

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Root of Conflict Podcast

Episode: Preventing Conflict in Fragile States

featuring

Liz Hume, Vice President, Alliance for Peacebuilding

interviewed by

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Monday, June 3, 2020

Full Transcript

University of Chicago Introducer: This is Nadia and you're listening to University of Chicago Public Policy Podcast.

Root of Conflict Interviewers: You're listening to Root of Conflict, a podcast about violent conflict around the world and the people, societies and policy issues it affects. You'll hear from experts and practitioners who conduct research, implement programs and use data analysis to address some of the most pressing challenges facing our world. Root of Conflict is produced by UC3P, in collaboration with the Pearson Institute for the Study and Resolution of Global Conflict, a research Institute housed within the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago.

Aishwarya Raje: The Global Fragility Act, or the GFA was passed by Congress as part of the 2020 Consolidated Appropriations Act and signed into law on December 20th, 2019. This bill represents a historic victory for the peacebuilding field, which has long advocated for the GFA as a way forward to prevent and reduce violent conflict. The Alliance for Peacebuilding, a non-partisan network of over 110 organizations working to end conflict and build sustainable peace, has been at the forefront of advocating for the GFA. In this episode of Root of Conflict, we spoke with Liz Hume, Vice President of Alliance for Peacebuilding. Liz is a conflict expert and has more than 20 years of experience in senior leadership positions in the federal government, multilateral institutions, and NGOs. In this interview, we discussed methods for ensuring bi-partisan support for the GFA, as well as the importance of research and advocacy in crafting policies that promote peaceful political outcomes.

Thank you, Liz for joining us. So, to start off, can you just tell us about the work and the mission of Alliance for Peacebuilding, and as Vice President of the organization, what are some of your main roles and responsibilities?

Liz Hume: So, thank you so much for having me. So, who is the Alliance for Peacebuilding? We're a membership-based organization. We have over 120 members working in the peacebuilding field, conflict prevention, in many different areas, Universities, academic institutions, large organizations like Mercy Corps and world vision and Catholic Relief Services and organizations that are doing other work besides just conflict prevention and peacebuilding. And then also smaller organizations, like New Gen Peace Builders, that are working in on education and peacebuilding. The field is in some regards, relatively small because of the funding that goes into the field. So, you're going to have larger organizations embedded in big development, and then you might have smaller organizations working in the field as well.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

So, we represent our members both in three buckets that we talk about, which is policy and advocacy, learning and evaluation, and partnerships. So, the policy and advocacy really focuses on how do we work with Congress, the executive branch, multilaterals like the UN, making sure that our organizations, their work, their best practices get into policy, find their way into policy in terms of how do we deal with laws like the Global Fragility Act. So, there's all sorts of ways. We just had a big meeting at the Alliance for Peacebuilding, where we were consulting on the new United Nations Sustaining Peace Platform. Those are just some examples from the policy and advocacy. We also focus in on technical areas and this is where it bleeds into our learning and evaluation program. So, looking at violent extremism, there's a lot of theories of change out there that say, "If you do this, then violent extremism will be reduced." But we really go deep in looking at it. What do we know? What don't we know? What is working? What isn't working? And what else do we need to do? And that, we work very closely with our L&E team. So, really focusing on that evidence piece, but then also how do we build capacity of our members to be able to do more in the evidence space, in the evaluation space. And then around partnerships and promoting this work, how do we bring people into the sector? We have our conference this year coming up on December 7th, and that really will focus on bringing people into the field. And so, that's a lot of our partnership work as well.

Mwangi Thuita: Honing in on the policy and advocacy aspect of your work. Can you tell us a bit about the Global Fragility Act and what the Alliance for Peacebuilding's role has been in that process?

Liz Hume: So we have to go back to 2016, a long time ago actually now. We were concerned that the peacebuilding field really came about in the nineties, this theory around peacebuilding, and it wasn't just about support to peace processes. You had to get into other sectors, and the peacebuilding field has grown, conflict prevention has grown. However, in the last two decades, we understand the causes of violence and violent conflict, but we don't have an overarching strategy of how to effectively deal with it in country X, country Y. And we've looked at it at a very projectized basis. And again, the funding that has gone into the peacebuilding field has been quite small.

When you look forward and you start seeing the numbers 2016, 2017 today, where roughly 2 billion people live in countries where development is affected by fragility, conflict and violence, and these numbers are increasing, the number of highly violent conflicts has increased for the first time in years. And it's not traditionally what we looked at. We looked at interstate conflicts that could be resolved by a peace agreement, getting all the actors, bringing them to us, a city in Dayton, Ohio and making them stay there until they came up with an agreement. We're not seeing that. Deaths from organized violence have risen over 230%. I mean, you could go on and on and on with these statistics. So, what we're doing isn't working. And so, sitting down and talking with one of our members from Mercy Corps, and taking a look at this, what does it need? What has to change? And so, we worked very closely with our member Mercy Corps to make this idea become realized around the Global Fragility Act.

We needed an overarching strategy for the U.S. government. We needed to do things differently, and that would mean additional funding. It would mean – there's many things coming into play, and at an evidence-based, both at the program level, but also at the 30,000 foot, is this country becoming more sustainable from a peace perspective? Are we reducing violence? What is it going to take to do things differently in name, your country? What are we doing wrong? And so that's where the idea came about. And then we had to build a coalition around it. And you know, it's not always easy to do that. A lot of people weren't keen on the idea at first, anything that's new is a little scary. People also are nervous about the U.S. government given its national security strategy. So there's a couple aspects of it, the idea itself, selling the idea, building the coalition and then more importantly, today, more than ever, if anything is going to work, it has to be bipartisan. So, making sure we have Republican and Democrats.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Mwangi Thuita: of Republicans or Democrats, our current political system, at least as it's portrayed through the media is highly fraught between both parties. What are the keys to success and ensuring bipartisan support for the Global Fragility Act and what kind of arguments have you found to be most persuasive with lawmakers?

Liz Hume: It's a great question. In this space, and when you talk to Republicans and Democrats separately or when they're working together, I don't want to say it's obvious, but it's obvious what's happening. What we're doing isn't working. We have the evidence to show that. This is what we need, and these are the things that we could do to make an overarching strategy. And this is what it's going to take. And when we looked at the evidence, one of the things that folks on the Hill have asked us repeatedly, show us where programs have had impact. And in the last few years, we've gotten a lot better at that. Some organizations within our sector have gotten a lot better and we were able to show them and prove that we have been able to reduce violence.

We have been able to say that this program reduced people's perceptions and desires to join an extremist group. It's horrible to say, but you had this incredible uptick in violence in the world coupled with the fact that the nature of conflict has changed. Again, not this interstate, more focusing on violent extremism, regional conflicts, community level conflicts. It's not this group against this group, that we needed to do something different. That wasn't a hard sell, both Republicans and Democrats, they get it, they understand it. They have been true partners in this approach. And really, we're the champions on it.

Aishwarya Raje: Can you speak a bit to how the Global Fragility Acts focus on preventative measures, rather than perhaps interventionists measures, has really made a difference in getting strong bi-partisan support and getting the legislation passed? And how is that approach different than maybe other foreign assistance packages or legislations that you've seen in the past couple of years?

Liz Hume: Well, there haven't been a lot of legislative packages in the last couple of year, focusing on these issues. You know, we've seen them a lot in the health sector PEPFAR, the malaria fund, the PMI program. And I have to say in early discussions, thinking about this as a PEPFAR for violence, that when we would say that you would see people get very nervous. Looking back at about 2015, 2016, one of the things that people talk about all the time is "How can you prove that you prevented violence?" That's a huge question that we had to overcome. And that's where I think a lot of the evidence that has started to come out in the last couple of years has been very critical for this.

But we started looking at specific countries in terms of what we were doing. And I always use Bangladesh as a perfect example. And this is not to say Bangladesh should be a GFA country, because you could pick any country and it will look like this in terms of U.S. government funding. So, if you look at the U.S. government strategy for Bangladesh it talks about how important it is. It talks about wants to address violent extremism. It continues on about governance issues, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. What we know in Bangladesh is that the funding levels for development sectors, agriculture are incredibly high, and no one's saying, "Don't do that work." But at the same time, the U.S. government reports, their conflict assessments, talk about what we need in Bangladesh to address violent extremism, conflict prevention really focuses on a governance approach.

But then when you look at the funding levels, the governance sector, the conflict prevention funding is a blip on the radar screen. It's so tiny. And so, what you're saying is "This is what we want to do." And our own experts are saying, "This is what it's going to take." And we know that instability and violence indicators are rising in Bangladesh, but let's just continue doing what we're doing, you know? And so, when you talk about that example, and I've done that at institutions with U.S. government folks sitting there, I had one U.S. government person lean over to me and say, "Good job, nicely done." It shows – I don't want to say the

ROOT OF CONFLICT

ridiculousness of it, these are great people trying to do great things. I worked at USAID, but we need some significant policy shifts. And that, I think when you talk about it and you present the evidence in terms of what we're doing, what isn't working, that violent conflict is going up, that we are able to start proving that these programs are working, it's kind of a game changer. And we're at that tipping point, I think right now.

Mwangi Thuita: You've talked a lot about evidence and we're at the Harris School of Public Policy, which places a strong premium on evidence-based approaches to policy, especially through quantitative analysis. While this is a vital piece of creating policy can you speak to the importance of combining the important elements of research and analysis with advocacy, outreach and communications? So how do advocacy-based approaches factor into your work?

Liz Hume: So again, great question. And I've had meetings all morning where we've been talking about this. In our sector, we've gotten away for a long time with not showing evidence, not even showing even unintended consequences, you know, seeing if this program worked, but did it have any impact overall? And again, that's changing, and there are some organizations that are doing a great job looking at this and making sure that this evidence comes into play. But we have to do better and we have to do a lot better. So, we have to publicize when we learn something. It's hard to do a lot of times, because again, a lot of programs aren't doing it, they're doing a lot of focus on outputs. That's what the donor wants. We spent the money the way we said we were going to spend it, but they don't say this is the impact that we had. These are the unintended consequences that we had.

So, I think that's a big problem. There's a competition. There's not a lot of funding in this field. So, any really good learnings are kept because it's a competitive advantage. And then also, you are working in conflict-affected and fragile states. I was running a conflict governance program in Ethiopia for four years and the government – we weren't supposed to be running that program. So, the government, anything that went out, the government would look at. So, we did not release a lot of our reports. They went to the donor, but they didn't go farther than that.

But there are ways that we can sanitize that information and be able to get it out, even if you're working in a very restricted environment. So, there's some things on us that we need to do as a field, in terms of the evidence piece. So those are the problems with our evidence base. How do we then get the evidence into advocacy? And why is it important? Because 1) people on the Hill have told us, Congress, if you can't prove it, why are we funding this? How do we know what's working and what isn't working? People just keep proposing some of the same programs over and over again. We have no evidence to say they worked or not. So, one of the things AFP has done is, let's say, we've looked at countering violent extremism, that sub-sector, and go down in that. People have areas of change that they treat as gospel. And some of them have even been put out by the U.S. government in the peacebuilding sector.

So, we've looked at them. Do we even have evidence on this theory of change? Does it work? Does it not work? And what more do we need to know? So, we are systematically going through a lot of sub-sector reviews, working with our different partners to say, "Please stop just throwing this theory of change out there." Even if it's on some government list somewhere. Make sure that you do the literature review, make sure that you know what's out there, what isn't out there. And then, once you do good work, we need to publicize it and we need to understand, "How do we put that back into a package that can be put into a policy document?" One that's no more than two pages because nobody reads in Washington more than two pages. And make sure your recommendations are clear and concise.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

And even if you said, “Okay, this didn't work.” But what is the next theory? Okay. If this didn't work, why don't we then look at this? One of the examples I was talking about earlier today was, we have some anecdotal evidence on trauma and mental health in this field, that if you attach some psychosocial programming to other programs that are running, that that actually might that might be more helpful. So, people think they're coming in for this, but they're actually getting a little bit more here. So, we have some anecdotal information from people who have received that programming that has been helpful. Okay. And we've heard about it in other places. So, let's test that theory. But don't just assume that it works, but test it and say, “Hey, we have this theory,” but what happens a lot of times is that people then just go off and do it and start treating it as gospel.

Aishwarya Raje: So going back to the GFA, you had talked about how many different sectors have to intersect in terms of actually putting the legislation together. But I'm curious as to how you see the potential of the GFA in touching other parts of society around the world beyond just maybe countering violent extremism, which of course is the main kind of crux of this legislation. But parts, society and development like health system, strengthening migration, gender equality, it seems like the GFA can really have a huge impact on all of these different pieces. So how hopeful are you that this legislation can actually do that?

Liz Hume: So two points well, a couple of points. I could talk all day about this. Just to go back really quickly on what you're talking about in terms of prevention and I don't think I answered that question completely:

Why the GFA is so important is because it really is for the first time talking about prevention and peacebuilding, and I think that is the critical piece of it. Now it says of five countries or regions, two at least have to be prevention countries. And that was something that in the end, when we knew it was going to come on the appropriations bill, that we really wanted to hold the line on, because we wanted to see this work in prevention countries and more than one, because we wanted to have a bit of a cross sector. So that's really, I think one of the key pieces of the GFA. On the second side, and what's so key about that is, it is really hard to get donors and the international community to focus on a prevention country. Because when things are blowing up all over the world, where does your attention go? Coupled with the fact of “How do you get people to pay attention?” when there's so much violent conflict, how do you decide where those resources go?

And so that, by far, I think is one of the most important aspects of it. On the issue of bringing in other sectors, this will not work if you don't. So again, I go back to Bangladesh as an example. You have the bulk of the funding that's going in there, education, health, agriculture. If those programs are not part of this design and are not focusing on their work from a conflict-sensitive approach, and that is beyond “do no harm” – the first thing, we want to make sure no program is doing harm – it's got to be more than that. And it's got to say, “Okay, first, do no harm. Secondly, how is this sector, program, activity helping to reduce violence and build sustainable peace?”

And I will say this, and the education sector has done a lot of work in this area, but it is hard to crack a lot of these other development sectors. And health has been one of the hardest ones. And so, I think what happened, what you just saw happen in DRC, not too long ago, with the Ebola clinics, there was a lot of mistrust around them. The health clinics, violence was sparked. Some were burned down. It is a good time to talk to the health sector, and we've started to say, “(1) How do we do no harm?” Clearly harm was done there, but this was an opportunity to help reduce violence and build sustainable peace. And you have to be better at it. And you have to be working in that space. You can't just say we're saving lives, and we don't have time, because that argument doesn't work anymore, coupled with the fact that you're missing a huge opportunity to help in terms of building sustainable peace.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

So, that's just an example, but at the same time, the field has to compromise. We have to use the language that they're using. If they don't want to talk about conflict because they want to be more neutral, okay, let's talk about risk then. We have to also simplify this conflict sensitivity so that you don't need a PhD to understand it. We have to help and give them the resources and the technical expertise to build in a practical way, but they also have to be open to it and understand their role in this conflict dynamic.

Mwangi Thuita: So, as you look forward towards the rest of the year, and also the coming couple of years, what are some conflicts that you're keeping an eye on? Are there any countries or regions that you think are being overlooked as potential hotspots for conflict?

Liz Hume: This is just such a hard question because there are so many out there. If you look on one of my favorite sites, the Fund for Peace Conflict, the Fragile State Index, you'll see a lot of countries sitting in the warning site. Ethiopia again is another example. It's always hovered in the last even probably two decades around number 19, or 20. But you also have to go in and see the conflict dynamics, those indicators are flashing, but what's the flip side? What's holding it back? What's the resiliency side of it there? And so, that, I think, is a bit more complicated than just going in and looking at the grievances and the conflict dynamics that are very targeted into what's wrong. So, in that regard, you have to look at it as more of a holistic approach. And I think we forget to do that a lot of times.

And also, one more aspect of it is that what sparks it, something's got to really spark it. I don't think anybody predicted what happened with the Arab Spring. You know, if you go down into Tunisia, what was the cause? It was somebody who got fed up and tired. He was told to move his stall, his livelihood. And that was a major spark. I always say it's not an exact science and, and it just isn't, because you're dealing with also human beings that can be very irrational, and they don't do what you think they're going to do. That being said, we have some good examples of, if you look at Burkina Faso right now, a year or two years ago, we had great indicators that there were serious problems in Burkina Faso. And we didn't focus on conflict prevention there. We are now, but the problem is the government has lost swaths of areas where they have no control.

It isn't just violent extremism. You have a security problem with many different issues in terms of splinter groups, some of it criminal. So, what do you do now with Burkina Faso? So, I have people coming up to me all the time. Somebody came up to me after I was talking about Burkina Faso at a State Department conference came up and said, "You just described what's happening on Cameroon." And right now, Ethiopia is a perfect example. Again, everybody is so excited about this political reform. We just put out a report that says, "You're having great political reforms, and these are the challenges." And this is again, the Fund for Peace in 2020, we'll most likely say it's one of the worsened states in terms of conflict dynamics. But you had this great political reform. In order to get into the Fund for Peace side or any other conflict watchlist and take those top countries and go in, but then also looking at what is that resiliency factor.

And a good way to look at it is also elections. We know elections are a big spark for violence. So, and again, Ethiopia, right now, it keeps postponing its elections, but right now they're set for August. So those are some of the things that, looking at, and I will tell you, one thing that I am incredibly nervous about is Afghanistan right now. I think it's pretty clear what the U.S. government wants to do there, mainly get out. I can't imagine what it would be like to be in Afghanistan now, for the last almost 20 years, staying there or going back there and recognizing that this all will be coming to an end soon with an agreement that in the past, or in the recent past, has not been inclusive with safeguards and monitoring set up in terms of any agreement that is decided with the Taliban.

ROOT OF CONFLICT

Aishwarya Raje: Well, thank you Liz so much for your time and for your tireless work in creating a more peaceful world.

Liz Hume: Thank you so much. This has been a pleasure talking with you, and also thank the Harris School for its role in producing evidence. I am a big fan of it, and I talk about it and make sure it gets in every strategy, document, law that's being proposed right now, because we have to do more of it.

Mwangi Thuita: Thank you for listening to this episode of Root of Conflict, featuring Liz Hume, Vice President of the Alliance for Peacebuilding. Special thanks to UC3P and the Pearson Institute for their continued support of this series. Your interviewers today were Aishwarya Raje and Mwangi Thuita. Aishwarya Raje also produced this episode. Mwangi Thuita edited and engineered. For more information about The Pearson Institute, research and events, visit thepearsoninstitute.org and follow them on Twitter.