



# Land, Conflict and Development: What Role for Donors?

OECD-USAID informal experts' seminar  
19 and 20 June 2003

## Summary

On 19-20 June 2003, following an initiative of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the OECD Development Centre and the OECD Development Co-operation Directorate organised an informal experts' seminar in order to:

- (i) examine the links between land and conflict;
- (ii) help formulate preliminary proposals on how donors can best incorporate land issues in their policy frameworks for the management and mitigation of conflict; and
- (iii) propose next steps to further advance this agenda.

Coming from around the world and from a variety of backgrounds with a balanced mix of academics, practitioners and officials, participants brought their diverse experiences and knowledge to the discussion. The Development Centre, with USAID support, commissioned an issues paper that helped focus the discussions. The paper recognized the significant work on best practices in land policy and land administration led by the World Bank over the past couple of years, and sought to look at these issues through the lens of conflict.<sup>1</sup>

Leading remarks by Mark Berman, Chairman of the Conflict, Peace and Cooperation Development Network of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, and comments by Klaus Deininger, principal author of the World Bank Policy Research Report on Land Policy also provided background and orientation for the discussion. In particular, Mark Berman noted that the DAC Guidelines on "Helping Prevent Violent Conflict" incorporate land among the root causes of violent conflict and, in essence, weave land issues into the bigger picture in a similar fashion as the issues paper. He noted, however, that these 'bookmarks' needed more depth and, importantly, discussion of solutions.

No other formal presentations were made. The group engaged in a roundtable discussion of sub themes within the paper and on key questions about what understanding of the issues means in practice for use of development assistance to manage and mitigate conflict. This note attempts to synthesise the output of that discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> The Development Centre has supervised the integration of the participants' comments and preliminary policy conclusions into the paper. It will be published within the framework of a broader study of the links between land and conflict at the end of 2003.

## Capturing the dynamics between land and conflict

- Scientifically, it is difficult to establish the role that land issues play in the outbreak of conflict; although they are often embroiled in conflict situations, they rarely seem to be *the* cause of violence.
- Violent conflict arises where “political entrepreneurs” succeed in mobilising groups along antagonistic identity lines (ethnic, religious, regional, etc.). These groups are all the more likely to be vulnerable to such manoeuvring when they find themselves in situations characterised by a lack of opportunities —rather than by poverty or inequality *per se*—, where no non-violent solution to their plight seems to exist.
- In this context, land may be designated to such groups as *a tangible object of dispute* more easily than other economic assets, because it holds both very high material *and* symbolic —even emotional— values for stakeholders.
- In such cases, land eventually comes to play a central role, as it increases the economic profitability of violence while providing a political justification for it. In the absence of efficient mediating institutions or livelihood sources other than related to land, “land-related” conflict may thus emerge in rural, but also in urban or peri-urban areas.
- In turn, such conflicts are a fairly “predictable” source of future, typically more violent, clashes over land, as expropriations and related brutality generate new grievances.

## How can land policy help to mitigate conflict?

- Good land policy helps to generate economic growth and is important for sustaining peace in the long run. It was however agreed that the potential role of land policy in preventing conflicts in the short- and medium-term remains insufficiently documented to provide clear-cut policy prescriptions.
- Nevertheless, it was stressed that once land has become a key political issue at the outbreak of conflict, failure to tackle it straight away can impede the chances of achieving a lasting peace.
- Conversely, if properly handled, land policy can play a critical, “positive” role within strategies aimed at consolidating peace in areas emerging from conflict, by ensuring that long-lasting grievances are not sharpened. This may imply the implementation of complementary policies such as the following:

(a) *Property Commissions* (or *Claims Commissions*) can play a leading part in processes of reconciliation and property restitution, by facilitating dialogue and data collection — potentially including “conflict proneness” indicators — while dealing with competing claims, resettlement and compensation in the aftermath of conflicts involving mass population displacements. Promising cases, including Cyprus and to some extent Bosnia-Herzegovina, suggest that massive and sustained donor intervention is a key factor of success.

(b) *Comprehensive dialogue programmes* — of the type initiated between herders and farmers in Mali by the French co-operation administration — can help to resolve enduring land disputes which would otherwise degenerate into fighting, and can pave the way for acceptable institutional reforms. It must be stressed, however, that failing to carry out such programmes to completion can prove counter-productive.

(c) *Investment in agricultural infrastructure* in post-conflict settings can complement land policy by creating new income-generating opportunities. Fostering agricultural productivity

and production will prevent the outbreak of food crises, and create employment and other economic opportunities for demobilised war veterans.

- It was suggested that *land reforms*, although they can be a useful tool for coping with claims threatening to escalate into conflict, have themselves often been a source of violence and frustration. This can be the case where dispossessed groups retaliate (as in Chile in the 1970s), or where land reform raises expectations it does not meet – in particular when economic performance actually deteriorates as a result of the reform (e.g. Zimbabwe in the late 1990s).
- While agreeing on the need for support to new farmers to ensure their economic viability, several participants pointed out that land was not the only asset which could be redistributed. In cases where alternatives to the dismantling of efficient existing farms are needed, or where land is conspicuously too scarce to be redistributed on a large scale (e.g., in South Asia), other redistributive strategies can meet claims without jeopardising peace and growth. These may include job creation linked to investment in agricultural infrastructure as well as staple food price policies.

### **Renewing donors' approaches & tools**

- Preliminary analysis suggests that donors' conflict-prevention programmes aiming to sustain peace in immediate post-conflict settings tend to neglect land issues (e.g. in Afghanistan). They usually fail to comprehend the potential role of land policy in paving the way for reconciliation and renewed growth, or believe it is a relevant, but long-term issue. Achieving political stability with early visible results is essential.
- Similarly, land policy projects often neglect the conflict dimension. While an efficient land policy promoting agricultural development is important for securing peace in the long run, its "traditional" prescriptions are insufficient to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict. Donors should therefore avoid strictly technical approaches, and pay attention early on to the political dynamics that may impede the implementation of their institution-building programmes.
- This requires that they invest in understanding the local political context of their intervention (e.g., how government institutions fit in to the 'taking - sides' equation), as well as in assessing the impact of their own aid and other policies in that context. The inclusion of "Political Impact Assessment" documents in project cycles could be a step in that direction.
- Better co-ordination among and within donor agencies is crucial. This may sound trivial, yet cases of inadequate co-ordination in the area of conflict and land policy resulting in tragic outcomes abound. Conversely, the benefits of co-ordination in lessening violence attached to disputes can be established from cases such as Cambodia. "Political Impact Assessments" could be used to identify areas where co-ordination is most needed in order to prevent counter-effects.
- Donors must ensure that recovery and reconstruction are set off in a direction compatible with longer run goals. This requires that those working on conflict issues and crisis interventions should link up more systematically with those working on long-term land issues; similarly, designing and implementing solutions requires that donors combine traditionally separate programmatic domains, such as economic growth, democracy, governance, etc.
- In conflict situations, donors must ensure that their interventions aimed at crisis mitigation and especially post-crisis reconstruction — such as agricultural revitalization, de-mining, resettling of refugees, etc. — do not inadvertently exacerbate or create a land-related conflict. On this, there is some good experience to learn from and the experts have a lot to share (a resource network might crystallize from the meeting - see below).

- ‘Best practices’ to deal with open or latent political conflicts include participatory approaches and comprehensive stakeholder dialogue, which can help frame a consensual policy agenda on land administration. Donors need to consider taking more risk in engaging all stakeholders in land related conflicts, as they do in helping to resolve broader conflicts.
- Donors should improve their ability to monitor potential land-incited conflict and to look for often-unheeded early warning signs; land issues should always be included in assessments of pre- and post-conflict vulnerabilities; a ‘do no harm’ checklist should be developed for project implementation in post-conflict reconstruction.

### **Research priorities and next steps**

Inadequate research methodologies partly explain why we still know fairly little about the dynamics that may —or may not— link land issues to violent conflict. The following suggestions were made that could prove equally useful for both “land” and “conflict” practitioners, and help improve the efficiency of donor policies in the land and conflict area:

- Since apparently similar situations can yield much contrasted results, *comparative research* on a limited set of cases — e.g., Guatemala and El Salvador — could be very precious.
- Research focused on the *politics* of societies was stressed as a means to highlight the mechanisms which correlate land and conflict. This could lead to the design of methodologies and frameworks to help donors carry out their *political assessments*, and thus to better inform them on the relevance of available policies.
- *Early-warning indicators* and tools for assessing vulnerability to conflict should also be identified.
- *A review of donor practices* affecting the interaction between land issues and conflict in recipient countries remains to be conducted.

In order to translate the promising interdisciplinary dynamics spurred by the seminar into action, the following next steps may be considered:

- Developing a toolkit to help practitioners in donor agencies, both in capitals and in the field, grasp the complex links between land and conflict issues.
- Forming a human resource network — possibly developing from the group of participants in the seminar and including invited experts who could not attend— in order to continue examining the ways in which donor policies with regard to land issues can become more conducive to peace.
- Upon the DAC-CPDC Chairman’s proposal, conveying the results of the seminar to the next CPDC meeting to be held in October 2003 in Brussels.

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