
Praxis Interviews Practitioners: John Prendergast

John Prendergast is co-director of the Africa Program at the International Crisis Group (ICG). Before joining ICG, he was special advisor on African issues to the U.S. State Department. The author of several books, including God, Oil and Country: Changing the Logic of War in Sudan, he has worked for a range of relief and development NGOs, UN agencies, and human rights organizations in Africa. In 1999, John was executive fellow at the United States Institute of Peace, and before that he served as the director of Africa Affairs at the National Security Council under the Clinton administration.

WHAT ARE THE MOST PROMINENT WAYS IN WHICH THE GROWTH OF INTRA-STATE CONFLICTS IN AFRICA HAS AFFECTED THE PRACTICE OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

The persistence and deepening of chronic conflict in Africa has forced the practitioners and policymakers associated with international development to adjust their strategies and approaches to fit new realities. First, in the context of protracted civil conflict, new opportunities to promote development emerge, while

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more conventional approaches become less relevant. For example, war-torn Sudan is the only country in Africa getting a major increase in U.S. development aid. Programs will focus on building capacity for governance and famine prevention in rebel-held zones of the south. By contrast, aid to newly democratic Kenya—a country that deserves a major increase in aid—is getting downsized by the Bush administration.

So with the proliferation of conflict, greater focus has moved to capacity building of local communities to withstand the impacts of war. This has reduced commitments to the structures of government that deliver social services, which erodes state capacity and leads to conditions of state collapse. The long-term repercussions of this disinvestment in state building are extremely damaging.

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON THAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM POST-CONFLICT PEACE BUILDING EFFORTS IN THE GREAT LAKES REGION?

There is very little post-conflict peace building occurring in the Great Lakes, so few lessons can be learned. Congo and Burundi are active conflicts, albeit with robust peace processes. Rwanda is a post-genocide environment, which is in no way comparable to a post-war situation.

However, where Rwanda has been most successful is at the grassroots level, focusing on reducing ethnic-based polarization and bridging communities through economic development. This economic work, more than anything in the short to medium term, will foster reconciliation.

HOW CAN ADVOCATES BEST FRAME THE ISSUES FACING CONFLICT-AFFECTED AFRICAN NATIONS WITHOUT RESORTING TO SENSATIONALISM?

It is difficult not to be sensationalistic when describing African conflicts, as the humanitarian and human rights repercussions are epic. However, beyond this

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humanitarian angle there are other windows into the coverage of African conflict. First, the destabilization and erosion of state capacity creates vacuums into which extremist organizations, sometimes terrorist,

can enter. This is the case in Somalia and the West African diamond trade. Sudan, in a weakened state, hosted Osama bin Laden for the first half of the 1990s. The Congo's mineral wealth has been infiltrated by unsavory elements working with terrorist organizations.

Second, the issues that fuel conflict are themselves monumental and potentially of interest to a wider audience. Whether blood diamonds, religion, oil, culture, racial/ethnic solidarity, or principle, every conflict on the continent has a set of interesting root causes that can be highlighted.

Third, the processes of peace are also diverse and interesting. Peace processes involving the UN, regional organizations, outside actors like the U.S., France, and the UK, civil society mediators, and other modalities are all unique and potentially of interest. ■