

Kenya: development failing?

A month ago Kenya fell prey to a sudden burst of post-electoral violence that left over 1 000 dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. The intensity and scale of the violence came as a surprise to the world. It is a painful reality-check for the development community.

Of course, Kenya had lived through tense electoral periods before, and none of us was blind to the many difficulties the country continued to face. But this time things seemed to be going well. This year's campaign had been exceptionally peaceful, and millions of citizens set out to vote on 27 December – at times walking and queuing for hours to cast their ballot. More fundamentally perhaps, Kenya was unanimously seen as the “good student” of development, some referring to it as a symbol of African renaissance. The “Kenya vision 2030 framework”, a set of ambitious macroeconomic, legal and constitutional reforms, was being implemented in close partnership with World Bank teams. Cherished by the donor community, Kenya received just under one billion dollars of official development assistance in 2006 – a figure up by 250% since 2002. Its booming horticulture and tourist industries were hailed as models for other African states to follow in their efforts to integrate into world trade. The country's economic expansion, which averaged 5.5% in the last four years and fuelled the progress of neighbouring economies, appeared as the proof that vigorous growth is possible on the African continent in the absence of mineral or fossil resources. Today, this economic miracle is up in the air, suspended to a political deal that Kenyan politicians refuse to strike. How did it all go wrong? What have *we* got wrong?

All is not lost, and there strong reasons to believe that the Kenyan people will surmount this political crisis and put the country back on its promising track. Yet, as we sit on the brink of the abyss, it is worth to re-examine our liberal assumption that since poverty breeds conflict, socio-economic development fosters political stability and reduces recourse to violence.

The first lesson we must draw from this month of civil strife is that development, however well managed, cannot solve everything. Some tensions are deeply ingrained in societies (not just African – after all, the Holocaust is just some 70 years away, and the Srebrenica massacre thirteen), and peace, whether in its liberal incarnation or its authoritarian kind, requires more than any development agency can deliver. There is thus, parallel to the growth agenda, a specific role for bilateral and multilateral diplomacy to play in support of improved governance. In fact, the development process itself generates a number of strains on societies that lie at the very roots of conflict. Attendant to its typical course (rural-urban migrations, dissociation with ancestral customs, empowerment of women, exposure to foreign media, etc.) are accelerated changes of identities that weaken traditional norms and solidarity networks. At least initially, economic growth tends to *increase* inequalities within the country, as some communities or individuals benefit from rising income and others don't. By displacing power attributes, it mechanically nurtures resentment, to which communitarian tags are easily affixed. Ethnic manipulation is a small step away – which many leaders are disposed to take.

Does this then disprove the link between development and peace, or invert the correlation? Not necessarily. At both micro and macro level, there is a lot that development projects and national economic development *can* do to alleviate some of the structural causes of political violence, provided they are done right. To start with, development professionals, whose very first duty it is to “do no harm”, should be more conscious of the complex strains brought upon developing societies. In Kenya as elsewhere, we still have a long way to go for this conflict-sensitivity to infuse the daily practice of our organisations and the projects they fund.

But development goes much further in the way of conflict prevention. Indeed, the enhanced economic activity it generates is the only way to ultimately reduce inequalities, particularly in a context of strong demographic growth: it is easier to work on a fairer distribution of a growing pie than one that is shrinking. Moreover, fast-paced but ill-distributed economic growth can be accompanied by programmes that cater to those that are left behind, thereby mitigating grievances: local development projects typically provide extra pieces of pie to those deprived of their share. It is no coincidence that much of Kenya's ongoing violence is taking place in the slums of its large cities, home to the millions of outcasts from Africa's renaissance. Had more attention been given to the country's most glaring inequalities in access to water, shelter or jobs, this population would not necessarily have chosen violence as an instrument of change.

Let us get the lessons of what is happening in Kenya right: socio-economic progress ultimately remains our best tool to prevent conflict. Yet the relationship between growth and political stability is more subtle and less linear than the typical liberal discourse would have it. Development is no miracle 'solution' to violence, and may often create its own set of grievances – particularly when done without regard to the abrupt changes it brings to societies in motion. Sadly, Kenya isn't the illustration of development failing, but of development at work: complex, powerful, and yet fragile.

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