How do international development agencies approach peacebuilding in a sub-national conflict?

Adam Burke

International development agencies often promote approaches that link aid and peacebuilding. However, the gap between what agencies say and what they actually do is demonstrated by the mixed response to subnational conflict in Thailand’s Far South between 2007 and 2012. Over this period, numerous agencies demonstrated little interest in addressing the conflict. Some agencies did over time try to support peacebuilding, although domestic government resistance and practical barriers generated obstacles. Conflict guidelines and toolkits were rarely used, while only a few agencies implemented the context-driven and knowledge-based approaches to local partnerships that peace promotion in a complex and politically sensitive environment demands.

Comment les agences de développement internationales abordent-elles la construction de la paix lors d’un conflit infranational ?

Les agences de développement internationales promeuvent souvent des approches qui relient l’aide et la construction de la paix. Cependant, le fossé entre les dires des agences et leurs actions est démontré par la riposte peu constante au conflit infranational dans l’extrême sud thaïlandais entre 2007 et 2012. Durant cette période, de nombreuses agences n’ont guère fait preuve d’intérêt concernant la résolution du conflit. Certaines agences, au fil du temps, ont tenté de soutenir la construction de la paix, mais la résistance gouvernementale au sein même du pays et les barrières d’ordre pratique ont engendré des obstacles. Les lignes directrices et les trousses à outils pour remédier aux conflits ont été rarement utilisés, et rares ont été les agences qui ont mis en œuvre les approches impulsées par les contextes et basées sur les connaissances concernant les partenariats locaux que requiert la promotion de la paix dans un environnement complexe et politiquement sensible.

¿De qué manera las agencias de desarrollo internacionales abordan la construcción de paz en un conflicto subnacional?

Frecuentemente, las agencias de desarrollo internacionales promueven enfoques que vinculan la ayuda con la construcción de paz. Sin embargo, la brecha entre lo que dicen las agencias y lo que en realidad hacen queda demostrada por la respuesta matizada ante el conflicto subnacional que tuvo lugar en el Extremo Sur de Tailandia entre 2007 y 2012. Durante este periodo, numerosas agencias demostraron poco interés en abordar el conflicto. A pesar de los
obstáculos que representaron la resistencia del gobierno nacional y las barreras prácticas, con el transcurso del tiempo algunas agencias intentaron apoyar la construcción de paz. Sin embargo, en pocas ocasiones usaron las normas y los manuales existentes en torno a conflictos. Sólo unas pocas agencias implementaron los enfoques basados en el contexto y en el conocimiento para crear alianzas locales, las cuales resultan imprescindibles para promover la paz en un entorno complejo y políticamente sensible.

Como as agências internacionais de desenvolvimento abordam a construção da paz em um conflito subnacional?

As agências internacionais de desenvolvimento frequentemente promovem abordagens que fazem a conexão entre ajuda e construção da paz. Porém, a variação entre o que as agências afirmam e o que elas realmente fazem é demonstrada pela resposta mesclada a um conflito subnacional no extremo sul da Tailândia entre 2007 e 2012. Durante esse período, várias agências demonstraram pouco interesse em abordar o conflito. Algumas agências realmente tentaram, no decorrer do tempo, apoiar a construção da paz, embora a resistência do governo local e barreiras práticas geraram obstáculos. Orientações e kits de ferramentas sobre o conflito foram raramente utilizados, enquanto que apenas algumas poucas agências implementaram abordagens direcionadas ao conflito e baseadas no conhecimento de parcerias locais que a promoção da paz demanda em um ambiente complexo e politicamente delicado.

KEY WORDS: Aid – Developmental policies; Aid – Aid effectiveness; Conflict and reconstruction; Governance and public policy; Methods; Southeast Asia; Thailand

Introduction

International development agencies (or “aid agencies”) have increasingly focused on peacebuilding as an element of their work. Early emphasis was placed on the need to ensure that aid funds at least “Do No Harm” given a depressing track record of policies and projects that unwittingly contributed to civil conflict. By the late 1990s, conflict analysis had already become established as a working approach and agencies were establishing specialist peacebuilding units. These trends have been widely adopted, leading to a constellation of toolkits, “conflict sensitive” approaches, training programmes, and specialists.

Peacebuilding is taken here to involve the promotion of a “just peace” that involves recognition of at least some of an opponent’s grievances, along with action to address them (Goodhand 2010: 351). Like all development initiatives, understanding peacebuilding approaches requires locating them in their wider political and institutional context. Many reviews have shown that aid agencies do not always integrate efforts to promote a just peace into their operations when working in conflict zones. When they do address conflict issues, they are often led by the political and security interests of donor countries or by their own institutional concerns, rather than by the concerns of local populations and of wider peacebuilding. Examples of compromised peacebuilding applications of development assistance include the overt use of foreign aid to support military objectives in high-profile conflict countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

In addition to such applications of aid within a security agenda rather than as a means to promote a just peace, commentators have noted a range of practical barriers that limit the scope to use aid to address conflicts. Critics of peacebuilding approaches find that the tools, methods, and ways of implementing on the ground commonly repeat many of the mistakes
that have limited the effectiveness of development projects for decades (Lange and Quinn 2003; Neufeldt 2007). Some of the core features of how aid funds are spent appear resilient to policy change. In many cases, foreign aid workers have repeatedly struggled to address conflict issues at all given mixed motivations and diplomatic compromises that pull aid agencies away from implementing their own peacebuilding policies. Policy-oriented publications regularly pass over these barriers. A prominent example, the World Bank’s 2011 World Development Report, provides careful explanation of the causes of conflict and yet offers little analysis of the barriers that limit aid agencies’ scope to engage in practice.

In light of the political and practical problems that accompany the merger of peacebuilding with development assistance, this paper considers how aid agencies have addressed subnational conflict in the Far South of Thailand. It shows how those aid agencies that support peacebuilding initiatives in the area demonstrated political awareness and operational flexibility in order to negotiate their involvement with a government that is strongly protective of sovereignty and limits the operations of international agencies. The Thai government has offered little in terms of concessions or reforms to address the grievances of local people in the Far South that lie at the root of the violence. In this environment, limited opportunities exist for international promotion of peacebuilding that is aligned with government policy and gains official approval. The findings suggest that for aid agencies to engage in highly politicised subnational conflict environments they need to demonstrate local understanding and flexibility rather than adherence to the technical peacebuilding toolkits and universal concepts such as conflict sensitivity that have been widely adopted by aid agencies at a global level.

Barriers to further engagement also stem from aid agencies themselves. Several aid agencies considering support for peacebuilding in the Far South did not prioritise it sufficiently to risk damaging their wider relations with the Thai government. They also found that their own structure and operational practices limited the space for engagement. Understanding the varied approaches of aid agencies in such a context, and the barriers that they encounter, helps explain the challenge of operationalising aid agency policy pronouncements that stress the need to link development interventions and peacebuilding.

Context

The Far South of Thailand shares many features with other subnational conflict areas in South, East, and Southeast Asia where self-appointed representatives of minority groups are countered by government security forces. Examples include Aceh and Western Papua in Indonesia, Mindanao in the Philippines, Xinjiang and Tibet in China, the highlands of central Vietnam, and parts of Northeast India. Foreign aid agencies operating national level programmes often encounter major constraints when aiming to promote peacebuilding in countries experiencing subnational conflict. The research summarised in this paper examines the patterns of agency responses to violent conflict in the Far South of Thailand and considers the reasons why aid agencies differed in their ability to put stated peacebuilding policies into practice. The paper then draws wider lessons relevant to development practice and peacebuilding in subnational and other conflicts.

Most research and practice addressing peacebuilding focuses on those major conflicts that Western countries regard as important, at times passing over more numerous conflicts with a lower international profile. In these other conflicts, politically salient interventions such as peacekeeping missions or mediation are less common, yet foreign aid is regularly still provided at least at the national level if not in the conflict-affected area itself. Relatively little attention is paid to foreign aid’s relationship with the causes and dynamics of these lower-profile conflicts.
Unrest in the Far South of Thailand is perpetrated by aligned groups of underground insurgents and countered by government security forces. The violence is a manifestation of long-term local resentment at the perceived enforced assimilation and associated political marginalisation of a Malay Muslim minority under a highly centralised Thai state. By 2012, eight years of violence had caused almost 5,000 deaths in over 9,000 separate bombings, shootings, and other incidents, with little sign of any short term improvement in the overall situation. The conflict is narrowly contained, with few economic or diplomatic repercussions for neighbouring countries or more distant powers. Violence is restricted to a small area of little international significance. The conflict-affected zone (along with the rest of Thailand) has little remaining absolute poverty and it does not figure highly in international or regional development policy debates. However, many international aid agencies, including NGOs, foundations, UN agencies, and official donors do still operate across Thailand. The context provides an opportunity to examine how these agencies responded to the resurgence of violence from 2004.

In the Far South of Thailand and many other areas affected by subnational conflict, decades of economic growth and expansion of state services have considerably improved most local people’s socio-economic status. However, associated changes have often exacerbated rather than reduced antagonistic group affiliations. Inequalities between minority groups and the majority population are often persistent, existing along political, social, economic, and cultural lines (Stewart, Brown, and Langer 2008). Governments across Asia often aim to boost the local economy in an effort to solve subnational conflicts, despite some evidence to show that such violence often persists even during periods of economic growth. Senior Thai officials informally cite the phrase “use economic growth to defeat the bandits”. Such uses of development form part of pacification strategies that aim to win a conflict rather than find a peaceful shared solution, acting alongside military “hearts and minds” campaigns and other efforts to undermine rebels through the integration of local populations into a central state. In peacebuilding terms, they are part of efforts to impose a “victor’s peace” rather than to seek a “just peace”.

Many government-led development initiatives in Thailand and elsewhere can be seen as political acts that strengthen central authority over the periphery, often provoking resistance. Education policies, for example, are often shaped by nation-building assimilation objectives, teaching specific languages and official versions of history (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). It is not coincidence that school buildings and teachers have been attacked by rebels in the Far South of Thailand and elsewhere as prominent symbols of the state (Liow 2009). Economic development initiatives, meanwhile, can appear from the ground level to be similarly biased against minority groups when they lead to unequal outcomes or disrupt local political relationships. A recent example that affected the Far South of Thailand was the construction of a natural gas pipeline from the Thai coast across the border to Malaysia. The pipeline stimulated various industrial enterprises, the benefits of which were perceived by many in the Far South to have accrued unfairly to well-connected and mainly Buddhist businesses. Predominantly Malay Muslim farming and fishing communities received few benefits and suffered the effects of increased pollution (King 2005).

Yet development interventions can also reduce the tensions leading to and perpetuating conflicts, serving as tools of peaceful transformation rather than as instruments of control. Development practitioners or politicians aiming to promote equality of outcomes have decades of experience of different approaches that are relevant to subnational conflict areas. The form of these interventions typically depends on specific context. Issues of participation and accountability are particularly relevant where the state ignores local interests, as is work on many dimensions of social exclusion, human rights, and justice. Three specific fields of intervention are identified here. The first involves promoting changes in how central state institutions operate. Stewart, Brown, and Langer (2008) and Esman (2003: 237) summarise a range of

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reforms that have been undertaken, including adaptations to political mechanisms to foster political participation by otherwise marginalised minority groups, land reform or other asset redistribution, and reforms to language policies. A second field involves facilitating decentralisation and increased autonomy, for example through technical support for local development budgets or funding area-based economic development schemes. Third, where a peace process is ongoing, development initiatives can support specific elements of it, for instance by offering economic policy advice, supporting victims of conflict, or facilitating the reintegration of armed groups.

Research methods

Two datasets contribute to the summary that I present here. Both are based on semi-structured interviews with aid agency representatives and their domestic partner organisations. The first dataset is based on over 100 interviews carried out as part of my PhD research from 2007 to 2009. The second, smaller dataset comprises 25 interviews gathered in 2011 and early 2012 as part of a multi-country study on foreign aid provision in subnational conflicts conducted by The Asia Foundation. The availability of these two broadly comparable bodies of material enables time comparison of agencies’ responses to conflict in the Far South of Thailand.

Both the earlier and the later sets of interviews covered a similar range of issues. In each interview, international agency representatives were first asked to explain their general approach, including:

- The shape of their overall programme for Thailand and the policy influences behind it
- Whether they managed any specific initiatives addressing the conflict or adapted other interventions accordingly
- How they understood the causes and dynamics of the conflict

Agency representatives were also asked more specific, practical issues:

- How their strategies and interventions were formulated
- What information gathering was conducted or how a knowledge basis was established
- Staffing structures and internal variety or complexity within the agency
- How the agency engaged with local and national development partner organisations including the government
- How they implemented on the ground
- What monitoring or evaluation had been conducted

Gaining access and conducting interviews with mid-level and senior officials on highly sensitive policy issues is not straightforward. In most cases, initial introductions through existing contacts were essential. The most valuable information generally came from informants with whom a relationship had already been established, or through follow-up interviews once the ice had been broken. Interviews were kept informal. They were most effective when employing a sole interviewer and on occasion took place in unconventional, relaxed settings: in a café, a car, or a bus. Unlike the classic neutral interviewer, at times I offered my own opinion and let the conversation flow in order to encourage the informant to speak more directly. Some interviews resembled a natural discussion rather than a research tool. Provided with an open and confidential environment, interviewees occasionally directly criticised their own organisations, while representatives of several large aid agencies spoke candidly about the lack of priority placed on peacebuilding, regardless of their agencies’ global policy statements. Given institutional and political sensitivities, all interviews have been kept anonymous.
Interview data was supported by further information from aid agency websites, unpublished agency documents, academic sources, and archives in order to build understanding of agencies’ histories, funding sources, political associations, and the broader context. For both the earlier and the later dataset, information was collated, compared, and compiled during the research process, enabling interviews to follow up emerging issues and themes.

2007–2009: different approaches to development and peacebuilding

Interview data showed that between 2007 and 2009 aid agencies working in Thailand could be divided into three groups (see Table 1).

1) Conflict-blind mainstream aid

The first group is here termed “mainstream aid”, made up of agencies implementing fairly traditional programmes that did not address conflict in the Far South. They tended to be the most financially significant agencies operating in Thailand, including ADB (the Asian Development Bank), JICA (Japanese International Cooperation Agency), JBIC (Japan Bank for International Cooperation), GTZ (German Technical Cooperation Agency, now GIZ), and the French bilateral aid programme. Although rarely still providing the high levels of assistance that Thailand received before its emergence as a middle-income country, these agencies continued to work in close cooperation with the Thai government. They provided occasionally high levels of financial assistance for infrastructure projects (such as long-term, low-interest loans provided by JBIC for new metro lines in Bangkok) and power generation, as well as smaller grants backing a range of issues from education reform to pollution control.

Staff of these agencies tended, as individuals, to demonstrate fairly strong understanding of the conflict in the Far South and its causes. For example, interviewees recognised the grievances felt by many Malay Muslims over their informal political marginalisation and did not see the violence as a direct result of religious differences. However, there was a large gap between their personal knowledge and the approach taken by their respective agencies. Mainstream aid agencies gave no indications that they had considered any possible associations between their development assistance and conflict in the Far South, or thought over options to promote peacebuilding in some form. Staff did not generally see the conflict in the Far South as an issue of relevance to their work. One interviewee regarded conflict as an issue to be addressed through political resolution rather than development interventions, stating that: “For us, conflict is a subtext, no more.”

Aid agencies may have chosen to work on other fields in Thailand rather than addressing the conflict in the Far South, yet that should not in theory have stopped them from considering how their interventions might be adapted to take into account the specific needs of the minority population in the conflict-affected area. Such conflict sensitivity is a core component of generic aid agency guidelines on how to conduct development work in conflict-affected environments. However, interviews showed a significant barrier between the personal understanding of both national and expatriate agency staff on the one hand, and institutional incentives on the other. Raising issues associated with violence in the Far South, whether at the level of country strategy formulation or within specific projects, would have broached sensitive issues beyond areas of narrow technical competence and potentially damaged relationships with Thai government counterparts.

The most overt case of conflict blindness among agencies in this group occurred through a project that included the Far South in its geographical target area. In several phases over two decades, the ADB has provided technical assistance to the Thai government and neighbouring
Table 1: International development agencies and peacebuilding in the Far South of Thailand, 2007–2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International agency</th>
<th>Wider programmes for Thailand</th>
<th>Focus on Far South</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>GROUP ONE – Conflict-blind mainstream aid</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian Development Bank</td>
<td>Major lender, totalling over US$5 billion from late 1960s. Very few loans today. Current focus on infrastructure, capital market reforms, environmental management.</td>
<td>No focus on conflict although projects may have impact in conflict area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>Major loans following 1997 Asian crisis repaid by 2003.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>‘Trilateral partnerships’ supporting Thailand’s own small foreign aid programme, education links, industrial assistance.</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Supporting small / medium enterprises, environmental issues.</td>
<td>None (beyond the work of Germany’s autonomous government-funded foundations).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other bilaterals</td>
<td>Range of small programmes mostly relating to trade, higher education, high profile social and environmental issues.</td>
<td>Some small embassy funds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most international NGOs &amp; UN agencies</td>
<td>Wide range, typically focusing on community empowerment, usually with Thai NGO implementing partner.</td>
<td>Little or none.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GROUP TWO – Trying but failing to address conflict</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>Promotion of Thai Development Goals (localised Millennium Development Goals) and broad governance aims.</td>
<td>Little progress on linked-up UN approaches especially around governance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>Range of project funds across many issues.</td>
<td>Failed to establish links with government departments. Funding for NGOs, foundations on human rights, education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GROUP THREE – Small islands of peacebuilding</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA: USAID and other agencies</td>
<td>Major donor in past. Support for NGOs on social issues. Other support for specific issues: child labour, environment.</td>
<td>Range of programmes, mostly with NGOs. Military assistance to Thai Government.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
governments for a regional economic and trade promotion initiative known as the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle. ADB staff, consultants, and partners who were interviewed uniformly explained that no efforts were made to link the project with efforts to address ongoing conflict in the Far South, one interviewee stating that project analysis “flew over” the issue during its initial design in the 1990s despite a long legacy of unrest in preceding decades. Closer examination reveals that opportunities did exist at the time to adopt a different approach. Some voices within Thailand, including academics, NGO activists, and the government department responsible for promoting peace in the Far South, wanted to take advantage of the Growth Triangle scheme to address local grievances over economic inequalities, supporting small-scale farmers, fishermen, and locally owned enterprises over the larger businesses dominated by investors from central Thailand. However, ADB’s assistance instead supported the position of its dominant domestic partner agency, the National Economic and Social Development Board (the Thai government’s central planning body), which had little time for such subtleties in its efforts to promote overall national economic growth.11

2) Trying but failing to address conflict
Several international agencies including the World Bank, UNDP, and the EU all attempted but failed to establish initiatives addressing the conflict in the Far South between 2007 and 2009. In each case, plans were frustrated by a failure to gain the approval of the Thai government.

The World Bank began gradually trying to find a way to address the conflict by funding Thai universities to conduct participatory research on causes and potential solutions. The aim was to use the research as a basis to build government confidence while designing a programme of support for civil society organisations or local government. However, a change of national government in Thailand following political deadlock and a subsequent military coup in 2006 led to plans being placed on hold as the new administration took a stronger line on keeping international agencies away from the Far South.
UNDP also attempted to establish an intervention addressing the conflict. By 2004, Thailand having already achieved middle-income status, UNDP focused its country programme on specific development challenges including tackling injustices, inequality, and the marginalisation of minority groups. At the same time, it worked to maintain a solid relationship with the Thai government, supporting overall national development policy-making in an effort to help shape its direction. In September 2005, UNDP organised a meeting in Hat Yai, just outside the conflict-affected area of the Far South, titled “Reconciliation and Rehabilitation Process for Local Communities in Southern Thailand”. The aim was to build a series of engagements promoting local community-led approaches to peacebuilding. But following that single event, no further meetings were announced and over time the UNDP staff responsible moved on to work elsewhere. A UNDP representative confirmed that the organisation did not manage to establish this or any other programme addressing conflict issues.

In 2006, the EU set about establishing its own programme of support for Thai government and civil society promotion of peacebuilding and human rights in the Far South. After relatively warm initial overtures from interested Thai government departments, the EU tried to find a common position as a basis for engagement. However, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs (whose permission is required before foreign agencies can establish programmes of assistance) chose simply not to respond following an initial meeting, in the process letting the proposed plans quietly die.

These experiences suggest that support from the Thai government is essential before foreign agencies can promote peacebuilding, creating significant problems for agencies that rightly wish to respect state sovereignty yet also maintain a position of neutrality. Given that the government effectively represents one side of the conflict in the Far South, while the insurgent leaders on other side remain underground and inaccessible, keeping a neutral stance is challenging. Aid agencies not only need recipient government permission for peacebuilding initiatives but they frequently also depend on the recipient government’s willingness to accept mainstream development grants, to partner initiatives, and in some cases to take out loans. For UNDP, their apex position as the most prominent UN agency addressing development issues means that they typically operate by the side of the state as a broker and facilitator of aid coordination. The Thai government, for its part, is fiercely protective of national sovereignty, all the more so in the context of a conflict that touches on sensitive issues of national identity and territorial control.

Aid agencies operating in Thailand have in general found it easier to address less sensitive issues. Over time, they helped to build the capacity of the Thai state to achieve mainstream development objectives. Repeated projects over many years extended infrastructure, health, and education across much of the country. Foreign aid gradually strengthened the state bureaucracy and contributed to mass poverty reduction. However, aid-funded projects have often hit barriers when attempting to reform rather than back how government works. Assessments conclude that projects were more effective when supporting the interests of domestic power-brokers, especially in key central government institutions. Overall, foreign aid provision to Thailand has tended to support a national development trajectory and associated domestic policy decisions that either did not address issues relating to inequalities between ethnic groups and the dynamic of conflict in the Far South, or approached them through assimilation programmes that recorded mixed success at best.

While the three international agencies in this group aimed to support peacebuilding initiatives in the Far South of Thailand, they did not appear to prioritise the issue. For UNDP and the World Bank in particular, peacebuilding issues were promoted by just one or two staff members, with other interviewees from both agencies stressing that conflict issues were marginal to their main mission in the country. The World Bank’s primary objective in Thailand,
accorded to informants, has long been to build close ties with the Thai state in order to re-establish a lending relationship. This point was confirmed by subsequent efforts that the World Bank made to broker a US$1 billion loan in support of the government’s overall budget, dwarfing the potential allocations for peacebuilding by a factor of roughly 500.

3) Small islands of peacebuilding

Some international agencies did succeed in implementing programmes designed to support long-term resolution of conflict in the Far South. As well as small-scale livelihoods initiatives supported by Oxfam and Raks Thai (the Thai branch of CARE), more prominent interventions included those of The Asia Foundation and UNICEF, both of which established a range of projects with government and non-governmental partners.14

The Asia Foundation and UNICEF took various steps in response to the onset of overt violence from 2004 in the Far South. These measures distinguished them from those agencies that tried and failed to establish peacebuilding interventions. They invested time and resources in building knowledge of the local context. UNICEF conducted a detailed situational analysis in 2005–2006, followed by surveys in conflict-affected areas to determine key aspects of child welfare. The Asia Foundation, meanwhile, is perhaps the only international aid organisation with a long track record of involvement in the Far South. It was working to improve teaching standards in secondary schools as far back as the 1960s, having recognised that the form and quality of education was a significant source of tension in the area. Ongoing relationships with partner organisations, both in the area itself and in Bangkok, enabled the agency to plan further initiatives following the return of extensive violence in 2004.

Both The Asia Foundation and UNICEF considered addressing conflict in the Far South to be a core priority for their country programmes. UNICEF’s focus on child rights had already led the agency to focus its work in Thailand on excluded groups including migrant and minority children. A global emphasis on working in conflict environments also encouraged it to prioritise the Far South. UNICEF employees readily discussed comparative conflict challenges during interviews held in 2008 and 2011, reflecting wider experience and the institutional priority given to responding to violence. The Asia Foundation also addresses injustice and conflict as a core part of its mandate. In this respect, both agencies differ from a more conventional development approach that places primary importance on socio-economic improvement. As a result, the conflict in the Far South was seen as a relevant issue by many different members of staff.

Interventions that followed adopted a politically aware stance, recognising the importance of the structure and policies of the Thai state to the roots of unrest. UNICEF worked with local universities and the government to find alternative language policies in public education in order to tackle the marginalisation of Malay speakers. They worked in other sectors to find ways to improve service provision in response to the specific cultural and social needs of the Far South. The Asia Foundation was able to take a more politically engaged approach. One notable initiative worked with a respected Thai think tank to build a network of prominent academics, public figures, and civil servants who collectively proposed possible autonomy arrangements for the Far South, a controversial step at the time. Other interventions aimed to build the scope of local civil society groups in the Far South to advocate on human rights and related concerns.

Although both The Asia Foundation and UNICEF addressed potentially controversial issues, interviewees stressed that they nonetheless successfully managed relationships with state officials. The Asia Foundation carefully selected local partner agencies and ensured that their own role was never prominent. UNICEF addressed the Far South as part of its government-approved national strategy for focusing on marginalised groups rather than as a separate initiative that
would have been more controversial. Their situational analysis helped to demonstrate inequalities between the Far South and much of the rest of the country, justifying the approach. The Asia Foundation and UNICEF were able to build on existing relationships with Thai governmental and non-governmental bodies in order to find domestic partners with whom to work. Staff of both agencies also spent considerable time in the Far South, fostering local relationships and increasing their own understanding.

Neither agency employed any of the widely available guidance or toolkits designed to promote peacebuilding interventions. Initiatives were planned at the national or local level in response to specific contexts rather than through the application of conflict sensitivity methodologies or other approaches. No conflict specialists were employed. Instead, existing staff demonstrated strong understanding of local context, with decentralised planning processes enabling them to turn knowledge into practice. Table 2 summarises the overall characteristics of all three groups of aid agency.

2011–2012: more agencies start up peacebuilding initiatives

In the years following the initial round of interviews, violence in the Far South continued with no significant political developments or shifts in the dynamics on the ground. By the time the second dataset was being gathered, some changes in aid agency behaviour were apparent. While mainstream donors continued as before, more international agencies had found small ways to support peacebuilding (see Table 3). By 2009, the World Bank had managed to gain approval for a low-profile programme providing small grants to local NGOs in the Far South. By 2011, it was also able to work with a well-respected national NGO, the Local Development Institute, in establishing a US$1.2 million programme of community grants and support for civil society organisations. UNDP was beginning to cooperate with academic institutions, NGOs, and special government projects addressing the Far South through a new grant initiative, while the EU was providing funds to various international agencies, including the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (a German government-supported foundation) and Save the Children. USAID also announced a programme of support for democracy promotion across Thailand with a specific sub-component focusing on conflict in the Far South.

In establishing new programmes, most of these agencies demonstrated similar attributes to those shown by others already working on the conflict. They tended to recognise that long term peace requires changes in how the state operates, with all foreign-supported interventions – even those working through partners at the community level – ultimately promoting adjustments to government policy. UNDP and the World Bank invested extensive time and funds in gradually establishing programmes through building better relationships with more carefully selected government counterparts. Like The Asia Foundation and UNICEF (and unlike UNDP before 2009), these two agencies were by 2011 able to maintain the same specialist staff working on the Far South over a period of several years, providing continuity that interviewees mentioned as a significant factor in building a knowledge base and maintaining relationships.

The second round of interviews confirmed earlier findings over the limited relevance of formal peacebuilding tools and methodologies. Although by 2012 a small number of agencies had undertaken steps like conflict analysis training, most of the new interventions were established through the same successful design processes already followed by The Asia Foundation and UNICEF, involving gradually acquiring contextual knowledge while carefully fostering relationships with partner organisations and government authorities. One reason why more agencies were able to establish small programmes addressing the conflict by 2011–2012 was the apparently increased ability of international agencies to undertake such steps. Most second round interviewees demonstrated not only an understanding of the basis of unrest in
Table 2: Attributes and limiting factors affecting peace promotion among three groups of aid agencies in the Far South of Thailand, 2007–2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivations of aid agencies – policy priorities and technical approach</th>
<th>Group one: Conflict-blind mainstream aid</th>
<th>Group two: Trying but failing to address conflict</th>
<th>Group three: Small islands of peacebuilding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>Attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on national economic growth and poverty reduction.</td>
<td>• Recognition of negative aspects of national development models.</td>
<td>• Broader vision of development encompassing rights, equality, justice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Little interest in subnational inequalities.</td>
<td>• Some awareness of inequalities, ethnicity and identity.</td>
<td>• Politically aware rather than technically oriented.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Weak understanding of horizontal inequalities, ethnicity and identity.</td>
<td>• Technical international outlook masks political context.</td>
<td><em>Limiting factors</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Technical international outlook masks political context.</td>
<td>• Continued commitment to national targets such as MDGs.</td>
<td>• Inability to ‘mainstream’ conflict concerns across programmes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interface between aid agencies and Thai government bodies</td>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>Attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relationships with central state institutions fundamental to operations.</td>
<td>• Aim to address state policy in order to have impact.</td>
<td>• Recognition of diversity within state institutions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Low levels of interaction with other agencies and individuals.</td>
<td>• Central state support sought for interventions. Some relationships with NGOs.</td>
<td>• Careful management of relationships at different levels: with non-governmental agencies and in communities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional practice of aid agencies</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Attributes</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
<td>Limiting factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use of national level statistics and targets; skill-sets prioritise top-down economic planning.</td>
<td>• Broader range of skills and outlook of some staff.</td>
<td>•Restricted by what state institutions will allow.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Internal uniformity and strong top-down management culture.</td>
<td>• Some procedural flexibility and freedom for staff to pursue more varied development agendas.</td>
<td>• At times conservative in supporting modest reform agendas.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peacebuilding in a sub-national conflict?
the Far South but also of the institutional barriers that hold back efforts to engage, enabling them to negotiate agreement with the Thai government.

There was no evidence that this gradual shift in orientation was a result of greater attention being paid by aid agencies at a global policy level to the links between development and peace-building. Instead, increased local understanding on the part of aid agencies emerged as more significant than policy statements or technical approaches being promoted from headquarters. Some of the increased awareness may simply have been a result of gradually improved understanding of the specific context over time. A further cause was a shift in Thai government policy, with the administration in power between 2008 and 2011 having been more amenable than its predecessors to some forms of international involvement. This created openings that agencies already considering programmes (like the World Bank, UNDP, and EU) were able to exploit.

Conclusions and implications

Overall, findings suggest that the constraints of aid agencies themselves, and the politicised context in which they were operating, limited the scope to use development assistance to support peacebuilding in the Far South of Thailand. In the absence of a peace process backed by the recipient government, even those agencies trying to promote steps towards peace faced limited options, although with the right approach some were still able over time to offer fairly small, yet still potentially valuable, inputs.

These findings have wider implications beyond the case study itself. From the perspective of foreign aid provision, the conflict in the Far South of Thailand shares many properties with other subnational conflicts in Southeast Asia and in other regions. Such conflicts tend to be relatively peripheral to the overall economic and political context of the country in which they occur, even if their causes relate closely to the nature of the nation state. The Thai government, like others in the region, has used development approaches in its efforts to win rather than as part of efforts to tackle perceptions of injustice and inequalities along ethnic lines, making it hard for aid agencies to find common ground with domestic policies. In Thailand and elsewhere, aid agencies also confront government reluctance to accept foreign involvement in a sensitive field. Elsewhere, aid provision linked with peacebuilding has only

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Table 3: Further programmes in the Far South of Thailand, 2011–2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>“Sapaan”, a national project promoting independent oversight and government accountability, and addressing conflict in southern Thailand. Technical assistance and resources for local NGOs and other groups. Some of the five year, US$30 million budget is earmarked for the Far South.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Bank</td>
<td>US$1.2 million over several years for community funds in pilot villages and support for local civil society networks. Objective is to assist efforts to promote trust within and among government agencies, civil society and local communities. Implementation by LDI, a national Thai NGO.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>‘Southern Thailand Empowerment and Participation’ (STEP) – US$1.6 million project over two years for community empowerment and public participation in local governance. Partners include government departments, NGOs, university research bodies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Union</td>
<td>Around US$1 million annual funding for international NGOs to work alongside Thai NGOs in the Far South. International recipients include Save the Children, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Oxfam, ActionAid.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
occasionally been considerably more abundant, most noticeably in Mindanao within the Philippines. In most other similar cases – Xinjiang in China or parts of Northeast India, for example – international aid is still less prominent than in the Far South of Thailand.

The impact of the small initiatives that were undertaken in the Far South of Thailand has not been substantially evaluated, but there is some evidence that they have contributed incrementally towards future improvements to the situation in the Far South. The Asia Foundation’s support for local promotion of decentralisation, for example, was followed by wider political discussion of the issue, representing a marked shift in national debate. Other international support has collectively strengthened civil society bodies promoting respect for human rights and encouraging a peaceful resolution of violence, with interviewees stating that local networks were gradually gathering momentum. Perhaps still more significantly, initial efforts by foreign aid agencies paved the way for subsequent initiatives, building knowledge of how to engage in the area and also reducing government concerns over external involvement.

Overall, conflict in the Far South of Thailand remains a low priority issue for aid agencies. It is not a prominent policy issue internationally and can be comfortably ignored from an office in Bangkok or outside Thailand, especially if following a conventional aid agenda premised on strong partnerships with domestic governments in support of poverty reduction and economic growth. Those agencies that from an early stage found ways to support peace promotion prioritised human rights, equality, and justice rather than a narrower and more conventional development agenda. Practical elements of their working methods also emerged as critical factors: setting priorities locally rather than following global policy prescriptions; building a strong knowledge base; and gradually developing selective relationships with domestic institutions. Agencies that established programmes at a later date demonstrated similar traits. Along with a changed domestic environment and Thailand’s higher international profile following protracted political crisis at the national level from 2006, this enabled them to support peacebuilding initiatives.

Aid agencies that addressed the conflict also tended to have relatively small budgets and were able to distance themselves from Thai government policies while also maintaining relatively good relationships with government institutions. They promoted policy reforms to address underlying inequalities in fields such as education and decentralisation, working closely with domestic non-governmental partners and, where common ground was identifiable, with government bodies. While aid agencies promoting peacebuilding were not generally able to back the overall Thai government policy position on the Far South, some government institutions did follow a more progressive line and offered opportunities to work collaboratively.

These traits and operating practices were more commonly shared by international NGOs and foundations, while being less prevalent in larger bilateral and multilateral agencies. Multilateral lending institutions needed to maintain a good relationship with the Thai state in order to generate future loans and tended to steer away from overtly political issues. UNDP also had to respond to the Thai government’s needs and, as usual, positioned itself closely alongside the state. Bilateral aid agencies operating in Thailand form one part of broader diplomatic relationships, with peacebuilding in the Far South being a lower priority than trade and investment opportunities that require good inter-state relationships.

The conflict-sensitivity tools that aid agencies have produced at a global level as part of the merger of development and peacebuilding were noticeably absent from the approaches adopted by aid agencies with active programmes in the Far South of Thailand. Instead, agencies addressing the conflict did so as a result of their intrinsic practical attributes and through institutional concern over the inequality and political marginalisation that lie behind the unrest. The main implication of this finding is that aid agencies need to concentrate on devolving responsibilities and emphasising core values. Country programmes need to build skills and ways of working that enable them to accrue political acumen and knowledge while also managing
difficult relationships with domestic partners. These conclusions confirm the findings of many other analyses of development practice over past decades. They suggest that advocates promoting closer attention to conflict heed wider experience of steps adopted to tackling inequalities rather than looking towards peacebuilding methodologies as a convenient but probably inappropriate short-cut.

The challenge of building an “aid relationship” with domestic partners, especially government counterparts, has received attention elsewhere (Eyben 2006; Jerve, Shimomura, and Skovsted Hansen 2008). It is especially important in many subnational conflicts including the Far South of Thailand where governments are often highly sensitive over external involvement. One aid agency interviewee in Thailand stated that “Everything donors try to do in the South clashes with nationalism”. Aiming to gain permission to operate while retaining sufficient independence to avoid following a consensual, pro-government approach in conflict environments is a considerable challenge that deserves greater recognition and analysis. It is especially important given that initiatives not only need to gain official permission to operate but also often have to find a direct or indirect path towards influencing government policy in order to have any major impact.

The changes needed for aid agencies to adopt peacebuilding approaches more widely in subnational conflicts are not simple to achieve. Even those agencies that did manage to promote peacebuilding in the Far South of Thailand uniformly struggled to link efforts to address the causes of conflict with their other interventions in the country. Across the rest of their Thailand programmes, they rarely managed to consider the specific circumstances of the Malay Muslim minority in the Far South, even in highly relevant fields like education policy and the promotion of democratic institutions. This underlines the practical challenges that aid agencies face in adopting peacebuilding approaches more comprehensively. Realistically, many aid agencies would need to make a strong policy commitment to address those development objectives associated with peacebuilding in subnational conflicts in order to progress from relatively small and isolated initiatives towards a comprehensive approach. Rather than promoting conflict sensitivity methodologies while leaving the fundamentals of aid practice unchanged, this would involve abandoning more traditional development approaches and instead embracing greater recognition of how unequal growth and political marginalisation exacerbate the risk of violent unrest along ethnic or other fault-lines, while understanding that minority groups often need special measures within both democratic and undemocratic political systems in order to ensure political representation. Such steps are challenging. Both the operational deficiencies of aid agencies and the need to negotiate a path with recipient governments create barriers limiting the adoption of approaches based around the promotion of human rights, justice, and equality. These practical barriers deserve more recognition than they typically receive in studies of aid and peacebuilding or in foreign aid agencies’ own policy analysis.

Notes

1. Uvin’s (1998) criticism of aid agency approaches prior to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is perhaps the clearest case study of the failure to address conflict-related factors. On the promotion of “Do No Harm” as a response to this and other examples, see Anderson (1999).
4. The notion of “teflon modernisation” (Simon and Dodds 1998: 596) refers to the non-stick or superficial properties of recent foreign aid trends, including peacebuilding.
5. I am not aware of any other recently published work or primary research addressing foreign aid provision in the Far South of Thailand.
6. For a detailed overview of the political causes of violence in the Far South, see McCargo (2008).
7. Violence is mostly confined to the three provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat, along with neighbouring districts of Songkhla province. The area has a population of roughly two million people and covers about 13,500 square kilometres – slightly larger than Yorkshire and slightly smaller than Connecticut.
8. “Ao setakit thalai chon.” In addition to Thailand, governments in India, Sri Lanka, China, and Indonesia have emphasised development expenditure alongside security measures as a means to tackle subnational conflict.
10. I took part in the majority of the second round of interviews as well as the entire first round. The recent Asia Foundation study “The Contested Corners of Asia: Subnational Conflict and International Development Assistance” draws on case studies of the Far South of Thailand, Aceh (Indonesia), and Mindanao (Philippines).
11. See King (2005). Initial IMT-GT formulation took place in the mid-1990s. More recent plans to revive the dormant scheme followed exactly the same pattern.
12. By 1986, 40 per cent of permanent secretaries, director generals, provincial governors, and other key senior position holders had been trained under USAID support (Muscat 1990: 55).
13. See Muscat (1990) among other sources. This topic is addressed more comprehensively in the author’s PhD thesis (2012).
14. The Asia Foundation defines itself in promotional material as “a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization committed to the development of a peaceful, prosperous, just, and open Asia-Pacific region”. Originally associated with US foreign policy and funded fully by the US government, it now receives funding for its programmes from a range of sources including various foreign aid donors. It is assumed that readers are familiar with other agencies mentioned here.
15. See McCargo (2010) for further detail on the autonomy debate.
16. Thailand’s middle-income status means that most of the north European bilateral agencies that often support peacebuilding elsewhere were not operating in the country.

References
Adam Burke


The author

**Adam Burke** is a freelance consultant who recently completed his PhD at SOAS, University of London. His research and practical work with NGOs, bilateral and multilateral aid agencies focuses on addressing the needs and rights of marginalised groups, especially in conflict-affected parts of South and Southeast Asia. <adam.burke@thepolicypractice.com>; <adam_burke@soas.ac.uk >