Preventing Civil Wars: Lessons for Foreign Policy

INSIGHTS FROM PRACTITIONERS

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Summary

Interviews with 44 officials at USAID, the State Department, the Defense Department, and federal contractors indicate that the U.S. government's existing guidance documents on foreign civil conflict do not play a key role in the formulation and implementation of U.S. policy addressing such conflict. Some of these officials, especially at USAID, praised the guidance documents as helpful in preparing formal conflict analyses, but none said they were used in preparing policy recommendations.

Except for the DOD officials, most interviewees had MA degrees in conflict-related fields. However, interviewees said such academic training did not provide clear policy guidance, so their work for the U.S. government was guided more by their professional experience. During their careers, they have received little formal U.S. government (USG) training on conflict – typically less than two weeks and often only a single day.

Most officials reported little interagency coordination in addressing foreign civil conflict. Many also said they resisted using guidance documents originating in other departments or even other offices of their own department or agency.

As the United States updates its tools to address foreign civil conflict, in the wake of the government's December 2020 "Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability," it should pursue the following: new guidance documents that link causes of conflict to policy options; more robust training on the causes of and potential remedies for foreign civil conflict; and increased interagency coordination based on common guidance documents.

Background

This aspect of our project sought insight from practitioners on how their work is guided by two factors: (1) existing USG guidance documents on conflict; and (2) their past education and training on conflict. From January – April 2021, the project interviewed 44 officials (Figure 1) at USAID, the State Department, the Defense Department, and federal contractors. All interviews were confidential. The interviewees had experience in the following regions

(and countries): Africa (Liberia, Mozambique, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda), Asia (Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Vietnam), Europe (Kosovo), Latin America (Nicaragua), Caribbean, and Middle East (Iraq, Afghanistan).

Figure 1. Distribution of 44 Interviewees
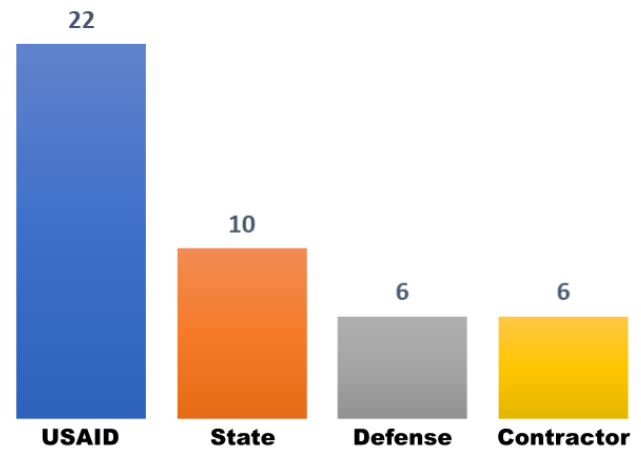
Guidance Documents – Findings

The USAID Conflict Assessment Framework (CAF) was the guidance document mentioned most frequently during the interview process.[1] This was due to two factors: half of the interviewees work at USAID, and the CAF is the USG's most commonly used conflict assessment tool. While interviewees also mentioned other guidance documents, such as the Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) and the Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR), the feedback on CAF was more extensive.

Conflict assessment is not institutionalized in the U.S. government beyond USAID. While USAID officials reported regular use of the CAF, most State Department officials except at the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) lacked experience in formal conflict assessment. No DOD interviewee ever had conducted or used a conflict assessment. State Department officials emphasized the *ad hoc* nature of the policy process, and said that responses to conflict should be specific to the country, region, or thematic area. A DOD official noted that unlike at USAID and State, the Pentagon does not have an office dedicated to conflict management, which constrains its ability to assess foreign civil conflict and respond accordingly. In light of these conflicting bureaucratic approaches, inter-agency coordination

remains a hurdle in the U.S. government's response to foreign civil conflict.

The Interagency Conflict Assessment Framework (ICAF) was designed to encourage a whole-of-government response to foreign conflict.[2] Many officials praise the ICAF's emphasis on interviewing local residents and its attention to a country's identities, institutions, and resiliencies. However, they indicated that no conflict assessment based on ICAF had been conducted in several years, due to interagency coordination problems and the time required to complete the process. They also noted that ICAF, like CAF, lacks guidance on formulating or implementing policy responses.

Interviewees (including embassy officials) reported that embassies resist conducting and utilizing conflict assessments. Embassies prefer their own approaches and reject the notion that an outside office can better diagnose their host country's dynamics. One official said that formal conflict assessments are rarely conducted because the U.S. government has few resources dedicated to conflict as its own discipline. Many officials (including at embassies) view experience in a specific country as sufficient to address conflict there. Conducting conflict assessments also competes for priority with preparing other documents that focus on country strategies, thematic areas, and agency-wide objectives. All of these analyses are intended to be used in concert, but interviewees also reported a lack of clear guidance on how to do so.

Interviewees generally praised the content of USG conflict guidance materials but rarely linked them to policy decisions. One complaint about the CAF regarded its suitability for situations characterized by greed or corruption, such as drug trafficking, rather than identity-based grievance. Some officials criticized conflict assessments for failing to prescribe specific interventions based on identified conflict dynamics. However, other officials said this was intentional, in that the CAF is designed chiefly as a diagnostic tool for USAID programming initiatives to facilitate conversation rather than create policy. One DOD official complained that the available guidance materials are "safe and unsophisticated" and do not provide strategic solutions to conflict.

Several DOD officials agreed that conflict assessments focus too much on a country's weaknesses rather than resiliencies that could be strengthened by deploying U.S. resources.

Interviewees also complained that conducting an assessment requires a great deal of time and resources, including to gain access to conflict participants, which strains resources that might be needed to respond quickly in the event of violence. Officials disagreed on the importance of gaining access to conflict participants. Interviewees who had focused on granular conflict analyses considered the inability to access violent regions of a country, and to speak with those perpetrating violence, as major obstacles to diagnosis and policy prescription. However, more senior officials argued that local partners have provided reliable assessments of conflict zones without necessarily visiting them.

The Atrocity Assessment Framework, a longstanding draft document that provides "supplemental guidance" to both State and USAID conflict assessment frameworks, was praised for its nuanced depiction of perpetrators, victims, and triggers of atrocities.[3] However, such guidance is not formally integrated into the government's response to conflict. Several interviewees noted that publicly using the word "atrocity" could undermine diplomacy. One official suggested that an atrocity assessment should ideally be followed by an action memo outlining policy options.

The Stabilization Assistance Review (SAR), in comparison to other guidance documents, was characterized by several officials as focusing more on strategy, based on a whole-of-government response.[4] While officials praised the SAR's goal of coordinating resources across the government, they reported that implementation had a mixed record in the 11 countries addressed to date. A recent problem is that many of the SAR's key concepts have been subsumed in the Global Fragility Act of 2019, causing confusion about the distinction between the initiatives.[5] Finally, one DOD interviewee complained that the SAR downplays the important role of the U.S. military in building a foreign country's defense institutions and logistics capabilities.

Education and Training – Findings

Non-DOD officials typically possessed a master's degree or higher in a conflict-related field.[6] By contrast, DOD officials lacked significant academic background in conflict-related fields, although several referred to themselves as "self-trained" in conflict. Most interviewees were well-versed in basic concepts about conflict, such as greed, grievance, and identity. However, their work on or in conflict relied mostly on professional experience rather than academic training that they viewed as impractical. One embassy official lamented the theoretical and geopolitical focus in his postgraduate education and claimed to have gained better insight by working in an embassy.

Interviewees seldom return to the classroom during their career, which USAID and State officials frequently complained about. Many praised the Foreign Service Institute's course offerings and USAID's in-house training. At foreign posts, however, the only common training most interviewees had received was less than one day on using the CAF or ICAF, focusing on technical procedures rather than conflict dynamics. Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs) reported receiving only minimal training on conflict management or assessment, such as USAID's Conflict 101 course or the aforementioned CAF or ICAF training. USAID FSNs have access to the agency's full training curriculum but are not compelled to take such classes, so instead typically rely on their own local expertise.

USG-sponsored trainings change frequently depending on initiatives within the Executive Branch and Congress. Atrocity Prevention training is currently required of all State and USAID employees, through the Foreign Service Institute, pursuant to the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018. This training focuses on underlying drivers of atrocities, and on U.S. bureaucratic procedures, rather than how to formulate policy responses to minimize atrocities. USAID's Center for Conflict and Violence Prevention (CVP) has begun integrating a suite of conflict sensitivity training, emphasizing how U.S. policies can potentially make conflict worse if not executed properly. State Department officials commented that some training can quickly go out of style, such as early 2010s requirements on spycraft and defensive driving, which are less relevant after the downsizing of the U.S. diplomatic presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

DOD officials reported that training in conflict management is neither required nor readily available to military officers or Pentagon civilians. All DOD interviewees said that due to a department-wide shift from counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism to great-power competition, the Pentagon has reduced training in peace and stability operations. The Army War College offers only elective courses on peace and stability operations, typically attended by students who already possess some familiarity with the topic. Another interviewee said that pre-deployment training for DOD civilians through the Joint Readiness Training Center pays inadequate attention to what traditionally has been called Phases 4 and 5 of military intervention, when peacebuilding would occur.

Recommendations

- New USG guidance documents are needed to help officials formulate policies to achieve specific objectives in foreign civil conflicts based on the underlying drivers of violence.
- New training on conflict's causes and solutions should be provided in flexible format to enable officials to access it asynchronously at their convenience.
- The U.S. government should increase interagency coordination on foreign civil conflicts, based on common guidance documents.

Endnotes

[1] USAID, "Conflict Assessment Framework," Version 2.0, 2012.

[2] State Department, "Interagency Conflict Analysis Framework (ICAF 2.0) Guidance Note," April 2014.

[3] U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, and USAID, Center of Excellence on Democracy, Human Rights and Governance, "Atrocity Assessment Framework," Working Draft, March 20, 2015. See also, USAID, "Field Guide: Helping Prevent Mass Atrocities," 2015.

[4] State Department, USAID, and Defense Department, "Stabilization Assistance Review: A Framework for Maximizing the Effectiveness of U.S. Government Efforts to Stabilize Conflict-Affected Areas," 2018.

[5] State Department, USAID, Defense Department, and Treasury Department, "United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability," December 2020.

[6] Master's degrees included International Peace and Conflict Resolution, Conflict Analysis and Resolution, International Conflict Analysis, Human Rights, and Political Science with a specialization in conflict analysis and mitigation.