people have the right to a life free from violence and the fear of violence. We are concerned that poor people's human rights should continue to be protected even in times of violent conflict. These statements are informed by our perception of the priorities of poor people as well as our understanding of international law.

ActionAid acknowledges that there is a close link between conflict and poverty. Violent conflict is likely to increase poverty. But ActionAid also recognises that if poor people assert their rights to an equitable share of resources and to treatment without discrimination, conflict may be the result. Such conflict can be a positive means of attaining rights and justice, or create opportunities for social transformation. We perceive the problem being in the extent of violence, not in conflict itself. Whilst we are not a pacifist organisation, we support non violent approaches to change.

Therefore ActionAid believes that 'peace' cannot be viewed as an end in itself unless it means 'peace with recognition of the interests of the poor'. This is likely to mean peace with justice and security.

Because it cannot be assumed that ActionAid's objective is simply to stop conflict, and because conflict often develops into extremely complex forms, it is necessary to analyse each conflict individually. This analysis must strongly reflect the perspectives and interests of poor people.

ActionAid acknowledges the need to address the direct needs and interests of poor people. Its response will often include relief and humanitarian elements. But it will always be focused on the perceptions of the affected people, and on developing their strength. ActionAid will be wary of intervening in international debates about conflict situations unless it has a clear mandate from poor people.

2. Conflict and Violence

Conflict affects everyone, but it impacts on poor and marginalized people the most because they are least able to protect themselves and most acutely feel the effects. Poor and vulnerable people, especially women and young girls, feel the worst effects of violent conflict but often have the least say in its conduct.

ActionAid recognises that in the lives of poor people there is no clear division between conflict and widespread violence related to inequality and discrimination, but its concern is primarily with violent conflict because of its likely harmful effects.

ActionAid also recognises that violence is not limited to interactions between armies or between rich and poor but also occurs between poor people, and even within their families. In every case ActionAid asserts the fundamental principle of respect for human rights.

ActionAid also recognises that the protection of the individual often depends on the protection of the community. ActionAid not only asserts individual human rights but also seeks to strengthen the capacity of communities to withstand the effects of violent conflict and if possible to transform conflict in a way that strengthens poor people and their social institutions.

3. Neutrality, Impartiality and Human Security

Our understanding of neutrality does not imply lack of concern for poor people. ActionAid remains neutral in that we are not actively involved with either side in a violent conflict. Instead, ActionAid consistently supports poor people in their struggle to achieve their rights, but we remain impartial between the parties engaged in violent conflict. We offer humanitarian assistance on the basis of our understanding of need, which is informed by peoples' capacity to cope as well as by immediate need.

ActionAid recognizes that a position of impartiality can only be sustained by rigorous analysis. Poor people themselves should be involved in analysing conflict and need, and conflict should be viewed primarily from their perspective.

ActionAid recognises that poor people face many threats to their security as well as those directly arising from a particular conflict. The aim is to reduce the vulnerability of poor people to all different forms of crisis, including violent conflict, and to reinforce human security.

4. Linking the Responses

In ActionAid's experience, the lives of poor people, particularly women and children, are often characterised by violence and the threat of violence. Conflict is inevitable in a world where there are competing interests for scarce resources and where powerful institutions work against the interests of people living in poverty. Often the political, economic and social factors interact. People may suffer because of discrimination based on their identity but this may be a reflection of political and economic interests.

It is necessary to examine the relationship between these factors carefully in order to identify strategic responses.

Violence can often be avoided and conflicts resolved by non violent means. But there is usually self interest driving the negative dynamics which precipitate conflict, and well respected mechanisms for non-violent resolution are seldom given adequate support. ActionAid needs to maintain a realistic understanding of these dynamics to work effectively.

ActionAid also recognises that violence at the household level may be linked to conflict at the national level and to inequalities and injustices in the global order. Therefore ActionAid will always consider a policy dimension when addressing conflict but will ensure that the different levels of analysis are linked together.

In particular, ActionAid recognises the importance of governance at the national level. It will always seek to ensure that local initiatives are integrated into national strategies.

ActionAid also recognises that conflict is closely linked to a number of other serious threats to security, notably HIV/AIDS and depletion of the environment. ActionAid will always seek to be flexible and comprehensive in its response to conflict, reflecting the concerns of those who are affected.

Finally, ActionAid recognises that the ending of conflict through ceasefires or peace agreements does not necessarily spell an end to the structural problems that caused conflict. This may lead to renewed violence in the future. ActionAid will ensure that its response in post-conflict situations does not underestimate these possibilities.

5. The Policy

In summary, ActionAid perceives that-

- Because of the interaction of poverty and conflict there is a need for detailed analysis on a case by case basis
- Conflict may be a necessary process in some circumstances but poor people are especially vulnerable to the impact of violence
- The vulnerability of women and girls is especially high but their role in decision-making is not proportional
- Human security is closely related to the strength of communities.
- In a conflict situation local peace initiatives will have limited impact unless they are related to a wider analysis at national and international level.
- Conflict takes on many dimensions and so responses must be flexible and comprehensive.
- In 'post-conflict' situations it is still important to address the underlying causes of conflict if there is to be lasting peace.

Taking these points together ActionAid has framed the aim for its work on conflict as follows: -

Aim

ActionAid will support poor people in achieving freedom from the fear of violence, from violence itself and protection of their human rights during violent conflict. It will do so on the basis of thorough and comprehensive analysis and with a strong emphasis on the perceptions of poor people. It will always seek to build on and strengthen their voice in all matters relating to conflict.

Basis for the response

Conflict may create the circumstances in which it is necessary to focus on survival, but may also create opportunities for ending poverty. In such cases ActionAid may be unable to assert all the claims of *Fighting Poverty Together* and may have to focus on the most basic rights.

But even where ActionAid is involved only in humanitarian relief it will always undertake a rights-based analysis (see box) that will identify the underlying causes, dynamics, and the survival strategies from the perceptions of poor people. We will also work within a strategic framework that addresses vulnerability at the individual, local, national and international levels.

ActionAid recognises that every conflict has different causes, dynamics and consequences. We will make a systematic analysis of every conflict in which we work. For this purpose ActionAid has developed an analytical tool –see Annex 3.

ActionAid recognises that a country with a previous history of violent conflict is predisposed to further violence and therefore that any peace agreement will need active support if it is to succeed. This means that ActionAid will retain a focus on conflict in every country where we operate if there has been a recent history of armed violence.

ActionAid's Rights Analysis

A rights-based analysis considers people affected by emergencies as citizens with rights and responsibilities. People have a right to protection, to human security and to assistance based on their needs.

Analysis of the distribution of power will inform all the elements of our rights analysis. It will also identify where and how poor people affected by disasters can increase their share of power.

An analysis based on rights looks at who does and who does not have access to, and control over, basic resources and services. This often reflects discriminatory policies and practices, as in countries where women's lack of entitlements to land makes them more vulnerable to disasters.

Our analysis will identify the responsibilities of people and institutions at all levels (individuals, families, local and national governments, regional bodies and international actors), and their capacities to uphold such responsibilities.

A sound analysis of the existing international, national and local legal and governance systems is central to AA's approach, since they establish clear obligations on states and non-state actors to guarantee human security and poor people's assistance and protection.

We will examine how people affected by disasters, particularly the most marginalised, can be actively involved in assessments, decision-making, and negotiation of their rights with other stakeholders.

ActionAid's analysis will identify those groups of people and social sectors whose rights and severely denied. Thus ethnicity, gender, generation and disability become high priorities in emergencies.

We will look at how gender roles and relations and patterns of discrimination make women more vulnerable, while undermining their capacity to cope with the effects of emergencies. For example, we will analyse the dynamics of sexual violence and human trafficking so that they are addressed by emergency programming.

A rights analysis addresses both the tensions and synergies between power, culture and rights.

Key Areas of Response

The framework for ActionAid's work in conflict will be-

1. **Causes:** Addressing the underlying causes of conflict, such as injustice, systematic human rights abuse, and unequal access to resources and government services, as seen from the perspective of poor and marginalized people.
2. **Negative dynamics:** Challenging the people, institutions and processes that contribute to the illegitimate use of violence and so driving conflict to become violent. For example, ActionAid will continue to be involved in advocacy to stop the illegal trade in diamonds and to curb the availability of small arms.
3. **Positive dynamics:** Supporting the people, processes and institutions that prevent the escalation of conflict into violence, or transform violent conflict into peaceful negotiation, while reflecting the interests of poor people. For example, ActionAid has been deeply involved in peace-building and peace education in Africa and promoting communal harmony in India.
4. **Immediate consequences:** Mitigating the consequences of violent conflict in such a way as to protect the security and rights of poor people, for example by assisting internally displaced persons and child soldiers and advocating for their protection.
5. **Long-term consequences:** In 'post-conflict' situations, continuing our analysis and engagement to promote development, governance and institutions which support the interests of poor people and so contribute to lasting peace with justice and security.